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# The politics of privilege and resistance: filial citizenship, education markets, and middle class parents in the people's Republic of China

Manon Laurent

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Sciences des Sociétés (ED624)

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et asiatiques (UMR 245)*

En cotutelle avec **Université Concordia**

## **The Politics of Privilege and Resistance**

*Filial Citizenship, Education Markets, and Middle  
Class Parents in the People's Republic of China*

Par Manon LAURENT

Thèse de doctorat de sociologie (Université Paris Cité)

PhD in Political Science (Concordia University)

Dirigée par Gilles GUIHEUX et Kimberley MANNING

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The Politics of Privilege and Resistance  
Filial Citizenship, Education Markets, and Middle Class Parents in the People's Republic  
of China

Manon Laurent

A Thesis  
in the Department of  
Political Science

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of  
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Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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Entitled: The Politics of Privilege and Resistance. Filial Citizenship, Education Markets, and Middle Class Parents in the People's Republic of China

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**Résumé :**

En octobre 2021, le gouvernement chinois promulgue la *Loi sur la Promotion de l'Éducation Familiale*. Ce texte législatif encadre la manière dont les parents peuvent et doivent éduquer leurs enfants à la maison pour qu'ils deviennent des citoyens performants sur le marché du travail et loyaux envers la nation. Cette nouvelle loi n'est que la dernière version d'un cadre normatif sur la parentalité formulé et diffusé par l'État depuis les premières années de la République populaire de Chine (RPC) et même du gouvernement républicain qui l'a précédé. Cette loi reflète les discours politiques qui façonnent l'organisation de la société chinoise actuellement : entre solidarité nationale et compétition internationale. Conjointement aux réglementations du marché de l'enseignement privé, la *Loi sur la Promotion Familiale* illustre comment la parentalité est au cœur du projet nationaliste chinois. Le parti-État cultive une métaphore de la nation comme une grande famille pour induire une relation filiale entre la population et la patrie, aussi appelé *nationalisme filial* par Vanessa Fong (2004).

En utilisant une approche de l'État dans la société (Bray et Jeffreys 2016 ; Migdal 2001 ; Ferguson et Gupta 2002), je montre comment les parents de la classe moyenne urbaine négocient avec et résistent à la présence omniprésente de l'État dans l'éducation de leur unique enfant. Dans cette thèse, j'avance que le régime autoritaire chinois construit des espaces de liberté et de choix pour les parents afin de favoriser des formes de compétition entre les familles tout en régulant les pratiques parentales et le contenu de l'éducation. Par conséquent, les parents de la classe moyenne exercent leur citoyenneté et leur loyauté envers l'État en participation à la compétition scolaire et éducative. Cependant, je montre que les parents des classes moyennes urbaines possèdent également leur propre agentivité et ne sont ni des agents passifs au service de l'État ni des révolutionnaires pro-démocratie ; ils profitent plutôt du régime pour renforcer leur position sociale et sécuriser leurs privilèges.

En étudiant les luttes éducatives entre les parents et l'État, je contribue à la littérature en science politique à deux titres. J'illustre les modes de relations État-société dans un régime autoritaire. Par ailleurs, je conceptualise les parents comme des acteurs politiques à part entière. Alors que nous observons une mobilisation importante des parents dans les mouvements récents sur le climat, les violences policières ou les questions de mœurs, ils n'ont jamais été définis par les chercheurs en science politique comme des acteurs politiques indépendamment de leur genre. La littérature sur le maternalisme a étudié les mouvements sociaux de mères, en s'appuyant principalement sur le ressort genré de la politisation. Dans cette recherche, je montre comment la parentalité, le fait d'élever un enfant, amène les individus de la classe moyenne chinoise à s'intéresser à la politique et parfois à se mobiliser. Je soutiens que ce processus de socialisation politique par la parentalité peut s'observer dans nos démocraties également.

**Mots clefs :**

Chine contemporaine, parentalité, classes moyennes, socialisation politique, nationalisme

**Title:** The Politics of Privilege and Resistance: Filial Citizenship, Education Markets, and Middle Class Parents in the People's Republic of China

**Abstract:**

In October 2021, the Chinese government promulgated the Family Education Promotion Law, legislation that exhorts parents to invest their time, money, and energy to raise children who are high-achieving and filial citizens. This new law is just the latest version of a state-produced discourse on parenting norms that can be traced back to the earliest years of the People's Republic of China, and the Republican government that preceded it. But the law also reflects more recent developments, specifically, the emergence of a private education market that gives parents an illusion of empowerment while simultaneously reinforcing the normative framework produced by the state.

Based on immersive fieldwork in Nanjing with parents and educational institutions, I show that the increasing responsibility impressed upon parents regarding their child's educational success has led to the professionalization of parenting practices and a reactivation of the process of political socialization among parents. The parent's acute sense of responsibility regarding the future success or failure of their child illustrates how governing practices have disciplined the population and configured parents as subjects.

To resolve the dilemma intrinsic to any country, that is how to guarantee an equal distribution of education resources while maintaining a competitive advantage on the international labor market, the Chinese government resorts to the marketization and regulation of educational resources. At the same time, the state transfers the responsibility of children's educational performance to parents so that they are held accountable for making the decisions regarding how their child accesses various educational resources. I argue that the diversification of school choice and the flourishing private education market in China simultaneously empowers middle-class parents and places outsized responsibilities on their shoulders.

I show how urban middle-class parents negotiate and resist the pervasive presence of the state in their care for an only child. Some parents, particularly mothers, choose to voice their discontent online or in the streets. Other parents are choosing to exit China to find education resources abroad. These exit strategies, albeit less visible, also question the state's capacity to provide an education for its population. I show that urban middle-class parents are neither state pawns nor democracy builders; rather they take advantage of the regime to reinforce their social position and secure their privileges. This dissertation examines such dynamics in the context of Nanjing, and shows the rising importance of parent activism, and its consequence on the urban middle class and the reproduction of various nationalist pressures. By focusing on struggles over education, the importance of parents as gendered and classed political actors in China and in the wider study of state-society relations, comes into sharp relief. Indeed, given that individuals are increasingly mobilizing under a parent-identity, comparative politics should conceptualize parents as political actors.

**Keywords:**

Contemporary China, parenting, middle-class, political socialization, nationalism





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*To my children,*

*À mes enfants,*



# Introduction

In August 2018, an elite public school in Suzhou (Jiangsu province) took the controversial decision to build a temporary wall dividing the premises in half to separate the wealthy neighborhood pupils from the children of migrant workers who had just been resettled there by the local authority.<sup>1</sup> These children had previously been enrolled at *Lixin Primary School*, a community school managed by migrant workers, until the school's lease expired in the summer of 2017. After a year of legal proceedings brought by the land owner, a private education company, the community school had to vacate the premises. Under the compulsory schooling law for all children from 6 to 15 years old, the local authority had to accommodate the 800 migrant children in a school so that they could continue their schooling. The local authorities picked the *Qinxi Experimental Primary School*, renowned for nearly a century for the academic success of its students, and which had inaugurated a brand new campus in 2016. After hearing the news about the resettlement of migrant children in their school, parents from the neighborhood strongly expressed their dissatisfaction and concerns on social networks and directly demonstrated outside the school. To reassure parents, the elite public school hastily built a physical separation that divided the premises into two.

This news item illustrates how state education policies produce contentious spaces where different social actors struggle to protect their vested interests. In this study, I focus on how urban middle-class parents become involved in contentious spaces to defend their interests and their child's interests. Doing so, they perform and reinterpret their social class and their citizenship.

In the story of the Suzhou schools' wall, three types of actors defend their interests: parents, public sector education actors (public schools and education bureaus), and private sector education actors (private education companies), revealing the intricate relationship between education policies and social hierarchy. Rural-to-urban migrant households have limited access to education resources in urban areas so they open community schools on the fringe of legality (Froissart 2003a). In the Suzhou school

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<sup>1</sup> In China, migrant workers are Chinese citizens from rural areas who migrate to the urban areas hoping to improve their living conditions.

Suzhou is the second major city in Jiangsu after Nanjing where I conducted my fieldwork.



story, migrant families appear first as victims of the commodification of educational resources when their school is closed; second, as passive targets of the implementation of education policies when the local education bureau resettle them in another school and finally as victims of discrimination by wealthy families who reject their children. This depiction is often accurate, although scholars have also shown migrant families resisting discrimination (Froissart 2003a). On the other end of the social hierarchy, urban middle-class parents act as proactive and entitled consumers who believe their children deserve a certain quality of education. They buy expensive apartments to get their children admitted to an elite school and they publicly express their concerns and discontent when they disapprove of the decisions taken by the local authority.

Second, public education actors are conflicted between their role as the local implementers of public policies and the pressure to respond to complaints and protests from the population. To add to this conundrum, local education bureaus have to balance competing policy objectives: providing education for all school-age children, while also maintaining the quality of educational resources in a constrained financial context.

Finally, private sector education actors have been flourishing since the 1990s, in the form of private schools and private extra-curricular learning centers. They are subjected to market principles, and seek to increase their revenue and attract new clients. Starting first as a primarily unregulated sector, in the last decades, these private actors have been increasingly under the regulation and control of the state.

The Suzhou story is one of the many places where one sees various struggles over the distribution of educational resources and where parents become actors to be reckoned with on a political level, forcing the hand of local governments and public schools. This dissertation examines such dynamics in the context of Nanjing, and shows the rising importance of parent activism, and its consequence on the urban middle class and the reproduction of various nationalist pressures.

To realize the *China Dream* and restore the greatness of the Chinese nation, Xi Jinping emphasizes the role of education, not only as a propaganda tool but also to train innovative and competitive citizens beholden to their nation.<sup>2</sup> Education policies inform the economic, social and nationalist projects of the Chinese president. To resolve the dilemma intrinsic to any country, that is how to guarantee an equal distribution of

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<sup>2</sup> The “China Dream” is a slogan attributed to Xi Jinping, since he became leader of the CCP. He first used this catchphrase in November 2012 at the opening of an exhibit at the National Museum of China. The exhibit was called the “Road to National Rejuvenation.”

education resources while maintaining a competitive advantage on the international labor market, the Chinese government resorts to the marketization and regulation of educational resources. At the same time, the state transfers the responsibility of children's educational performance to parents so that they are held accountable for making the decisions regarding how their child accesses various educational resources. I argue that the diversification of school choice and the flourishing private education market in China simultaneously empowers middle-class parents and places outsized responsibilities on their shoulders. Based on immersive fieldwork in Nanjing with parents and educational institutions, I show that the increasing responsibility impressed upon parents regarding their child's educational success has led to the professionalization of parenting practices and a reactivation of the process of political socialization among parents. Parents' empowerment renews how parents configure and are configured by state-society relationships.

In this introductory chapter, I set the stage for my argument. First, I propose a definition of parents and parenting to distinguish these social constructions from family and parenthood. I define the identity of parents as a social and political performance shaped beyond biological and legal bounds. Second, I build on Foucault's concept of governmentality to explain the central role of parents in state-society relations in contemporary China. Third, I show how the parents are involved in the implementation of education policies. I then present the mixed methodology I used to conduct this research combining in-person immersive fieldwork in Nanjing and extensive online research during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Finally, I provide an outline of the dissertation.

## **Family, parenthood, parents and parenting**

In this study, I focus on parenting practices defined as purposive practices and emotion-work which contribute to the enactment of the parent-child relationship and as a social role in which an individual embodies and perform the social and political representation of a parent. I begin by distinguishing three terms: family, parenthood and parenting. Traditionally, the family was presented as the smallest "natural" collective

unit of the population (Neyrand 2011). Now, scholars define family based on three main bonds: the contractual relation of a heterosexual couple; the biological relations of individuals sharing the same DNA; and the social relations between individuals living in the same house, all of which are organized by hierarchies, authority, obedience, nurturing and so on (Neyrand 2011; Bourdieu 1993; Ariès 1996). According to Bourdieu (1993), the family is a social construction. Bourdieu argues that the family “as an objective social category (a structuring structure) is the basis of the family as a subjective social category (a structured structure) which determines thousands of representations and actions (such as weddings) which participate in the reproduction of the objective social category” (Bourdieu 1993, 34). Indeed, the daily roles and relations of individuals within the family are determined by subjective social representations. Among these roles, I focus on the relationship between parents and children.

The modernization, globalization, and urbanization of societies around the globe have had a great impact on the social expectations regarding the parent-child relationship in the last centuries. Some Western scholars have shown that parenting shifted from a function of mere reproduction to a more educational role. Parenting went from community-based social practices to private and intimate practices (Gauchet 2004). According to the renowned historian of childhood, Philippe Ariès, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Western family model shifted from an open society geared toward the adult world to a closed and nuclear family model geared towards the protection of children (Ariès 1996). In the open family model, children from an early age were considered adults and integrated into adult society as apprentices, farm laborers, or young princes, depending on their family’s social background and their gender.<sup>3</sup> In the closed family model, children are raised outside adult society. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, children became more and more precious in industrialized countries due to the lower fertility rates which accompanied the industrialization process and women joining the workforce. At the same time, the state took on the role of providing universal education. The generalization of schooling opened new venues of family social mobility, giving a public and political dimension to the notion of “upbringing” in the education system. Birth rate have continued to drop since the Second World War, from 3.6 births per woman in 1.60 to 1.6 in 2019 in OECD countries (World Bank 2021). China scholars

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<sup>3</sup> The word child did not have the current restricted meaning. In the Middle Age, people would use the word child like the word ‘guy’ nowadays. (Ariès 2014, 177)

have also applied these explanations to analyze how social changes in contemporary China influenced the parent-child relationship (Naftali 2016).<sup>4</sup>

Legal and medical innovations such as divorce, adoption, surrogacy, IVF, have allowed for new forms of biological and legal families. Social changes, such as urbanization, greater rights for women and, women's participation in the labor market have also challenged the social construction of families. These changes have brought scholars to shift their analysis from the family as a holistic unit, to the nuclear family and further to children and parents as distinct categories of actors. The "parent" has now become a discrete social category in its own right (Neyrand 2011). A flourishing literature on reproductive rights has emerged on the processes of becoming a parent and acquiring the parenthood status for different communities, and through different means (Ginsburg and Reiter 1995; Hoghughi and Long 2004). Furthermore, scholars have outlined the need to differentiate genetic parentage from legal parenthood or parental responsibility, as these may be split between different individuals or institutions in relation to a particular child (Bainham 1999).

Parenthood is a status whereas parenting is a verb: to act as a parent toward a child, to care, raise and educate a child. A great variety of individuals in the environment of a child are involved in parenting. Hoghughi and Long define parenting "as purposive activities aimed at ensuring the survival and development of children" (2004, 5). This definition does not contain any legal or biological elements, but rather emphasizes actions. However this definition overlooks the role of emotions in parenting (Kuan 2015). Darling and Steinberg (1993) distinguish parenting style from parenting practices. They define the former as the "emotional climate within which socialization occurs" (1993, 488) whereas the latter describes "goal-directed behaviors through which parents perform their parental duties" (Darling and Steinberg 1993, 488). Building on these authors, I offer my own definition of parenting practices as purposive practices and emotion-work contributing to the enactment of the parent-child relationship.

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Philippe Ariès is often cited by Chinese scholars and taught in sociology class at Universities. During my fieldwork, I participated in sociology courses at University of Nanjing and East Normal University in Shanghai during which the professors mentioned Philippe Ariès as a reference to analyze the impact of modernization on family relationships.

# Governmentality in the Chinese context

The parent's acute sense of responsibility regarding the future success or failure of their child illustrates how governing practices have disciplined the population and configured parents as subjects. In the late 1970s, Foucault underlined that the shift to governmentality has made the family a "privileged instrument for the government of the population" (2006, 140). In his work, Foucault (2006) describes the historical evolution of Western states from the personalization of power in benefit of the prince's rule; to the 'art of government' a diffuse and pervasive distribution of power which disciplines and controls the population in the context of demographic, financial and agricultural expansion. Foucault theorizes the concept of governmentality as an "ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculation and tactics" (Foucault 2006, 142) which discipline the population to maintain order and security. Governmentality also designates a tendency to rely on knowledge and expertise to govern. Building on Foucault, Rose (1996) develops the concept of governmentality as applied to "advanced liberal democracies" meaning that "it is possible to govern without governing *society*, that is to say, to govern through the regulated and accountable choices of autonomous agents – citizens, consumers, parents, employees, managers, investors – and to govern through intensifying and acting upon their allegiance to particular 'communities'" (Rose 1996, 61). Thus, it is important to understand the processes, the mechanisms and the practices that make it possible for individuals to imagine the state, while the latter governs from a distance by organizing "the 'responsibilization' of subjects who are increasingly 'empowered' to discipline themselves" (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 989).

Although the conceptualization of governmentality has largely been applied to the analyses of an advanced liberal governmental agenda, it offers important insights into the practices of government in non-democratic contexts as well. Recent scholarship applies the concept of governmentality to the Chinese context to question the understanding of a strong state facing a weak society (Sigley 1996, 2006; Jeffreys and Sigley 2009; Bray and Jeffreys 2016). According to Sigley (2006), Chinese governmentality differs from its western variants not because of the lack of freedom of

the citizens but rather because of its higher reliance on technoscientific knowledge and its deterministic discourse regarding the consequences of individuals' choices. Hoffman (2006) illustrates how the shift from state-organized job assignments system to an individualized labour market in the 1990s has not only made individuals responsible for their future but also for the future of the nation. She outlines how individuals' "choice and autonomy are *a part of* the governing and subject formation processes" (Hoffman 2006, 553). Hoffman further argues that Chinese governmentality differs from the western neoliberal version because of its strong nationalist dimension. For instance, she shows how the Chinese version of governmentality encourages young graduates to fulfill their professional potential through responsible choices by suggesting that it is part of their duty as citizens, since it will enable them to build a stronger Chinese nation (Hoffman 2006). Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) describe two stages in the Chinese process of governmentalization in the domain of population policy. First, during the Deng era in the 1980s, the construction of state-bureaucratic capacity allowed for the strict implementation of the family planning policies. The second stage, during the Jiang and Hu eras from the 1990s to the 2000s, led to "professional disciplines and individual self-governance" (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005, 23). I argue that this process evolved to a third stage in the 2000s, due to the emergence of state-organized competitive spaces in which citizens feel responsible for their choices and their life success. This competition is reinforced by state-led nationalist discourses which underline that citizens should employ their autonomy to govern themselves and pay respect to their nation. This process configures how parents raise their children.

Since the 1980s, education reforms in many countries led to the emergence of competitive education market relying on parents' sense of duty to invest in their child's education. This phenomenon is best described by Philip Brown's concept of parentocracy, whereby the state introduces reforms to encourage parents to believe that "the education a child receives must conform to the *wealth* and *wishes* of parents rather than the *abilities* and *efforts* of pupils" (Brown 1990, 65, italic in the original text). The emergence of parentocracy overturns the idea of meritocracy. The child's merit is no longer a criterion for accessing educational resources. The social, cultural, and economic capital of a household overdetermine the wealth and wishes of parents and thus a child's capacity to access education and build a future. Selecting and securing the appropriate educational resources for one's child is a way for parents to perform and reproduce

their social position. Jin and Di (2015) argue that parentocracy, is a widespread phenomenon in urban China undermining equity and fairness in the distribution of public educational resources. A parentocratic education system downplays the responsibility of government to fight against social reproduction.

I argue that the emergence of an education market leading to a parentocratic education system is a tool to govern the Chinese population. The government frames parents as autonomous subjects whose choices have a decisive impact on social mobility to give parents the illusion that they are accountable for their child's social success.

## **Parents and education reforms**

Parents' heavy investment in the education of their children raises their awareness about education policies and local regulations. I argue that this high awareness for policies reactivate the process of political socialization defined by Galsberg and Deri as the "process by which individuals learn and frequently internalize a political lens framing their perceptions of how power is arranged and how the world around them is (and should be) organized; those perceptions, in turn, shape and define individuals' definitions of who they are and how they should behave in the political and economic institutions in which they live" (Glasberg and Deric 2011, 47). This reactivated political socialization can lead to forms of civic activism, such as street-protests or legal pursuits against local authorities.

To analyze the politicization of parent practices, I use the concept of cause field developed by Laure Bereni to analyze women's movements in France in the 1990s. Building on Bourdieu's concept of field, Bereni defines a cause field as a set of mobilizing structures mostly devoted to the advancement of a specific cause, "cutting across the line between civil society and political institutions" (Bereni 2021, 208). These structures can have contrasted, sometimes conflicting claims. The important feature for Bereni and for my own research is to move beyond the clear division between civil society and political institutions. A cause field encompasses intra and extra-institutional actors. In the parents' cause field this aspect is crucial, because the state is highly involved in the legal and practical definition of parenthood and parenting practices. On the one hand, governments also often blur the boundaries between formal institutions and informal

organizations to mobilize parents as volunteers supporting other parents or children. In their review of parenting support program, UNICEF shows that parents are often mobilized by support programs to volunteer to help other parents. For instance in China volunteer mothers are recruited to help left-behind children; in Belarus fathers are recruited as volunteer trainers in the Father School, and mentor mothers are recruited in South Africa to “help improve maternal skills” in low-income households (UNICEF et al. 2015, 28). On the other hand, parents’ organizations often establish institutional relations with schools. For instance, in France, parent representatives are now an integral part of the education community (Gombert 2008; Barthélémy 1995).

The concept of cause field captures the imbalanced power relationship among a group who supposedly defend the same cause. First, the primary assumption shaping the parent cause field is that most parents defend their child’s interests by investing resources and sometimes getting involved in civic activism. However, the emergence of competitive education market has pitted parents against each other in the race for the best schools. I argue that middle-class parents defend their child’s interests to the detriment of working-class families by resisting policies aiming at redistributing educational resources.

Second, I argue that middle-class parents actively participate in social reproduction by devising educational strategies which mobilize their social, cultural, and economic capital. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of capital (Bourdieu 1986), I define social capital as the family’s interpersonal relations, also called *guanxi* in Chinese. The cultural capital is divided into two forms of capital: the knowledge transmitted within the family and the familiarity with social codes and procedures. The household’s revenues and real-estate properties constitute economic capital. Finally, there is an additional form of capital that is specific to the Chinese context: the household registration or *hukou*, which officially anchors a family to a district. The mobilization of resources shows the power imbalance in the parent cause field.

## **Methodology**

This study builds on the literature of the anthropology of the state (Sharma and Gupta 2006; Abélès 2005) and explores how governing techniques and interactions



shape parent-identity and parenting practices. Hagman and Péclard (2010) provide a compelling heuristic framework to study power configurations and local instantiations of the state, which they call *negotiated statehood* as it is produced “through processes of negotiation, contestation and bricolage” (Hagmann and Péclard 2010, 544). Their framework proposes to study three elements: actors, arenas, and repertoires of actions. In my research, I observed the discourses and practices of three sets of actors: families composed of children, parents and grandparents; state representatives, that is central authorities and street-level bureaucrats such as teachers and school principals; and, private companies in the education and the real-estate sectors.

Hagman and Péclard (2010) use the term “negotiation arenas” as a tool for the researcher “to identify the confines of the political space in which actor groups bargain material and symbolic dimensions of statehood. [...] Within these arenas statehood is negotiated in more or less formalized and routinized ways” (Hagmann and Péclard 2010, 543). In addition, Hagman and Péclard show “negotiation arenas are difficult to locate geographically as they are embedded in social relations between contending groups and are characterized by spatio-temporal dynamics and a certain informality” (Hagmann and Péclard 2010, 551). In this study, I analyzed the role played by state and non-state actors interacting to negotiate education policies. In China, between 1949 and the 1980s, when it came to education, the main negotiation arenas were confined to the relations between families, the Communist Party and the work-units which provided childcare and school services.<sup>5</sup> However, by the 1990s, the progressive liberalization of the education system and emergence of a private education market opened new arenas for families to negotiate the role of the state in the education of their children. In those relational and dynamic arenas, I observed the performative discourses of each actor (state, private companies and families) which I argue are various ways through which each actor negotiates what is the role of state. These negotiations use different repertoires of actions, including: coercion, consultation, protests, legal pursuits, corruption and lobbying. The use of these repertoires of actions depends on the resources available to each set of actors at specific moments. In this study, I argue that negotiation arenas transform parent perception of the state and politics.

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<sup>5</sup> The work-unit, in Chinese 单位 [dānwèi], is formally the place of employment for all individuals in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). These units also served as multifunctional collective institutions in urban areas, distributing social welfare, providing childcare services, canteens and so on. They are often defined as a governing tool for the Chinese regime to control the population, especially during the Maoist era (D. Bray 2005).

To observe the interactions between the state governing from a distance and parents as political actors, I combined multiple qualitative research methods both onsite and online. I conducted an immersive fieldwork in Nanjing, a city of about 8 million inhabitants, and the capital of one of the richest provinces of China: Jiangsu. Nanjing is part of the “new tier 1” city with Chengdu, Chongqing, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Tianjin, Suzhou, Xi’an, Changsha, Shenyang, Qingdao, Zhengzhou, Dalian, Dongguan and Ningbo.<sup>6</sup> Because of its administrative status, Nanjing was one of the cities selected to test educational reforms such as the strengthening of school zoning policies in 2014.

As the first capital of the Ming dynasty (1368-1421), Nanjing has a long cultural history and well-established public education infrastructure. The oldest schools, while remaining public, have a solid reputation for excellence. By contrast, in Shanghai most of the elite establishments, apart from the universities, are private because of the relatively recent economic development of the city and the expansion of the educational landscape during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the foreign concessions. In Nanjing, the middle classes fiercely compete to enroll their children in the best public schools. Only a few private schools (e.g., the Sujie School) attract children from the middle and upper classes. Officially, the public and private education system leaves little room for parents to play a role in the admission process. Enrolment in public schools is determined by a zoning system based on the household’s place of residence. However, numerous strategies are used by middle-class parents to circumvent this system. For instance, parents make financial donations to the school; stage their child’s unique talents; or use their social network to arrange a meeting with the director of the desired school. Private schools have more freedom in their selection processes. From nursery school onwards they select children depending not only on their skills, but also on the parents’ economic situation and social status.

### ***Immersive fieldwork in Nanjing***

In 2018, I followed middle-class parents for eight months as they pursued educational activities and developed school selection strategies.<sup>7</sup> I started the fieldwork

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<sup>6</sup> The Chinese city tier system is an unofficial hierarchical classification of Chinese cities based on population, wealth and business attractiveness. The Tier-1 includes: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. In 2017, the financial magazine, *Yicai Global*, ranked 338 cities into 6 tiers: the Tier-1, the New Tier-1, the Tier-2, the Tier-3 and so on.

<sup>7</sup> To conduct this research, I was granted the support from the Concordia Human Research Ethics Committee on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The certificate n°30009469 is reproduced in Annex 4.

in August by meeting with Amy Wang, director of La Source, a local learning centre.<sup>8</sup> La Source offers childcare services for children aged 2 to 3 and out-of-school lessons in writing and painting for children aged 3 to 6. While helping the director to set up English lessons for the 3- to 6-year-olds, I observed the interactions between the parents, the director and the teachers. At the end of August, I attended the Summer Preschool graduation day. Amy Wang, the director, introduced me as a researcher working on parenting and school choice in Nanjing. I met the children and the parents and joined the online WeChat discussion, on which parents quickly started exchanging information about the coming school year and how to best prepare children to enter kindergarten. Most children attending La Source enrolled in the same neighboring public kindergarten. Starting from September, during evening classes, I sat in on discussions between parents in the waiting room and carried out in-depth interviews with consenting parents. At special occasions, I accompanied some parents to activities with their children and meetings with teachers at school and extra-curricular learning centers.

During the discussions, I collected a large number of online resources (websites, podcasts, and articles) that the parents used to find out about schools, extracurricular activities and children's education in general. After a few weeks, an acquaintance introduced me to a parents' network called Support for Parents of Nanjing Foreign Languages School.<sup>9</sup> This network, created in 2015 by Ms. Sang, defines itself as an "independent media outlet" publishing articles on schools, extracurricular activities and children's education.<sup>10</sup> Since its creation, the network has grown, now employing two people who organize several weekly events entitled Good Parents Classroom, during which a model parent, usually a mother, is invited to share her experiences.<sup>11</sup> More than one hundred sessions were in 2019. According to the employees, the network is becoming known throughout China and parents come from other towns to attend the

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<sup>8</sup> I call this a 'local' learning centre because it is not affiliated to any large company and most of the children live in the neighbourhood. It is a registered and for-profit company. The name "La Source" was chosen by Amy Wang, the director after her four-year stay in France. In French, "Le Source" means the water spring or the origin. She thought this name would attract customers to use a French word, which is also translatable in English. During our meeting she rejected any form of anonymity, most probably because she assumed being cited in a research by a foreign scholar could be good advertisement for her business.

<sup>9</sup> In Chinese 南外家长帮 [nán wài jiāzhǎng bang].

<sup>10</sup> Literally, a 自媒体 [zì méitǐ] means a self-media outlet, similar to websites specialising in information, but only open on the WeChat platform. Any user can follow any self-media and receive the information, articles or invitations published by that self-media. In general, these self-media or official public accounts are financed by the advertising they host.

<sup>11</sup> In Chinese 好家长课堂 [hǎojiāzhǎng kètáng].

Good Parents Classroom. The model parents are recruited according to the school results of their children, a model according to which the child’s academic success are proof of the parents making the right educational choices and therefore being “good parents”.

The parents I met through the Support for Parents of Nanjing Foreign Languages School network were generally of a higher social status than those from La Source. The former group consisted of private company executives and senior-level public sector employees, whereas the latter were low-ranking managers, employees and shopkeepers. Most of the parents had stable jobs and the capacity to dedicate a large share of their household budget to education. All the parents could afford to enroll their child in extra-curricular courses but nearly all of them mentioned that education expenses impacted their budget.

Over the course of my eight months of observation, I carried out thirty seven formal interviews, half of them with parents met at La Source and half with parents from the support network. Each interview lasted from 50min to 1h30 and was conducted and recorded entirely in Chinese by myself to ensure an equivalent treatment for all interviewees, with the exception of one interview with an American father married to a Chinese woman and residing in Nanjing whom I interviewed in English.<sup>12</sup>Nearly two-thirds of the interviews were with mothers, a third with fathers, two with grandmothers and one with the support network employees. In the table below, I present a quantitative description of the interviewees.

<b>Households</b>	<b>Persons</b>	<b>Fathers</b>	<b>Mothers</b>	<b>Grandparents (women)</b>	<b>Two-child households</b>
32	34	8	24	2	5

Most of my interviewees were in their thirties or early forties, raised as the first generation of single children in the 1980s during the Deng era. For the majority they were raised in urban centers where they directly experienced the rapid economic development, the massification of higher education, the liberalization of the labour market and the opening of China to the global market. They had their children in the mid-2000s, when the family planning policies started to being relaxed in some areas. During my fieldwork, I encountered only five out of thirties households with two children. Most of my interviewees clearly expressed that they did not want a second

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<sup>12</sup> I then hired a Chinese undergraduate student to transcribe in Chinese all the interviews. Finally, I coded the Chinese transcription of each interview and translated in English the sections used in the dissertation.

child, because raising the first one was already a source of anxiety and exhaustion.

Although I did not conduct interviews with children, the age of the child was a criterion to select the households. I interviewed parents with school-age children or children who were about to enroll in school, preferably aged from 3 to 13 years old.

<b>Children</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Age 0 - 6 (K-)</b>	<b>Age 6 - 11 (PS)</b>	<b>Age 11 - 15 (JHS)</b>	<b>Age 15 - 18 (SHS)</b>
37	17	20	17	10	8	2

K = Kindergarten; PS = Primary School; JHS = Junior High School; SHS = Senior High School

In the two-child households, the first child was usually much older than the second one. For instance, in one household the older son was 17 years old and about to take the university entrance examination, while the younger daughter was 3 years old and about to attend kindergarten.

My interviews were structured in six sections. First, I asked parents to describe and explain their child’s schooling history (school and extra-curricular activities). Parents were also asked to evaluate the quality of the schools they chose. Second, parents described their interactions with the schools, in particular their use or lack thereof of phone applications and group study. Third, we discussed the involvement of the different members of the family in the education of the child. Fourth, I traced back the residential history of the family and whether it was influence by the child’s schooling. Fifth, we had a discussion about education policies and the state’s discourse regarding education. Several expressions used by the state such as ‘Quality Education’; ‘Happy Education’; ‘Reducing the burden’; ‘suppression of schools rankings’ were brought up by the interviewees themselves. The interview ended by a discussion on a recent newspaper article reporting on the story which opens this introduction and the consequences of the shutdown of a school for migrant workers’ children by the Suzhou education bureau. We discussed this article and I used it to observe the discourses critiquing or justifying the decision of public authority and the parents’ reaction. These steps were not followed in a specific order, as I wanted for the parent to share their own perspective and for the conversation to flow naturally.

During the fieldwork in Nanjing, I also collected physical materials recommended by the interviewees to document parents’ experiences. In this dissertation, I provide an in-depth analysis of two of these documents. First, to understand the intense normative discourse around motherhood, I analyzed the best-selling book on intensive

motherhood, *A good mother is better than a good teacher* from Yin Jianli (Cheng 2014), which sold more than 12 million copies between 2009 and 2017.<sup>13</sup> Second, I examined the influence of real-estate companies on the educational trajectories of the middle-class families. During fieldwork in Nanjing, I collected a booklet on education-apartment published by one of the major Chinese real estate agencies, House365.<sup>14</sup> The analysis of this booklet gives an overview of the discourse produced by real estate agencies and how it supplements the discourse of other actors from the private sector.

A second field study trip, planned for the summer 2020 in order to meet with the families again and deepen my analysis of the social and academic careers of children and parents, was cancelled due to the global pandemic. Two of the main goals of this second fieldtrip would have been to better understand the education market and examine the trajectories of mothers who dedicated their life and professional career to mothering (see Chapter 5).

### ***Offsite discursive analysis***

Having to cancel of the second leg of my fieldwork led me to reorient my fieldwork toward online resources. Luckily, the year 2021 was very rich in terms of discursive production on family and parents in China. In the spring, the publication of census data showed a drastic decline in the birth rate, sparking debates on policy measures to incentivize families to have more children. In the summer of 2021, the government's crackdown of the private education sector produced a wealth of statements from officials, experts and companies on the impact of extra-curricular activities, and more broadly on school competition and the educational financial burden on families. Finally in the fall of 2021, the government promulgated the Family Education Promotion Law (FEPL) which defines a detailed legal frame for parenting practices. As such, 2021 provided a particularly interesting setting for me to further my understanding of the political dimension of parenting practices and led to examine two key dynamics.

First, I traced the genesis of the FEPL and sought to better understand the Chinese state's discourse on the family institution and parent-child relationship. To this end, I collected online archives mainly produced by the state, the Party and the All-China Women Federation (ACWF).<sup>15</sup> I focused on documenting the successive "Five-Virtue

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<sup>13</sup> The title of the book in Chinese is 好妈妈胜过好老师 [Hǎo māmā shèngguò hǎo lǎoshī]

<sup>14</sup> In Chinese 365 淘房 [táo fáng]

<sup>15</sup> The ACWF is a mass organization founded in 1949 at the same time as the establishment of the People's

Family” campaigns by collecting promotional flyers, official documents, and newspaper articles.<sup>16</sup> This campaign is mentioned by representatives advocating for the recent law, and the ACWF is mentioned by the government as one of the main enforcers of the FEPL with public schools. I conducted a discursive analysis of online archival materials to analyze the institutional and governmental documents on parenting practices. The most recent version of this campaign has transformed into a televised family pageant competition, in which selected families tell their story in front of the camera (CCTV 2019). Based on discussion with my interviewees, this state-sponsored show does not seem to such a great reach, but it illustrates the state’s normative discourse on the ideal family. In chapter 3, I analyze some family stories showcased by local chapters of the ACWF and by the national competition.

Second, to understand the relationship between private companies and parents as an arena shaping parenting norms and how the state influence these norms through regulating of private companies, I analyze an online service mentioned by several interviewees, called Parents’ Helper.<sup>17</sup> This mobile application is the most comprehensive parenting service I came across during my fieldwork. This service was developed by one of the major Chinese education companies, *Tomorrow Advancing Life* (TAL Education Group), first as a website then as a multiplatform service with a mobile application. The TAL Education Group was founded in 2003 under the name Xueersi by graduate students from an elite university in Beijing to provide mathematics tutoring to children especially training for Olympiads (Yan 2019; Zhang and Bray 2020). Seven years after its establishment in an elite district of the capital, the company went public on the New York Stock Exchange in 2010. In 2013, the company took the name Tomorrow Advancing Life (TAL) Education Group (see on the top of organizational chart on Fig. 1) and incorporated eight brands (see the second and third lines on Fig. 1). On the second line, from left to right, the brands are: Xueersi Online School, Zhikang one-on-one, Xueersi Peiyou which correspond to the initial elite learning centers, the Moby brand for toddlers, and on far right the platform Parents’ Helpers. On the third line, from left to right, the brands are: Xueersi Science, Happy English, East School for Chinese supplementary courses. Each brand offers specialized services to children and students.

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Republic of China, and aiming at mobilizing women in the construction of the new socialist China.

<sup>16</sup> The title of the campaign in Chinese is 五好家庭 [wǔ hǎo jiātíng]

<sup>17</sup> In Chinese, called 家长帮 [jiāzhǎng bang], the URL is the acronym of the *pinyin* that is jzb.com

Some of these brands have been acquired and some were created by TAL Education Group. According to the company’s presentation documents for investors, the group has more than a thousand learning centers dispersed over 90 cities in China (TAL Education Group 2021). In this study, I focus on the platform Parents’ Helper which is the logo located on the far right of the second line.

**Figure 1. Organization chart of the TAL Education Group<sup>18</sup>**



I analyzed the arborescence and the content of the website and the mobile application. Before accessing the content, whether the website or the mobile application, users must identify their location and their child’s age. This information personalizes the content depending on the user’s characteristics. For my research, I posed as a parent from Nanjing with a five-year-old child about to enroll in primary school.<sup>19</sup>

Following the lack of regular updates, the website has progressively become obsolete. However, the mobile application is regularly updated, interactions on the app are frequent, and the online community of parents is growing. I focus on the mobile application in the analysis and sometimes refer to the website content (see chapter 4). The mobile application is structured by four tabs accessible with four icons on the bottom of the application: Recommendation; Parents’ University; Local; My profile.<sup>20</sup> The first tab aggregates media content about parenting and school admission. This page is divided into two main categories: expert live broadcasts and media articles. Experts are selected by the platform, after 40-45 minutes of solo presentation in front of the

<sup>18</sup> Origin of the chart: <https://www.163.com/dy/article/GOP3MMH40536QDVA.html>, extracted on November 14<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>19</sup> I did not interact with real-life human users of the mobile application, because this would have required the modification of my ethics protocol and the access to the pay walled sections of the mobile application. In this research, I only observed and collected information which are publicly available.

<sup>20</sup> In Chinese it is respectively: 头条 [tóutiáo], 家长大学 [jiāzhǎng dàxué], 本地 [běndì], 我的 [wǒ de]



camera, there is a Question & Answer period, during which time parents ask questions on the chat, and the expert answers orally. The second section, “Recommendations for parents” aggregates newspaper articles initially published on other platforms. These articles cover current news, such as stories of high-achieving children, the last government debate on the education law, or the latest consumer trends (e.g., the best New Zealand milk or the last education game). The page ‘Recommendation for parents’ is accessible free of charge. As the first page to appear when users open the application, it attracts parents’ attention with commonly asked questions and ready-for-use solutions. From there, parents are invited to access more elaborate content, such as the Parents’ University. The core of the mobile application is the Parents’ University, where most of the commercialized content appears. The Parents’ University is a compilation of online courses for parents organized in themes such as parent-child communication, cognitive science, puberty, kindergarten, primary school, high school, and parents-school communication. Each course costs about 400RMB.<sup>21</sup> All live broadcasted experts’ videos accessible on page “Recommendation for parents” are also displayed on the page of the Parents’ University for free. The platform Parents’ Helper also provides various opportunities to create virtual spaces for interactions. First, it started as a forum website, where parents opened discussions with a question about a specific issue or a challenge that they are facing and platform users give answers. Then, the Parents’ Helper transformed into a mobile application, connected with the Chinese social network WeChat. Each page has a WeChat button enabling users to share on their social network profile and join a WeChat users group interested in the same topic. The analysis of the multiplatform service Parents’ Helper combined content and discourse analysis and digital user experience methods looking at the functionalities offered by the platform (Rouquette 2009).

This online and offline fieldwork provides an extensive picture of the environment in which Chinese parents from the urban middle-class devise their educational strategies, giving an overview of the interactions between the three types of actors: families, state actors and private companies. I argue that this normative and interactive environment lead to a renewed interest for and interaction with educational policies and reactivate the political socialization of urban middle-class parents.

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<sup>21</sup> In July 2021, 400RMB is around 52€ and 77\$CA.

# Outline of the dissertation

In chapter 1 and 2, the literature review presents the different concepts such as political socialization, politicization, and introduces the key discourses (natalist and nationalis) framing parents' practices in China and more broadly in the developed world. In chapter 1, I argue that a new global era of politicized parenthood is characterized by a contested definition of parenthood as not exclusive to mothers, a revival of nationalist discourses politicizing parent-identity, and finally, a form of rights-based activism focused on the 'future' of children. In chapter 2, I argue that these phenomena play a crucial role in the Chinese context to rethink state-society relationships. The nationalist discourse at the center of the China Dream promoted by Xi Jinping is a discourse of neofamilialism. The Family Education Law promulgated in October 2021, gives further political weight to parenting practices already under heightened pressure and surveillance. However, the current demographic issue – falling birth rates and a rapidly aging population – simultaneously pressures the state to entice the urban middle class parents to have more children and 'save the nation' from population decline.

In chapter 3, I examine how the state produces and disseminates a normative framework on parenting. The chapter shows the evolution of the mass-mobilization Five-Virtue Family Campaigns first launched in the 1950s which framing shifted from the family institution as an economic production unit to the family as basic unit of nation-building. I argue that this shift led to the promulgation of the Family Education Promotion Law (FEPL) in October 2021, which stipulates precisely how parents should raise their children and configure parents as the subject of state-led normative discourses.

In chapter 4, I show how, starting from the 2010s, the for-profit private sector has been reinforcing the normative framework produced by the state via a parenting market selling services and products. In chapter 5, I look at how parents enact and negotiate these norms. I show that some parents, especially mothers, reclaim the capacity to produce knowledge on parenting practices. Mothers from the upper middle-class use their agency to become 'professional mothers', selling their advice to earn a living. In chapter 6, I argue that the urban middle-class parents devise strategies to secure the

best educational resources for their children and protect the familial privileged position. I highlight the different resources mobilized by upper and lower middle class parents. Finally, chapter 7 illustrates how parents question the formulation and implementation of education policies. Parents question the principles of equity and justice used to justify education policies, sometimes they participate in online or street protests to denounce what they consider unfair distribution of educational resources. I demonstrate how at the same time, parents also support and reinforce institutional practices, such as monitoring teachers and education professionals. To conclude, I argue that the activism of urban middle-class parents does not question or threaten the current authoritarian regime in China, but rather rejects education policies which might threaten their class interests.

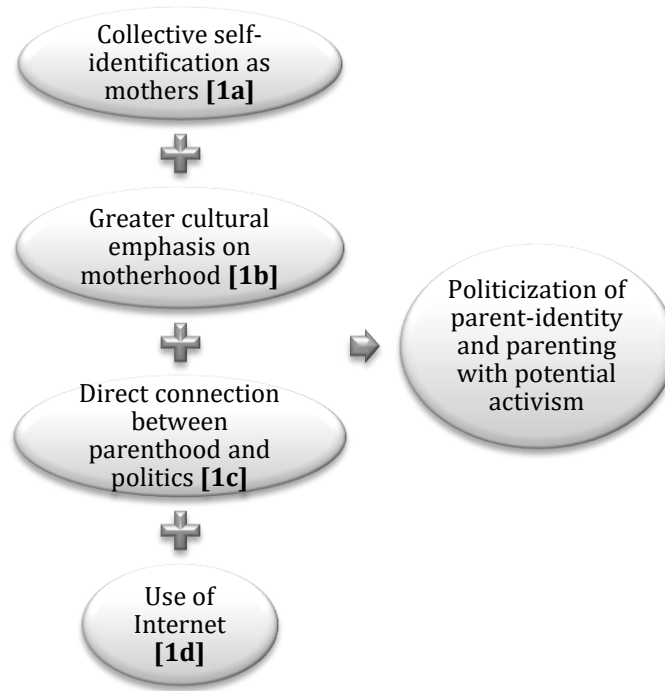
# Chapter 1. Conceptualizing Parents as Political Subjects

In May 2016, thousands of parents in major cities across China protested against quotas that had been recently established for university entrance examinations. Worried that their children might not gain entrance to a top university, these economically privileged parents sought to overturn quotas established to favor students from poorer regions. In Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu province, for example, parents mobilized to “call out” officials. This shows their active engagement and desire to influence education policies (T.-P. Chen 2016). Specifically, these parents attempted to hold the state accountable for the educational opportunities offered to their children, even as their advocacy clashed with other state goals, such as improving social equity. The recent street protests have brought parenting into the public sphere in a dramatic way. Why do parents take educational matters to the streets? In this dissertation, I explain parent protests as part of a new era of politicized parenting.

To date, political science was not conceptualized the parent-identity and parenting practices as a research subject or a political category. Despite a rich literature on the maternalist politics and mothers’ activism which emerged as early as the 1990s (Ruddick 1995; Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor 1997; Fisher 1989; Swerdlow 1993; McClintock 1993; Koven and Michel 1993), political scientists do not conceptualize mothers and parents as full-fledged political subjects. For instance, scholars do not give the same attention to parents’ voting behavior as to that of youth or the working class. Similarly, parent mobilizations rarely emerge as a specific topic in the study of social movements. My research on Chinese middle-class parents suggests that this is an oversight. Indeed, given that individuals are increasingly mobilizing under a parent-identity, comparative politics should conceptualize parents as political actors. This chapter provides a broad overview of what I see as the global emergence of a new form of “politicized parenting”.

My conceptualization of “politicized parenting” builds on Langner, Greenlee and Deason’s (2017) framework on “politicized motherhood,” which offers compelling

explanations on how the personal can become political (cf. Figure 1). Their explanations draw from historical examples and articulate individual and collective motives to account for mothers engaging in civic activism. This framework “provides a context in which mothers’ identities are likely to become politicized via greater cultural emphasis on motherhood [1b on Fig. 2], explicit connections between parenthood and politics [1c on Fig. 2], and use of the Internet to connect parents [1d on Fig. 2]” (193).



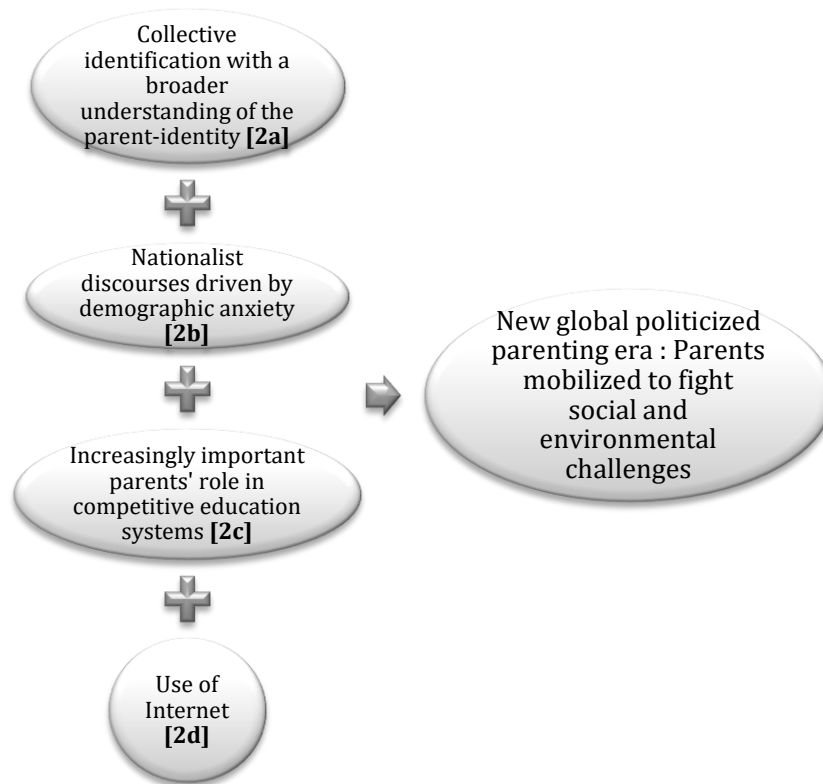
**Figure 2. Theoretical framework developed by Langner, Greenlee and Deason (2017)<sup>22</sup>**

I diverge from the theoretical framework of Langer et al. (2017) on several points (see **Fig. 2**). First, the authors focus mainly on “women as the default parent” (**1a** on **Fig. 2**) and concede that their framework “does not place enough responsibility on men, both in the political world and in the non-political world” (Langner, Greenlee, and Deason 2017, 192). In earlier research, parents’ mobilizations were mostly mothers’ mobilizations. In the 1960s, Mothers Strike for Peace protested against nuclear proliferation (Swerdlow 1993). In the 1980s-90s, the mobilization of mothers attracted scholars’ attention, especially in Latin America (O’Connor 2014). In Argentina, for example, the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* mobilized for the identification of relatives who were being disappeared by the dictatorship (Fisher 1989). This mobilization symbolized

<sup>22</sup> This chart is produced by the author of this research.

the peaceful but powerful resistance against the bloody military junta that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. In the Middle East, mothers organize for peace in the Israel-Palestine conflict (Hammami 1997; Sharoni 1997). In the early 1990s, the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia became worldly known for its fight against the first Chechen War and the military conscription of Russian youth (Lebedev 2013). Yet, the current parent-identity encompasses a broader range of category of individuals than just cisgender female mothers. Scholars showed a rising self-awareness of fatherhood among males (Lamb 1987; Seward and Stanley-Stevens 2014; Fitzgerald et al. 2020). As early as the 1980s, fathers were fighting for parenting rights in the USA and France (Vogel and Verjus 2013; Leport 2020; Hagan 1992). Moreover, in many countries, marginalized communities such as LGBTQIA+ fight for reproductive rights and to be recognized as parents. In the early 1980s, same-sex couples also began fighting for legal parenting rights in California, and their struggles quickly spread across the US and the world (NeJaime 2016). I argue that, although the parent-identity is still a gendered subject, and women around the world perform most parenting tasks, non-women are becoming more and more visible in their fight for reproductive and parenting rights (**2a** on Fig. 3), giving a new dimension to the politicization of parenting.

Second, the Langner et al. (2017) theoretical model focuses on the individual level, that is the self-identification as mothers. The two other explanatory factors, the “cultural context” and “the direct connection between parenthood and politics,” are not elaborated in the authors' writings. In this study, I assume that the rise of nationalist discourses driven by demographic anxiety characterizes the general “cultural context” leading to renewed politicized parenting (**2b** on Fig.3). At the same time, the intensifying global competition between education systems increases the role of parents in ensuring children's school performance. Thus, I argue that parenting practices are directly connected to education policies (**2c** on Fig. 3).



**Figure 3. Theoretical framework for a politicized parenting era<sup>23</sup>**

In this chapter, I show how parents configure and are configured by political discourses and public policies on three levels: first, at the macro and discursive level, parenting is at the heart of countries' nation-building project (1); second, at the meso and society level, parenting is at the heart of countries' social project to fight against the familial reproduction of social inequalities (2); and finally, at the micro and individual level, parenting is at the heart of family project to defend the children' interests (3).

First, I show how the revival of nationalist projects in many countries around the world provides a general context for the politicization of parenting. Some governments across regime types revive the image of the motherland and the role of the family to guarantee the nation's future and strengthen national cohesion. These nationalist projects are reinforced by familialist welfare policies implemented to battle demographic imbalance due to aging populations. Families and parents are at the heart of nationalist discourses, symbolizing the cohesion and the future of the nation.

<sup>23</sup> This chart is produced by the author of this research.

Second, I show that education policies directly connect parenting practices with government action. The family institution is presented as the heart of the social reproduction mechanisms that reinforce social inequalities. The state deflects the attention from its responsibility to reduce social inequalities through public education provision onto parents who should educate their children and wisely devise educational strategies to harvest or balance out the family pre-existing resources.

Finally, I argue that parents are full-fledged political subjects and I characterize parent activism. First, using the concept of cause field (Bereni 2021), I show that parent activism cuts “across the line between civil society and political institutions” (Bereni 2021, 208). Parents are mobilized by the institutions which implement education policies at the local level. They can use institutional venues such as teacher-parent meetings to advocate for their cause. However, they also organize public demonstration of discontent, such as protests, or sit-ins. In this research, I explore the diversity of actors enacting a parent-identity and parenting practices. Second, I use a broad definition of activism to include new forms of activism such as blogging and informal community building, given these practices’ ability to influence current politics. I argue that the pervasive and daily use of the internet blurs the limits between parenting and activism. Finally, parent protests are not specific to social movements on the left or right, nor do they reflect a certain class. I show that parents present themselves as advocates for their child, in a form of “other-advocacy” (Langner, Greenlee, and Deason 2017) questioning the traditional distinction between class-based and identity-based social movements.



# The nationalist revival: from natalist policies to raising the right kind of children

There are fewer and fewer children born in Europe. For the West, the answer (to that challenge) is immigration. For every missing child there should be one coming in and then the numbers will be fine, but we do not need numbers. We need Hungarian children. (Szakacs 2019)

Viktor Orbán, Hungarian Prime Minister, announcing a Family Protection Action Plan, with loan program and fiscal incentives to increase the birthrate of Hungarian citizens, on February 10th 2019

Wilders understands that culture and demographics are our destiny. We can't restore our civilization with somebody else's babies, (Brostoff 2019)

Steve King, Iowa Republican congressman in a tweet about the nationalist Dutch politician Geert Wilders, on March 12th 2017

Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of pro-nativist discourses to protect ethnocentric definitions of the nation, largely articulated by politicians on the far-right. In October 2018, John B. Judis (2018) explained in *The Nationalist Revival* that nationalist discourses and politicians are back in the spotlight due to the deepening of globalization among trade elites. Claire Sutherland argues that ideologies are adapting to “the ‘cosmopolitan challenge’, used to denote a set of trends ranging from migration and the creation of diasporas to the even wider phenomena of transnationalism, regionalization and globalization” (Sutherland 2011). In this study, I am less interested in explaining the causes of the nationalist revival as I am in exploring how these nationalist discourses center mothers and parents at the heart of their project to protect national cohesion. I show that the upsurge of nationalist pro-nativist discourses against so-called demographic threats can foster the politicization of a parent-identity. Yet, parents worldwide also partake in social activism on behalf of their children without a populist and nationalist context.

Early nationalist studies focused on establishing a link between nation-building and modernization. Nationalism was seen as a necessary movement to build intelligible and stable nation-states, especially in Western Europe in the late nineteenth century but also in the decolonized countries in the second half of the century (A.D. Smith 1998; Greenfeld 1993). As Brubaker (2020) argues “nationalism was construed by key theorists as a major vector of historical development, central to the epoch-making

political, social, economic and cultural transformations of modernity” (Brubaker 2020, 47). In the 1980s and 1990s, the turn away from structural – economic and social – theories of nationalism (Gellner 2009 [1983]) toward discursive and cultural conceptualisations of the nation (Anderson 2006 [1983]) led progressively to more micro-level analyses of nationalism, examining how individual citizens experience and perform nationalism (Billig 1995). The literature offers two distinct conceptions of nationalism based on distinct criteria: ethno-cultural features and civic characteristics. The former relies on ethno-demographic or cultural features to draw the putative boundaries of the national community; the latter conceptualize the national community as a voluntary and rational political form. Several authors have criticized this strict dichotomy (Brubaker 1999; Nielsen 1999; Dieckhoff 2006). The nativist far-right discourses mentioned above rely resolutely on an ethno-centric conception of the nation. This type of discourses is not new. Pronatalist policies have been linked with far right movements since the World War II (King 2002). King shows that in Israel, Singapore, France and Romania pronatalist welfare programmes reflect ethno-nationalist ideologies. Writing in the early 2000s, King argues that “ethno-nationalist visions of the nation may become less influential, in part due to demographic imperatives” (King 2002, 367). He assumes that in order to compensate for aging populations, government will open their borders to migrants. The opposite trend is occurring, as ethno-nationalist discourses are very much present on the political stage in Trump’s USA, and in Europe with Mateo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, the radical right-wing AfD in Germany, the National Front in France, but also in Russia, Turkey, India and China.

These political developments are often also qualified as promoting populist discourses. Conceptualizing the overlapping but distinctive features of populism and nationalism, Brubaker (2020) concurs with De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) that populism focuses on the opposition between ‘the elites’ and ‘the people’, whereas nationalism focuses on the inside-outside dimension of the national community. In my research, I focus on this latter dimension which justifies nativist, ethnic and xenophobic discourses. In the current nationalist revival, the nation has to be saved or protected against demographic threats. Thus women’s reproduction power/function and, more broadly, parents are situated at the heart of nationalist projects. I show that the nation-as-family metaphor became prevalent in the representation of the nation and how

feminist scholarship sheds light on women's role in nation-building and the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation. Then, I argue that natalist policies and demands for greater reproductive rights claims have brought parenting to the forefront of the political stage.

## **The nation-as-family metaphor**

Building on the latter literature in nationalism studies, I argue that the current nationalist renewal in many authoritarian states, such as China and Russia and in more and more Western democratic countries, such as Italy, Brazil, the United States, France, Hungary, relies heavily on the metaphor of the nation as a threatened family. These discourses provide a favorable context for politicizing familial identities and practices. Lauenstein et al. (2015) show that the prevalence of family representation in national anthems around the globe produces what they call an imagined family. They argue that describing nations as imagined families rather than mere 'imagined communities' is not only a theoretical tool for scholars. It is also a normative and prescriptive discourse for the members of this national family. They found that "the use of family metaphors within national anthems ... naturalize the social relations or realities of a country" (Lauenstein et al. 2015, 321) as a heteronormative family. The anthems often represent the country and land as the mother to be protected by soldiers who are the men and fathers of the nation. The family metaphor is a powerful tool to describe the nation and prescribe how members of the nation should perform their duty. In these representations, external military forces often threaten the nation, and men need to protect the nation.

Notably, the Chinese anthem, the 'March of the Volunteers' was first written in 1934 by the communist playwright Tian Han as the theme song for the movie *Children of Troubled Times*, depicting a young poet who waver between his love for a glamorous widow with a western lifestyle and his love for his nation embodied by his lifelong friend who joins the resistance against the Japanese.<sup>24</sup> The movie title posits that all young Chinese are children of the motherland who should sacrifice themselves when the nation is in danger. This image of the nation illustrates Anderson's conception of a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (2006 [1983], 7), explaining the potential mass self-sacrifice of

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<sup>24</sup> Also known as *Children of the Storm* and in Chinese 风云儿女 [Fēngyún Ērnǚ]

young people for the nation. “Anderson rightly points to the way in which the nation is likened to a family, and the family is treated in most of human history as a domain of disinterested love, purity and solidarity” (A.D. Smith 1998, 140). Indeed, Anderson highlights that the nation brings together people who do not know each other and create a family-like bond.

According to Lakoff (1996), the ‘nation-as-family’ metaphor is “one of the most common ways we have of conceptualizing what a nation is” (Lakoff 1996, 13). Working in cognitive science, George Lakoff conceptualizes two distinct “worldviews” of liberals and conservatives in American politics in the 1990s: the “strict father morality” held by conservative politicians and the “nurturant parent morality” held by liberal politicians. These two worldviews, in turn, shape different policy agendas. To illustrate the mundane dimension of the nation-as-family metaphor, Lakoff mentions common patterns of speech:

We talk about our founding fathers. George Washington was called ‘the father of his country’, partly because he was the metaphorical ‘progenitor’ who brought it into being and partly because he was seen as the ultimate legitimate head of state, which according to this metaphor is the head of the family, the father. The U.S. government has long been referred to as ‘Uncle Sam’. George Orwell’s nightmare head of state in 1984 was called ‘Big Brother.’ (...) When our country goes to war, it sends its sons (and now its daughters) into battle. (Lakoff 1996, 153, emphases in the original text)

In these examples, the nation is depicted as a family, the government as a parent, and the citizens as children (Lakoff 1996, 154). Masculine roles are emphasized to the neglect of women’s roles. It is particularly striking in the image of George Washington as a progenitor. Feminist scholars in the field of nationalism studies have questioned this traditional, heteronormative and patriarchal conception of the nation-as-family metaphor. McClintock argues that the family trope is important to represent the nation because “the family offers a ‘natural’ figure for sanctioning social *hierarchy* within a putative organic *unity* of interests (...) [and] offers a ‘natural’ trope for figuring historical *time*” (1993, 64). She looks more specifically at the subordinate and reproductive role given to women in the building of the South-African nation, highlighting the contradiction between the crucial role given to women and their exclusion from the political stage. The nationalist discourse diminished women’s political rights in South Africa by limiting their role to being the nation’s reproductive force.

The nation-as-family metaphor aims at producing a familial bond between strangers to inspire national solidarity and justify social hierarchies between apparent

strangers. The metaphor gives meaning to the sacrifice of young men during wartime as if they were protecting their own families.

## **Natalist policies and reproductive rights to control the reproduction of the nation**

During wartime, women's wombs are mobilized to produce more soldiers. Thus natalist policies were pervasive in Europe decades before World War I when military tensions arose (Koven and Michel 1990). Today, the perceived threats are cultural rather than military, thus it is not just about birthing babies but also about making the right kind of babies and raising them in the right way. I show that this shift from birthrate to childrearing practices gives a renewed political meaning to parenthood.

### **Natalist discourses and reproductive citizenship**

During the twentieth century until the present, governments have oscillated between natalist discourses aimed at increasing the birthrate among the general population and nativist discourses that favor birth among a selected population group. Nativist discourses are usually implemented through eugenic policies and control over reproductive rights. In Europe, these policies and discourses are associated with far-right movements (King 2002). However, in settler-colonial contexts, these policies were relatively common until the mid-twentieth century (Paul, Stenhouse, and Spencer 2018). For example, in the United States with Native American population (A. Smith 2005), with Mexican migrant women (Gutiérrez 2008), and with the Black population (Roberts 2016 [1997]); and in Canada (McLaren 1990), in Quebec (Baillargeon 2009), and in Australia with aboriginal women (Wyndham 2003). In another settler context, Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion (1971) wrote, "if the Jewish birthrate is not increased, it is doubtful that the Jewish State will survive... Any Jewish woman who, as far as it depends on her, does not bring into the world at least four healthy children is shirking her duty to the nation, like a soldier who evades military service" (King 2002, 372). Nowadays, nativist discourses have infused nationalist discourse beyond settler contexts (Triandafyllidou 2021). Who is allowed to have children is a central question in the current political debates worldwide because the nations' survival seemingly depends on it. Far-right politicians privilege the *ius sanguine* over the *ius soli*, as the biological

lineage and purity of the population are often presented as paramount to maintaining national cohesion.

Nowadays, the three main threats to the nation cited by far-right politicians including in the USA, Western Europe, Turkey, and India: the aging of the population, immigration, and the internal tensions around ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities. In Europe, far-right movements play on the fear of the “Great Replacement”, a white nationalist conspiracy theory in which non-European populations, particularly from the African continent, would replace white European populations through mass migration and demographic growth (Obaidi et al. 2021). In the USA, the far-right is fuelled by fear-mongering of the “majority-minority shift,” following which minorities will make up more than 50 percent of the American population and become the majority by 2050. This shift is allegedly the worst threat to the American way of life (Craig and Richeson 2014; Alba, Levy, and Myers 2021). In Turkey and India, nationalist discourses rely on the fear of national division due to religious and ethnic minorities’ claims for autonomy or recognition (Omar 2021; Waikar 2018; Çırakman 2010). In these discourses, the main threats to the nation are direct consequences of perceived demographic issues. Thus the reproduction of the right people in the right conditions becomes the only solution to saving a nation under threat, and the reproductive role of the women and the family is at the heart of nationalist projects to protect national cohesion.

Yuval-Davis and Anthias argued that women participate in nation building in five ways:

- (a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
- (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
- (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
- (d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences- as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
- (e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 7)

The role of reproducers of members and the group’s boundaries (*a* and *b*) refers to the biological capacity of women to give birth to children. Institutions and authorities in charge of defining the nation constantly attempt to control which women can and should birth children and how children are recognised as members of the group. Migration policies, reproductive rights policies, and marriage laws enact this control over reproduction. Bryan S. Turner proposes the concept of reproductive citizenship to argue

that “reproducing the next generation of citizens through marriage and household formation is a central means of acquiring comprehensive entitlements of citizenship and fulfilling its corresponding obligations” (B.S. Turner 2001, 196). Building on the Marshallian conception of civil, political, and social citizenship, he asserts that “Marshall’s theory was primarily a theory of entitlement” (B.S. Turner 2001), granting rights to citizens and neglecting citizens’ duties and obligations. He argues that, due to the casualization of the labor market and the technological turn of warfare, it is the nexus parent-citizen, rather than that of either the worker-citizen or the soldier-citizen, that remains the most vital route to performing active citizenship. Turner’s argument sheds light on the fundamentally political dimension of birthing and parenthood. To foster the demographic growth of the “right” people, countries combine different tactics to incentivize women to have babies. Familialist welfare policies, as part of the ‘art of government’ described by Foucault (2006), discipline and control the population. These policies rely on the citizens’ responsibility to save the nation. For instance, in Singapore, since the 1980s, policies, and programs have been implemented to encourage the most highly educated Singaporeans to have more children with tax incentives, child-care subsidies, and housing priorities (King 2002, 379).

Medical innovations in human fertilization and contraception have ignited new debates around reproductive rights. As early as 2001, Turner explains that “the larger issues which the technologies raise explicitly concern mothering, father and conception, and implicitly the creation of the social self” (2001, 197). He shows that heterosexual marriage is the privileged way to reproduce citizenship and social entitlement. Conflicts and social movements from the right and the left have arisen about the limitation, the protection, or the granting of reproductive rights. In France, as protests took place against and for the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2012, all protesters had in mind that it might lead to the legalization of same-sex reproductive rights. Medical and technological innovations have broadened the understanding of parent-identity.

Finally, nationalist discourses center on the nation’s transmission within the family. Yuval-Davis and Anthias identified this issue as the third role given to women in nation-building “as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture” (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 7). This form of national cultural reproduction is not solely bestowed upon mothers. Indeed scholars have centered their research on the role of the school as the primary tool of the

state to inculcate a sense of belonging to a national community (Deloye 1994; M.W. Apple 1993, 2004). However, the literature on banal nationalism has shown the importance of everyday practices within the family in transmitting the national sentiment (Antonisch and Skey 2017; Billig 1995). Based on her study of the political socialisation within the family among children in France and England, Throssel (2015) argues that parents are central actors in transmitting the 'national habitus'. In France, Duchesne and Ferry have recently launched a study to understand better how parents convey the feeling of belonging to a national community to their children (Duchesne and Ferry 2020).

In China, nativist and natalist policies have targeted the population according to ethnic and social criteria to control and encourage birthing. The one-child policy implemented in the early 1980s aimed to "save the nation from poverty" because the economy could not sustain such a vast population. From its early implementation, the one-child policy included exceptions for ethnic minorities who could have two children when the policy was first implemented (Francis-Tan and Mu 2019). It is worth noting that ethnic minorities count for less than 5% of the Chinese population, thus they do not constitute a threat to the Han majority. A few years later, rural households were allowed to have two children. So in the late 1980s, only urban households were subjected to the one-child policy. They were deputized as 'good citizens' supporting the economic recovery of the Chinese nation (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). This is an important oversight when, as I argue, education policies reinforce the political dimension of parenting identities and practices.

In the next chapter, I examine in more detail how the recent shift from strict birth control to the stimulation of birth rate is also presented as an opportunity for urban educated households to perform their worth as 'good citizens'. These policies and programs are embedded in a broader framework that defines who can and should reproduce the nation. The family education law voted by the National People's Congress in the fall of 2021 adds another building bloc to the national edifice by detailing precisely how parents should educate their children and inculcate nationalist sentiments. The revival of nationalist discourses which play on demographic threats to gain widespread approval puts the family at the heart of state-led projects to save the nation. Scholars showed the centrality of the family in nationalist discourses, but they have overlooked how this framing of parenting impacts parents' political socialisation.



# **Fighting the reproduction of social inequality: parents as targets of education policies**

Parents are not only situated at the heart of the nationalist projects of some politicians; they are also directly targeted by policies implemented around the world to tackle social inequalities. Another threat to social cohesion identified in current political debates is social injustice leading to social unrest. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, the emergence of welfare programs and policies in Western countries was motivated by nationalist agendas to increase the birthrate to have more soldiers for the upcoming wars (Koven and Michel 1990). At the same time, the establishment of universal primary education in Western countries was instrumental to state formation (Green 2013 [1990]). School is the place to produce full-fledged and loyal citizens who can participate in public life and fight to defend the motherland (Deloye 1994). Primary education also aims at supporting the modernization and industrialization of the economic system by improving workers' skills and providing vocational training. Initially, the national education systems of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century mainly targeted the male population. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women progressively accessed universal primary education, and after the Second World War, secondary and higher education (Schofer and Meyer 2005). In the meantime, the state assigned new functions to the education system, such as enabling social mobility and fostering individual emancipation.

The discourse on the importance of establishing a universal education system was diffused worldwide by international organizations, such as UNICEF, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. In the 1990s, the economist Mahbub ul Hap promoted the Human Development Index (HDI), which includes an indicator of the scale of the education system (Haq 1995). Until 2010, the knowledge and education indicator was measured by the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrollment ratio; since 2010, it has been measured by mean years of schooling completed and expected years of schooling upon entering the education system. Since the 1990s, the HDI has been used by international organizations to measure a country's

development. It aims at moving beyond solely economic indicators such as the GDP toward a more human-centered approach. The HDI stresses the responsibility of the governments to establish an efficient education system that allows for everyone to access education (Kumar and Sarangapani 2004). Thus, developing the education system becomes a goal for developing countries. It is expected that an efficient education system improves a country's human capital to produce more skilled workers, enabling upgrading of the industrial sector. Higher education level attainment is also expected to enable social mobility and individual emancipation.

Since the 1980s, in many countries around the world, the responsibility for social mobility has shifted away from the public education system to the family and parents, which Brown (1990) identifies as the emergence of parentocracies (Brown 1990). Brown compared countries from the former British Empire, yet, this evolution is also visible in other Western European countries, and in China. Parents are deemed responsible for providing the best resources to their children before entering the school and choosing the best option suitable for their children among the private and public education resources offered in their society. I argue that this greater responsibility bestowed upon parents encourages their involvement in school-parent relations and more broadly boosts their interest in formulating and implementing education policies.

First, in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars in sociology highlighted how the family social background shapes social determinism and how it hinders social mobility despite access to education. Bourdieu conceptualized the idea of cultural and symbolic capital as distinct from the more visible economic capital. These forms of capital favor social reproduction among educated elites (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964; Bourdieu 1986). Second, scholars in psychology, such as Diana Baumrind (1971), stressed the impact of parenting style and a child's school achievement. Her experiment led to the emergence of a whole field of research focusing on cultural differences in parenting styles. Finally, in the 1990s, scientific parenting emerged as a general discourse to determine the best way for parents to raise their children, for the child's own sake and the good of society. This evolution led to the promulgation of more and more laws and policies to support, accompany and regulate parenting practices. The literature on familial reproduction of social inequalities shaped discourses among international organizations which led to the diffusion of public policies programs directly targeting parenting practices such as the *Family and Parenting Support* program launched by the UNICEF in 2015 (UNICEF et al.

2015). This process, in turn, had contributed to the political dimension given to parent-identities and the emergence of parents as political actors.

## **Familial responsibility and the reproduction of social inequality**

In 1958, the British sociologist Michael Young published the dystopian novel, *The Rise of Meritocracy*, which questioned the illusion of fair distribution of social positions according to merit, especially school selection. In France, the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, published in 1964, demonstrated how the French public school system fosters the reproduction of social inequality by rewarding a specific type of cultural capital prevalent among elite educated families. According to Bourdieu and Passeron, a child's social background influences their achievement at school despite the pervasiveness of education resources across the territory and the principle of free education. These observations were confirmed by international comparisons (Dubet, Duru-Bellat, and V  r  tout 2010; Hadjar and Gross 2016). Consequently, Bourdieu and Passeron concluded that schools should provide a similar education to all children, and should compensate pre-school – that is family-related – inequalities to effectively foster social mobility. Their research also questioned the notion of meritocracy and the role of standardized competitions in the distribution of spots to enter higher education.

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic, the American sociologist Ralph H. Turner (1960) conceptualized two types of social mobility mechanisms depending on the form of the school system: the contest mobility and the sponsored mobility. For instance, contest mobility prevails in the absence of an aristocratic tradition in the USA. Thus, the elite are selected through a full-fledged competition. Turner compares this mechanism with a race, in which competitors are given equal chances, provided a similar training until the final race. He contrasts this with societies with an aristocratic tradition, such as the UK. Here, the hereditary elite or their agents define criteria and implement early training for a select group of children. The future elite are introduced into the elite club as early as possible to ensure the reproduction of the system. Building on Turner's seminal article, Van Zanten (2015) analyzes the French system and refines the concept of sponsored mobility by distinguishing social sponsorship (often the

parents) from institutional/school sponsorship. Van Zanten uses the concept of social sponsorship to describe “all actions by which social groups that are part of the elites - or that can, thanks to their resources, claim to be part of them - influence the modalities of school selection or adapt them in an effective way” (Van Zanten 2015, 86). This argument builds on her earlier work that found that middle-class parents in the suburbs of Paris choose their child’s school (Van Zanten 2009). Her work illustrates how parents’ involvement in their child’s school trajectory influences social mobility. In the USA, Annette Lareau and Kimberly Goyette conducted similar research on the influence of parental involvement in school admission processes (Lareau and Goyette 2014). Scholars focused also more specifically on the connection between the household residential and the child’s school trajectory (Lareau and Goyette 2014; Barrault-Stella 2017; Barrault and Gaxie 2013).

Annette Lareau’s earlier work explored parenting practices at the intersection of race, gender, and social class. She developed two compelling concepts: concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth. She argues that “middle-class parents engage in a process of *concerted cultivation*” (Lareau 2003, 2, italic in the original text) which stem from extensive discussions between parents and child to cultivate talent. This process leads to a “strong sense of entitlement” (Lareau 2003, 2), rewarded in institutional settings, such as schools. The research team observed the accomplishment of natural growth among working-class and poor households, where clear boundaries are set between the world of adults and that of children. Parents do not consult children regarding their education; thus, children are not constrained by organized activities. They are in charge of their schedule for playing and studying. The author argues that children raised in the accomplishment of natural growth “appear to gain an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint in their institutional experiences” (Lareau 2003, 3). Lareau sheds light on the influence of social class on mobility and reproduction in society, which tends to deny the role of family background in the individual’s stories of success. Despite the situated dimension of her study, scholars worldwide use the concepts of concerted cultivation and natural growth to analyze the relation between parenting and academic achievement. Sociologists shed light on the influence of the family background and daily practices on social reproduction and social mobility prompting the emergence of public normative discourses on how family relationship should unfold.

## **The emergence and the dissemination of the scientific parenting discourse**

I argue that the descriptive and analytical scholarship developed in sociology, psychology and cognitive science around parenting has led to the emergence of prescriptive discourses and public policy programs to regulate parenting within families. Furthermore, sociologists influence the relationship between parenting and school achievement.

### **Scientific assessment of good parenting practices**

The development of professional criteria to assess the quality of parenting practice illustrates how family matters which were long regarded as part of the private sphere – the intimate relationships among family members – are now defined and assessed by scientific research and professional standards in the public sphere. In the 1960s, Diana Baumrind, an American clinical psychologist, explored the relationship between parenting practices and school achievement and developed the concept of parenting styles. Based on two criteria, parents' responsiveness to their child's needs and parents' expectations regarding their child, American researchers subsequently proposed four main parenting styles: authoritarian or disciplinarian, authoritative, uninvolved, and permissive or indulgent (Newman et al. 2015; Yan Li, Costanzo, and Putallaz 2010; Baumrind 1971). Each parenting style leads to different parenting practices, impacting the child's school achievement. This typology laid the ground for numerous studies regarding the impact of parenting styles on educational achievement and self-development, with a particular emphasis on cross-cultural surveys (Newman et al. 2015; Y. Li, Costanzo, and Putallaz 2010; Steinberg et al. 1992). American scholars aimed to understand why some children would succeed in school according to their ethnic background. Scholars try to understand how so-called Asian values – collectivism, filial piety – influence children (X. Chen, Dong, and Zhou 1997; Newman et al. 2015; Cheung and McBride-Chang 2008; X. Chen, Liu, and Li 2000). Researchers suggested that parenting styles expressed the cultural values associated with Asia – collectivism, filial piety, obedience, and respect for authority. Scholars focused on the case of Asian families adopting an authoritarian parenting style to explain the academic success of their children (X. Chen, Dong, and Zhou 1997; X. Chen, Liu, and Li 2000; Cheung and McBride-Chang 2008).

The study of parenting practices expanded beyond the sole question of academic achievement to child development in general. Further research led to developing a General Parenting Observational Scale (GPOS) for professionals to assess the appropriateness of parenting practices during different daily life activities, such as mealtime, sleeping habits (Rhee et al. 2015). The GPOS reveals the complexity of parenting practices; it sheds light on the role of emotional work involved in raising a child. In many western countries, assessment from professionals can be used by social services to determine the parent's ability to care for their child and sometimes to remove a child from its family.

The scholarship in psychology and cognitive science is based on *a posteriori* observation of parenting practices and their consequences on a child's school achievement. Yet, in the 1990s, a more prescriptive and normative discourse emerged from the growing research in cognitive studies, child development studies, psychology, and education (R.D. Apple 1995). This discourse was coined "scientific parenting". Progressively, academic articles and research findings are reformulated and disseminated to the broader public in ready-to-use handbooks on parenting (such as Sunderland 2016; Haelle and Willingham 2016), or online courses (such as Barner 2021; Dewar 2019). This phenomenon pigeonholed traditional and intuitive maternal practices as unsuitable and outdated (Gojard 2010; R.D. Apple 1995). The discourse on scientific parenting also reinforced specific roles to each parent, excluding family and community members who played a central role in children upbringing in previous decades.

### **Emergence of the discourse on intensive motherhood**

Sharon Hays showed that the normative discourse of "intensive motherhood" emerged in the 1960s, when nuclear families became the norm and the mother became the central caregiver. She defines intensive motherhood as "*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive*" (Hays 1996, 8, italic in the original text). Hays argues that intensive motherhood reproduces gender norms by focusing on the mother's investment. She denounces a model which is only assessed on the child's development and neglect the impact on the mother: "the model of intensive mothering tells us that children are innocent and priceless, that their rearing should be carried out primarily by individual mothers and that it should be centered on children's needs, with methods that are informed by experts, labor-intensive, and costly.

This, we are told, is the best model, largely because it is what children need and deserve” (Hays 1996, 21). Intensive motherhood exacerbates the contradictions between the claims for women’s emancipation and participation in the labor market and the claims for good mothering practices which put the child’s needs above the mothers’ need and dedicate her time and energy to implement good childrearing practices (Hays 1996).

### **Public diffusion of scientific parenting discourses**

The media played a crucial role in disseminating scientific parenting and intensive motherhood discourses. In the years after World War II, psychiatrists and pediatricians such as Donald Winnicott in the United Kingdom, Françoise Dolto in France, or Benjamin McLane Spock in the USA, advocated for a child-centered approach to parental upbringing. They all stressed the responsibility of mothers in taking care of the children and the necessity to educate mothers to improve childrearing. Their discourse quickly gained wide popularity thanks to media coverage. In the UK, Winnicott was invited to talk on the BBC as early as 1943; Spock’s book *Baby and Child Care* sold 500 000 copies six months after its initial publication in 1946, and Dolto was invited to host a show on the national radio in the 1960s. In France, Dolto’s media appearances were criticized for their oversimplifying and prescriptive dimension (Cecotti Stievenard 2017). Garcia argues that Dolto’s discourse has legitimized gendered parenting practices by reinforcing mothers’ anxiety and sense of guilt for not doing the right thing (Garcia 2011). As moral entrepreneurs, newsworthy psychiatrists and pediatricians contributed to shifting from a scientific and descriptive discourse on parenting to a prescriptive discourse on scientific parenting, which sets good parenting standards (Le Pape 2012). Media representations of ‘good parenting practices’ have become a worldwide phenomenon. Diverging from scholars’ theoretical and descriptive work, the media discourse takes no account of social inequalities, cultural diversity and complex social context to construct an ideal and universal ‘good parent’ based on personal experiences (Assarsson and Aarsand 2011).

Some scholars question the universal dimension of the norms carried by the discourse on scientific parenting. They showed the cultural diversity of ‘good’ parenting practices. The Parenting Across Cultures project (Parenting Across Culture 2021), examines parenting practices among middle-class parents and working-class parents across thirteen different cultures. The research project led to the publication of an

edited book, assessing the dissemination of certain parenting practices, such as concerted cultivation among middle-class parents:

In part, the pattern of parenting that has been characterized as concerted cultivation in middle-class American families (Lareau, 2011) is grounded in beliefs and values that do not necessarily generalize to middle-class parents in other countries. For example, middle-class parents in Sweden tend to believe that children and adolescents should be given agency to direct their own development without undue influence from parents (Sorbring & Gurdal, 2011). Nevertheless, middle-class parents across countries are more likely to have the means both financially and in terms of social capital to access resources, such as tutors or cram schools to prepare students for high-stakes exams, that can enable them to excel in school. (Lansford and Sorbring 2019, 144)

However, the prescriptive discourse disseminated by the media on good parenting practices has much more influence than nuanced scientific results as illustrated by the controversy around Amy Chua's book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. The book depicts how the author, an American lawyer of Chinese descent, raised her two daughters in the USA. She describes her authoritarian style of parenting as a magic bullet for the academic success of her children (Chua 2011). Published in 2011 in the USA, the book subsequently received a tremendous international recognition. Indeed, it was translated into 20 languages and best-selling book in the UK, Germany, and in China. The book was welcomed with a mixed response about the seemingly strict cultural dichotomy between Chinese-style parenting and Western-style parenting and about the normative and prescriptive dimension of the book. Is Amy Chua's successful experience specific to the Chinese-style parenting and/or should it be considered as a universal parenting experience? As reviewers explain, it is difficult to decide whether the book is a "how-to guide, a satire or a lament" (Mong 2011).

### **Parents (re)producing scientific discourses**

In this study, I argue that the discourse of scientific parenting and intensive motherhood has become influential and legitimized gendered and classed parenting practices among the urban Chinese middle class. I debunk the idea of a culturally-specific Chinese authoritarian parenting style and I shed light on a global normative discourse on parenting which neglects social and gender disparities. This discourse not only influences individual parents but also shapes the regulatory context and the institutions surrounding them.



In China, Yin Jianli published the best-seller *A good mother is better than a good teacher* (2009), which sold more than 5.4 million copies in the first five years. It ranked first in the best-seller list for nearly five years for major online stores and ground bookstores (Cheng 2014).<sup>25</sup> This family education book attracted the attention of the film and television industry; the Henan Film and Television Group adapted the book into an education drama for the television. With the second edition in 2016, sales reached a record of 7 million copies in 2017 (Shu 2017).

Both Amy Chua and Yin Jianli's books are written by mothers who depict their personal stories and rely on their high-achieving daughters to show that their parenting practices and educational prescriptions are the best to raise successful children. Both books quickly became best-sellers. Yet, they advocate for radically opposite parenting practices. While Amy Chua promotes so-called Chinese education methods with strict Confucian, hierarchical parenting practice, Yin Jianli advertises a liberal and permissive parenting style based on leniency, empathy, and love. I examine Yin Jianli's moral and educational prescriptions in chapter 4.

These books illustrate how a child's educational achievement catalyzes parent worries. Parenting practices are assessed and legitimized based on the child's success in school, which in turn justify parental investment in their child's development. The divergence in content questions the cultural factor in determining parenting style. However, it shows that the parenting literature often claims to offer ready-to-use solutions for parents to make sure that their child is happy and successful. Online communities heighten this normative and competitive environment around parenting practices as parents can more easily produce and diffuse their own content. The phenomenon of Mommy blogging, while providing space for solidarity and a sense of community, also reinforces gender norms in parenting (Chen Masullo 2013). Parenting becomes science instead of an object of scientific research; parents become scientists who need to constantly update their knowledge and practices based on the most recent research.

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<sup>25</sup> In Chinese, the book title is 好妈妈胜过好老师 [Hǎo māmā shèngguò hǎo lǎoshī]

## **State involvement in parenting: between support and surveillance**

State sanctioned parenting standards combined with a “scientific” parenting discourse increase parents’ perceived responsibilities toward the child’s educational success. Parenting is not only a private and intimate matter but also as a public and political matter.

In the years following World War II, the consecration of the child as an individual in its own right was concomitant in academic milieus and international organizations. The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) was created in 1946 to defend children and provide humanitarian and developmental aid to children worldwide. In 1989, the UN adopted the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) and created the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 1991 to monitor and report on the implementation of the CRC across the world. The CRC was first written to protect children’s rights from violence, injury, abuse, neglect, maltreatment, or exploitation. In addition, it sets obligations for the state to support parents and set childrearing standards. According to the article 18 of the Convention, states “shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their childrearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children” (United Nations 1989). Moreover, UNICEF recognizes the importance of family and parenting support in “social policies and social investment packages aimed at reducing poverty, decreasing inequality and promoting positive parental and child well-being” (UNICEF et al. 2015, 5). Thus, for international organizations and most countries now, family and parenting support are integral to the government’s scope.

At the international and national level, states are since expected to set norms regarding child rearing and parenting and to provide services for parents. These programs replace some early welfare programs initiated in the turn of the twentieth century, which focused on the infant and mother’s health to reduce mortality during childbirth (Koven and Michel 1990). Since the 1990s, there is a consensus that the early years of the infant and children are crucial for the child’s later development and well-being (J.L. Evans 2006). Parenting and family support programs broadened their scope from their earlier health-focus to other dimensions of parenting. UNICEF offers a comprehensive framework to analyze and evaluate parenting and family support

programs developed around the world (UNICEF et al. 2015). This framework starts by distinguishing parenting and family support programs. “Family support is broader, concerned with the family as a social unit and its ecological balance – the relationships and resource flows between members as well as how well the family is embedded within supportive networks” whereas “parenting support is [narrower], being focused on parents and parental engagement practices” (UNICEF et al. 2015, 8). In this study, I look first at parenting programs. According to a study from Judith Evans commissioned by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report of the UNESCO, “the broad objective within parenting programmes is to create awareness of the importance of the caregivers’ role in relation to supporting children’s growth and development, and to strengthen or modify caregivers’ attitudes, beliefs and practices in relation to caring for a child” (J.L. Evans 2006, 8).

Numerous programs around the world have been developed by non-state actors, such as doctors or private foundations, to support at-risk parents in poor or remote communities during prenatal care or the early years of the infants. Most of these programs focused on nutrition, and health advice; among these programs are the Nurse-Family Partnership initiated in the USA in 1977, which was later adapted in the UK and the Netherlands, or the Integrated Nutrition and Community Development Project in Thailand (J.L. Evans 2006). When the program proved its effectiveness, for instance based on infant-weight indicators, the government would often take over the program or provide significant subsidies. Some programs focused more on parents’ ability to stimulate the cognitive development of their children. For instance the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPI) programs, initiated by Dr. Avima Lombard in Israel in the 1980s, is a home-based preschool education program for parents which aims at providing “equal educational opportunity” to “communities and families worldwide who face socio-economic challenges” (HIPPI International 2021). This program, now implemented in 15 countries around the world, including China, Canada, the USA, clearly targets parents in the fight against social inequalities. Another noticeable program is the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program initiated in the USA in the 1981 which has been adopted in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, England and Malaysia. Two other programs are mentioned by UNICEF: the Australian Triple P and the American Incredible Years. Despite some differences in delivery and content, all these programs aim to support parents improve their parenting practices. To a certain extent,

parenting programs contribute to the diffusion of the prescriptive discourse on ‘good parenting’ because they rely on the principle that by training parents, they can change the fate of children. However, according to Evans, “families are not to be held responsible to undertake the guaranteeing of children’s rights on their own; they must be supported by the State (Article 18.2 [of the CRC]) and ‘parents’ is inclusive of mother and father (Article 18.1 [of the CRC])” (J.L. Evans 2006, 5). In reviewing this literature, I want to highlight two important trends: first the broadening of the understanding of who is and can be a parent and a caregiver. As Judith Evans underlines in her evaluation of parenting programs around the world, until recently, the impact of the programs on parents was mostly evaluated through mothers’ self-assessment (J.L. Evans 2006, 39). She stresses the need to develop parenting programs which include alternative caregivers with first and foremost the fathers. As there is an increased awareness of the role of fathers, more and more research and programs promote the involvement of the fathers in the child’s development (Fitzgerald et al. 2020), for instance the Empowerment and Reaffirmation of Paternal Abilities program in the Philippines, the Father School initiative in Minsk, Belarus and the think-and-do tank Fatherhood Institute in the UK (UNICEF et al. 2015, 19). These developments indicate an emerging broader understanding of the parent-identity, beyond that of “mother”.

Second, states intervene ever more closely in parent-children relations. States were initially concerned with issues of parentage, filial bonds and legal parenthood, to define who and how one can be legally recognized as the parent of a child (Bainham 1999). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious authorities heavily influenced how parents raised their children, intervening and removing children from homes when deemed necessary. They mainly targeted communities deemed outside the white, heterosexual, middle-class norm. In the Americas, they targeted particularly indigenous and black communities. Now, states are responsible for these types of coercive interventions by judging whether children are raised correctly (Henricson 2008). Governments promulgate parenting standards to protect children from parental abuse or neglect, in order to determine the threshold when state’s intervention is needed, and decide whether to withdraw the custody of the children from unsuitable parents. These regulations are most often formulated in terms of parental responsibilities or parents’ obligations and downplay the state’s responsibilities as stipulated in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Henricson 2008). There is a legal debate around the boundaries

between private and family life on the one hand and the protection of children's rights on the other (Eekelaar 1991). Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights states:

1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.
2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. (European Court of Human Rights 2021)

Scholars in France warn against the shift from merely defining parenting standards to surveilling and controlling parenting practices (Neyrand 2011; Lamboy 2009). This control targets in particular parents from poor communities who are deemed responsible for their social position and, by extension, the reproduction of social inequalities. Parenting programs aimed at improving child's social prospects tend to blame parents' inappropriate practices and insufficient involvement in their child's development (Lamboy 2009). According to DiQuinzio, policy makers and government officials in the U.S. also tend to categorize and label mothers and mothers' practices as 'bad' or 'good' to justify state intervention in the most vulnerable households (DiQuinzio 2006, 61).

While scholars have focused on the impact of parenting practices on social inequalities and how state involvement influences parenting practices, they have neglected the impact of the politicization of parenting on parent themselves.

# **Parents as political actors engaging in social activism**

In this dissertation, I show how the process of becoming a parent, in societies where so much emphasis is put on the parental role in reproducing the ethnic, cultural and economic cohesion of the country, can reactivate the process of political socialization. In the current global context, becoming a parent and identifying oneself as a parent can reactivate the process of political socialization and even sometimes lead to an engagement in social activism. Galsberg and Deri define political socialization as the “process by which individuals learn and frequently internalize a political lens framing their perceptions of how power is arranged and how the world around them is (and should be) organized; those perceptions, in turn, shape and define individuals’ definitions of who they are and how they should behave in the political and economic institutions in which they live” (Glasberg and Deric 2011, 47). Political socialization might lead to engagement in a political organization (such as a political party or a union), but it is far from systematic.

Scholars on socialization have identified several institutions participating in political socialization: the family, the school, the Church, the media, and the state (Bargel 2020). Each institution influences how individuals perceive the world and position themselves within the economic and political system surrounding them. Scholars have focused first and foremost on the political socialization of young children, also called primary socialization, to understand the reproduction of voting behaviors within a family and to explain why some individuals engage in social activism and others do not (Muxel 2001; Sulloway 1996; Percheron 1974). The primary socialization process emphasizes the role of the family and the school in shaping individuals’ political identities. Muxel also highlights the generational effect: individuals from the same generation experience the same political events. These shared experiences can produce common political beliefs and sometimes divide a generation (Muxel 2001). Yet, the scholarship on primary socialization tends to give a static representation of political behaviors as if entirely determined during childhood. Few scholars have looked at secondary socialization during adulthood and its influence on political behaviors. Berger and Luckmann show that any biographical event, such as marriage, psychotherapy,

religious conversion, or professional reconversion, leads the individual to learn new behaviors, and social roles or create new ties (Berger and Luckmann 2018). These biographical disruptions can challenge political beliefs and behaviors acquired during childhood (Cruzell 2004). Life-changing events such as becoming a parent can influence the process of political socialization as well.

Becoming a parent can lead to greater involvement in the political sphere. From the 1950s to the 1990s, American scholars have shown that motherhood depresses women's electoral turnout and women's engagement in politics due to the lack of time and social isolation. Manning Lee shows that motherhood hinders women's political activity and is the main factor explaining why so few women hold public office (Manning Lee 1976). McGlen provides a more nuanced analysis, showing that the influence of motherhood on women's political engagement depends on their level of education. She argues that "for women with a high school degree, motherhood does not appear to conflict with the level of political activity common for citizens of this status" (McGlen 1980, 312). Even so, she concurs that motherhood, in general, hinders women's participation in political activities. Melanee Thomas and Amanda Bittner take a different approach. Instead of looking at the gap between a pre-determined level of political engagement, often based on male political engagement, and instead of restricting the analysis to traditional forms of social activism, the authors start with the premise that women do engage in politics, but through different means. They examine how parenthood impacts this engagement (Thomas and Bittner 2017, 5). In the model of politicized motherhood by Langner et al. (2017), the first elements are the processes of self-identification and self-categorization as mothers, which lead to the construction of a collective identity. Individuals identify themselves as mothers and then identify other mothers as peers. These processes have always taken place, but they have evolved with the digital era, as mothers can more easily encounter online a broad community of parents and even sub-communities of mothers who share a similar approach. Langner et al. focus primarily on mothers, however, they recognize that "in a different cultural context, [their] argument could be expanded to fathers" (Langner, Greenlee, and Deason 2017, 180). I argue that in this new era of politicized parenthood, a greater diversity of individuals self-identify as parents and engage in social activism on behalf of their parent communities.

## **From maternalism to attached advocacy: rationale for engaging in politics**

I argue that parents engage in politics to defend the interests of their child, but also as a new way of performing the good citizen. In contrast with other social movements in which individuals mobilize to better their own living or working conditions, parent mobilizations are performed as altruistic inspired by their emotional attachment to their child. This altruistic performance is in fact mixed with political, cultural and economic factors, and also driven by parents' personal interests. My argument responds to the call from Thévenot (2006) and Lebedev (2013) to explore how close bonds with relatives and with one's environment are driving social movements. Thévenot questions the prevalent myth in the western liberal democracies that assumes that the public sphere is structured by a rational and autonomous subjectivity, supposedly untainted by clientelism or nepotism. In my research, I argue that maternal thinking and the political movements resultant of maternalism, although gendered, are not exclusive to mothers but rather are "the grounding for an alternative vision of society in which the social welfare of citizens is privileged" (Hayden 2003, 197). I argue that individuals who identify as parents can mobilize in the name of empathy and care ethics. Manning (2017) uses the concept of attached advocacy to describe how sometimes parenting practices and the enactment of filial ties become political practices. Some parents become active political actors, whose emotional attachment to their child drives them to become politically active.

I agree that emotional attachment and care rationality can be legitimate and common motives for involvement in the public sphere in addition to socioeconomic factors and personal interests. Building on an the earlier literature on maternalism which "exalted women's capacity and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance and morality" (Koven and Michel 1990, 1079), I argue that values of care and nurturance should be conceptualized as attached advocacy inspired by care ethics rather than maternalism. The broaden conception of parent-identity to non-female individuals make this shift all the more important and subverts essentialist critics of maternalism to extend attached advocacy to the whole parents' community. From the early twentieth century, feminist scholars and activists encounter a tension between on the one hand using an individualist approach representing women as rational



autonomous subjects deserving equal rights and citizenship as men; and on the other hand highlighting women's idiosyncratic experiences as another form of work specifically care-giving work using a relational approach to offset the liberal individualist patriarchal society (DiQuinzio 2006, 57-58). In the 1990s, Sara Ruddick conceptualizes the notion of maternal thinking to "represent mothers as reasoners" rather than only naturally emotional individuals (Ruddick 1995). She stresses the importance of looking at mothering as a practice distinct from the mother-identity. She underlines the paradox between power and powerlessness experienced by the mother, who is all powerful in her relation with her child while completely powerless in the public sphere in a patriarchal society. Other scholars such as Carol Gilligan, conceptualized a "maternal morality" or "ethic of care" which "privileges connection, empathy, and contingent reasoning from concrete experiences over abstract, impersonal absolute, and linear approaches to problem-solving" (Boor Tonn 1996, 4). Studying women's social action during the emergence of large-scale state welfare programs, at the turn of the twentieth century, Koven and Michel explain that "maternalism always operated on two levels: it extolled the private virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women's public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace. In practice, maternalist ideologies often challenged the constructed boundaries between public and private, women and men, state and civil society" (Koven and Michel 1990, 1079). Critics of maternalist scholarship point at the essentialist bias, women by essence would be the only individuals who perform mothering practices and maternal thinking.

## **Parents' other-advocacy transcending left-right division and old-new social movements**

A focus on parents' attached advocacy questions the division between the traditional class-based mobilizations and the identity-based mobilizations which characterizes the literature on New Social Movements. Because parents' attached advocacy movements cross ideological boundaries, they are better categorized based on the object of mobilization. I use the distinction between self-advocacy and other-advocacy to distinguish different types of parents' mobilizations.

Parents' attached advocacy has assumed different forms over time. When mother movements began to gain in visibility in Western countries at the turn of the twentieth century to advocate for social welfare for mothers and children, they encompassed activists from all sides of the political spectrum. Koven and Michel (1990, 1993) show that the maternalist agenda was pushed by women in the name of Christian values, republicanism, and even socialism at the turn of the twentieth century. Some activists were fighting for social welfare and women's protection to reduce maternal and child mortality during birth by advocating for gender specific roles in the reproduction process. Meanwhile some activists were fighting for social welfare in the name of more gender equality in the labor market. These latter movements were driven by forms of self-advocacy, mother activists advocating for an improvement of their rights. In more recent protests, in the twenty-first century, the mother-identity has also been used to mobilize across the political divide. This is well-illustrated by the 2000-Mother's Day in the U.S., when the Million Mom March organization, advocating for stricter gun control policies faced the smaller but yet existing counter protest organized the Armed Informed Mothers. On the issue of gun laws, mothers are divided between their right to defend their families with guns and against guns. These movements led Greenlee to shift her argument that motherhood lead to more risk-averse beliefs and thus more conservative stances to defend the family's interests (Greenlee 2010), toward a more nuanced observation that "maternalist politics can be found at all points on the ideological spectrum" (Langner, Greenlee, and Deason 2017, 183).

I offer another way of categorizing parents' mobilizations by looking at those for whom parents are mobilizing. Some parents engage in self-advocacy to gain new rights for parents such as parental leave or father custody. DiQuinzio (2006) defines mothers' movements as activism which "focuses on improving women's choices with respect to motherhood, improving the conditions in which women and 'maternal practitioners' do their work, deprivatizing the work of raising children and caring for dependent persons, and garnering public support for it. With a focus along these lines, the issues that come to the forefront are the (all too familiar) issues such as reproductive choice, prenatal and childhood health care, childcare, and workplace policies on families" (DiQuinzio 2006, 64). The concept of parents' self-advocacy broadens the scope of individuals and social groups who advocate for defending reproductive rights and for improving the

conditions of care practitioners; here, mothers' movement are a component of parents' movements.

Parents can also advocate on behalf of others, in particular for their child. Langner et al. (2017) use the term other-advocacy to describe the parents' engagement in politics. This concept, defined as "activism on behalf of others, particularly children" (Langner, Greenlee, and Deason 2017, 182), could be applied to any individual mobilizing on behalf of someone else. However it is quite common among parents' group because it fits cultural norms expected from parents as caregivers.

Parents can mobilize on behalf of their children because they deem their offspring are unable to mobilize by themselves and for themselves, either because of their youth or their disabilities. For instance, parents mobilize for the rights of trans children in Canada (Manning et al. 2015), or parents advocate for the recognition of their child's specific disabilities, for the development of legislation to protect their children's rights, or for the improvement special education provision (Schrami-Block and Ostrosky 2021; Goldsmith 2021). In these advocacy campaigns, parents overcome social stigma, in the name of their emotional attachment to their child. In both case, children are considered too young or vulnerable to be at the forefront of the fight, thus parents mobilize on behalf of their child.

Some parents advocate for children who have disappeared. The most well-known examples are Argentina's Madres de Plaza de Mayo who protested against the disappearance of their children during the nation's war (Fisher 1989). In Russia, mothers of soldiers mobilized in the 1990s for recognition for their sons who died or disappeared in the service of the army (Lebedev 2013). In China, the Tiananmen Mother Group gathered a hundred mothers who lost their children during the Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989 (Tai 2006). The group collected and disseminated information about victims of the massacre. In the early 2000s, they used internet to recruit families and publicize their fight around the world. The Tiananmen Mother Group published open letters and public statements to denounce the government's involvement in the Massacre. The Group is nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 (Tai 2006, 107). In 2008, another group of parents are protest in China, parents who lost their only child in the collapse of poorly built public schools during the 2008-earthquake in rural Sichuan. Lee (2008) argues that the importance of parenting in the Chinese culture but also the strict implementation of the one-child policy in the early 1980s in

rural areas increased the impact of parent protests. In 2008, the protests which gathered mothers and fathers triggered reactions from officials from the local level to Beijing. These protests show the strength of emotional attachment as a motive for advocacy and social activism even when the object of the attachment is no longer present.

Finally, some parents mobilize against the potential threats facing their children. This is a broader category, as parents can advocate against any danger that would hang over their child, their future child or any potential child. In the U.S., the well-known Mothers Against Drunk Driving movement obtained stricter laws and policies at the local level (DiQuinzio 2006). In 2012 in France, when the government legalized same sex marriage, numerous parents mobilized both for and against the law. The mobilization did not revolve around marriage or homosexuality per se, but rather around filiation and parenting, as marriage is considered as the first step for legalizing same-sex families. The law was called by its proponent 'Marriage for all'. So, the opposing movement called themselves *Manif pour tous* which means 'Protest for all' implying that their protest welcomes parents and children. The opponents of the law were organized around the Catholic Church and right-wing political parties. Parents fought against the new law because they believed that being raised by a homosexual couple would contradict nature and harm the child's development (Borillo 2014). In these mobilizations, parents are not mobilizing for themselves. They are not losing rights or money, they are not directly harmed by the new law. Parents against the law are mobilizing on behalf of the supposedly harmed children of homoparental families. This type of other-advocacy mobilizations are also seen in movements against climate change (Duffy et al. 2021) and against the proliferation of nuclear weapons (Sverdlow 1993).

This description of parent other-advocacy movements is by no mean exhaustive. In militarized conflict across the world, it is relatively common to see mothers and women mobilizing against war in the name of their children who could be soldiers, prisoners or victims of the war (Lorentzen and Turpin 1998). Parents' of victims of police brutality, for instance in the Black Lives Matter Movement, are often at the forefront of the march but many more parents advocate for stricter police oversight on behalf of their living child's security. Being a parent and having the responsibility for the lives of one's children become a motive for individuals to hold the state accountable for its actions, discourses and policies.

As illustrated in the Black Lives Matter movement, the politicized parent identity intersects with other identity frames such as gender, race and class. The concept of other-advocacy questions the distinction between new and old social movements. To summarize a lengthy and complex debate among scholars on social movements, the literature portrays traditional social movements as based on social classes' struggles, and new social movements as based on individual identity (Pichardo 1997). An example of parent activism intersecting class, racial and gender dimensions is the fight of the activist Fatima Ouassak (2020) in France. She denounces the racial and classist discrimination she experienced when she tried to join the most institutionalized pupils' parents association, the FCPE.<sup>26</sup> In reaction she created an alternative association for parents called *Front de mères*.<sup>27</sup> She initially fought for vegetarian options in her daughter school. Instead of recognizing her ecologist argument, her claims were misconstrued by the school and by other parents as a religious demand to avoid giving non-halal food to her daughter. Her book describes how she came to organize and mobilize to fight on an ecologist, feminist and anti-racist agenda in one of the poorest suburbs of Paris. In an interview, Fatima Ouassak clearly states that "if [she] decides to organize politically, as a mother, it is not only to fight against oppressions experienced by mothers, but it is first and foremost to fight against oppressions experienced by the children. [She] considers that ... we need to reinvest the notion of child protection" (Ouassak and Roux 2021, 5, translated from French). She explains that what I call "other-advocacy" is the primary motive for her to become an activist.

School-related issues are a common gateway to activism for parents are mobilizing to defend their child's interests. Education science has been studying parents' involvement in school for several decades (Epstein 2016; Yemini, Ramot, and Sagie 2016; Barton et al. 2004; Oostdam and Hooge 2013). Barton et al. (2004) have proposed a compelling model to understand not only what parents do but also how and why they engage in their child's schooling. Their model, called Ecologies of Parental Engagement, analyze how parent engagement in school is mediated by space and capital. Parents interact with school officials depending on their social, economic and material capital as defined by Bourdieu (1979). These interactions happen in formal or informal settings. According to Barton et al. (2004), parents can author new spaces through activation of

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<sup>26</sup> The French acronym FCPE means Fédération des Conseils de Parents d'Elèves.

<sup>27</sup> In English, it would be translated the Mothers Front.

capital or position themselves within existing spaces. Parents from the middle class, who perform attached advocacy defending the interests of their child, mobilize their capital to secure the best education resources and guarantee their class privileges. This type of parental engagement increase the elitist reproduction in education systems across the world, it reflects for instance the legacy admission process in elite higher education institutions in North America (Khan 2016).

To conclude these examples illustrate how parents' attached advocacy on behalf of their child transcends both left-right division and old-new social movements' distinction. Parents' activism intersects with race-based, class-based and gender mobilizations.

## **Parents' cause field and modalities of activism**

I argue that parent activism does not have clear boundaries, so I use the concept of a parents' "cause field" to describe the modalities of parents' attached advocacy work. First, the concept of cause field allows for the recognition of intra and extra-institutional actors participating in parent activism. Second, the prevalent role of the internet and online activism makes parents' activism even more pervasive and the limits between parenting and activism even more blurry. There is rarely a clear defining moment for a parent to become activist.

I argue that parent activism features a broad range of actions and that the boundary between parenting and activism is unclear. In her book on the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (CSM), Lebedev (2013, 114) argues that claimants who simply write a letter to the CSM are already participating in a form of activism. Most claimants are soldiers' mothers who lost touch with their sons, denounce the mistreatments and abuses suffered by their sons in the military, or try to assert the rights of their sons to demobilize due to special familial or health conditions. Lebedev argues that restricting activism to effective volunteering work, or to formal membership to the CSM misrepresents the highly dynamic activism happening in the offices of the CSM. Indeed, many women who wrote letters often follow up in person and advocate on behalf of their son. They stay in the offices and quickly help out the volunteers and the formal workers at least until the CSM obtain some answers on the whereabouts of their son. Lebedev (2013) also argues that the mere fact of framing one's story in a letter is a

form of political involvement. In their letters, the claimants try to create a close bond with the recipient, here the CSM, relying on a common mother-child attachment. Lebedev's study highlights the role of attachment's advocacy in creating a community of activist across Russia, in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the scholarship on parent activism, scholars have observed how parents can organize and mobilize in ways traditionally observed in social movements: protests, sit-ins, institutionalized and formally recognized organizations (Fisher 1989; Hayden 2003). Some parent mobilizations use judicial tools to make their voice heard, in particular when it comes to discrimination (Roux 2018), and some parent organizations launch broad advocacy campaign to change laws and policies (DiQuinzio 2006). However, and as illustrated by Lebedev (2013), parent activism can take more subtle and discrete forms. I argue that parents politicize their practices when they cross the boundary between the private and the public sphere. When parents' recount their story, or describe their practices outside the intimacy of their household or their relatives, they most often use framings to make their practices acceptable. During her study on parenting practices of the American middle class, Annette Lareau observed this framing process in the semi-public situation of the interview, when her research team interviewed parents who were beating their son to correct his misbehavior. The parents justified their practices to make them acceptable in fear of being turned in (Lareau 2003, 231).

The boundary between the private and public spheres is even more blurry in the current digital era. Scholars have shown that the internet plays a central role in the emergence of parent communities across the world (Langner, Greenlee, and Deason 2017; DiQuinzio 2006). Mommy bloggers emerged in the early 2000s and quickly flooded the emerging blogosphere. This phenomenon engendered controversy among the women bloggers, as it seems to reduce the role of women to their reproductive function and to the private sphere. However after a controversy at the inaugural BlogHer conference in 2005, Alice Bradley, a mother blogger, asserted that "Mommy blogging is a radical act" (Lopez 2009, 730). Lopez showed that mommy blogging is a legitimate form of activism and it has "the potential to change the discourse surrounding motherhood" (Lopez 2009, 730). Mommy blogging questions the distinction between the private and public spheres, by publicly depicting the practices and hardships faced by parents on a daily basis. Writers and readers live a cathartic experience in these

blogs, yet it goes beyond an individual experience. Mommy blogging also creates a platform to build a strong community which reclaim knowledge on mothering and parenting. This empowering experience is sometimes an unconscious collective reaction to the disempowerment process initiated by the discourse on scientific parenting. It is not to say that Mommy bloggers reject the discourse on scientific parenting, yet the fact that they share their own experience of mothering and parenting produces new knowledge which is not labelled by science. This has been especially true when it comes to hardships neglected by the experts, such as the post-partum depression, or parenting children with disabilities (Goldsmith 2021). Wu also describes instances in which “this solidarity coalesced into collective action” when Mommy bloggers pressured “corporations to remove insulting television commercials” (Wu Song 2016, 45). A last feature of the phenomenon of mommy blogging is the commodification of the virtual community. Advertisers quickly identified Mommy blogs as effective mean to place ads and sell products. Hunter argues that “Mommy blogging has evolved into a largely commercial endeavor that commodifies the audience” (Hunter 2016, 1306). This commercial phenomenon further blurs the boundaries between the private sphere when blogs depict sincere and intimate stories and the public and monetized sphere when blogs use stories to sell products. There is little research on the broadening of parent-identity in the blogosphere. Although mommy blogging is, since its emergence, at the heart of the longstanding feminist struggle to define women in relation to the title of mother, the virtual space has not yet rendered more visible the experience and practices of non-female parents.



# Conclusion

In this chapter I showed that the new politicized parenting era is a global phenomenon, fueled by nationalist discourses and by a growing number of policies linking parenting practices to the tackling of social inequalities. I argue that the broadening of parent-identity to include non-female and non-heterosexual individuals is a new feature of the current politicized parenting era, yet, I appreciate that parenting is still a highly gendered practice and motherhood has long driven feminist struggles around the world and continue to bring women together in solidarity. This shift is especially visible, even if undoubtedly instrumentalized, in the formulation of policies for child protection across the world. Governments favor the wording “parents and legal guardians” to neutralize the gender dimension of parenthood.

The politicization of parenthood and parenting involves, on the one hand, the political narration of parenting often by state actors and, on the other hand, the politicization of individuals who want to become, who become or who are parents. I argue that the parent-identity leads to an increased self-awareness about one’s socio-economic and political environment and thus can lead to engaging in some forms of social activism. I show that an increasing number of parent-based mobilizations emerged around the world as a consequence of the reactivation of political socialization processes of parenthood and parenting. Finally, I argue that the deep emotional and subjective experiences that parents encounter reactivate their political socialization and that attached advocacy is a relevant motive for engagement in political activism.

In the following chapters I examine how politicized parenting unfolds in the Chinese urban context. I argue that the politicization of parenthood and parenting offers new leverage for parents to influence state action, in particular regarding the implementation of education policies and the general project of creating equal access to education.

# Chapter 2. Parenting: a Contentious Class Performance

In 2021, three headlines epitomized the Chinese government's efforts to control how parents birth and raise their children. In the spring, the national census showed the slowest population growth over the past ten years. The National Bureau of Statistics' director, Ning Jizhe, revealed that 12 million babies were born in 2020, a sharp decrease from the 18 million borns in 2016 (Brant 2021). The decrease continued in 2021, with only 10.6 million births reported (Reuters 2022). Following the publication of the census data, the government announced the loosening of family planning policies, now allowing three children per couple, and the implementation of incentives for young couples to have more children, including financial subsidies and extended maternity and parental leaves.

At the same time, in the summer of 2021, the government launched a crackdown on private education companies to lower the cost of education for parents. Apart from implementing financial regulations on profit and investment, the government banned academic training during weekends and holidays and online tutoring for children under six (Ni 2021).<sup>28</sup> The official goal of this ban is to reduce the education burden on families and pupils. However, the clampdown indirectly strengthens the government's grip over parents and how they raise their children by regulating the weekly schedule of children. Competition and peer pressure in education are still deep-seated among middle-class values, so many parents are looking for one-on-one home-tutoring solutions to maintain their child's performance. In the end, the new measures mainly increase parents' alienation from their child's education and widen the social gap between urban middle-class families and the rest of the population.

Then, in the fall of 2021, the National People's Congress passed the Family Education Promotion Law, which defines the responsibilities of parent for the content and methodology guiding their child's education. This law allows courts to punish

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<sup>28</sup> The new measures include the obligation for all existing tutoring centers to register as non-profit organizations, which means that already listed companies cannot use stock market financing to invest in extracurricular tutoring activities.

parents for failing to educate their children, thus increasing the state's capacity to shape family relationships.<sup>29</sup>

As these three news headlines demonstrate, parents are a critical object of government regulation and oversight. I argue that urban middle-class parents are central actors in realizing the China Dream. My approach to parents in the study of Chinese politics not only brings the 'parent' as political actors into view for the first time, but also offers a framework for understanding the complex ways in which they are shaped by and are shaping political struggle. Despite the recurrent use of the so-called Confucian ideology framework and the concept of filial piety to analyze Chinese society (Pye and Leites 1982; Nathan 1993; Moody 1994), scholars have yet to conceptualize parents themselves as key protagonists in state-society relationships. I argue that parents are an important focus of state discourses and public policy. The nationalist discourse promoted by the government since the early 2000s relies heavily on the nation-as-family metaphor to induce a filial relationship between the population and the motherland. Xi Jinping draws on family values to bind the national community, by highlighting the role of parents in transmitting the experience of national belonging, sometimes even staging his own family to shore up the image of a good patriarch (China Plus 2019). The presidential couple, nicknamed online Xi Dada and Peng Mama, symbolizes domestic bliss and the parental gaze watching over the Chinese people (Ting 2022). The *China Daily* paraphrases Xi Jinping to explain how the China Dream of national rejuvenation is intimately bound to families' dreams (An 2018). In a public address for the Spring Festival 2015, Xi Jinping explicitly binds the faith of each household to the faith of the nation:

Family is the basic cell of society and the first school of life (...). No matter how much the times have changed, no matter how much the pattern of life has changed, we should pay attention to how family building, family education, and family style, carefully cultivate and promote socialist core values, combined with carrying traditional Chinese virtues, such as family harmony, love, healthy growth of the next generation, and care for the elderly, so that millions of families become the foundation for national development, progress, and social harmony. (Xi 2015)

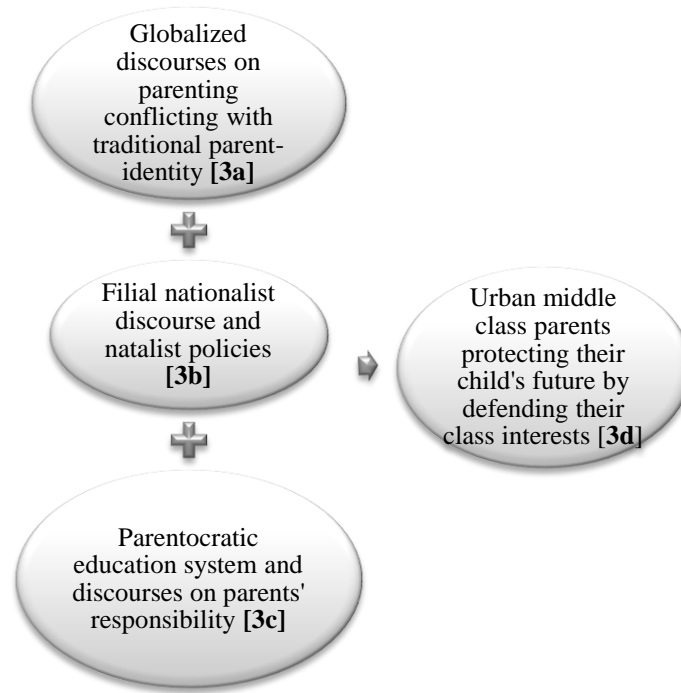
Rapid changes in birth planning have accompanied Xi's familial discourse. Since the mid-2010s, family planning policies have underlined the need for babies to reproduce the nation. Threatened by the demographic decline, the family does not just

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<sup>29</sup> The next chapter of this dissertation delves into the letter of the law and shows how the new FEPL makes parent-child relationships legible.

metaphorically represent the nation; it needs to be saved by parents birthing and raising children out of their love for the nation. Nevertheless, the party-state does not grant everyone reproductive rights and childrearing support. Traditional parenting norms are still prevalent in that homosexual couples and single individuals are excluded from birthing and raising children (Yaya Chen 2021b). Also, childcare support, maternity insurance, tax reduction, and most measures to support parents target urban working parents while excluding rural and migrant households (Ran 2022). I argue that the nationalist discourse and family planning policies have led to the reactivation of political socialization among the urban middle-households.

In this chapter, I argue that global discourses on parenting practices permeate Chinese society and sometimes conflict with traditional parent-identity and practices [see **3a on Fig. 4**]. This chapter is organized in three sections, aiming to set a broad understanding of the prevalent discourses with which parents interact and which shape parents' politicization. First, I examine how nationalist discourses blamed and instrumentalized the family institution for the nation's failures at the turn of the 20th century. Since the early 2000s, filial nationalist discourses accompanied by natalist policies have given a new political dimension to the family institution and the parent-identity [see **3b on Fig. 4**]. Second, I argue that education reforms implemented since the 1990s led to the emergence of a parentocratic system in which the state leads parents to believe that they have the power to guarantee their child's success whilst still being subject to the indirect control of the government [see **3c on Fig. 4**]. The state encouraged the emergence of an education market, which fosters competition among pupils, teachers, schools, and all actors involved in the market. This market is part of the toolbox of the state governing from a distance. Finally, this chapter shows how urban middle-class parents both acquiesce to and resist education policies which distribute educational resources [see **3c on Fig. 4**]. They engage in advocacy to protect their child's vested interests.



**Figure 4. Theoretical framework for politicized parents in urban China<sup>30</sup>**

While scholars often consider the urban middle-class to be the passive and submissive support of the Chinese regime (Chen and Lu 2010; Chen 2013), my study of urban middle-class parents suggests that urban middle-class parents engage in social activism to secure a promising future for their progeny. I argue that parent’s social activism is shaped by state policies and discourses, and relies on the defence of class-based aspirations on behalf of their children.

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<sup>30</sup> This chart is produced by the author of this research.

# **Filial nationalism: the imperatives to raise children to reproduce the nation**

The Chinese filial nationalist discourse reinforces a sense of belonging, especially among urban middle-class families tempted by a globalized lifestyle (Xie 2021b; Fong 2004a). The filial nationalist discourse attempts to strengthen the loyalty and respect of the population for its nation. I argue that this discourse also provides a favorable context for politicizing parent identities and practices. Vanessa Fong defines filial nationalism as “an imagined family ... composed of ambitious, well-educated people worldwide” (2004a, 632). In previous research analyzing the nationalist discourse in primary school Mandarin textbooks, I argued that filial nationalism “correspond[s] to a state-engineered discourse that powerfully unites the Chinese nation, whether at home or abroad, and inculcates a sense of duty to repay the nation” (Laurent 2020, 545). State-approved primary school textbooks depict citizens as members of a great family, the nation. Whether they live in China or abroad, citizens are bound to their homeland by the same emotional, loyal, and respectful relationship as they are to their family.

Examining the role assigned to the family as a social institution in the process of nation-building and state-building in the PRC, I argue that the current nationalist discourse construes the nation as a family, emphasizing the filial relationship between Chinese citizens and the motherland to reinforce national unity. Yet, the family is not just a metaphor for the nation, it is also the location where the nation is reproduced biologically and culturally. Thus, filial nationalist discourses accompany natalist policies to “rejuvenate” the population and face demographic challenges. I show how this discursive context gives a political meaning to the family relationship, which, in turn, leads to a renewed political socialization for parents. I illustrate this process in the chapters five, six and seven of this dissertation through parenting practices, school choice strategies and parents’ mobilizations pro and against education policies.

This chapter builds off of Joseph’s conception of political familism, which she defines as “the deployment of family institutions, ideologies, idioms (idiomatic kinship), practices, and relationships by citizens to activate their needs and demands in relation

to the state or polity and by the state or state actors to mobilize practical and moral grounds for governance based on a civic myth of kinship (Joseph 2005) and a public discourse that privileges family” (Joseph 2011, 151). She also underlines that “the family itself has been a highly unstable category of social organization” (Joseph 2011, 162). This assertion is especially valid in the Chinese context, where the state has constantly sought to transform the size, shape and meaning of the family institution.

## **Family institution as obstacle or tool in the modernization process of the Chinese nation**

The family institution has not always been regarded as a driving force of nationalism in China. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the twilight of the Chinese Empire, intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), leader of the May Fourth Movement, and Fu Sinian (1896-1950), chief editor of the renowned journal *New Tide*, considered the traditional Confucian family institution as the cause of China’s backwardness and the main obstacle to the modernization of the country.<sup>31</sup> Fu Sinian even labeled the traditional family “‘the origin of myriad evils’ (*wan e zhiyuan*)” (Jin Feng 2004, 29).<sup>32</sup> Chen Duxiu contrasted Western societies – which he claims rely on individual subjects – from Eastern societies – which are supposedly built on family units. He asserts that “‘the various symptoms that speak of the ignominy, lawlessness, cruelty, and weakness of the Eastern countries can all be traced back to this [evil of the traditional family]’” (Jin Feng 2004, 29). Intellectuals blamed the patriarchal family for maintaining generational and gender hierarchies and preventing individuals from committing to broader social and national issues (Schwarcz 1986; Glosser 2002, 2003). During the first half of the twentieth century, Republican reformers closely linked national regeneration to family reforms. They promoted nuclear families built on free-

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<sup>31</sup> The May-Fourth Movement is an intellectual, cultural, and political movement that grew out of students protests in Beijing on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919, against the terms of the Versailles Treaty discussed at the Paris Peace Conference at the end of World War I. The Treaty, negotiated mainly among Western nations, surrendered northern Chinese territories (e.g. the Shandong Province) to the Japanese Empire. Student protests aimed at pressuring the young Chinese republican government not to sign the Treaty. Intellectuals from the May-Fourth Movement promoted the modernization of the Chinese society against the Confucian traditions and the building of a strong nation. Cultural and political effervescence led to the emergence of nationalist movements, the rise of feminist activists and even the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 in Shanghai (e.g. Chow 1960; Schwarz 1986; Bergère 1977; Paulès 2019). In Chinese the journal title is 新潮 [xīncháo]

<sup>32</sup> In Chinese: 万恶之源 [wàn'è zhī yuan]

choice companionate marriage as the key to individual happiness and to building a strong nation (Hershatter 2004).

After establishing the PRC in 1949, the new communist regime sought to continue in the vein of the May Fourth Movement, blaming the traditional Confucian family model for the nation's failures (Guiheux 2018, 347). The Marriage Law was one of the first significant laws promulgated in 1950. The law promoted freedom of choice in marriage, banning arranged marriages, polygamy, and underage marriages. The law also established divorce procedures with possible alimonies. According to Diamant (2001), this law made "love legible" by building a legal framework and an administration to register marriages, divorces, births, deaths, and civil status records. The party-state launched a mass-mobilization campaign against the traditional patriarchal family, denouncing "despotic spouses" and "feudal marriage" (Guiheux 2018, 364). However, the law was not welcome in rural areas where brideprice was a well-entrenched tradition, and divorce meant a significant loss for the families.

Some historians argue that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) backed away from the promotion of the 1950-Marriage Law in order to secure peasants' support in the land reform and collectivization (Johnson 1983; Croll 1981). Johnson (1983) and Stacey (1983) showed that the CCP benefited from maintaining patriarchal institutions to a certain extent. Stacey coined the apparent oxymoron 'patriarchal-socialism' to describe the CCP discourses and policies in the 1950s and 60s (Stacey 1983). Scholars (Glosser 2003; Friedman 2005) argue that the communist regime made an instrumental use of family reforms to "bring the domestic realm into closer relationship with the state" (Hershatter 2004, 1000). Family reforms also strengthened its control over the population by "drawing married men and women out of kinship networks and into the more encompassing intimate community of the socialist nation" (Hershatter 2004, 999). More broadly, the Party and the work unit aimed at replacing the family as the primary beneficiary of individual loyalty and as the main structure of production. The state and the work units established public childcare and schools to allow women to participate in production fully. According to Ji *et al.*, "the state built the *danwei system* (...) in part to socialize social reproduction, building facilities such as dining halls, laundries, and childcare and healthcare centers" (Ji et al. 2017, 767). The CCP did not question the gender division of house chores or the maternal role assigned to women (Robinson 1985; Evans 2002), and earning gaps and occupational segregation still existed in the



socialist era (Ji et al. 2017; Zuo and Jiang 2009; Jin 2006). Housewives initially labeled as bourgeois parasites became the main constituency for the recruitment of local chapters of the All-China Women Federation (ACWF) after a reevaluation of their status as lower-class and poor. The Party's need for support among the urban population and the competition between the ACWF and the Department of Women Workers motivated this reevaluation, which gave a tinge of 'service-oriented' dimension to the ACWF (Wang 2005).

A "Marxist maternalist and egalitarian" (Manning 2006, 356) ideology underpinned the CCP's work in the fight for women's equality. This ideology was based on the premise that women's natural role is in the work of reproduction: women's bodies should be controlled because they are at the heart of the reproduction of society, and motherhood remained a natural and sacred duty of women (Manning 2006). Concurrently, this "Marxist maternalist and egalitarian" ideology promoted the equal participation of women in productive work. The contradictions in the ideological discourse were brought to light in campaigns like the Great Leap Forward, during which women were required to participate in work brigades but menstruation and pregnancy were stigmatised and treated as threats to the achievement of production targets (Manning 2006). Childcare was collectivised despite resistance, and motherhood was lauded on the condition that it did not hinder production.

The Maoist regime oscillated between a pro-natalist policy and birth planning. The Marxist ideology, from which the Maoist ideology derives, opposes the Malthusian thesis regarding population control (Guiheux 2018, 350). In theory, the success of a new socialist society rests on the reproduction of the workforce. However, the Maoist regime adopted a more pragmatic approach to control demographic growth, establishing the Family Planning Commission in 1964 and launching a campaign to reduce the natality in 1975, long before the One-Child Policy (Parish and Whyte 1978; Croll 1985; Banister 1987).<sup>33</sup> The slogan of this campaign – 'later, sparser, fewer' – encouraged marrying later, spacing birth between children, and having fewer children.<sup>34</sup> Until the late 1970s, state-sponsored birth planning was primarily framed as women's liberation, health, and children's education, rather than national survival (Greenhalgh 1990). This campaign led to a decline in the birth rate from 5.9 children per woman in 1970 to 2.7 children per

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<sup>33</sup> In Chinese 计划生育委员会 [jìhuà shēngyù wěiyuánhui].

<sup>34</sup> In Chinese 晚稀少 [wǎnxīshǎo].

woman in 1979 (Guiheux 2018, 352). In the decade before the implementation of the One-Child Policy, the birth rate in China had already halved.

After the death of Mao in 1976, the privatization and progressive dismantling of the State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) led to the reduction of benefits and public services to employees. However, the influence of the state on the family did not fade but rather changed in its goals and nature. The attention shifted from increasing production in a socialist society to controlling population growth in an emerging neoliberal society.

## **From family planning to family care**

I show the increased influence of the Chinese state's influence over parenting practices, since the 1980s. While scholars have focused on the formulation, implementation, and consequences of the One-Child Policy on birth planning, I argue they have neglected the influence of politics on parents and parenting practices. When the state promulgated the One-Child Policy in 1979, the CCP feared that population growth would hinder or slow economic reforms underway (White 2006). Susan Greenhalgh shows that the policy was first presented by a ballistic expert, Song Jian, as a scientific solution to an economic problem (Greenhalgh 2005). Scholars on population policies have studied the Chinese family planning policies extensively as an extreme example of social engineering, where the state controls its population's body and sexuality (Greenhalgh 1990; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Greenhalgh 2008). Family planning was no longer a women's matter but a question of national survival and economic success. Other scholars have focused on the consequences of this policy on the process of population aging and gender ratio (Loh and Remick 2015; Ebenstein 2010; Attané 2011), the hidden children born out of the family planning (Johnson 2016), and on Chinese children more broadly (Naftali 2016; Chicharro 2010, 2012; Fong 2004b).

However, population policies are not only aimed at slowing the growth of the population by reducing the number of children; these policies are also at the center of the nationalist project to improve the population's quality. Population policies are an integral part of the nationalist project to modernize China (Greenhalgh 2008) and increase the competitiveness of the Chinese population on the global labor market (Fong 2004a). Official policy documents published in the 1980s stressed the goal to use the Chinese demographic advantage by raising the education of the population. A report

titled *From a country with a large population to a country with high quality human capital* explicates the government's objectives and plans (Hu 2012). This report highlights the importance of increasing the quality of the population for the nation's sake. The government asserted that the quality of human capital – the population – was crucial for economic development and its modernization (Yan 2003). According to Yan Fu, “the quality of the people is the basis of saving the nation while the visibility of new institutions is merely an external sign of the nation's health” (cited in Kipnis 2006, 302). The concept of quality, *suzhi*, has a long intellectual history in China. Kipnis (2006) offers a compelling account of the evolution of the concept of quality in China and traces its origin in a form of social Darwinism in the early twentieth century. The internal definition of quality remains ambiguous, encompassing various characteristics innate and acquired. According to Kipnis (2006), “[the] reference to *suzhi* justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts, with those of ‘high’ quality gaining more income, power and status than ‘low’” (Kipnis 2006, 295). The concept of *suzhi* relies on individual's self-entrepreneurship to improve one's quality for the nation's sake. The concept of quality draws scholars' attention away from demographic data toward family practices in childrearing.

The state-sponsored modernization project initiated new forms of relations between individuals and traditional and socialist structures, e.g. the family and the work unit, whereby the rise of individualism questioned the full-on collectivism that prevailed during the Maoist period. This process leads to a form of individualization of the society, a society in which individuals are allowed and even encouraged to make choices for themselves, for instance choosing their spouse or their job (Guiheux 2018, 375). According to Yan Yunxiang (2009), this individualization was not accompanied by a rise in individualism in China, in which individuals' interests and choices are valued *per se*. Yan Yunxiang conceptualizes the emergence of a neofamilism in contemporary China, where individuals are recognized and accepted within the family context (Yan 2021). Individuals' choices and interests are valued so long as they align with the family's interests. He distinguishes this form of neofamilism from the new-familism emerging in the 1990s in Western countries in which the family is a means to reaching individual happiness. Looking at parent-driven marriages and divorces, Yan shows an increase in intergenerational dependence, a return of parental power and a new form of filial piety based on descending familism, e.g. grandparents helping the younger generation (Yan

2011, 2016). In traditional filial piety, adult children care for the elderly, rather than the opposite. Some scholars studying childcare show that “as family power centre has shifted from the old to the young, grandparents no longer enjoy the power and status their traditional counterparts once did” (Goh, Tsang, and Chokkanathan 2016, 2). Thus, in this new familial arrangement, also called intergenerational reciprocity, the middle generation is no longer subservient to the elderly. Grandparents are mobilized to serve as inexpensive baby-sitters to their grandchildren. Yan Yunxiang argues that neofamilism emerged in a depoliticized context where materialistic and consumerist goals are predominant, offering a safer approach to life for most individuals (Yan 2011).

While I concur with Yan that this individualization process reinforced the state-sponsored modernization project, I disagree with his argument that this process is devoid of politics. I argue that the rise of family values is highly politicized at the collective level by the state discourse on filial nationalism and at the family level by urban middle-class parents’ defending their families’ interests. This dynamic is captured on the anthropologist Kailing Xie’s account of her childhood in 1990s: “Together with other boys and girls from my school, I was taught the idea that there is only one way forward: we must study hard and enter a good university, so that we can become successful in our work, therefore ‘giving back’ to our parents and [the] *zu guo* (motherland 祖国)” (Xie 2021b, 3).

### **Filial nationalism as the new path to a strong and modern country**

We are a family and we are all brothers and sisters. (...) By the one hundred years since the founding of the New China [in 1949], the Chinese nation will surely be able to stand firmer among the nations of the world. At that time, we surely will have built a happy and modern country. The Chinese nation holds tightly like pomegranate seeds, and we are all members of the Chinese nation community. In the process of building a socialist modern country, no ethnic community can be left behind. We must firmly believe that tomorrow will be better. (Xiaosong Zhang and Zhu 2021, translation from the original text in Chinese)

Discourse of Xi Jinping, President of the PRC during a tour in the northwestern province of Qinghai, on June 8th 2021

Building on previous research examining school textbooks (Laurent 2020), I argue that in the 2000s, the Chinese government set in motion a new form of nationalism that sought to reshape the relationship of citizens to their motherland and promoted a proud and unapologetic China. This shift, neglected by scholars so far, is just as, if not more, significant than the Patriotic Education Campaign (PEC) launched in 1994 (Perry 2007).

After the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 and the international boycott that followed, the Party-state initiated a “patriotic education campaign” that included a revision of the school textbooks and mobilizations of the masses. Specifically, the PEC highlighted the transgressions of the West, as having bullied China from the mid-nineteenth century, and sought to remake the CCP as the country’s historical savior. According to Wang Zheng, the CCP “skillfully utilized China’s humiliating past to arouse its citizens’ historical consciousness and promote social cohesion” (Wang 2008, 803). The mainstream scholarship on the rise of Chinese nationalism focuses on its impact on the country’s foreign policy (Hughes 2006, 2011; Duan 2017). Some scholars have questioned this alleged rise of patriotic sentiment (Carlson 2009; Johnston 2017), while others have highlighted the diversity of national narratives in China and rejected a single monolithic nationalist discourse (Friedman 1994; Leibold 2007; Wang 2001). Other scholars on Chinese nationalism focus on nationalist protests (Weiss 2013; Wallace and Weiss 2015) and the impact of popular nationalism on Chinese foreign policy (Brittingham 2007; Lampton 2001). Many scholars take for granted the success of the PEC and the resulting rise in patriotic sentiment among the population since the 1990s. Yet, the state-led nationalist discourse highlighting China’s past humiliations (Callahan 2004) directly contrasted with the real-life experiences of many Chinese citizens who aspired to study or find a job in a Western country (Dong 2017).

While the PEC and its consequences received much scholarly attention, unexplored to date is the emergence and impact of an equally forceful ideological shift among school curriculum and state discourses in the early 2000s that reflect a much prouder, more assertive, and global form of nationalism: filial nationalism. After the 2008 economic crisis, scholars argued that the resilience of the Chinese economy fostered the legitimacy of the Party-state, which relied on popular nationalist sentiment. The crisis forced Western countries to acknowledge the new position of China on the international stage (W.A. Joseph 2014; Shambaugh 2013). Based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the 2001 primary school Mandarin textbook reform, I argue that Chinese leaders began to promote filial nationalism to citizens several years before the economic crisis (Laurent 2020). The emergence of filial nationalism marks a sharp break with the aggrieved and backward-looking nationalist discourse of the 1990s. Whereas Fong explores filial nationalism as the spontaneous patriotic behaviour of Chinese teenagers seeking employment in the global labour market (Fong 2004a), I suggest that filial

nationalism is the government's tool to solve what Zhao Suisheng has identified as "the tension between upholding the individualistic political values of modernity and the need for a strong, unified state to survive in a world of competitive nation-states" (Costa 2014, 99).

Building on a feminist critique of the scholarship on nationalism (McClintock 1993), I argue that filial nationalism relies on the family as a trope to unify the population while sanctioning social hierarchy and economic competition. The new discourse fosters a filial bond between the citizens and their nation, inculcating a sense of respect and pride for the nation (Liu and Zhou 2019). This filial bond also prioritizes the duty to *give back* by promoting the nation and participating in the national effort to achieve economic growth and integration on the global stage and unites different ethnic and social groups constituting the Chinese population. Filial nationalism instills a reciprocal long-term attachment to the motherland in the same way that Confucian norms of filial piety cultivate a reciprocal long-term attachment to parents. Building on Elisabeth Militz and Carolin Schurr's (2016) concept of affective nationalism, I argue that nationalism is a relational and emotional discourse. Filial nationalism allows for different groups to bond with the motherland. Neither "inchoate and incoherent," (Pye 1993) nor an all-encompassing narrative (Friedman 1994), filial nationalism reconciles a long-term deep-seated attachment to the motherland with an individualistic lifestyle and a diversity of career paths fostered by China's market economy and global integration.

Since the 2010s, saving the nation is not about controlling population growth; instead, it is about "rejuvenating" the population. Although filial nationalist discourses accompanying natalist policies are deployed to foster a rebound in the birth rate, the government does not want just any kind of babies. Rather, it wants children from urban educated households who inculcate a sense of duty to repay their motherland.

## **Targeted natalist policies to serve filial nationalism**

Adhere to the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, (...) implement the national strategy to actively respond to population aging, implement the *three-child* birth policy and supporting measures, and (...) promote the realization of an appropriate fertility level, promote

the long-term balanced development of the population, and provide a solid foundation and lasting driving force for building a prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful modern socialist country and realizing the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.<sup>35</sup>

*Decision of the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council on Optimizing the Fertility Policy and Promoting the Long-term Balanced Development of the Population, June 26th 2021*

Since the 1980s, the Family Planning policies went from a strict one-child policy for most households to the promotion of three children per couple in the spring of 2021. Xi Jinping is acutely aware that his ambition to “rejuvenate the Chinese nation” requires dealing with the declining population. Since the 1980s, China’s birth rate dropped significantly, from 18.21 births per 1,000 people in 1980 to 7.52 births per 1,000 in 2021 (World Bank 2019a; Reuters 2022). Family planning policies have a direct impact on fertility. The fertility rate went from 6.3 children per woman in 1966 when the Cultural Revolution started to 2.7 children per woman in 1979 before the promulgation of the One-Child Policy. It reached 1.3 children per woman in 2020, and as a consequence, the government initiated the two-child policy (Zhao and Zhang 2021; World Bank 2019b). According to some journalists, “this declining population will lead to economic disaster and even could end China’s civilisation as we know it” (Xie 2021a). As stipulated in the Decision of the Central Committee and the State Council cited above, the need to raise the birth rate is considered a matter of national survival. Only a dramatic reversal of the declining birth rate, it is believed, will realize the Chinese dream and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Since the mid-2010s, natalist and familialist discourses accompanied the filial nationalist discourse promoting childbirth to strengthen the great national family. Reproductive policies have shifted target from birth control to birth incentivization, yet reproductive matters remain a public and political matter rather than as a matter of an individuals’ rights to choose.

Abortion rights are an excellent example of the instrumentalization of reproductive rights. For thirty years, abortions were an integral part of the family planning process, with numerous forced abortions undertaken during the strike-hard campaigns in the 1980s (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). In contrast, now that China is trying to increase its population, the government recently announced its goal to reduce

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<sup>35</sup> In Chinese: “坚持以习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想为指导, (...) 实施积极应对人口老龄化国家战略, 实施三孩生育政策及配套支持措施, (...) 推动实现适度生育水平, 促进人口长期均衡发展, 为建设富强民主文明和谐美丽的社会主义现代化强国、实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦提供坚实基础和持久动力。”

non-medical abortions in 2021 (State Council 2021). Nevertheless, despite the state's official announcement to restrict abortion rights, some reports describe multiple stories of forced abortions among Uyghur women in Xinjiang (Office High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). In China, abortion rights are framed as pragmatic policy tools by the government at the service of the nation.

On June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021, family planning took a new turn in China with the promulgation of the “Decision of the State Council and the Central Committee of the CCP on Optimizing the Fertility Policy and Promoting a Long-Term Balanced Development of the Population” (referred to as the June-Decision).<sup>36</sup> Reproduction is not a question of rights, freedom, or choice; it is about state regulation and policy performance. The words “optimizing” and “balanced development” imply a performance for the government in controlling the population's reproduction. This decision lists the measures targeting households to raise the birth rate: suppression of all fines related to family planning, preferential housing policies, and tax deductions.<sup>37</sup> At the national level, the government is seeking to improve the population forecast and registration system, improve medical prenatal and postnatal care, fund and manage a public nursery system, support private childcare services, and supervise the training of childcare professionals. The government also commits to support women's reproductive rights on the labor market, guaranteeing maternity leave, breastfeeding leave, and parental leave.

However, most of these rights and services are decentralized and thus depend on the local government to promote “a long-term balanced development of the population.” The interests of central and local governments in China are not necessarily aligned (Mertha 2009), and policy implementation is undoubtedly not instantaneous. The regulations on maternity leaves are an excellent example of challenge for local authorities. When a woman goes on maternity leave, her salary is maintained and paid chiefly by her private employer and partially by local government social security funds. In the June-Decision, the central government commits to “improv[ing] the cost-sharing mechanism for vacation labor”.<sup>38</sup> Yet, local governments are responsible for implementing measures. They do not want to burden their business sector with

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<sup>36</sup> In Chinese: 中共中央 国务院关于优化生育政策促进人口长期均衡发展的决定 [Zhōnggòng zhōngyāng guówùyuàn guānyú yōuhuà shēngyù zhèngcè cùjìn rénkǒu chángqī jūnhéng fāzhǎn de juédìng]

<sup>37</sup> One of the ways to enforce the One-Child Policy was to fine household who gave birth to a second child. Parents would need to pay a social maintenance fine (in Chinese 抚养费 [fǔyǎng fèi]) to formally register their child so that he or she is granted all social rights.

<sup>38</sup> In Chinese “健全假期用工成本分担机制” [jiànquán jiàqī yònggōng chéngběn fēndān jīzhì]



extended maternity leave or shoulder the maternity leave payments. Several commentators warned that the extension of maternity leave would only lead to more discrimination against women in the labor market (Sun and Chen 2021). Despite these obstacles, several provinces, such as Jiangxi, Hubei, Beijing, and Shanghai, revised their family planning regulations and extended maternity leave from the legal minimum of 98 days to between 138 and 158 days. The eastern province of Zhejiang added 30 days off for second and third children (Li 2021a). In a nutshell, the central government's official announcements to increase the birth rate and "optimize fertility" depends on the willingness of local governments to implement and enforce the reproductive rights of female employees.

The natalist discourse promotes a traditional family model depicting a young married heterosexual couple who gives birth to two or three children. The June-Decision clearly "advocates for age-appropriate marriage and childbearing".<sup>39</sup> Thus children should be born in wedlock and women should be of an appropriate age to give birth, that is, under 35 years old (Qiu 2019). In early 2022, proposals from the National People's Congress delegates assumed that future parents should preferably be educated urbanites. Zhou Yanfang, a delegate from Shanghai, suggested that universities should set up daycare and maternal counseling centers for on-campus mothers and provide graduate-level female students with maternity leave (Ni and Zhu 2022b). Zhang Junting suggested that city governments "should work toward lowering the cost of childbearing by offering free kindergarten education for families' third child" (Ni 2022). These policy proposals target educated urban households who have access to universities and childcare services. In August 2022, the National Health Commission, and sixteen other national agencies published "Guidelines for Further Improving and Implementing Fertility Support Measures" which lists numerous measures to encourage families to have more babies (Xin Li 2022). However, most of these measures target urban households.

On the other hand, the state denies reproductive rights to several communities, for instance single individuals and LGBTQ+ people. In September 2021, Chen Yaya, a researcher on gender equality at the Institute for Literary Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, argues that "... in successive revisions of the fertility policy,

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<sup>39</sup> In Chinese 提倡适龄婚育 [tíchàng shìlíng hūn yù]

it is consistently assumed that a ‘couple’ will give birth to the children in question, which means that in practice, many provinces and cities still regard nonmarital childbirth as a violation of the family planning policy, which is injurious to the rights and interests of single mothers, who may not be able to take maternity leave, or benefit from maternity insurance, etc., and may even encounter penalties, such as the child’s being denied household registration and being required to pay social compensation fees” (Chen 2021b).<sup>40</sup> In sum, the Xi regime promotes a familialist discourse; however it does not want just any kind of children nor just any kind of family.

The Family Planning Law, the June-Decision and other legislation advocate for “excellent birth, excellent education”.<sup>41</sup> This phrase encapsulates the government’s perspective on reproduction, which aims to increase the birth rate of the urban middle-class, educated households. Xi Jinping seeks to tie urban middle-class parents to his rejuvenation project. I argue that these state-led discourses promoting filial nationalism and a familialist model reconfigure the parent-subject as crucial actors to save the nation and give a strong political dimension to the family institution. Parents should give birth to children and provide an excellent education, which is no longer the sole responsibility of public schools.

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<sup>40</sup>In Chinese the household registration is called 户口 [hùkǒu], and the social compensation fees is 社会抚养费 [shèhuì fùyǎng fèi].

<sup>41</sup> In Chinese 优生优育 [yōushēng yōuyù]. It is noteworthy that 优生 [yōushēng] is often translated by “eugenics” in the English literature, yet the Chinese word does not convey the same fascist connotation. 优生 [yōushēng] literally means “excellent birth”, it is associated with the biological and social conditions under which women are giving birth, such as age, marital status, health conditions.

# **Parentocracy in the education system: governance of the social project**

I show how the liberalization of the education market in the 1990s increased parents' responsibility in securing a bright future for their children. The education reforms implemented in the 1990s entailed privatization, commercialization, and liberalization of education resources. These reforms built a competitive education market with multiple schools, tutoring institutes, and other educational services. Until the recent introduction of new regulations, parents were left to separate the wheat from the chaff in the flourishing education market, in order to choose the most suitable educational environment for their children (Crabb 2010). Furthermore, Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) show that the implementation of the One-Child Policy and "the state's norms on population quality, far from suppressing desire, [have] stimulated desire by tapping into widespread parental aspirations for the upward mobility (and future filiality) of their one (or two) children" (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005, 217). These trends, that is the greater 'choices' for parents regarding their child's education and the state's encouragement for 'quality children', have led to increased social competition for education resources and a heavier burden on parents.

This increased responsibility fosters the involvement of parents in the Chinese education system, also called social sponsorship (Van Zanten 2015; Turner 1960).<sup>42</sup> Social sponsorship shapes the educational opportunities of Chinese children from kindergarten to senior high school, reinforcing social reproduction among the urban middle class. The emergence of an education market frames parents' choice for their children's education as an autonomous choice expressing a personal subjectivity. Scholars highlight the role of self-entrepreneurship in the neoliberal governance implemented in China after the reforms (Sigley 2006; Bray 2009; Bray and Jeffreys 2016; Rose 2005). In her analysis of the emergence of the labor market in China during the reform era, Hoffman shows that "freedom [to choose a career] then is not indicative of the absence of power governance, but is a technique of governing where the

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<sup>42</sup> Cf chapter 1 for a discussion on the concept of social sponsorship

regulation and management of subjects happen ‘through freedom’. This analytical orientation shifts questions of autonomy away from state-society power struggles and towards an examination of job choice as a mechanism of governing and subjectification” (Hoffman 2006, 553). Nevertheless, this choice is framed within the notions of social responsibility and patriotism. It is noteworthy that, in recent years, the Chinese government uses a more direct approach to regulate the education market, as illustrated by the crackdown on the private tutoring market in the summer of 2021. This crackdown drastically limits parental choice in the education their children can access.

## **The function of the education system: ideology or expertise**

Since Imperial China, the primary function of the Chinese education system has shifted from purely ideological training for the future governing elites to giving access to a form of upward mobility for the majority of the Chinese citizens. Education is usually considered a fundamental feature of Chinese culture. In Imperial China, Confucianism promoted the idea that studying the past and classical texts was the best way to learn how to govern (Lieberthal 2003, 7). China was the first country to select its local administrators based on an examination. Schooling was thus not only a means of accumulating knowledge or merely learning how to be in society; it effectively improved one’s familial social conditions. Succeeding in the imperial examinations ensured an excellent social and financial position as an imperial administrator, a mandarin. At the collective level, the education system shaped the country’s governance. For centuries, the education system influenced the governing bodies and individuals’ upward social mobility. Intellectuals have consequently generally enjoyed a privileged position in society (Lieberthal 2003).<sup>43</sup>

During the Republican era, reforms democratized the education system. Primary education enrolled 2.8 million students in 1912, 11 million in the early 1930s, and 17 million in 1945. Secondary school enrollment, grew from around 100,000 students at the beginning of the Republican period, exceeded 500,000 in the early 1930s and reached 1.4 million in 1945 (Paulès 2019, 308). The education reforms were not only a

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<sup>43</sup> In Chinese, the word ‘intellectuals’ is translated by 知识分子 [zhīshì fēnzǐ] and designates people who have received secondary and higher education.

statistical matter for Republican reformers; it was first and foremost a matter of content and organization. Inspired by Japanese and Western systems of education, education reformers advocated for integrating arts and science in the curricula, the timetabling of teaching by discrete classes, and annual graduation (Hayhoe 1996; Bastid-Bruguière and Zhang 1988; Gang 2001). Yet, education reforms launched in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “reflected on the interconnection between nationalization and internationalization”; reformers “did not totally negate tradition nor advocate a wholesale Westernization” (Gang 2001, 163). Curran points to the irreconcilable differences between Western and Chinese society which explains the “distinct failure” of the modernization of the education system (Curran 2005, 14) For instance, he mentions the Chinese distaste for business, the central role of education in selecting bureaucrats who participate directly in ruling the country. Curran (2005) highlights the divergence between, on the one hand, an imperial education system inspired by Confucian classics, which acculturates and socializes students to a moral ethos oriented toward governing the country and on the other hand, a Western education system aimed at disseminating artistic, scientific, or technical knowledge instrumental for the improvement of society. He cites the example of the difficulties encountered by Huang Yuanpei in his attempt to promote vocational education. As early as the late imperial and Republican eras, the Chinese education system was already in a tug-of-war between education as instrumental knowledge and education as a moral framework.

During the Maoist Period, education reforms were at the heart of the tension between the two governing political factions: the moderates and the radicals. Tsang (2000) argues that party leaders were divided over “three enduring policy dilemmas: [education] for political/ideological development versus education for economic development (redness vs. expertise) (1); education for social equality versus education for efficiency (e.g., education for the masses versus education preparing a well-trained élite) (2); enlisting intellectuals and high-skilled personnel in socialist development versus treating them as antagonists and suppressing them (3)” (M.C. Tsang 2000, 583).

The oscillations between the two projects often occurred suddenly and radically. In the first decade (1949-57), leaders tried to find a compromise between these two projects. On the one hand, the regime undertook the nationalisation of educational institutions by centralizing the funding and promulgating a universal curriculum using simplified Chinese. This curriculum enabled the state to control the ideological content

inculcated to children (Kwong 1985). On the other hand, the regime introduced different tracks within the education system with the development of vocational schools to train skilled workers.

During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), the radicals shifted education reforms toward more redness, bringing manual labour onto school premises, and fighting adult illiteracy to ensure that all Chinese citizens understood mass-mobilizations campaigns. The comeback of the moderates during the adjustment period (1962 – 1965) resulted in further diversification and vocationalization of the education system. Finally, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) brought the tension between ‘redness’ and ‘expertise’ to an apex. For several years, the national examination for university admission was cancelled, higher education institutions closed and educated urban youth were sent to the countryside for re-education through manual labor. Despite the flip-flopping orientation and the chaotic and sometimes violent implementation, the education reforms during the Maoist Era led to some progress. From 1959 to 1979, the universalization of basic education reduced the illiteracy rate from 43% to 30% and until 1961 the enrollment growth rates in primary education achieved around 34% and in the higher education around 50% (Guiheux 2018, 389).

After the death of Mao Zedong, the moderates led by Deng Xiaoping took over the leadership of the Party and the country. Deng halted the revolutionary education campaigns launched during the Cultural Revolution and revived a selective and multi-track system of education. The education system resumed the essential function of political socialization, but the ideological content shifted across time from class struggle to nationalist cohesion (Laurent 2020; Vickers 2008; Wang 2008). Moreover, the individualization of society induced social changes as described by Mary Crabb: “with a continuing emphasis on moral education (deyu), education in China certainly still fulfills the ideological function of inculcating values and national pride, but it does so in a changed political and ethical context where ‘private’ interests in social mobility and expanded consumption coordinate with state interests in capital accumulation” (Crabb 2010, 391).

During the Republican and Maoist era (1911-1978), education reforms oscillated between ideology and expertise, yet these reforms brought millions out of illiteracy. During the Reform Era, the regime has taken a clear orientation toward a diversified, partially commercialized, and elitist education system. Since the 1990s, education

reforms have been driven by neo-liberal policy tools giving more choice to the user-consumer, in this case, parents and children, while maintaining a heavy ideological content in the school curricula.

## **The emergence, development, and regulation of the education market**

Since the 1990s, the Chinese authorities have focused on the second dilemma listed by Tsang: “education for social equality versus education for efficiency (e.g., education for the masses versus education preparing a well-trained élite)” (2000, 583). The government aims to provide equal access to education for all regardless of socio-economic status and geographical origin to foster social mobility and decrease structural inequalities. At the same time, the Ministry of Education encourages competition among schools and students to provide the best quality education to the strongest students who will become the élite. The international neo-liberal discourse on education reforms praising competition and differentiation as the best ways to improve education provision influenced China’s liberalization and privatization of education resources (Crabb 2010). This competition increased the responsibility of the individual for their success and failure.

The education reforms implemented in the 1990s leaned toward an elitist and competitive education system by promoting school differentiation (privatization, unequal funding, different curricula, and so on) to improve education quality (Cheng and DeLany 1999; Zhang 2011). This process led a “school choice fever” among urban middle-class families (Cheng 2002).<sup>44</sup> After lifting restrictions on the private sector in the 1990s, the education market expanded rapidly (Kwong 1997; Pepper 1990; Zhang 2011). Crabb describes “the proliferation of a wide variety of private and quasi-private educational institutions, including state-owned schools subsidized by government funds, tuition-charging schools affiliated with top, competitive public schools, exclusive and expensive private boarding schools catering to the *nouveaux riches* and a host of other fee-based educational institutions of varying size and quality” (Crabb 2010, 390).

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<sup>44</sup> In Chinese “school choice fever” is called 择校热 [zé xiào rè]

In the 2000s, the state tried to regulate the formal education market, by removing the characterisation “key schools” and limiting the establishment of private schools. In 2010, the Ministry of Education published the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* to reiterate its willingness to regulate school admission processes and tuition fees. The state published several policies which banned tuition and miscellaneous fees. These regulations aim to regulate this fever, reduce the financial burden and guarantee fairer access to education resources (Ministry of Education 2010). Local education bureaus also attempted to regulate school admission processes based on demographic data by drawing school catchment areas. In 2014 and again in 2017, the government promulgated new regulations to standardize the school admission process. However, the constant reiteration of these regulations reveals the lack of strict implementation in practice. To this day, many public schools continue to charge extra fees to enroll pupils from outside their district. These fees are not labeled tuition fees but book fees, meal fees, or renovation fees (Fu 2011). Some public schools offer to bypass school districting if parents donate money for school renovations or projects (Wu 2008, 2012, 2013b). Finally, some public schools offer private tutoring or are affiliated with a tutoring company. Children enrolled in these extra-curricular courses have a greater chance of entering the affiliated public schools.

The weakening of the work-unit system prompted employers to close services offered to their employees, such as health clinics and daycares. Even though school is mandatory only from six years old, the liberalization of the education market has opened a lucrative market for preschool institutions. The proportion of children who enroll in preschool from the age of three has risen dramatically in the last 20 years, from 46% in 2000 to 83.4% in 2019 (Ministry of Education 2020a). In 2018, only 37.8% of preschool are public including the ones run by public enterprises, public institutions and local communities (Ministry of Education 2020b). Thus, most parents enroll their children in private preschools, which are operated by for-profit companies. A recent media story on this lucrative industry draws on a government report to estimate that the early education market in China is worth 250 billion yuan (\$36.1 billion) (Cai 2020). However, parents are very weary of private kindergartens and complain about the lack of regulation from the state. The situation is quite different for primary schools, with only 3.8% of private schools among the 160,000 primary schools in the country in 2019



(Ministry of Education 2020a), and most of the 6,228 private primary schools being geographically concentrated in eastern metropolis such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Nanjing.

Finally, the fragmentation of the formal education market was accompanied by the development of a highly lucrative market in extra-curricular activities, also called shadow education (Bray and Lykins 2012) and estimated to be a multi-million dollar business (KPMG 2010; Deloitte 2014). The shadow education market encompasses a great diversity of services such as preschool educational daycare (to prepare children to enter kindergartens), pre-primary school summer courses, and hobby courses to develop new skills (calligraphy, dance, musical instruments, and so on).<sup>45</sup> Parents can also enroll their child in courses to increase the child's grades even when these grades are above average, for instance, revision courses covering the formal curriculum (English, math, Chinese) and supplementary courses (to learn beyond the official curriculum).<sup>46</sup> The class format varies, one-on-one or collective, online, or in-person. Currently, the most profitable market is probably online English courses. Household surveys by the China Institute for Educational Finance Research reveal the fast expansion of the tutoring market in major cities. In 2017, 44.8% of urban students participated in the shadow education market, as described by Zhang and Bray "urban China had not only higher enrolment rates but also higher per-capita expenditures, at RMB 5,762 (US\$ 831)" (2020, 44). According to Credit Suisse, in 2020, Chinese children attended around 20 hours of extra-curricular class each week (Pyshkin 2020). Providers of tutoring range from informal operations involving single individuals to large multinational corporations (Bray and Lykins 2012). In the 2010s, major corporations, such as New Oriental Education, or Tomorrow Advancing Life (TAL Education Group), became holdings with specialized brands (English-learning, K-12 tutoring, preparation for the national university entrance examination).<sup>47</sup> According to Credit Suisse, in 2020, New Oriental Education and TAL Education each have an annual turnover of about 3.5 billion USD (25billion RMB) (Pyshkin 2020).

The government tried to regulate this highly profitable sector as early as the 2000s (Nguyen Tri 2001). In the summer of 2021, the Chinese shadow education market made

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<sup>45</sup> In Chinese respectively : 早教[zǎojiào], 幼小衔接[yòuxiǎo xiánjiē], 兴趣班[xìngqù bān]

<sup>46</sup> In Chinese respectively : 复习班[fùxí bān], 补习班[bǔxí bān]

<sup>47</sup> In Chinese New Oriental Education is called 新东方 [xīndōngfāng] and Tomorrow Advancing Life formerly Xueersi, 学而思[xué ér sī] and is now translated in Chinese by 好未来 [hǎo wèilái]

the headlines of international financial newspapers. In May, Xi Jinping described this market as “chaotic” and a “stubborn disease that is difficult to manage” (Li 2021b).<sup>48</sup> Two months later, the State Council, China’s highest governing body, issued a draft policy to rein in the market. The new policy, coined the Double Reduction Policy, aims to reduce homework and extra-curricular activities.<sup>49</sup> First, the policy introduces a strict ban on international and for-profit companies’ investment in the education sector. Second, the policy restricts companies from offering courses that shadow the formal curriculum and take place during school weeks and weekends (Ni 2021; Chang 2021). This crackdown on the private education market in China led to a larger crash of the stock indexes of for-profit education worldwide (Chang 2021).

The government justified this policy with the need to control the content taught to children and limit foreign influences. The Double Reduction Policy also aims to ease parents’ anxiety and the financial burden of raising a child to favor natalist policies. Indeed, one of the main reasons couples only have one child is the financial weight on household finances and the time-consuming investment necessary in a child’s educational development, a responsibility usually borne by the mother. The first consequences of the crackdown have been massive teachers layoffs and the closing of hundreds of training centers (Xiao 2021). However, parental anxiety has not disappeared over night. China watchers already observe how urban middle-class parents circumvent the new regulations on companies by hiring teacher-nannies (Jiayun Feng 2021). As the same time, education corporations have started to sell parenting services to shift their economic model (James 2021). In fact, the market shift is consistent with the parentocratic system which first emerged in the 1990s. This system promotes the idea that parental choice determines educational achievement and reinforces the state narrative praising the urban middle-class as autonomous and rational subjects.

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<sup>48</sup> In Chinese 培训乱象 [péixùn luàn xiàng] and 很难治理的顽瘴痼疾 [hěn nán zhìlǐ de wán zhàng gùjí].

<sup>49</sup> In Chinese the policy is called 双减 [shuāng jiǎn].

## **Parentocracy: a performance of the urban middle-class which reinforces social determinism**

Social classes are central to understanding state actions in the PRC; the Party-state established its power in 1949 in the name of the working class. In the 1950s, the state assigned two class labels to each individual: a class origin and a class background.<sup>50</sup> “The class origin was determined by a person’s activities during 1946-9; class background by the father’s activities when the individual in question was born” (Goodman 2014, 14). These labels were passed on to the next generation. These labels conflated individuals’ socio-economic position with their political consciousness despite the formal definition. Some categories were inherently positive, classified as “red” or “revolutionary,” such as “poor peasants” or “workers.” In contrast, some categories were inherently negative and classified as “black” or “counter-revolutionary,” such as “landlords” or “capitalists”. Since the 1950s, the classification of the population has been a discursive tool used by the Party-state to establish social order and organize the society. Individuals labeled as counter-revolutionary could in some ways redeem themselves during self-blaming sessions or by participating in political activities. Goodman describes this system as “essentially class as performance, with individuals required to meet, and seeking to meet, revolutionary credentials through participation in activities and individual behaviour” (Goodman 2014, 22). Shirk coined the term “virtuocracy” to designate the class system in China where performing virtue confers a better social position (Shirk 1984, 58).

The reform era led to increasing inequalities and social stratification. A linguistic shift from the term “social class,” which contains a strong Marxist-Leninist connotation, to social stratum, renewed the state discourses to bridge with international scholarship on stratification.<sup>51</sup> In the 1980s, sociologists from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Liang Xiaosheng, Lu Xueyi, Sun Liping, and Li Chunling, were mobilized to classify the population. Using four determinants: means of production, position in the authority structure, possession of skills, and expertise and closeness to the Party, Lu Xueyi identified ten strata to describe the class composition of the workforce (Lu

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<sup>50</sup> In Chinese 阶级成分 [jiējí chéngfèn] and 家庭出身 [jiā tíng chū shēn].

<sup>51</sup> In Chinese social class is 社会阶级 [shè huì jiē jí] or 社会阶层 [shè huì jiē céng].

2012).<sup>52</sup> In the following table, I reproduced the survey data from Lu Xueyi compiled by Goodman (2014, 60).

**Table 1. PRC Class Composition of Workforce (percentage), 1952 – 2006.**

<b>Class</b>	<b>1952</b>	<b>1978</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>State and social administrators</b>	0.5	1.0	1.7	2.1	2.3
<b>Managers</b>	0.1	0.2	0.5	1.6	2.6
<b>Private entrepreneurs</b>	0.2	–	–	1.0	1.3
<b>Individual business owners</b>	4.1	–	3.1	7.1	9.5
<b>Professional and technical personnel</b>	0.9	3.5	4.8	4.6	6.3
<b>Office workers</b>	0.5	1.3	1.7	7.2	7.0
<b>Employees of commercial services</b>	3.1	2.2	6.4	11.2	10.1
<b>Industrial working class</b>	6.4	19.8	22.4	17.5	14.7
<b>Agricultural labourers</b>	84.2	67.4	55.8	42.9	40.3
<b>Urban and rural unemployed and semi-employed</b>	–	4.6	3.6	4.8	5.9

*Source : compiled from Silverstein et al. 2012:29.*

This table details the composition of the Chinese workforce from 1952 to 2006 divided by occupation. The upper middle-class includes to the three first categories (state and social administrators, managers, private entrepreneurs) and the lower middle-class to the next three categories (individual business owners, professional and technical personnel, and office workers). In 1952, these categories are less than 10% of the workforce, whereas in 2006, they correspond to nearly 30% of the workforce.

In 2010, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) produced another classification based on lifestyle and purchasing potential. Goodman compiled these data in the following table (2014, 59).

<sup>52</sup> These ten strata are state and social administrators, managers, private entrepreneurs, individual business owners, professional and technical personnel, office workers, employees of commercial services, industrial working-class, agricultural labourers, urban and rural unemployed, and semi-unemployed.

**Table 2. Class by consumption in the PRC, 2010.**

<b>Class</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Subgroup</b>	<b>Number of Households (million)</b>	<b>Household Income (RMB)</b>
<b>Upper</b>	6 %	Upper affluent	7	270,000 <sup>53</sup> +
		Lower affluent	16	139,300 – 270,000
<b>Middle</b>	28%	Middle class	22	90,000 – 139,200
		Emerging middle class	87	43,800 – 90,000
<b>Lower</b>	66%	Next generation	176	15,000 – 43,800
		Left behind	65	6,000 – 15,000
		Poor	20	Less than 6,000

*Source: compiled from Silverstein et al. 2012:29.*

This table shows the relative size of the middle-class (28%) among the population and offers another approach to social stratification in China. In general, these tables give a broad overview of the distribution of wealth in the Chinese population in the 2010s. However, these two examples of social stratification deliberately ignore another crucial determinant to classify the Chinese population and, that is, the household registration system, *hukou*, introduced in 1955. The household registration system divides the population into two categories: rural and urban households (Young 2013). At birth, each individual is registered on its household record, *huji*, which includes information such as location of birth, province, and family status.<sup>54</sup> This booklet grants the individual rights such as access to land for rural households and access to unemployment benefits for urban households. Access to schools and public health care facilities also depends on the household registration; hence it is nearly impossible for an individual born in a rural location, to enroll their children in an urban public school (Froissart 2003a). Some scholars argue that the household registration system creates sub-citizens with lesser rights such as the rural-to-urban migrants (Froissart 2008). The correlation between the

<sup>53</sup> October 2022 1RMB = 0,14US\$, so 270,000RMB = 37,634US\$

<sup>54</sup> In Chinese *hukou* is 户口 and *huji* is 户籍

reproduction of social inequality and residential status led to various reforms of the *hukou* system (Anagnost 2004; Young 2013). However, the urban-rural divide remains a strategic discourse for the government to reproduce social order and fuel social competition between rural and urban residents (Zavoretti 2017).

Initiated in the late 1990s, a state-led discourse construes the middle-class as the basis of social stability, the primary factor to stimulate domestic consumption, and the major agent of cultural modernization (L. Sun 2009; Lu 2012). Some scholars (Tomba 2004; L. Zhang 2010; Anagnost 2008) argue that the state engineered the emergence of the urban middle class by subsidizing “the purchasing power of a public-sector professional class primarily through private ownership of residential real estate” (Anagnost 2008, 499). Hence real estate ownership is used as the main feature characterizing the urban middle-class. “However, housing further became the *mise-en-scène* for a middle-class lifestyle realised through the power to consume. Citizen-subjects were no longer defined as equal members of a collective political body but by the degree of their individual progress towards middle class status” (Anagnost 2008, 499). Instead of using specifiers to map out the composition of the population *ex-post*, scholars used behavioral criteria to define the middle class in the making, looking more specifically into consumption habits (Goodman and Chen 2013; E.Y.-H. Tsang 2014). From the 1990s, the academic discourse on the emergence of the middle class had an anticipatory and performative effect, “inciting aspiring individuals to adhere to new social norms of middle-class identity often defined around consumer practices” (Anagnost 2008, 498).

Housing has become a central vehicle for accessing education resources and education is a central dimension to perform middle-class identity. Scholars showed that “schooling (...) is a positional good insofar as the chief determinant of whether people consider themselves to have secured adequate learning and qualifications is whether the amounts and qualities of schooling are greater than those held by peers and competitors” (Zhang and Bray 2020, 45). Thus, the urban middle-class households make education investment decisions by comparing their strategies with those of their peers, which increases education competition. However, these familial strategies are part of a broader national scheme. “While urban parents provide their only child with every social, economic, and cultural privilege in order to facilitate their access to higher education (Jacob 2006), they also fulfil the state-designed agenda to foster a new

generation of ‘high-quality’ people, who can function within the current political framework to build a strong modern Chinese nation (Woronov 2009)” (Xie 2021b, 48). As explained previously, the term quality, in Chinese *suzhi*, justifies social hierarchies. Anagnost (2004) shows how ‘high quality’ is embodied by the middle class child attending numerous extra-curricular activities and fed with food supplements, whereas ‘low quality’ is represented by the child of rural migrant workers. Parents and teachers emphasize the importance of schooling to improve the quality of the population and by extension to maintain the nation’s competitiveness. The concept of *suzhi* relies on individual’s self-entrepreneurship to improve one’s quality for the nation’s sake.

Scholars highlight the importance of rationality and self-entrepreneurship in perceived upward social mobility from ordinary workers who become successful self-made entrepreneurs (Guiheux 2007; Guiheux and Zalio 2010) to hardworking singletons who cannily use family resources to improve their social status (Fong 2004b). Hai Ren defines the middle class as a ‘risk subject’ who strategically assesses the costs and benefits of taking risk in pursuit of economic advantage (H. Ren 2013).

Despite the conceptual fuzziness of the concept of the middle-class (Rocca 2017), I argue that parents make decisions according to what they perceive as middle class rationality to maintain their social status. In this study, I focus on how urban middle-class parents perform and reproduce their social position via their investment in their children’s education. The parentocratic education system partially gives parents the illusion of power to choose education resources for their child and empowers parents to perform their class status. I argue that 2021 marked a shift in how urban middle-class households have been enticed to perform their social status. For an extended period, private tutoring classes symbolized the urban middle class’s access to high-quality education. The 2021 crackdown on private tutoring and the Promotion of Family Education Law promulgated in October 2021 showed that the government is trying to promote parents’ role as educators. The state-led normative discourse around parenting and education is shifting from extensive financial investment in private educational services toward time-intensive parenting.

Parents are not, however, passive pawns. The opportunity to choose adds a political dimension to performing parent-identity and parenting practices. Urban

middle-class parents create space for solidarity and contention as they seek to secure resources on behalf of their child, as they participate in social activism to voice their discontent, and as they seek to influence the implementation of education policies. The state shapes the education terrain (incentives, resources, possibilities, ideological framings) within which parents act as parents — including when they, in turn, mobilize to shape the state's actions.



# **Parenting: a reactivation of political socialization for the urban middle-class**

In the Xi Jinping era, identifying oneself and performing as a middle-class parent reactivate the process of political socialization and, in some cases, has led to engagement in social activism. In the previous chapter, I used Galsberg and Deri's definition of political socialization as the "process by which individuals learn and frequently internalize a political lens framing their perceptions of how power is arranged and how the world around them is (and should be) organized; those perceptions, in turn, shape and define individuals' definitions of who they are and how they should behave in the political and economic institutions in which they live" (Glasberg and Deric 2011, 47). Political socialization might lead to activism, but it is far from systematic.

Chinese urban middle-class parents internalize that they constitute a high-quality population who deserve access to an excellent education. They believe that the current regime's power arrangement is there to reinforce their social position and secure their child's future social success. Thus, they defend their right to choose their child's education trajectory and frame it as an issue of social justice and equality. Most scholars focus on whether the Chinese middle class is conservative or liberal and whether its emergence is a stabilizing or destabilizing force (Li 2013). In this study, I examine how performing one's parent-identity influences one's perception of the sociopolitical environment. I argue that the filial nationalist and population-quality discourses put parent-identity at the heart of Xi Jinping's dream. Hence, it increases the pressure on urban middle-class parents to perform their parent-identity correctly and reinforces the process of political socialization. This research shows that parents act simultaneously as disruptive agents and compliant citizens-subjects, in a highly competitive schooling context.

I argue that the advocacy work of parents indicates how the neoliberal agenda has successfully combined individual responsibility for life success with national competitiveness and social cohesion. In making this argument, I broaden Cruikshank's (1999) argument beyond democratic settings and argue that the Chinese authoritarian

regime empowers parents in their child's education. This empowerment "contains the twin possibilities of domination and freedom" (Cruikshank 1999, 3). Thus because parents feel responsible for their child's education and life success, parents govern themselves and their children to succeed. I argue that this process participates in a *dispositif* to control the population (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 994; Foucault 2006), which is a key sign of a resilient authoritarian system.

## **Sociopolitical attitudes of the middle class**

Scholars have long emphasized the role of the middle class in the democratization and transition process (Lipset 1959). Huntington argues further that "the most active supporters of [the third wave of] democratization came from the urban middle class" (Huntington 1991, 67). Scholars applied this framework to explain the democratic transition in South Korea (Han 1989b; Koo 1991) and Taiwan (Chou and Nathan 1987; Cheng 1989). At the same time, the democratization process in these country undermined cultural explanations for the resilience of authoritarian regimes in East Asia. Democratization theories influenced the reformist government of Deng Xiaoping, who was wary of the emergence of a middle class demanding political reforms. Some liberal scholars outlined the possibility of an emerging middle class leading a democratic movement (Liu 1988; Han 1989a). Consequently, the term middle class "was almost prohibited in formal publication during the 1990s" (Li 2013, 15). Following the 1989-Tiananmen protests, scholars discussed the role of the middle class in the uprising. Tang and Unger (2013) argue that the middle-class's participation in the protests was motivated by self-serving and mostly economic motives: "members of the educated middle class were furious that when it came to determining living standards, 'political connections' took precedence over their own expertise and loyal service" (B. Tang and Unger 2013, 91).

China came to epitomize the perfect counter-example of democratization theory in which the emergence of the middle class did not lead to a democratic transition. In the late 1990s, the government initiated a shift to construe the middle-class as a stabilizing force for the political order (Li 2013). Thus scholars have taken on the challenge of explaining why the Chinese middle class is a stabilizing and conservative force rather than a democracy-craving class. Nathan (2016) elucidated "the puzzle of the Chinese

middle class". He argues that the Chinese middle class only represents a small and very new portion of the population, whose wealth depends on the state because most middle-class urbanites occupy public jobs; thus, they are not inclined to bite the hand that feeds them. The lack of associational life also explains the conservativeness of the middle class. Nathan offers a typology of sociopolitical attitudes of the middle class: the politically anesthetized who focus on their career and consumption; the acceptors who are loyal and trust the democratic discourse of the regime; the ameliorators who see flaws in the system and believe they can contribute to improving it from the inside; and finally the alienated who have no illusions "but are not ready to risk their necks in opposition or to give up their privileged status and connections for a less privileged and less connected life in a foreign country" (Nathan 2016, 14-15). A flourishing scholarship accounts for the nationalism and conservatism of the Chinese middle class by explaining that they favor sociopolitical stability to improve their social status (Chen and Lu 2010; Goodman 2014). In a recent survey-based study, Jie Chen (2013) argues that the middle class supports the government as long as its living conditions improve. Economic growth is both a dependent and independent variable to explain conservatism. The middle class prosper thanks to economic development and their rising purchasing power stimulates economic growth. At the same time, the middle class want political stability to guarantee future economic growth.

Scholars use the same indicators to explain both the democratic aspirations and the conservative stance of the middle classes. On the one hand, Western scholars Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) explain that the middle class plays the role of "buffer in the conflict between the elites and the citizens [because] the middle class – by virtue of its more comfortable economic situation and the greater education of its members – can be a critical catalyst in the process toward democracy" (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, 39). On the other hand, Chinese scholars Li Qiang and Zhou Xiaohong use similar explanations to justify middle-class conservatism: "first, they benefitted the most from the economic reforms and subsequent rapid economic growth; second, they depend heavily on the state, which treats them favourably and protects their interests, and thus they have a propensity for state authoritarianism; and third, they show apolitical attitudes and are materialistic" (Li 2013, 14). Thus, the middle class plays the role of a buffer layer, prevents political radicalism, and stimulates economic growth (Li 2001; Zhou 2005).

Although the middle class does not call for more political rights, they advocate for individual rights (to work, education, and the right to move anywhere in China). Some scholars have refined their description of the middle class to explore its diversity and better explain its internal contradictions (Goodman and Chen 2013). Li Chunling (2013) distinguishes three categories: the new middle class, with lower-grade professionals; the old middle class, with small employers; and the marginal middle class with routine non-manual employees and personal service workers. Using this typology, she explains the contradictions in the sociopolitical attitudes of the middle class:

The new middle class, that is, the middle class with high cultural capital, hold a contradictory sociopolitical attitude. On one hand, they view state authoritarianism unfavourably, preferring a more democratic state; on the other hand, they display the highest levels of satisfaction with their current living standards and thus want to avoid sociopolitical change. The entrepreneur class and the old middle class, that is, the middle class with high economic capital, holds relatively conservative political views. They are more likely to support state authoritarianism and are more accepting of social inequality. The marginal middle class, that is, the lower strata of the middle class, holds the most liberal view. They are the least accepting of social inequality and state authoritarianism, and are the most sympathetic to the lower class. (Chunling Li 2013, 32)

Jie Chen (2013) surveys the political behaviors of the middle class, and shows relatively low participation in informal political actions. He explains this finding to mean that the middle class exhibits low support for democracy and high affinity with the government (Jie Chen 2013). A growing literature explores how the urban middle class performs its citizenship in local spaces for contention.

## **Spaces for contention among the urban middle-class**

My research focuses on the daily interactions of the state and its instantiations with urban middle-class households by looking at social structures and ordinary citizenship. A vast literature in political science attempts to define the Chinese political regime, focusing on its institutions and elites actors (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Cabestan 2014). Scholars have shown that the Chinese regime tolerates spaces for contention (O'Brien and Li 2006; Chen 2011) which enables the regime to adapt to different crises (Heilmann and Perry 2013). Many scholars have come to view the Chinese state as giving rise to a form of fragmented authoritarianism (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988), that is a non-democratic and non-monolithic state, which leaves space for contention and collective mobilization. To date, most scholars investigate how

marginalized populations interrupt policymaking and policy implementation, in particular in rural areas through collective action (O'Brien and Li 2006; Mertha 2009) or informal ritualized networks (Tsai 2007).

An emerging literature examines how contentious spaces operate in urban areas (Bellot 2019; Thireau and Hua 2010; Tomba 2014; L. Zhang 2010). Scholars focus on two particular segments of the middle-class: the educated middle class akin to the intellectuals and homeowners associations who defend property rights. The former group was involved in the 1989-uprising and therefore have some experience in political mobilization, yet they also learned the hard way of the risks of getting involved in politics. More recently, intellectuals and university teachers opened spaces to talk about politics yet these interstitial spaces remain modest (Frenkiel 2014; B. Tang and Unger 2013). In contrast, the homeowners associations have become a more and more visible social phenomenon (Rocca 2013). These associations defend homeowners against contract infringement from real estate companies and management companies, in particular regarding the use of common areas or contractual terms. Zhang Li (2010) describes the campaign launched by homeowners when the real estate company transformed a “green land” into another housing building. These homeowners bought their apartment with the promise of green grass all around the compound, yet to increase its profit the real estate company decided to build another housing unit. Scholars pay particular concern to these conflicts because they assume that the defense of contractual, propriety rights “could lead to the struggle for citizens’ rights” (Rocca 2013, 111). This assumption has not been verified, yet. As Jean-Louis Rocca explains, “homeowners, be they leaders, activists or participants, do not have a ‘universal’ approach to various rights and laws, except on rare occasions when the discourse shifts to ‘lofty ideas’ during meetings” (Rocca 2013, 121).

Yet, Aurore Merle (2014) accounts for a petition collecting more than 180,000 signatures of homeowners to amend the law on private property which was about to be promulgated in 2007. Three years later, 200 homeowners from China’s major cities met in the building of the National People’s Congress to launch a platform to coordinate actors from residential communities (Merle 2014). The organization-movement opened training centers for homeowners to learn their rights and defend their interests. Benjamin Read shows the diversity of forms taken by homeowners organizations in urban China (Read 2003). Liugi Tomba shows that the emergence of homeowners

association accompanies the construction of gated residential compound which shape the Chinese urban spaces. He also underlines the renewal of local governance via the legitimization of the residents' committees (Tomba 2014). The scholarship on homeownership shows that the possibility of political conflicts coming from the urban middle class households does not lead to the collapse of the regime, but rather highlights the adaptiveness and responsiveness of the regime. The institutionalization of homeowners' associations did not precede the formation of a class consciousness with coherent and defiant claims. These associations mostly focus on close-to-home issues which can be solved locally. At the individual level, homeownership questioned the relations between citizens and state encouraging individuals to rethink their perception of justice and the rule of law. Scholars examine "the transformative role of homeownership, new residential space, and lifestyle practices in shaping middle-class subjects and activism as well as urban governing strategies" (Zhang 2010, 3). Homeownership led to a complete redefinition of self-worthiness, and achievement for the urban middle class. I argue that the liberalization of the education market and the growing school competition led to a similar process. During the Maoist era, manual labor and political righteousness defined one's position in society nowadays, material ownership, such as housing and consumption habits, as well as educational trajectory determine one's social status (Xie 2021b; Fong 2004b).

Another way to consider the politics of the middle-class is via their role as parents. I extend the scholarship on rights awareness which focused mainly on property rights awareness (L. Zhang 2010) to the question of education rights. I argue that education rights are by nature different from property rights. Education rights foreshadow a child's future social status and perceived quality. The state discourse highlights the need for *quality* children to save the nation and the role of parents in raising and educating these children. These discourses shape how parents perform their citizenship on a daily basis.

## **The reactivation of the political socialization process among urban middle-class parents**

The investment by parents in their child's education reactivates the process of political socialization for parents among the urban middle-class. The concept of a

parents' cause field allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the process of political socialization of parents in urban China, allowing for the study of the role of the state in defining parenting norms and practices, and the investment of private companies in promoting these norms.

I identify three steps in this process: knowledge and norms acquisition, community building and finally participation in discussion on policies and sometimes in social actions. First, parents internalize and reclaim certain parenting norms and practices. I show how the government and international discourses shape a normative framework on parenting practices. Parents internalize these norms, yet they also distance themselves from these norms. During my fieldwork, I observed numerous parents trying to conform to the norms of intensive and scientific parenting. Most parents also question the benefits of these practices for themselves, for their children and for society. Some mothers reclaim these norms – sometimes critically – and create their own channels to produce and diffuse parenting norms. I argue that this work of knowledge production and norm diffusion are the initial steps for political socialization. Parenting norms and practices are directly connected to the parents' perception of how power is arranged and their role in the society.

Second, parents build community and networks online and off-line. Since the 2000s, schools set up online discussion groups to initiate discussion between parents and teachers, most often using the Chinese social network Wechat. Parents often create groups without the teachers to coordinate among themselves and organize events in real life. These online networks also exist among parents enrolled in the same private learning center or tutoring class. These communities transcend formal and informal boundaries bringing together intra and extra-institutional actors. This is what Bereni (2021) calls a cause field where the boundaries between state and society are blurred. Within these online groups, discussions produce forms of solidarity and sometimes competition. These online groups serve different functions for parents: gathering and sharing information about school work, parenting practices or consumption tips; organizing informative or casual events; buying gifts for the professor; bonding in solidarity with encouragement or compassion; or bragging about their child's success and building up competition. I argue that these networks play a role in the reactivation of the political socialization process of urban middle-class parents, because they are constantly in contact with other parents, comparing situations and strategies. In the

scholarship about homeowners associations, homeowners gather and organize when they encounter an issue, usually with a real estate or management company. Thus the institutionalization of their organization come *a posteriori*, whereas parents' networks are often initiated by formal institutions – private or public – but are reclaimed by parents who create their own networks. These communities do not aim to solve a problem or protest against a specific injustice, yet they enable parents to get a broader perspective on their situation and sometimes to question education policies.

The third step in this reactivation of the political socialization is political debates. On these online platforms or during these real-life events, parents often use recent news to illustrate an issue such as the quality of the food at school, or the distribution of education resources in a city or a district. The discussion that arises from the collective analysis of this news item can bring parents to question education policies. Parents often have only a partial understanding of the news item and the education policies, yet it is enough to instigate a heated discussion. During interviews parents often referred to news items to link them with political concepts such as equality, justice, rule of law or freedom.

My research highlights a long term and slow reactivation of the political socialization via the practice of parenting among the Chinese urban middle-class households. Yet, this process is not the same for all individuals from the urban middle-class. First, this process does not have the same implications for men and women. Women bear the heaviest economic and emotional costs in child upbringing. Most urban middle-class mothers feel a keen sense of responsibility toward their child's educational success. As I show in chapter 5, some women reduce their workload and their income to strategize for their child's education and sometimes advocate on their behalf. Some even shift careers to become professional mothers, providing advice to other mothers on how to educate their children. For their part, fathers are most often responsible for providing the financial means to implementing the educational strategies devised by the mother. Their work schedule justifies their absence at home and their lack of involvement in their child's education. Yet, some dissident fathers diverge from the norm and get involved in teacher-parents meetings and extra-curricular activities. Institutions such as schools do not really encourage the father participation in child's education, as they often privilege the interactions with the mother. Second, the parenting norms are highly discriminatory in terms of generation. In chapter 5, I show that while grandparents are



mobilized by parents to care for the children, they are discredited as competent educators. They merely serve the complex logistic of the mother's education plan. Yet, some dissident grandparents get involved in the education of their grandchildren. The normative focus on the mother's exclusive competency in education increases the political dimension of parenting by excluding, discriminating against and rejecting any other members of the households.

Third, the reactivation of the political socialization process unfolds differently among lower and upper middle class households. I argue that the upper middle class have more ambitious education strategies for instance they consider sending their children abroad or applying to schools beyond their district. Upper middle-class parents develop networks beyond their child's school. While lower middle class rely on localized source of information and have limited resources to implement school strategies. The upper middle class encompasses managers, lower-grade professionals working in big public or private companies, and lower-grade public servants. These highly educated parents have crucial resources to implement education strategies for their children, such as the right household registration and geographically strategic home ownership. The lower middle class is composed of non-manual employees, small employers and personal service workers, with lower education levels and lesser resources.

# Conclusion

In this chapter, I present how nationalist discourses frame the family institution as a tool to save the Chinese nation. Xi Jinping renewed the existing nationalist and natalist discourses to tie urban middle-class parents to his rejuvenation project. I argue that state-led discourses promoting filial nationalism and a familialist model give a strong political dimension to the family institution. These discourses guide the formulation and implementation of policies targeting parents, and future parents. Since the mid-2010s, natalist policies encourage young educated women to have more children.

The slogan “Excellent birth, excellent education” adopted by the All-China Women Federation and asserted in the Family Planning Law epitomizes the government’s goals regarding childbirth and education. Natalist policies combined with education reforms increase the responsibility of the family in the nationalist rejuvenation project.<sup>55</sup> In the 1990s, the education reforms fostered the emergence of a vivid education market with leading private education companies. These reforms reframe education supply away from a public utility toward a client-provider relationship and parents adopting a consumerist behavior. Urban middle-class parents invest vast amounts of money to enroll their child in the best educational facilities. A parentocratic education system comforts the urban middle class parents in their social position. However, since the mid-2000s, the government has shifted from market-oriented education policies to market regulations. The government aims to restrict parents’ consumer choice, take back control over education content and rein in the development of very large private education companies.

Hence, I show that education is crucial to the Chinese nationalist rejuvenation project, and that education is shaped by three major actors: the government, private education companies and parents. I examine the role of each actor in the next chapters and I argue that the interactions between these actors leave spaces for parents to advocate on behalf of their children. I concur with the literature showing that the Chinese state leaves spaces for contention. I argue that the performance of parenting reactivates the process of political socialization among urban middle class households. I look at how the modalities of politicization of parent-identity described in the previous

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<sup>55</sup> In Chinese the slogan is 优生优育 [yōushēng yōuyù].

chapter apply to the Chinese urban middle class. In other words, how attached advocacy and other-advocacy reactivate the political socialization of urban middle-class parents.

# Chapter 3. Making Family Care Legible

**Article 1.** This Law is formulated so as to carry forward the Chinese people's excellent tradition of emphasizing education and to guide all of society to pay attention to families, family education, and family situations, increasing family happiness and social harmony, and cultivating the comprehensive development of the builders of socialism and their successors in terms of morality, intelligence, sport, arts, and labor. (China Law Translate 2021)

The Family Education Promotion Law (FEPL) was adopted by the National People's Congress Standing Committee in October 2021, coming into force January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022 (CGTN 2021).<sup>56</sup> For several years now, representatives from the National People's Congress have been advocating for a law on family education. The recent pandemic and the lockdown measures, which led parents to be the sole educators for their child for several months, as well as recent juvenile delinquency cases, have hastened the legislative process to promulgate the FEPL. According to the Supreme People's Procuratorate, China experienced a rebound in crimes committed by minors in 2019, after several years of decreasing rates of juvenile crime (Yuan 2020). Earlier in 2018, several murder cases attracted national attention and launched a debate about the need for Chinese authorities to adopt a stricter stance toward juvenile offenders (Jinghai 2018). Instead of adopting a punitive approach toward juvenile offenders, however, the government shifted the responsibility for juveniles onto parents and legal guardians, blaming rural-to-urban migrant communities and rural communities for their negligence and abuse.

Under the pretence of protecting children from parental neglect and abuse, the FEPL goes much further and makes parent-child care legible. I embrace Scott's (1998) concept of making a society legible by setting up large-scale social engineering to shape human behaviour. Studying Maoist China, Diamant (2001) uses the phrase "making love legible" about the marriage registration process established in 1950. The marriage ledgers and certifications were a way to organize the Chinese population and make it

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<sup>56</sup> In Chinese, the law is called 中华人民共和国家庭教育促进法 [zhōnghuá rénmin gònghéguó jiāting jiàoyù cùjìn fǎ]

“legible” to the state. The Marriage Law set up criteria for the state to allow and record marriages, births, divorces, and deaths. Diamant argues that the law is “most dramatic [attempt] by a state to make its society more ‘legible’ by inserting itself into ordinary people’s consideration in marriage and divorce...” (Diamant 2001, 450). This state-family relation is not specific to the Maoist era. In 2013, the Chinese state had promulgated the Law of Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People to assess the quality of filial piety and make elderly care legible.<sup>57</sup> This law stipulates the responsibility of children to their parents, describing the correct filial behaviors (S. Zhou 2014b). A public education campaign, “Twenty-four Filial Acts”, accompanied the new law and was taken up by private companies to sell insurance, nursing homes, and medical treatment (Rochot 2019, 98).<sup>58</sup> In 2021, the FEPL makes parenting and childcare legible stipulating specific criteria to assess the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Building on a critical analysis of state discourse, this chapter shows how public actors produce and promote a universal ideal of parenting practices which increase the educational responsibility of the family. The prevalent discourses on scientific and intensive parenting demand that parents dedicate their time, money, and energy to raise high-achieving filial citizens. This normative discourse on parenting reinforces the narrative of the mother as a morally responsible subject, by promoting a gendered conception of parenting in which mothers and fathers have specific roles to play. The discourses on universal parenting norms render invisible the material and socioeconomic conditions experienced by households. Social class, ethnic division, gender, geographical location, disabilities, and other conditions directly influence how parents care for their children. The law promotes the urban middle-class subjectivity as exemplary parenting practices beneficial for all households regardless of their socio-economic situation.

With a total of 55 articles organized into six chapters, the FEPL stipulates the general principles underlying family education (Chapter 1), family duties and responsibilities (Chapter 2), the state support to promote family education (Chapter 3), the social coordination needed to promote and enforce this law (Chapter 4), legal liability (Chapter 5) and some supplemental provisions. The law stipulates precisely

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<sup>57</sup> In Chinese, the law is called 老年人权益保障法 [lǎonián rén quányì bǎozhàng fǎ]

<sup>58</sup> The title of the public education campaign in Chinese is 二十四孝 [èrshísìxiào].

what methods parents should use to raise their children and what kind of knowledge parents should inculcate to their children. Some Chinese politicians compare this law to Western legislation dealing with parents' statutory responsibilities and obligations in Australia, the United Kingdom, or Sweden. Chinese politicians also mention programs such as the "2000 Education Strategy" and the "No Child Left Behind Act" voted in 2001 in the USA (Guo Xinzhi 2016; Hubei Democratic Progressive Association 2020), to explain the need for the state to intervene in intra-familial relationships. Nevertheless, I show in this chapter that this law is instead a continuation of the Chinese government's attempt to control and shape the most intimate relationships, following in the footsteps of the Five-Virtue Family mass-mobilization campaigns initiated by the All-China Women Federation (ACWF) as early as the 1950s.

The Chinese party-state uses two specific tools to promote its universal parenting ideal: education and exemplarism. The FEPL stipulates that each public school should establish a School for Parents to provide educational advice, support families in their educational role and become a resources center for parents on how to raise and educate children. Second, public actors organize competitions staging exemplary families' stories. As early as the 1950s, the ACWF organized mass-mobilization campaigns promoting the Five-Virtue Families.<sup>59</sup> During these campaigns, the most virtuous family was awarded a diploma, and its story was displayed on public billboards. Nowadays, a talent show titled "The Most Beautiful Family" stages the ideal family on national TV every year.<sup>60</sup> As Bakken (2000) argues, the promotion of models in Chinese society is a means to maintain social cohesion and prevent disorder. The normative discourse on parenting maintains social order by invisibilizing socioeconomic conditions and upholding and normalizing the middle-class as a standard for society.

In the first part of the chapter, I show that, from the mid-twentieth century to the early 2000s, there is a discursive shift from the family as an economic production unit to the family as a nation-building unit. Family pageant competitions set models of filial nationalism. In the second part of the chapter, I argue that the FEPL defines good

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<sup>59</sup> Mass-mobilization campaigns were a standard tool for implementing policies during the Maoist period. These campaigns urged the bureaucracy, the population or a specific group of people to rally behind a simple and radical slogan which often either designated an enemy to eradicate or promoted the right political behaviour (Guiheux 2018, 25). In Chinese, the campaign is called 五好家庭 [wǔ hǎo jiā tíng]. The mass-mobilization campaigns' slogan commonly use numbers to be easy to remember. This was particularly true during the Maoist era when the vast majority of Chinese were illiterate (Ji 2004).

<sup>60</sup> In Chinese, the campaign is called 最美我的家 [zuì měi wǒ de jiā].

parenting practices based on the urban middle-class subjectivity drawing on three seemingly contradictory ideologies: socialist values, so-called Confucian traditions, and the Western-like liberal parenting style.

# From production-oriented to filial nationalism: the evolution of a family ideal

In this section, I trace the historical background leading to the promulgation of the FEPL, showing how the normative discourse on the family institution shift from the mid-twentieth century to the early 2000s. Whereas the family was considered as a unit for economic production during the Maoist period, it slowly became the central piece to the nationalist project. With the advent of the PRC in 1949, the idea of the family as the primary socialisation environment for children was called into question. The family cocoon was a “bourgeois” ideal, and the stay-at-home mother a “parasite”, guilty of politically incorrect behaviour (Wu 2014, 65). For the CCP, each individual should socialise in respect and love of the Party and the regime. However, the Party’s need for support among the urban population quickly led to a reevaluation of the status of housewives as lower-class and poor workers. They became the primary constituency for local chapters of the ACWF (Wang 2005). In 1952, Premier Zhou Enlai offered an alternative socialist interpretation of housework:

Domestic work is part of social work, and it is honorable to participate in it. We should promote women's participation in domestic work to create a social trend. Suppose women are able to be diligent and thrifty in the household, so that their husbands and children can actively engage in various kinds of labor. In that case, they are also contributing to the country and society, and the wages that their husbands and children receive also include the price they deserve for their domestic work. (T. Ni 2016, 1)

In this speech, Zhou Enlai values domestic work which fosters a home environment conducive to labor performance. He goes as far as to assert that the husband’s and children’s incomes include the remuneration of women’s domestic work. He does not question the gender dimension of domestic work and confirms women’s role in accomplishing these tasks. Housewives are considered productive elements as long as they actively maintain a good home environment for the well-being of male workers. As Tang (2010) shows, the state’s official recognition of “housewife” as a social status also excludes women from the labor market, they are not considered unemployed, and thus they cannot pretend to be entitled to a job assigned by the state



(Tang 2010). According to a report of May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1956, Cai Chang the then chairwoman of the ACWF, made a speech calling for all families to actively participate in the Five-Virtue activities to help their husbands achieve their production goals and complete the national plan. She underlined the role of female workers in raising children and taking care of housework (Xinhua Agency 1956). This campaign emphasized the role of women in nurturing good family relationships and smoothing conflicts within the community. Three decades before its conceptualization by the American sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild (2017 [1983]), the ACWF construed emotion work as an indispensable element of the production sphere. Yet, emotion work did not grant a direct income, but rather was rewarded as a form of social and political recognition.

Since the 1950s, the Five-virtue Family campaign is conducted as a competition grants local and sometimes country-wide recognition in the form of a title. Competition was a common way to organize mass-mobilization during the Maoist Era. Local chapters of the Federation showcased the stories of virtuous women as models for the community. Work units that volunteered to participate in these activities (such as doing house chores and taking care of the elderly and children) competed to be the most performing in housework and all five-virtue activities. In Beijing, the Five-Virtue Campaign included helping children complete their homework (Huang 2020). In 1953, in Wuhan, families were mobilized to accomplish five-virtue activities to support worker production: “good-day planning, encouraging workers to produce well, good community solidarity, good hygiene, good teaching and education of children” (Ni 2016, 44). During the Maoist period (1949-1976), the goals of Five-virtue Family campaigns remained vague, but the numerous activities held under the slogan Five-Virtue across the country infused a certain family ideal at the service of the production and produced norms for family relationships (Huang 2020). Yet the campaign lacked a form of national coordination.

These government-organized social competitions organized by government agencies have been common during the reform era. Local chapters of the ACWF are in charge of promoting the five-virtue family campaign and identifying the suitable family, at every level of the administration up to the national competition.

## National campaigns to shape family care

In 1982, the ACWF launched the first country-wide campaign, “Strive to create Five-Virtue Families”, where families could compete for the eponymous title. The Beijing chapter published the five criteria used to select the most virtuous families (Huang 2020). The first criterion, “good political thinking and good production at work,” indicates that the family remains at the heart of ideological indoctrination and in service of economic production. The second criterion, “family harmony and respect for the elderly,” bridges the intergenerational gap that developed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), however, traditions are still considered as backward as shown by the fourth criterion, “change prevailing habits and customs.”<sup>61</sup> These criteria reflect the ideological shifts occurring in China away from revolutionary ideal toward social harmony. The third criterion refers to the implementation of the recently promulgated one-child policy. To be virtuous, families should abide by the family planning regulations. The third criterion also includes an educational component, indeed family planning is directly connected to the improvement of children’s education. The fifth criterion pertains to community emotion work following the footsteps of the 1950s activities: “neighborhood solidarity and civility.” When awarded this title of Five-virtue Family, families received a diploma, such as the one below, with their name. This diploma was often displayed in the family living room. The drawing below the title illustrates a gendered conception of family care (see Figure 5). From left to right, it represents: a woman serving two hot rice bowls on a table, a woman accompanied a little girl and helping out an old man, a couple discussing while a little girl is sleeping and a couple cleaning. The last drawing on the far right is a woman going to the bank to save the household money.

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<sup>61</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, Lin Biao, the then First Vice Premier of the PRC, called the Red Guards to Destroy the Four Olds, that is Old Ideas, Old Culture, Old Customs, and Old Habits. This mass-mobilization campaign led the Red Guards to attack humans, monuments, and objects symbolizing traditions. Students persecuted their teachers, and urban youth destroyed artifacts representing ancestral China.

Figure 5. Example of a “Five-virtue Family” Diploma (Toutiao Baike 2020)



Source: Toutiao Baike. 2020. "Five Good Families activities carried out by the All-China Women's Federation"

<http://jmxgn.com/pic/%E4%BA%94%E5%A5%BD%E5%AE%B6%E5%BA%AD/9762611/0/f3d3572c11dfa9ecdabda9036dd0f703918fc117?fr=lemma&ct=single>.

Accessed on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2022.

To promote the national campaign, local chapters of the ACWF showed a movie titled “In-laws”.<sup>62</sup> The movie, which came out in 1981, depicts a family torn apart by disputes and jealousy between a married woman and her mother-in-law. A happy ending comes when the woman apologizes to her in-laws and makes amends. This movie symbolizes women’s responsibility in carrying out the emotion work necessary to ensure family harmony. The heroine becomes a model for women to imitate.

A Joint Circular, published in 1996, widens the scope of the Five-virtue Family campaign by mobilizing more than 15 ministries and government agencies such as the Ministry of Propaganda, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Health and many more. This Joint Circular shows that the campaign is not just a women’s matter promoted by the ACWF but is a matter for the whole society and has to be endorsed by all departments and all levels of government in China. The Joint Circular (Ministry of Propaganda et al. 1996) provides an official framework for all promotional activities, stating the five criteria on which families’ virtuousness is assessed: Patriotism, law-abiding, support for public welfare (1);

<sup>62</sup> In Chinese 喜盈门[xǐ yíng mén]

equality between men and women, respect for the elderly, and love for the youth (2); studying forward-thinking, dedication, and love for work (3); change the customs and traditions, reduce and improve births (4); diligent and thrifty management of the household and environmental awareness (5). These criteria illustrate the ideological shift in the mid-1980s away from the revolutionary period toward the reform and opening era. China opened its economy to foreign investment and its intellectual sphere to Western liberal ideas. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre, the party-state launched a comprehensive nationalist campaign attempting to renew the CCP's legitimacy as the ruling party. The Joint Circular integrates the Five-virtue Family campaign into the broader nationalist campaign. The first criterion, patriotism, replaced the vague idea of "political thinking," and the concepts of rule-abiding and public welfare symbolize the normalization of state action. The third criterion implies assessing "equality between men and women" within family relationships. This new criterion may have resulted from the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women hosted by Beijing in 1995, which triggered an upsurge in feminist claims for gender equality in the following years. The fourth criterion reflects the continuing importance given to childbirth reduction and family planning. Finally, the fifth criterion reveals new attention to environmental awareness, which I also observed in primary school mandarin textbooks in the early 2000s (Laurent 2020).

In 2009, the ACWF made minor adjustments to the criteria but changed the campaign slogan to "Five-virtue and the Civilized Family".<sup>63</sup> In 2008, the Central Committee of the Communist Party launched a campaign titled "Ten-star Civilized Households" in rural areas.<sup>64</sup> Households could receive the following stars: patriotism, education, science and technology, rule of law, marriage and childbirth, family harmony, modernity, hygiene, diligence and thrift, and moral and benevolence star. The campaign rewards exemplary households in remote villages based on criteria which are similar to the ones used for the Five-virtue and Civilized Family. The scope of the campaign differs because the Five-virtue and the Civilized Family campaign is implemented all across China, whereas the Ten-star Civilized Households campaign specifically targets rural households.

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<sup>63</sup> In the late 2000s, the notion of civilization is promoted by the Chinese President Hu Jintao who wants to build a Harmonious Socialist Society.

<sup>64</sup> In Chinese 十星級文明家庭 [shí xīng jí wénmíng jiātíng]

Regarding the minor adjustments made for the 2009-campaign, first, “harmony between husband and wife” replaced “equality between men and women.” This change reveals the importance of heterosexual marital status and the differentiated roles of men and women in Chinese society. The idea of harmony appeals to the Confucian tradition, in which everyone respects the social order and hierarchies. Individuals live in harmony when each person knows and remains in their social role. Second, the concept of “scientific parenting” replaced the idea of “love for good work.” This criterion allows the ACWF to assess the quality of parents’ education. Noteworthy, the criteria “reduce and improve births” disappeared from the Five-virtue and civilized family in 2009, illustrating the loosening of the family planning program in the 2000s. Finally, “environmental awareness” is replaced by “low carbon life” following the rise in pollution awareness among urbanites (Johnson 2013; Li and Tilt 2017). Local chapters of the ACWF assessed each household under their purview based on the criteria listed above; then, they sponsor an exemplary family to the national competition. The 2009-criteria underlined the subjective conception of the family’s virtuousness assessed by morally-accepted behaviors.

In 2012, the short-lived campaign “The Harmonious Family” took up the motto of the President of the PRC, Hu Jintao: the harmonious society. Under this slogan, the President called for the establishment of a “society in which the material needs of most citizens are adequately met”.<sup>65</sup> The criteria used during this campaign were highly controversial. They relied mainly on households’ consumption habits, such as: internet access, frequent travel and dinners, collection of books, subscription to newspapers, and participation in donation activities. Critics underlined that these criteria *de facto* excluded poor households and that family harmony should not be assessed based on consumption habits (Li 2012a).

## **Family pageant competitions: models for the nation**

In 2014, the ACWF launched a new campaign under the slogan “Finding the Most Beautiful Family”.<sup>66</sup> The notion of beauty replaced the notion of virtue and no clear

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<sup>65</sup> In Chinese, Hu Jintao’s slogan is 小康社会 [xiǎokāng shèhuì].

<sup>66</sup> In Chinese the slogan is 寻找最美家庭 [xúnzhǎo zuìměi jiā tíng].

criteria were associated with the title, thus reinforcing the subjectivity of the campaigns. In her Ph.D. dissertation, Li Qiankun explains that this new campaign aims at letting ordinary families practice and advocate for moral norms. The local chapters of the ACWF encourage each household to nominate themselves or each other and to evaluate nominees (Li 2019, 184). Li underscores the cooperation between the ACWF and the China Central Television (CCTV) to host a talent show titled “My Most Beautiful Family” which is staged at the competition at the national level.<sup>67</sup>

The talent show is a pageant competition for families. Each member of the family presents itself and its role within the family. Individual presentations are interspersed with short videos revealing the family's daily life and a wide shot of the family on the TV stage. Stories often depict ordinary families who seem to have sacrificed themselves at work or home for the good of their community and their nation. In 2019, twenty families successively presented their stories: one family was praised for their loyal work in aeronautics across four generations, one couple for its dedication to the police force at the expense of family life, and another one for its dynamism as fruit producers in a remote rural region (CCTV 2019). The talent show celebrates different sectors of Chinese society: the nation's protection, industry, and agriculture. Of particular importance is the attention given to the grandparents, who first introduce the family story with their own account of how they met and how they got married. They represent the legacy and long-term attachment to the party-state and the nation.

Family stories are also displayed on ACWF websites. For instance, the Zhao family was awarded the most beautiful family in 2017.

Zhao Yanqiang, Zhu Changxia couple, a perfectly happy family, can be called household names in their village. When they are mentioned, villagers show envious eyes because they show filial respect for the elderly, love within their couple, family harmony, and two cute and good children. They are moral family models, but they are also good at running their household simultaneously as they are good at running their business. They are enthusiastic about helping others, getting along well with neighbors, and playing a leading role in the village in community life and work. (Qiao 2017)

This description used as promotional material for the campaign looks more like a restatement of the standard criteria to designate a model family than a realistic depiction of a real-life family. The story emphasizes harmony as a characteristic of the

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<sup>67</sup> In Chinese the TV show is called 最美我的家 [zuìměi wǒ de jiā].

family's internal dynamic and the family's relationship with the neighborhood and the community. The story also underlines the family's industriousness, thriftiness, and friendliness. The story of the winning family is reported and reproduced by official media with a picture of the family. It is also often publicized on the local community billboard.

**Figure 6. Picture of the Du Family awarded Most Beautiful Family by the Hainan Women's Federation in 2019 (Hainan ACWF 2019)**



*Source: Hainan ACWF. 2019. The most beautiful family in China | The most beautiful family's happiness and emotions. Du Weihong family.*  
<https://www.163.com/dy/article/EGRHC35T0514JACP.html> Accessed 2021/04/22.

The Du family, pictured in Figure 6, was awarded Most Beautiful Family by the Hainan Women's Federation in 2019. A short account of the family story is displayed in an online article.

Du Weihong is the director of the fifth taxation branch of Danzhou City Local Taxation Bureau. He and his wife, son, and daughter form a happy family of four. They are like most families, just an ordinary family, they have not done anything sensational, but the whole family is proactive and happily help others. They show mutual respect and love for each other, embodying natural family harmony and warmth. They are well-received by their neighbors.

In 2016, when Du Weihong was still serving in the army, his wife Lin Daojun became pregnant. Du Weihong gave up the opportunity to work in the provincial capital so that he could stay close to his wife and help at home with their first-born son, who was in elementary school. He chose to transfer back to the local administration. He took off the military uniform to put on the taxation uniform.

In April 2017, Du Weihong was appointed to Xuezhai village in Mutang town to serve as the first secretary. When he received the appointment, Du Weihong chose to accept the administrative arrangements with loyalty. He has never put any requests to the administration, and he has always overcome family difficulties. At home, he discusses politics with his wife and explains his work. He deeply cares

about the society, that's why he sacrificed his small family for the bigger family, the nation. [...]

His achievements at work are inseparable from the support of his wife. Their eldest son is 12 years old that year, a critical period between primary school and high school. Their younger daughter is just a month old. In order to support her husband's work and not let him be distracted by family chores, [Lin Daojun] takes care of everything at home and arranges the household in an orderly manner. Even when she was tired, she never complained to her husband. Thanks to his wife's understanding and support, Du Weihong can be at ease in his administrative work to achieve excellent results. The wife is also dedicated to the son's educational success, to ensure he seizes the best possible opportunities (Hainan ACWF 2019)

These family stories share similar features. First, all the stories accounted on official media emphasize the ordinariness of the families awarded the title of "Five-Virtue Family" or "Most Beautiful Family." This feature allows any household to compete and feel close to the awarded family. Second, the gender dimension is striking when looking at the stories of families awarded the title of Five-virtue family or Finding the Most Beautiful Family. The husband is praised for his hard work and sacrifice for the country, and the party, whereas the wife is acclaimed for sacrificing herself for her family. The husband is also characterized as family head and political agent.

Reading this story as the official account of the "most beautiful family in China" in 2019 published by the All-China Women Federation undermines claims for gender equality in the PRC and questions the role of state feminism as promoted by the ACWF. This family is praised because the husband sacrifices himself at work and the wife "support[s] her husband's work and [do] not let him be distracted by family chores." As Li Yuanchao, the vice-president of the PRC, asserted during the opening ceremony of the campaign in 2014, "Finding the Most Beautiful Family":

Women are important contributors to family harmony and the biggest beneficiaries of family harmony. A good career gives people a sense of accomplishment, and a good family gives people a sense of happiness. Comrade Mao Zedong once said, we advocate the "go home" and "strengthen the family" double policy. Comrade Jiang Zemin also said that women shoulder the heavy burdens of work and family. Like women's personal development, family harmony is equally important to women. (ACWF 2014) Li Yuanchao, Vice-President of the PRC from 2013 to 2018, an excerpt of a speech given on May 15th, 2014



In this discourse, Li Yuanchao stresses the historical continuity between Chinese leaders from the 1950s to the 1990s about women's familial role. He naturalizes women's sacrifice for the family because "family harmony is equally important to women" as is their personal development. This discourse shows the prevalence of patriarchal norms in official family policy discourse in recent decades.

Third, all the family stories share the theme of a professional or personal sacrifice for the nation's good, the "bigger family."<sup>68</sup> In the Du Family, the narrative thread is organized around the sacrifice of each family member. The husband starts as a soldier willing to sacrifice his life for his country. However, he gives up on his military career to take "the taxation uniform" to stay closer to his pregnant wife. Then, the wife sacrifices her personal life and hides her pain to provide a good family environment for her children and her husband. The image of selfless individuals who dedicate their lives to others constantly reminds the reader of the duty to repay the nation.

In 2019, the ACWF launched a new program to bring different initiatives under the same umbrella: the "Family Happiness and Well-Being Program"<sup>69</sup>. This slogan broadens the evaluation of the family ideal from beauty to happiness and healthiness<sup>70</sup>, including some environmental considerations. This program is organized around four pillars. First, the ACWF promotes the family ideal via the "Most Beautiful Family" competition and another competition titled the "Green Family", which rewards the most environmental-friendly household. Second, initiatives around family education are encouraged by establishing schools for parents and family education service centers. More broadly, the ACWF and the Ministry of Education are responsible for ensuring that the FEPL provisions are enforced in every household. Third, the Federation aims to develop family services such as home care services and marriage counseling. Finally, the ACWF is committed to funding research on the family to produce scientific knowledge on the best parenting practices.

In sum, the successive Five Virtue Family campaigns produce a normative framework for a parent-identity. Family pageant competitions staged on national television are tools for the Chinese government to shape parenting practices and govern

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<sup>68</sup> In Chinese in the story of the Du family, we can find the expression: 真正做到了舍小家顾大家 [zhēnzhèng zuò dào le shě xiǎo jiā gù dàjiā]

<sup>69</sup> In Chinese : 家家幸福安康工程 [jiā jiā xìngfú ānkāng gōngchéng].

<sup>70</sup> In Chinese 安康 [ānkāng]

the population from a distance. The state defines the right moral behaviors that families should adopt at the service of the nationalist project. This state-led normative discourse frames parent-subjects as crucial to defending the nation. These family normative campaigns enact a filial nationalist discourse, whereby families' virtuous performance is a form of repayment to the nation. This discourse recently gained legal force with the promulgation of the FEPL, enforced by the ACWF and public schools.

# Defining good parenting based on urban middle-class subjectivity

At the campaign's opening ceremony, "Finding the Most Beautiful Family", the Vice-President of the PRC, Li Yuanchao, delivered a speech entitled "Taking advantage of women's unique advantages and actively building civilized families."<sup>71</sup> He described how the ideal civilized family epitomizes the syncretic aggregation of a so-called Confucian tradition and Marxist theory:

The family is the primary cell of human society. Marx and Engels pointed out that human development is determined by material production, including means of living and human beings. The social system in which people live is controlled by the development of labor on the one hand and the development of the family on the other. Marx said that people who spend every day reproducing themselves are also producing for other people, that is, breeding offspring. This is the relationship between husband and wife, the relationship between parents and children, the beginning of the family. (...)

Since ancient times, the Chinese have regarded 'managing one's household' as the foundation of 'ruling the country' and 'pacify the world'. The Book of Rites says, 'From the loving example of one family a whole state becomes loving, from the virtuous example of a family, a whole state becomes virtuous'. The cultivation of benevolence, justice, etiquette, wisdom, and trust starts right from the family. Family virtues such as mother-kindness, filial piety, righteous husband and virtuous wife, long friendship, and child respect have always been essential components of traditional Chinese culture. Li Yuanchao, Vice-President of the PRC (2013-2018), an excerpt of a speech given on May 15th, 2014 (ACWF 2014)

In this speech, the vice-president highlights the importance of the family in the production system, yet individuals are not praised for their sacrifice at work but rather for their moral values. After citing Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Li Yuanchao cites one of the classics of the Confucian tradition, *The Book of Rites*, which describes how individuals should behave in their environment from the center, the family, and outward, in the society, and the world. This depiction of social relations from the inside out reflects the Confucian tradition following the anthropologist Fei Xiaotong's (2017) description of the Chinese society as a series of centrifugal relational circles around individuals. In the Confucian tradition, the same kind of respect, hierarchical loyalty, and mutual solidarity should govern family relations and leader-citizen relations. In his discourse, Li Yuanchao downplays the Marxist theory of class struggle to focus on moral

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<sup>71</sup> The name of the campaign in Chinese is 寻找最美家庭 [xúnzhǎo zuìměi jiātíng]

values and Confucian principles. These heterogeneous ideologies appear clearly in the FEPL, as illustrated in article 3 of the law.

**Article 3.** The basic task of family education is fostering ethics and character, by cultivating and practicing the Core Socialist Values, advocating the exceptional traditional Chinese culture, and cultivating the comprehensive moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetics and labor development of the builders and successors of socialism. (China Law Translate 2021)

The FEPL enforces a particular ideal of the family institution reflecting the urban middle-class subjectivity. This ideal relies on a syncretic discourse aggregating socialist values, Confucian principles and nationalist aspirations. The FEPL target specifically the “parents or legal guardians”, thus family education means the education provided by the parents at home. Despite the grandparents’ active involvement in their grandchildren’s education, the law does not mention them even once. The law sets a legal framework to evaluate parents’ ability and performance in raising their children as loyal and successful citizens. This legal framework targets parent-subjects to perform a seemingly universal family ideal, based on urban middle-class subjectivity. This ideal neglects the socio-economic conditions in which families live and sets the urban middle-class parents as subject to a normative political discourse. The ACWF and public schools are in charge of implementing this law.

## Universal parenting norms

The FEPL translates the normative framework produced by the Five Virtue Family campaigns into legal requirements and lists precisely what values and knowledge parents have to transmit to their children. In an earlier version, the law specified the content parents had to teach to their children by age range. In the final version, article 16 reads:

**Article 16:** Minors' parents or other guardians shall carry out family education with the following content as guidance targeted to the physical and psychological characteristics of minors at different ages:

- (1) Teaching minors to love the party, nation, people, and socialism; establish a conception of preserving national unity, solidify an awareness of the Chinese community, and cultivate strong feeling for the homeland
- (2) Teaching minors to admire virtue and be inclined to goodness, to respect the elderly and love the young, to adore the family, to be diligent and thrifty, to work together and help each other, to be honest and friendly, to cultivate

- their social moral value, family virtues, personal morality and rule of law awareness,
- (3) Helping minors to establish the correct view of becoming a success, guiding them cultivate broad interests and hobbies, healthy aesthetic pursuits, and positive study habits; enhancing awareness and capacity for the spirit of scientific exploration and innovation;
  - (4) Ensuring minors' balanced nutrition, scientific exercise, adequate sleep, and physical and mental happiness, to guide them to develop positive life habits and behaviors, and promote their healthy physical and psychological development;
  - (5) Paying attention to minors' physical and mental health, guiding them to treasure life, conducting education for them on safety knowledge in areas such as transportation and travel, healthy internet use, and preventing bullying, drowning, fraud, trafficking, and sexual assault; so as to help them master safety knowledge and skills , to enhance their awareness and ability of self-protection
  - (6) Assisting minors in establishing a correct conception of labor, participating in labor suited for their abilities, increasing their ability to care for themselves, and fostering an excellent character of being able to bear hardship and withstand hard work, and the good habits of loving (China Law Translate 2021)

According to this article, parents are responsible for teaching their children “to love the party, the nation, the people and socialism” and “to establish a conception of preserving national unity”. According to this law, Chinese parents are legally forbidden to despise and criticize the party, the nation, and socialism before their children. The law forbids the promotion of any subnational sense of belonging that could threaten national unity; thus, it makes unlawful the transmission of any autonomous claims from ethnic minorities. In a later article of the law, local authorities, such as schools and neighborhood committees, are invited to denounce any parents or other legal guardians who do not comply with the principles promoted by the law. The article mentions the “Chinese community” as a homogeneous group; there is no mention of ethnic minorities, which officially compose the Chinese population. Parents from ethnic minorities might be the main target of article 16.1 of the FEPL. They should make sure to inculcate the notion of national unity to their children. This article enables the state to control how parents participate in nation-building. This article gives a distinct nationalist dimension to parenting practices. The law uses its goal of regulating family education and the parent-subject as a point of entrance into a deeper and far-reaching attempt to regulate behavior and human relations in society. This law is an example of a governmentality tool used by the state to govern from a distance.

The second item of article 16 focuses on family and community relationships, repeating the criteria used in the Five-Virtue Family Campaign. It lists the moral virtues parents should nurture in their children to foster beauty in their family and community. The third item deals with the conception of success and the role of education. The article emphasizes the necessity to find a balance between study habits and extra-curricular activities. This article directly targets the ultra-competitive education system and the flourishing private education sector offering a plethora of “interest courses” such as calligraphy, dance, Lego, and so on.<sup>72</sup> The government promulgated the FEPL a few months after issuing stricter regulations on private education companies. In March 2021, Xi Jinping delivered a notable speech on how “training chaos can be described as a stubborn disease difficult to cure” (Li 2021b).<sup>73</sup> The Double Reduction Policy issued in the summer of 2021 bans for-profit education companies from offering courses for children under six years old, courses covering the official curricula, and courses during the weekends and official vacations. Whereas the Double Reduction Policy regulates private companies, the FEPL targets parents’ education choices. The fourth item of article 16 is a follow-up of the third item, defining a healthy and balanced environment by highlighting the importance of physical exercise and healthy eating habits. This item refers to the phrase the “comprehensive development of the child,” often used by officials, experts, and parents about children’s moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic education.<sup>74</sup> Article 16 stresses the parents’ responsibility to balance between investing in their children’s educational success and preserving a positive environment for development.

The fifth item highlights the need for children to enjoy a safe environment to grow up. This item targets the issue of video game addiction. In 2021, the government introduced regulations on minors’ access to online games, allowing minors to play only one hour a day on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays (Laurent 2022; Chen 2021a). This item also refers to child trafficking scandals in the last decades. While some National People’s Congress delegates call for harsher measures against traffickers and buyers (D. Ni 2022), the FEPL underlines the parent’s responsibility to educate their child on safety measures and self-protection. The FEPL epitomizes how the Chinese state governs from

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<sup>72</sup> In Chinese: 兴趣班 [xìngqù bān]

<sup>73</sup> In the original Chinese version: “培训乱象，可以说是很难治理的顽瘴痼疾。”

<sup>74</sup> In Chinese, comprehensive development translates 全面发展 [quánmiàn fāzhǎn] which means 德智体美育 [dé zhī tǐ měiyù].

a distance by providing a code of conduct for the population to govern itself. In the same spirit, the article 16.6 talks about “a correct conception of labor” and the parents’ duty to “foster [in their child] an excellent character (...) to bear hardship and withstand hard work”, showing the role of parents to inculcate the right behavior in their child. When they grow up, these future citizens should be able to govern themselves, live in society, and repay the nation for their hard work. It is parents who are responsible for the success or failure of their children. In 2017, a well-known parent's magazine, *Parents Must Read*, cited the Chinese family psychologist Zhang Kan to explain how parents should make sure that their child is not unemployed by the age of 20.<sup>75</sup> Parents inculcate them the proper habits from an early age, such as resilience, curiosity, and patience (Zhang 2017).

The FEPL makes parents responsible for reproducing filial, compliant, dedicated, hard-working, and civilized citizens. This all-encompassing responsibility increases pressure on parents and gives a strong political meaning to parent-identity. Scientific education was a criterion for selecting the virtuous families in the late 2000s, and article 18 of the FEPL enshrines scientific knowledge to build a normative parenting framework states:

**Article 18.** Minors' parents and other guardians shall establish a correct conception of family education, conscientiously studying information on family education, carrying out focused study during the critical phases of pregnancy and as minors enter infant or child care, kindergarten, and school, to get a grip on scientific methods of family education and to increase capacity for family education. (China Law Translate 2021)

Moreover, according to the law, public institutions should offer training for parents to learn how to raise their children with “scientific methods”. This expression is repeated ten times in the law without a clear explanation of its meaning, sometimes referring to nutrition, sport activities or more broadly “scientific methods of family education” (art.18). The law mentions childcare establishments (art. 44), medical and health establishments (art. 45), and cultural venues such as museums, libraries, and so on (art. 46). As other scholars have note, governments use science to justify their growing control over the population’s behaviors (Lascoumes 2004; Foucault 2004; Sigley 2006). In general, science is used to provide specific recommendations and set up standards. Here, the Chinese government consecrates parenting as a science in the law.

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<sup>75</sup> The name of the magazine in Chinese is 父母必读 [fùmǔ bì dú].

Despite the repeated use of “scientific parenting”, the law does not provide a clear definition of this science. Yet, the law gives precise prescriptions regarding parent-child relations, relying on liberal principles such as respect for the child as an individual and equality between parents and child. For instance, article 5 reads as:

**Article 5.** Family education work shall comply with the following requirements:  
(1) Respect for the norms of minor's physical and mental development and individual differences;  
(2) Respect for the personal dignity of minors and safeguard their lawful rights and interests;  
(3) Compliance with the norms of family education and implement a scientific conception of family education;  
(4) Benefitting the overall development and healthy growth of minors;  
(5) Closely integrating and coordinating family education, school education, and social education;  
(6) Employing flexible and diverse measures in consideration of the actual circumstances. (China Law Translate 2021)

In this article, the two first principles explicitly recognize the child as an individual with specific rights and interests. Parents are required to respect the child as a full-fledged individual. The sixth principle requires flexibility and adaptability in parenting practices, which seems to contradict the traditional Confucian parent-child relationship based on inflexible generational hierarchies. Article 17 goes even further by describing the parent-child relationship as an attachment bond and a discussion among equals.

**Article 17.** Minors' parents and other guardians carrying out family education shall pay attention to the minors' physical, psychological, and intellectual development; respect their rights to participate in family affairs and express opinions; and reasonably use the following means and methods:  
(1) Raising them personally and strengthening parent-child bonds;  
(2) Joint participation, giving play to the roles of both mother and father;  
(3) Seizing teachable moments, integrating education into daily life;  
(4) Subtly influencing, combining words and actions;  
(5) Mixing sternness and leniency, combining concern and strict requirements;  
(6) Respecting differences, conducting scientific guidance on the basis of their age and personal characteristics;  
(7) Talking as equals, showing respect, understanding, and encouragement;  
(8) Mutual promotion, with parents and children growing together;  
(9) Other means and methods that are conducive to minors' overall development and healthy growth. (China Law Translate 2021)

The first item stresses the role of parents in the child's development. However, in contemporary China, grandparents play a crucial role in childcare, mostly for financial and practical reasons. Chinese scholars and the media constantly underline the harmful role of grandparents in childcare (Li 2004; Chen, Liu, and Mair 2011; Mao and Zhang



2018). Intergenerational childcare arrangements are a growing field of research in Chinese family sociology. Most scholars focus on rural households in which children are left-behind in the home village in the care of grandparents when parents work in factories (Mao and Zhang 2018; Chan 2009). Scholars highlight how intergenerational arrangement leads to a care deficit (Laurent and Wen 2020). They examine the child's psychological state and academic achievement to make their case.

Moreover, scholars point to intergenerational childcare arrangement as one of the main factors for social reproduction and social inequalities (Silverstein, Cong, and Li 2006; Zeng and Xie 2014; Wen and Hanley 2015). In that way, Chinese scholars also contribute to the state discourse on intergenerational relationship. In urban areas, parents organize another type of intergenerational arrangement – called *joint education* – when the three generations live under the same roof and grandparents participate in daily childcare activities (Kong and Wang 2013; Liu 2014; Xu 2019).<sup>76</sup> Despite parental presence, grandparents are deemed by academics a danger to the child's educational achievement because of their so-called backwardness (Mao and Zhang 2018; Han, Whetung, and Mao 2019). The Family Education Promotion Law takes a clear stance on this debate by disqualifying grandparents as educators and allowing the court to force parents to “personally” educate their children (Ni and Zhu 2022a).

The second item mentions “the roles of both mother and father.” It is the sole mention of mothers and fathers as distinct individuals. All the articles of the law target “parents and other legal guardians.” In the latter phrase, gender is invisibilized as the law does not differentiate parents' duties by gender. Fathers and mothers are equally responsible for raising their children. The first court judgments illustrate this formal equality (Ni and Zhu 2022a). Yet, as stipulated in article 17.2, the state recognizes distinct roles for mothers and fathers. Similar to many other patriarchal societies, in imperial China, parenthood was regimented by sayings, such as: “men outside, women inside” and “strict father, kind mother”.<sup>77</sup> According to this patriarchal discourse, fathers worked outside to provide food and financial means, they played the role of the family breadwinner; meanwhile, mothers stayed inside, taking care of the children and the housework (Hare-Mustin and Hare 1986). Fathers were also considered to be

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<sup>76</sup> In Chinese, scholars coined *joint education* 联合教育 [liánhé jiàoyù]

<sup>77</sup> 男主外女主内 [nán zhǔ wài nǚ zhǔ nèi] and the second one is 严父慈母 [yán fù cí mǔ]. The latter is a quote from a 4<sup>th</sup>-century book 昆弟诰 « Kun di gao » by 夏侯湛 Xia Houzhan (243-291) in the West Jin Kingdom.

“educators and disciplinarians” (Abbott, Ming, and Meredith 1992, 46). Disciplinarian fathers enforced a strict patriarchal and hierarchical order based on the practice of filial piety. In contrast, mothers symbolized kindness, love, and care. As educators, fathers were in charge of the children’s intellectual, aesthetic, and moral development, particularly for the boys. In imperial China, the examinations to become dignitary were only open to male candidates, so male children’s education was prioritized (Nguyen Tri and Despeux 2003).

During the Maoist period, women were quickly and widely mobilized in the sphere of industry and production to the point that China had the highest rate of women participation in the labor force (Chen 2019). Even though women started working outside of home, fathers did not start working inside to participate in housework. A survey conducted in the late 1970s, by Hare-Mustin and Hare (1986) shows that “frequently, the Chinese mother was regarded as stricter than the father. At the same time mothers were regarded as more forgiving and less dogmatic than fathers. It was reported that some fathers helped at home, but there was universal agreement that fathers did not do as much as mothers. Subjects agreed that a man who helped too much was ridiculed” (Hare-Mustin and Hare 1986, 76). In the 1980s, fathers are not considered as the strict educator and disciplinarian from imperial China anymore. Their role is confined to being breadwinners and playmates (Tamis-LeMonda 2004; Chuang, Moreno, and Su 2013).

Despite the emergence of a scientific discourse suggesting that fathers’ involvement has a positive impact on their children’s school results (Tam and Lam 2013; Wang 2019; Wu, Zhu, and Liu 2012), fathers generally remain absent. Three nationwide surveys examine fathers’ practices in childcare. The National Survey of the Status of Women (NSSW) presents women as primary caregivers and main school tutors in terms of self-reported responsibilities (Wang 2019).<sup>78</sup> The China Health National Survey (CHNS) shows that time devoted to maternal childcare time is similar in 2004 and 2011, while there is a slight increase in fathers’ involvement in childcare from 11.2 hours in 2004 to 15.9 hours in 2011. However, Zhao (2018) nuances this observation by showing that in households where the father’s childcare time increases, the mother’s childcare time does too. Finally, Liu (2019) uses the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS) to

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<sup>78</sup> In Chinese the National Survey of the Status of Women is called 全国妇女地位调查 [quánguó fùnǚ dìwèi tiáo chá]

demonstrate the prevalent role of mothers in school affairs.<sup>79</sup> She underlines that this unbalanced care fosters the reproduction of gender inequalities.

In the 2010s, controversies regarding the alleged lack of masculinity of young Chinese men reignited the debate on the father's role in children's education. In January 2010, Sun Yunxiao, Li Wendao, and Zhao Xiao from the China Youth Research Center published a book entitled *Save the Boys*.<sup>80</sup> They conceptualized a crisis of masculinity among young Chinese males. They identify three causes for this crisis: academic failures, absentee fathers and male role models, and androgynous pop culture models (Zheng 2011). This book quickly became the hot topic of the year in academic circles and mass media (Zheng 2015).<sup>81</sup> The famous Chinese feminist sociologist Xu Anqi, from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, responded to the debate with an article the same year entitled "Boy Crisis: An Alarming Pseudo-Proposition". She rejected the idea that boys had to be saved, and argued that there was a crisis of patriarchal norms rather than a "boy crisis." She called for the reshaping of gender values in Chinese society (Xu 2010). However, ten years later, some media headlines look at how "China wants to bring machismo back to school" to cultivate masculinity (Zhang 2021; Du and Chen 2021). In the Du family story cited earlier, the father's role is significant during the son's teenage period, which is called a "critical period." Despite the apparent equality asserted in the Family Education Promotion Law, patriarchal norms remain influential in Chinese society, as illustrated in the most beautiful families' stories.

The third item of article 17 underlines how parents should "integrate education into daily life." The remaining items set up a normative framework based on liberal parenting principles such as equality, positive reinforcement, and "parents and children growing up together." Integrating education into daily life requires an intensive investment from parents, who need to dedicate time and resources in learning the right parenting practices and observing their children. These practices are mainly accessible to wealthy households, where one parent can reduce their work load to dedicate more time raising the child, a task often falls on the mother's shoulders. In some urban

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<sup>79</sup> In Chinese, the China Education Panel Survey 中国教育追踪调查 [zhongguo jiaoyu zhuizong diaocha]

<sup>80</sup> In Chinese 孙云晓、李文道、赵霞 《拯救男孩》北京:作家出版社, 2010. The authors work at the 中国青少年研究中心

<sup>81</sup> In 2010, during the talent show Happy Boy, equivalent to American Idol, one of the contestants a 19-year-old young man, Liu Zhu, cross-dressed into a woman (Lighthstronger 2010). In 2012, the New York Times picked up the topic focusing on the academic failures of boys in China (Farrar 2012).

middle-class families, parents outsource daily childcare tasks to private actors (nannies or daycare).

To summarize, the Family Education Promotion Law requires parents to provide a stimulating, safe, nurturing, and healthy environments for their children. According to the law, parents are responsible for their child's political and moral education, yet the normative framework offered by the law relies on a heterogeneous ideological discourse. Finally, parents should educate themselves on scientific parenting methods to implement these prescriptions. They should not mobilize the grandparents but rather dedicate their time and energy to seize all "teachable moments" for their child. Even though patriarchal norms widely infuse society, the law is blind to gender differences.

The Family Education Promotion Law offers a one-size-fits-all solution downplaying the socio-economic and geographical constraints weighing on households. The law requires parents to dedicate much time to educate their children and learning the right parenting practices. These norms assume a certain cultural, social, and economic capital which favors urban middle-class households who can invest time, money, and energy in their child upbringing. The norms promoted by the law reflect the subjectivity of the middle class parent.

## **Enforcing parenting norms**

Public schools and community services play a crucial role in the implementation of parenting guidance programs. According to a report from UNICEF, "the Five Year Plan for Family Education 2005-2010 provided for the development of a training manual on family education with special focus on children's rights and gender equality. It required school-based parent education programmes as well as parenting support service centres to be established in 80 per cent of communities and 60 per cent of villages in China. The national guidelines on family education published in 2010 further emphasize the role of family awareness and education for nation building" (UNICEF et al. 2015, 55). These guidelines led to the content of the 2021-FEP Law, in which articles 39 and 40 require all schools to establish parents' schools to educate the parents:

**Article 39.** Primary and secondary schools and kindergartens shall include family education guidance services in school work plans and in the content of teacher training.

**Article 40.** Primary and secondary schools and kindergartens may employ methods such as establishing parenting schools focusing on the traits of minors at different ages to periodically organize public interest family education guidance services and practice activities, and promptly contact the parents or other guardians of minors and urge them to participate. (China Law Translate 2021)

Parent schools are nothing new in China. As Meredith (1991) traced these institutions back to the early 1980s with the first schools for parents opening in 1983. Croll's (2006) conducted an evaluation of these schools for UNICEF and concluded that they "largely consisted of classes to help parents enhance the health and education of their single child" (Croll 2006, 172). These schools did not attract much attention until 2015, when two official memos restated the role of the central and local authorities in providing guidance for parents. These memos reaffirmed the state's commitment to establishing schools for parents all around the country. In 2015, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued "Guidance from the MOE on strengthening family education work" which provide precise guidelines about how public schools should establish courses for parents to attend in the evening. Schools coordinate parents' committees and meetings starting from kindergarten. They organize "training seminars and counseling services" to promote "scientific parenting." The guideline also talks about "home visits and parents' open doors" by educators. Earlier in this guidance document, more elements are provided about good parenting practices. In 2016 the ACWF, along with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and other government agencies, issued a "Five-Year Plan on Guiding the Promotion of Family Education (2016-2020)", which provides similar recommendations regarding the role of school in educating parents. Nowadays, parenting schools are pretty standard in China. Most parents were quite skeptical during my fieldwork regarding these mandatory training sessions, considering it a waste of time and money. During an interview, an American father married to a Chinese woman and raising two boys in Nanjing, explained to me that he or his wife had to go; otherwise, the teacher would think that they are not sufficiently invested in their children's education. Teachers publicly mention absent parents at the parents' conferences.

Public and private schools also shape parenting norms via their admission process. During the interviews, parents shared anecdotes about schools discriminating against children based on their primary caregivers. Indeed, schools disapprove of the investment of grandparents in education. According to an interviewee, Sao, the mother

of a fourteen-year-old girl, schools' selection process reflects the widely accepted discourse about the grandparents' harmful impact on children's cognitive development. I met Sao during a "Classroom for Good Parents" session, an informal network organizing events with upper-middle-class parents. Sao is extremely invested in her daughter's education choosing work part-time when her daughter started primary school. Sao explained to me that one of the best public primary schools in Nanjing takes the liberty of selecting its pupils according to the person who looks after them, despite the school zoning regulations:

We have a school in Nanjing called Jinling Huiwen. You have probably heard about it. It is exciting. There is a primary school and a junior high school. The particularity of this school is that during enrolment for the primary school, it draws up a list indicating who looks after the children, whether it is the grandparents or the parents. If it is the grandparents, they put the child [the child's file] there [Sao pretends to put a file to one side]: those children won't be considered, whatever grade they get in the entrance exam. They start by accepting the children who are looked after by their parents. I think they are right [to do this], because children whose grandparents look after them aren't as good as those who are looked after by their parents. Why? Because the grandparents will do everything for the child, the child [cared for by the grandparents] will be obstinate and selfish, and he [or she] will not be able to cope with obstacles or adversity. That is why I stayed at home, I didn't work, I raised [my daughter].

It is not clear how Jinling Huiwen primary school obtains information about caregivers, but this anecdote shows how schools influence parenting practices by disqualifying grandparents as educators. This admission process increases the pressure on parents and reiterates parents' role as the main caregivers who should not outsource or externalize their educative task. One interviewee, Cui, a university professor and father of a five-year-old girl, shared a similar story about the selection process at Nanjing's best private primary school (Sujie School). Parents are invited to fill in a questionnaire to enroll their children in the nursery affiliated with the primary school. Among the questions, there were three concerning childcare:

After their enrolment in Sujie primary school, how much time will the child spend with their parents each day?

After their enrolment in the school, please describe the family's project for their education if your child spends most of their time at home.

Please list all the family members living in the household.

Cui was thinking of enrolling his daughter in this private school, thus he gathered information from colleagues and friends about the selection process. He stated that the school selects parents even more than the children. Schools select parents who have

enough time to accompany their children in their studies and reject parents who delegate educational tasks to elderly relatives or nannies. Accepting or rejecting children based on the mode of childcare within the family implies that the person in charge of the child is the main factor in the child's future academic success. This selection method downplays the child's skills and ignores the economic conditions underlying the great diversity in modes of childcare within households.

I argue that schools play a crucial role in the enforcement of the Family Education Promotion Law by educating parents. Schools are entitled to discipline children directly (art. 43) and then they "notify parents" and "provide targeted family education guidance services to parents ... where it is discovered that minor students have negative or serious negative conduct." Parents are deemed responsible for their children's "negative conduct". The law clearly fosters public criticism and denunciation by neighborhood or work colleagues if parents are not conforming to the parenting norms. Article 48 shows the importance of community control over the population:

**Article 48.** The residents' committee, villagers' committee, and women federations for the areas where minors live, and the units to which the parents or other guardians of minors belong, as well units with close contact with minors such as primary and secondary schools and kindergartens, that discover that the parents or other guardians are refusing to fulfill their family education responsibilities or are doing so inadequately, or are illegally obstructing other guardians from carrying out family education, they shall criticize and educate them, admonish and stop them, and when necessary urge them to accept family education guidance. (China Law Translate 2021)

The party-state entrusts community institutions to implement the normative framework set up by the law. Tomba extensively examined this governance model in his book *The Government Next Door* (Tomba 2014) showing how residents' committees and even private management companies governed different social strata of the population, respectively urban disenfranchised and unemployed workers and highly-educated professionals. "Socialization in an ethical community is often described as 'the best school for building citizens,' 'the cornerstone of society,' or 'the foundation on which the nation is built'" (Tomba 2014, 57). In the Family Education Promotion Law, article 48 illustrates how the government can control its population from a distance using community institutions to regulate parents' behaviors who should correct their child's behavior. Community institutions use policy tools, "criticize," "educate," and "admonish", recalling the Maoist period, when public accusation meetings were organized in villages.

As described in a report from UNICEF, community institutions in China can use other tools such as “Child Friendly Spaces” which “offer an integrated micro child protection service” and “provide extensive informational support to parents and family members on basic health, early childhood development and other parenting issues” (UNICEF et al. 2015, 56).

As a last resort, article 49 details how courts can take coercive measures to implement the Family Education Promotion Law.

**Article 49.** Where in the course of handling a case, public security organs, people’s procuratorates, people’s courts discover that minors have serious negative conduct or have committed crimes, or that the parents or other guardians of minors have improperly carried out family education, infringing on the lawful rights and interests of minors, they are to admonish the parents or other guardians and may order them to accept family education guidance. (China Law Translate 2021)

The improper enactment of family education can lead to mandatory guidance sessions. As of 2022, the few cases that rely on the FEPL involved divorced or separated couples with one parent complaining on about the provision of childcare. One case led to financial sanctions for a father who failed to pay child support. In another case, a mother was ordered to communicate with her seven-year-old daughter at least once a week (Ni and Zhu 2022a). The implementation of the FEPL illustrates the diversity of state actors involved in governing family relationships and shaping parent-subject as targets of normative discourses.



# Conclusion

The party and the state have always attached great importance to the construction of civilized families and the unique role of women in the construction of civilized families. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized the need to give full play to the unique role of women in social and family life, and give play to the unique role of women in promoting the Chinese nation's family virtues and establishing a good family tradition.<sup>82</sup> (ACWF 2014) Li Yuanchao, Vice-President of the PRC from 2013 to 2018, excerpt of a speech given on May 15th 2014

In 2014, at the ceremony launching the Most Beautiful Family, the Vice-President of the PRC, Li Yuanchao highlighted the role of the state and the Party in defining family norms and values. In this chapter, I have shown how the state produces a normative environment through highly publicized discourses regarding parenting. The “Five-Virtue Families” campaigns first initiated in the 1950s allow the ACWF to select virtuous families based on detailed criteria which are publicized and displayed. These criteria create norms for good parenting practices. Since the 2010s, this campaign is taking a new dimension with TV shows staging family pageant competitions at the local and national levels. These competitions, common in China in the public and private spheres, showcase so-called ordinary individuals to serve as example for the rest of the population. This framing of parenting and family education as a competitive process with criteria evolving depending on political discourse, produce an even more anxious environment for parents who are constantly reminded that they need to make the right choices for their child. These competitions rely on the household responsibility to perform as a good family.

The Chinese state has long been shaped family relations and parenting practices. During the Maoist Period, the family institution was considered an economic production unit. Since the 1980s, the political shift reconsiders the family as the basic unit of the nation-building project, and parents are primary targets of the nationalist project. They are the subject of a normative discourse prescribing how they should raise their children to make them loyal and successful citizens. In 2021, the Family Education Promotion Law promulgated by the National People's Congress transformed these

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<sup>82</sup> Original version in Chinese:党和国家历来重视家庭文明建设，重视发挥妇女在家庭文明建设中的独特作用。党的十八大以来，习近平总书记强调，要注重发挥妇女在社会生活和家庭生活中的独特作用，发挥妇女在弘扬中华民族家庭美德、树立良好家风方面的独特作用。

parenting norms into legal duties. Chinese legislators claim that China is on the verge of a moral and political crisis because parents nowadays favor knowledge-oriented education rather than moral and political development (Guo Xinzhi 2016).<sup>83</sup> Consequently, the law is highly moralistic, albeit aggregating heterogeneous principles from socialism to Confucianism and individualism. The law remains ambiguous regarding parents' gender role, mixing notions of individual equality, and liberal principles together with filial piety and socialism. This syncretic and sometimes incoherent prescriptive discourse puts pressure on parents who have to sort out their rights and duties by themselves. Despite this ambiguity, the state-led normative discourse aims to shape a universal ideal of parenting practices, downplaying social, economic and material conditions. The ideal parent-subject is modelled after intensive parenting discourses and urban middle-class household's standards who can dedicate large amounts of money, time and energy to raising their children.

To conclude, the Chinese state set parent-subject at the center of its nationalist project, giving a highly political dimension to the parent-identity and parenting practices. This discourse increase parents sense of responsibility and anxiety to stand up to the ideal standard diffused by the state. Private companies take advantage of parent's anxiety by offering training, guidance, and information to help parents navigate parenting norms. A real parenting market is emerging in China, organized along the guidelines formulated by the state.

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<sup>83</sup> In Chinese they summarize this parenting crisis with the phrasing 重知轻德 which literally means "heavy on knowledge; light on moral."



# Chapter 4. The Emergence of a Parenting Market

Jiazhangbang, established in 2003, is one of the largest parent communities in China, with tens of millions of users. JZB is devoted to creating a diversified educational information-sharing platform to offer parents one-stop information services (...). Every day from massive amounts of information, we will extract the most valuable information and stay helpful to parents and children.  
Excerpt of a promotional video produced by TAL Education Group to attract investors (TAL Education Group 2017)

The state is not the only source of parenting norms that influence parenting practices. Private companies are also interested in parents as potential consumers. Major corporations shape parenting norms by selling one-size-fits-all solutions to launch children into the best universities. Whereas public actors focus on parents' moral and legal responsibility towards their children, private companies stress parents' power to shape their children's future. This chapter argues that the emergence of a parenting market with the development of goods and services around parenting (supply) constructs parents as consumers (demand).

No scholar to date has analyzed the parenting market produced by actors from the private sector. Some scholars have studied the representations of parenthood in the media (Tao 2015; Xuan Li 2016). Tao Yanlan, for example, highlights the consumerist culture promoted by the second most popular magazine on parenthood, *Parents Must Read*.<sup>84</sup> Many scholars examined the rise of private companies in the realm of education. In the early 1990s, when the Chinese government promoted school differentiation (privatization, unequal funding, different curricula, etc.) to improve education quality (Cheng et DeLany 1999), private companies and for-profit organizations emerged as significant actors in the education system. These companies thrive by selling supplementary tutoring courses which shadow the formal school curriculum (Bray 2009b; 2012). Bray and Zhang show how the shadow education market emerged in the 1990s, and then was institutionalized in the early 2000s with the establishment of

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<sup>84</sup> In Chinese 父母必读 [fùmǔ bì dú].

corporations. However, there is a dire lack of literature on the role of private-sector actors in shaping and disseminating parenting norms.

In this chapter, I show how private companies sell goods and services to parents with the promise of securing their children's academic success. I argue that the commodification of parenting advice transforms parenthood into commercial services disconnected from biological, legal, and relational considerations. Private sector actors formulate parenting advice as a one-fits-all solution, oblivious of the material, cultural and social conditions in which parents raise their children. The normative framework promoted by both private and public actors upholds the middle-class household lifestyle as a standard. Private companies target households that can afford to pay for private parenting services and implement expensive residential strategies but cannot afford to exit the Chinese education system.

In this chapter, I focus on three types of actors from the private sector which promote a parenting normative framework. First, I examine the flourishing production of books and magazine on parenting. I begin this chapter with a discussion about the 'ideal parenting style' promoted by the book *A good mother is better than a good teacher* by Yin Jianli (2016).<sup>85</sup> I choose this book among the abundant literature on family education and parenting for several reasons. In terms of content, this five-year best-seller clearly asserts the educational role of parents. Each chapter provides unequivocal prescriptions on childrearing and how to educate children. The format of the book is very accessible. Short stories, illustrated with computerized watercolor drawings, recount anecdotes from the author's life with her husband and her daughter, Yuanyuan. The book's format might explain its editorial success. Although the book focuses on the mother's role, it also mentions the father's role. Finally, the book caught my attention because the author directly criticizes school education and teachers, shedding light on some of the contradictions of the state-led discourse on parenting norms.

Second, I analyze an online parent service called *Parents' Helper* developed by the major company TAL.<sup>86</sup> This analysis shows how private education companies in part reinforce the state normative framing on parenting practices, while also offering an

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<sup>85</sup> In Chinese 好妈妈胜过好老师 [Hǎo māmā shèngguò hǎo lǎoshī]

<sup>86</sup> In Chinese, called 家长帮 [jiāzhǎng bang], the URL is the acronym of the *pinyin* that is jzb.com. I use the term multi-platform to describe this product because it is developed as a website in 2003, eduu.com, a mobile application, and a mini-program embedded in the omnipotent WeChat application.

alternative normative discourse. Parent-subjects are defined by their consuming performance rather than their loyal citizenship. For-profit private companies package parenting practices into ready-to-use recipes for educational success, using four main ingredients: models of ideal parenting, platforms with training courses, online communities which create a sense of common faith among anxious parents, and formal explanations on educational resources and state regulations. Private education companies sell online courses, one-on-one counseling services, and peer-to-peer discussions to build parent communities. Access to these communities requires an entry fee. These online commodified online communities give parents access to private events and open marketing space to sell more products and services. Education companies and specialized media organize in-person conferences with psychologists, child-development experts, educators, and other experts. I argue that private companies represent parents as entitled subjects to make their own parenting and schooling choices, yet the discourses diffused by private parenting services offer a narrow understanding of which parenting practices are appropriate and which are not.

Third, I argue that real estate agencies play the role of intermediaries between state and society in implementing education policies (Laurent 2015). Real-estate agencies use informational goods – like school district maps – to attract clients and sell apartments. They have created a new category of goods: the education-apartment.<sup>87</sup> These apartments are strategically located close to several elite schools (kindergarten, primary school, junior high, and senior high). Real estate agencies encourage all parents to buy these education-apartments to secure a spot in elite schools and ensure their children have access to the best resources. I argue that real estate agencies have an ambiguous discourse regarding school district policies. They convey the state discourse on the importance to control the distribution of educational resources while highlighting parents' power in circumventing state regulations.

This chapter shows the diversity of normative discourse on parenting practices, where private education companies partially reinforce but also question the state discourse. This limited diversity opens opportunities for parents to further challenge state norms and inform the reactivation of the political socialization process.

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<sup>87</sup> In Chinese, it is called 学区房 [xuéqū fáng]

# A good mother is better than a good teacher

Covering kids' clothes, food and drink, sports equipment and all kinds of extracurricular activities, the Chinese market for goods and services for children has expanded to 4.5 trillion yuan (US\$695 billion), state media outlet Economic Daily reported on Sunday. (...)

Almost half of the families surveyed in the 2020 Children Economy Insights Report, conducted by analytics firm QuestMobile, said 30 to 50 per cent of their overall spending was allocated to children-related expenses. Besides daily necessities, they spent mostly on education, entertainment and classes such as music tuition. Close to 90 per cent of parents aged 25 to 40 who had children aged under 12 spent 1,000 to 5,000 yuan on their children each month, the report said. (Huang 2021)

The children-parents market was one of the first to attract foreign and domestic marketing and manufacturing companies (Croll 2006). Beginning in the 1990s, this market expanded exponentially. Naftali (2016) focuses on historical and psychological factors to explain the growing spending on children in the 1990s and 2000s. This generation of parents escaped a childhood of shortages and disruptions during Mao's socialist era (Naftali 2016). Thus, they want their children to live comfortably in a land of plenty. This historical factor, combined with the increased value and emotional attachment associated with single children, led to an increase in spending on children per household. The share of a family's income spent on children increased quickly, from one-third in 1988 to 40% in 2004 (Croll 2006, 174); this trend applies particularly to urban households.

Over time, the children's market grew rapidly and diversified into different segments: food consumption, toys and leisure activities, media and TV cartoons, and education services. International companies jumped in to sell colorful children's clothes, infant milk formula, chocolate bars and snacks, branded toys, and so on. In the 1990s and early 2000s, foreign products were associated with modernity, science, health, and high achievement. After establishing the Heinz Institute of Nutritional Science in Guangzhou, the President of Heinz-UFE asserted that they were "selling not only products but also hope and confidence, calling on parents to rear the future generation in scientific ways" (Croll 2006, 177). The children's market quickly picked up a scientific and competitive dimension to raise high-achieving children. Advertisements for games and toys quickly promoted the educational benefits of products to entice parent-

consumers. In her anthropological research among urban middle households in Kunming, Teresa Kuan highlights how popular experts use an economic language to promote specific parenting methods, bringing concepts such as ‘return on investment’ to parenting. For example, Wang Lingling, a so-called expert from Kunming, affirms wholeheartedly in her pamphlets that parenthood consists in spending a great deal:

Family is no longer just a life unit within the planned economy, a cell of society; it is the production unit [shenchan danwei] within the market economy, it has the function of investing and producing [touzi chanchu]. (...) Parents know, relying on book knowledge in the future will be far from enough. When the child of another family surpasses one’s own child in a special talent, yours could forever be behind. No matter how frugally you have to live, you must ensure investment in a child’s learning ... There will be payoff [huibao] from investing in a child’s future. However small, it is all worth it. (Kuan 2015, 166)

In this quote, parents are not consumers anymore; they are investors. So, they should always consider the long-term perspective. An investment is an asset or item that is purchased with the hope that it will generate income or will appreciate in the future. This so-called expert calls for parents to invest in their child’s future to avoid losing in the long run to fierce social competition. A popular saying appeared in the last decades in China, “losing on the starting line”, designating parents’ fear that their child would not be ready for their studies and the demands of social competition.<sup>88</sup>

I argue that the shift from parents as consumers toward parents as investors led to the emergence of a new market: the parenting market. While the children’s market encompasses goods and services bought for the child, the parenting market designates goods and services for parents. This market relies on parents’ lack of confidence in their ability to raise their children (Kuan 2015). Parents feel they need help to make the right choices and provide the right environment for their children. A growing literature on parenting emerged in libraries and kiosks. Several Chinese sociologists have used popular magazines and books to analyze media discourse on scientific parenting and intensive motherhood. Chen Meng and Chen Qian (2019) analyzed the discourse on “scientific parenting” and the representation of motherhood in the magazine *For the Children* and Tao Yanlan (2015) published several scientific articles on the discourse around parenting practices published by the magazine *Parents Must Read*.<sup>89</sup> In 2012, an

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<sup>88</sup> In Chinese the saying “losing on the starting line” 输在起跑线 [shū zài qǐpǎoxiàn]

<sup>89</sup> In Chinese the magazine *For the Children* is called 为了孩子 [wèile háizi] and the magazine *Parents Must Read* is called 父母必读 [fùmǔ bìdú].



analysis of the reception of parenting magazines listed the top five magazines in terms of readership: *Mommy Baby*, *Baby World*, *Parents Must Read*, *Mama and Baby* and *Parents* (Tao 2015).<sup>90</sup> Recommended by my interviewees, *A good mother is better than a good teacher* is an illustrative example of this literature.

Best-seller *A good mother is better than a good teacher* by Yin Jianli (2016), shows that enacting correct parenting practices is crucial to secure a child's future educational and social success.<sup>91</sup> The second edition, which came out in 2016, is a 371-page long book, divided into five chapters: "How to improve the quality of love," "Make studying an effortless activity," "Moral education for a lifetime," "Cultivate good study habits," and "Useful wisdom to parent." Each chapter comprises six to nine short stories and ends with a Questions & Answers (Q&A) section based on letters and online comments the author reportedly received.

The author stresses the valuable moral lessons she drew from her mothering experience. Her prescriptions on parenting practices suggest the enactment of the concept of concerted cultivation defined by Annette Lareau (2003). Yin's recommendations encourage parents to cultivate the child's personality and talents. Her book illustrates the urban middle-class subjectivity with little consideration for material constraints and socio-economic privilege.



**Figure 7. Book Cover A mother is better than a good teacher, 2nd edition, 2016 [picture taken by the author]**

## **Liberal and permissive parenting style with Chinese characteristics**

Yin Jianli advocates for a liberal and permissive parenting style. Responding to a letter from an anxious mother worried because her four-year-old boy is too distracted and does not want to study after class, the author suggests that the boy is fine and advises the mother not to care so much about extra-curricular courses. Similarly, in a

<sup>90</sup> Respectively in Chinese: 妈咪宝贝 [mā mī bǎobèi], 宝贝世界 [bǎobèi shìjiè], 父母必读 [fùmǔ bìdú], 妈妈宝宝 [māmā bǎobǎo], and 父母 [fùmǔ].

<sup>91</sup> In Chinese 好妈妈胜过好老师 [hǎo māmā shèngguò hǎo lǎoshī]

section about eating habits, the author prescribes that parents should not concern themselves too much with food management. She asserts that parents should surrender responsibilities when it comes to food. In each of these stories, she uses vernacular expressions in Chinese to give more weight to her recommendations and to convince the reader not to worry about these issues.<sup>92</sup> Yet, she also provides specific recommendations regarding not eating snacks between meals.

Yin goes further by explaining that parents should let their children play freely and even let them be disobedient. The section titled “To be ‘obedient’ parents” tells the story of the author going to see the flag ceremony on Tiananmen Square with her daughter, Yuanyuan, two female relatives, and their children.<sup>93</sup> Yuanyuan runs around and even



**Figure 8. Illustration of the story "To be 'obedient' parents" (Yin 2016, 315) [picture taken by the author]**

climbs on a little railing (Fig. 8). One relative asks the girl to get down and walk calmly; otherwise, they will miss the ceremony. Yuanyuan refuses and stays on the railing, even asking her mother to look at her. The author does not care; she says, “do not mind her; if she wants to walk like that, let her walk like that”. The female relative seems impressed by the patience of the author. Meanwhile, another child jumps on the railing and gets scolded by his mother.

The author provides two more anecdotes about obedience and parental commands. In the text accompanying the stories, the author explains that letting children express themselves freely enables them to find their own path. More importantly, she rejects the idea of obedience because it relies on a hierarchical relationship. Her education methods promote the notion of equality, advocating for children and parents to “talk as equals.” The Family Education Promotion Law conveys similar recommendations on parent-child equality.

Yin asserts that “parents are the most important role model.” Thus instead of ordering children to behave, “parents should persuade children to do what adults think” (Yin 2016, 324). At the end of this section, she hints at the idea that parents should be

<sup>92</sup> The author uses the Chinese phrases 没关系 [méiguānxì] and 不管 [bùguǎn].

<sup>93</sup> In Chinese the section is called 做“听话”的父母 [zuò “tīnghuà” de fùmǔ].

obedient to their children and draws a parallel between obedience, citizenship, and political regimes:

“Being obedient” and being indulgent are two completely opposite things. The essence of “obedience” is to understand children and treat children as equals: indulgence is just spoiling. Obedience cultivates citizens with a democratic temperament; indulgence can only create a petty tyrant with a bossy temperament. Asking children to be “obedient” is a very common thing in our lives. Obedience and good behavior have become simple standards for people to assess children. In my family, my husband and I have always been aware of this issue, so we rarely require “obedience” from Yuanyuan. On the contrary, we prefer to be “obedient” parents. (Yin 2016, 324)

The word “obedience” translates to the Chinese phrase *tinghua*, which literally means “listen to the words.”<sup>94</sup> Parents commonly use it to ask a child to obey an instruction. The meaning of the phrase extends to the notion of “obedience.” This section plays on the meaning of this phrase by reversing the role of children and parents. Parents should also “listen to the words” of children in order to be “obedient” parents. According to Yin Jianli, educating children with mutual listening, respect, and a sense of equality gives them a “democratic temperament.” The author articulates that parenting practices influence children’s behaviors as future citizens. In her book, Yin Jianli promotes a liberal, permissive, and laid-back parenting style. Some recommendations do not require much money, but they require a high investment in time and energy from parents.

## Learning while playing with parents

Yin Jianli describes how parents should regularly play with their children to seize any educational opportunity. She advocates that learning should not be difficult or harsh. Parents, who draw the child’s attention to words, writings, and books from an early age, can easily transform character recognition into a game-like activity. She opposes the common Chinese saying that learning is about “eating bitterness”.<sup>95</sup> In the first Q&A section, she answers the question of a parent about education philosophy:

Q: Dear Professor Yin, you always say that passion is the best professor, but I think sometimes survival is the best professor. Only the pressure of survival can force people to make the efforts. It is said that children who endured a lot when they were

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<sup>94</sup> In Chinese 听话 [tīnghuà]

<sup>95</sup> In Chinese 吃苦 [chīkǔ]

young are generally more promising when they grow up. What do you think? Is it appropriate to say that?

A: Wrong. *Growing up, you don't even see sweetness and kindness when you suffer a lot as a child.* Don't make your child suffer, and don't put pressure on your child. Happy children also have a bright future. The material difficulties during childhood are not so much a problem, but emotional distress and the lack of moral support make it easy for a person to live a hard life. Human nature is to avoid hardships and seek pleasure, especially for children. (Yin 2016, 66)

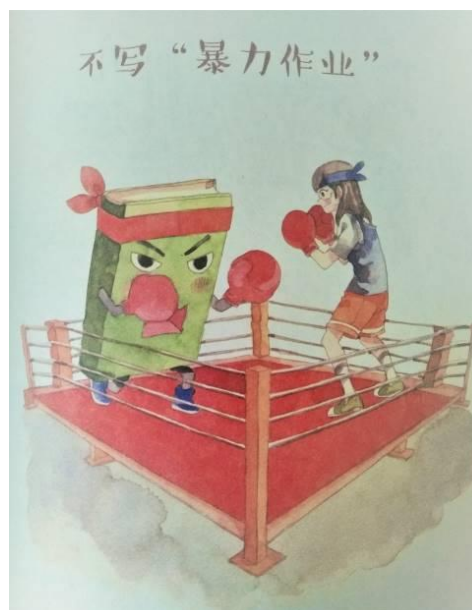
Yin is quick to dismiss material difficulties as unimportant and focuses instead on moral and emotional subjective assessment. Yet, socio-economic constraints are central for rural and poor households and directly impact the moral and emotional support that parents provide to their children. Yin Jianli's depiction of the ideal parenting style epitomizes the urban middle-class subjectivity and lifestyle that requires time, energy, and money from parents. This parenting style also relies on parents' confidence in their ability to accompany their child through school. Yin Jianli rejects both extra-curricular courses and heavy homework burdens. Taking her daughter's class as an example, she asserts that hardworking children with a strict education are good pupils, and yet they usually cannot write good essays because they lack creativity and imagination. Rather than enrolling their child in extra-curricular courses and burdening them with homework, parents should play shopkeeper with their child to teach them basic mathematical knowledge. Good study habits should be inculcated in children early, and parents are responsible for improving their child's learning interests. She asserts that extra-curricular courses can only provide short-term results because they do not imprint good study habits in the child (Yin 2016, 93).

In some aspects, Yin Jianli's discourse concurs with the state discourse regarding the mutuality of parent-child respect. Article 17 of the Family Education Promotion Law, quoted in the previous chapter, prescribes that parents talk to children as equals and "seize any teachable moments" (China Law Translate 2021). Yin Jianli's discourse places the responsibility for the child's success on parent practices, ignoring socio-economic conditions altogether.

Yin condemns heavy homework burdens and extra-curricular courses in line with the most recent state regulations, such as the Double Reduction Policy. The author's rejection of homework burdens led to an altercation with her daughter's schoolteacher. On its cover page, the short story titled "Do not write 'punitive homework'" (Yin 2016, 251) depicts the author in a boxing ring against a book, which symbolizes school education. In the story, the author's daughter, Yuanyuan, must copy a mathematic theorem ten times. When the author verifies that her daughter knows the theorem, she tells Yuanyuan that she does not need to complete the punishment. The little girl is worried about the

teacher's reaction, but the author convinces her that learning and homework should be enjoyable rather than coercive. The author appeases her daughter and promises to see the teacher the next day to defend her child. Yin Jianli asserts that "punitive homework is the enslavement of students by teachers and parents" (Yin 2016, 259). She claims that parents should actively argue with teachers against punitive homework.

Yin Jianli diverges from state prescriptions, however, when she openly criticizes public schools, specifically textbooks and teachers. In a section explicitly titled "Learning 'Chinese' is not learning 'Chinese textbooks'," she complains that textbooks focus too much on teaching *pinyin*, the alphabetical transliteration of Chinese characters. She explains that language is a tool to read and learn, and *pinyin* is a tool to learn the Chinese language, so *pinyin* is merely "a tool of a tool" (Yin 2016, 133). Children should not spend too much time learning it. According to her, *pinyin*-learning reveals how "Mandarin teaching is increasingly oriented by an instrumental mindset" (Yin 2016, 136) rather than by an aesthetic and moral one. She describes teachers as robots who justify *pinyin*-learning with empty arguments, merely mirroring the official curricula. The author argues that children should acquaint themselves with Chinese characters as early as possible. Thus, reading beyond class requirements is the best way to improve one's grade and educational achievement. She expresses her discontent regarding knowledge-



**Figure 9. Illustration of the story "Do not write 'punitive homework'" (Yin 2016, 251) [picture taken by the author]**

oriented education at school, which neglects the “comprehensive development of the child,” referring to children’s moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic education.

Yin Jianli recounts one of her daughter’s homework assignments. The instruction was to write an essay for Mother’s Day about how children clean their mother’s feet to symbolize filial piety. However, she did not want her daughter to clean her feet, so she thought her daughter could write an essay about a family experience. To assuage her daughter’s worries, the author asserted that the assignment’s goal was more about writing a sincere and thoughtful essay than the story itself. She brushed aside the teacher’s instructions. However, at the next teacher-parent meeting, the teacher praised the essay in which the child described his mother’s hard and callous feet in detail. Yin Jianli complains about the restrictiveness of the essay instructions, which bound the imagination and compel children to exaggerate insignificant stories. She quotes two renowned Chinese writers, Qian Liqun and Bi Feiyu, to support her claim that writing is first about courage and imagination rather than technicality. In these stories, Yin Jianli criticizes public school methods as too coercive and narrow-minded.

The author further questions teachers’ status in a story with the unequivocal title: “Can we criticize the teacher” (Yin 2016, 170). She concedes that teachers deserve respect and that parents “should teach children to respect the teacher, but [parents] should not be too rigid and excessive in this matter. Children should be allowed to question teachers’ behaviors, criticize them to some extent, and have their own ideas and behaviors in front of the teachers” (Yin 2016, 179). Yin Jianli advocates for parents to distance themselves from public school teachers and teaching methods. Her harsh criticism of public-school teachers reveals a form of intellectual independence typical of urban-middle class professionals. Yin Jianli quotes Western authors such as Erich Fromm, a German psychoanalyst, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, respectively on children’s selfishness and sex education. She uses Newton as an example of a disorganized genius to condone her daughter’s chaos. Yin Jianli uses Asian and Western intellectuals to support her discourse on parenting practices.

After the editorial success of her book, Yin launched a series of goods and services to promote her parenting ideal. She started an online self-media to disseminate her advice, sell tickets to her conferences and to advertise her training workshops for

parents.<sup>96</sup> Yin Jianli explains that there are three kinds of parents: “The first kind of parent is the parent who doesn’t understand education and doesn’t care about their children; the second kind of parent is the parent who doesn’t understand education, but they care about their children very much; the third, and last kind of parent is the parent who both understands education and cares about their children” (Yu and Zhu 2014). Yin Jianli ignores how parenting can be time-consuming, money-consuming, or energy-consuming and that it is mainly the mother who dedicates time and energy to educate children. She divides parents based on their understanding of parenting and the care they provide to their child. She completely neglects the gender, social and economic conditions which constrain parenting practices.

To conclude, Yin Jianli’s book is a recollection of moral prescriptions illustrating ideal practices of intensive motherhood and concerted cultivation. This ideal mirrors urban middle-class households. Yin is not the only author selling parenting advice online. Influenced by state discourses, private companies are also selling parenting advice and opening online parents’ schools, such as the Parents’ University on the Parents’ Helper mobile application.

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<sup>96</sup> A self-media, in Chinese 自媒体 [zì méitǐ], is a public account on the Chinese platform WeChat on which the administrator of the self-media can post or share articles and events. Anyone can subscribe to receive notifications from any self-media. These self-media are the first source of information for many Chinese.

# Private education companies shifting from pupils to parents

Education companies are expanding their activities from the shadow education market, selling extra-curricular courses to an emerging parenting market (James 2021). Parents remain the target of private companies not only because they pay for their child's extra-curricular courses but also because they spend money to be trained, advised, and coached to be good parents. Parenting services is becoming an independent market with its own supply and demand. The multiplatform service *Parents' Helper* is an example of the products offered on this market.<sup>97</sup> This platform reinforces the state normative discourse on parenting practices. Private companies use the same seemingly 'scientific' discourse as the state to shape parent-subjects into specific practices. For instance, the "Recommendation page" is divided into two main categories: expert live broadcasts and media articles. The live broadcasts are composed of hour-long videos of an expert presenting topics such as children's reading habits, sleeping habits, feeding regime, and the homework autonomy.

The platform reinforces the state's discourse on natality, often depicting a happy family with two or three children. For instance, an image and a slogan head the "Recommendation tab": "Raise together a child who thinks about the future."<sup>98</sup> The image pictures an ideal two-child family with flowers, which contrasts with the long-lasting one-child policy recently rescinded (see Fig. 10). The slogan highlights the collective responsibility of the parents to raise a child who is forward-thinking.

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<sup>97</sup> In Chinese, called 家长帮 [jiāzhǎng bang],

<sup>98</sup> In Chinese: 头条 [tóutiáo].





**Figure 10. Headline of the page Recommendation for Parents on the Parents' Helper mobile application [screenshot taken by the author on June 24<sup>th</sup> 2021]**

The platform *Parents' Helper* also reinforces the state-led gender discourse on parenting. Most experts are women who present themselves as professors at the Parents' University, which is another service on the platform. They often bring to the fore their own experiences as a mother to support their presentation. Few men are invited for live broadcasts; they are mostly male professors from elite universities whose family or parenting status is not even mentioned. Parenting expertise thus takes a gendered dimension. Young women are experts because of their mothering experience in raising a successful child, whereas men are experts because of their long studies in child development, cognitive, or education science.

The online mobile application claims to provide three types of services to help parents: offering personalized advice and parenting courses with so-called experts, building a local parent community and helping parents to choose the best educational resources for their children. One of the first ways to achieve these goals is by helping parents to sort out the plethora of information accessible online. In its presentation video, the TAL Education Group boasts that “every day from massive amounts of information, [they] will extract the most valuable information and stay helpful to both parents and children” (TAL Education Group 2017). By embedding media articles from other platforms, TAL Education Group inserts itself within a broader market of parenting advice and claims its expertise in identifying “the most valuable information” (TAL Education Group 2021).

I argue that the mobile application *Parents' Helper* also offers an alternative framing from state discourse, by presenting parents as entitled consumers who should make their own educational choices. This alternative framing is more visible in the *Parents' University* and the section on school choice. However, private companies, like the state, neglect the socio-economic conditions constraining parents' decisions regarding education.

## **The KSM parenting model promoted by Teacher Shi**

In June 2021, the headline of the Parents' University was a course from a "Famous professor from Hengshui." Hengshui is an elite boarding high school in Hebei province.<sup>99</sup> This high school is famous in China for its exceptional scores in university entrance exam competitions and the many students who enroll in the top universities in Beijing. Each year the top students from Hengshui high school are contacted by media and education companies to share their experiences and explain their recipe for success (Yiming Li 2021c). On the Parents' Helper mobile app, the "famous professor from Hengshui High School" is a young man called Shi Guo. According to the short presentation following his picture, he has been the Youth Committee of China Psychological Association director and a juvenile psychology counselor for 14 years (see Figure 11). According to this presentation, he is "good at summarizing learning methods, improving learning efficiency, and stimulating test potential and stress adjustment". In his online course, Shi Guo will present the KSM method, which "brought a new miracle with 216 students from Hengshui admitted to Beijing University and Tsinghua University in 2018".<sup>100</sup> The course presentation deconstructs some common beliefs about school success in China, such as a strict schedule, heavy academic tasks, and highly performing classmates and teachers. The KSM method relies on three keywords: Knowledge, Skills, and Mental acuity. According to this so-called "scientific learning method," pupils will succeed at school if they consolidate their basic knowledge, master study skills, and train their minds to handle high pressure. Then, the presentation outlines the steps of the course, highlights the problem it aims to solve and the targeted students and families, and finally displays testimonies of satisfied clients. Excerpts of online coaching conversations between Shi Guo and parents or students are exhibited as proof of the personalized attention that each client will receive. These excerpts are gathered under the title: "He is a godlike presence in the hearts of children" (see Figure 12).

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<sup>99</sup> Hebei province is located in Northeastern China, neighboring Beijing. It is well-known for its elite schools enabling children from outside the capital region to get admitted to the best universities of the capital. The geographic proximity enables students to become acquainted with the top universities during open house days.

<sup>100</sup> Beijing University and Tsinghua University are two elite universities.



**Figure 11. Short presentation of Shi Guo who teaches an online course on the Parents' Helper mobile app [screenshot taken by the author on June 28<sup>th</sup> 2021]**



**Figure 12. Testimonies of clients who registered for Shi Guo's online course on the Parents' Helper mobile application [screenshot taken by the author on June 28<sup>th</sup> 2021]**

One testimony mentions how a young female teenager, entangled in a romantic mess, used this method and successfully enrolled at the High School affiliated with Beijing Normal University. In China, parents and teachers discourage intimate relationships among teenagers during high school so that students focus on their studies, particularly before entrance examinations. Testimonies from satisfied parent-clients highlight the efficiency of the KSM method in producing scholastic achievements. The online course boasts more than a million students and more than ten thousand one-on-one coaching consultations. This course is both very personalized and has a broad reach. The KSM learning method advertises a one-fits-all solution that would work with any child in any circumstances. Testimonies, course content, and live broadcasts never mention the clients' social, material, and living conditions. The Parents' Helper mobile application promotes a universal, scientific, and normative approach to parenting, oblivious of social class and the rural-urban divide. This ambiguous discourse portrays parents as inept educators who need training, simple explanations, and individual

coaching but are also all-powerful in determining their child's school success and professional future. Some of these features are similar to Yin Jianli's discourse and the state-promoted normative framework on parenting. The Parents' Helper creates online parents' communities to disseminate this discourse.

## Building a parents community to promote parental influence over school admission

To promote community building on the mobile application, an illustration depicts a community where parents are gathered around a child in a school uniform, the child hold a sign saying: "Join us quickly!" (Figure 13). On the top of the image the text says "Join a local parents' group and chat together with parents same-age children." The platform stresses that the WeChat groups are targeted, by the localization and children's age. These tools enable parents to build a sense of community, talk to like-minded and geographically-close parents who encounter similar challenges.



**Figure 13. Page to join a WeChat group on the Parents's Helper Application**  
*[screenshot taken by the author on June 24<sup>th</sup> 2021]*

According to a promotional video, Parents' Helper aims to build a "large domestic vertical community for parents" (TAL Education Group 2021).<sup>101</sup> The adjective vertical means content-driven as opposed to comprehensive online communities. A vertical community refers to online communities produced by private operators focused on

<sup>101</sup> In Chinese 国内大型家长垂直社区 [guónèi dàxíng jiāzhǎng chuízhí shèqū]

specific content, such as sports communities on *Hupu* and entertainment communities on *Zuiyou* (Finder 2021).<sup>102</sup> Parents' Helper creates online communities of parents focused on educational and school content. The platform relies on parents' sense of solidarity and competition and offers a space for parents to ask questions and share their stories.

The platform displays successful family stories in order to attract parents' attention. A page titled *Nanjing Parents' Must-Read* highlights some stories:

- Sharing practical experience – some thoughts on getting the Gulou experience
- Sharing practical experience – repaying hope with hard work, and achieving dreams with persistence — remembering 2019 elementary school entrance
- Sharing practical experience sharing – no matter how late it is, a 3-month course on elementary school entrance is useful

This list targets Nanjing parents because I posed as a Nanjing resident when I logged in to the mobile app. Gulou refers to one of the oldest districts in the city located, around the eponym Drum Tower.<sup>103</sup> The district hosts a cluster of elite schools and the three main universities: Nanjing University, Nanjing Normal University, and Houhai University. In this story, a mother shares her blissful experience living in the Gulou district with access to the best educational resources in the city. The second story recounts two local policy shifts in 2019: implementing a strict no-homework regulation in primary schools and introducing a lottery system to allocate elementary school spots complementary to the standard school district. The former aims to ease the burden on school children and decrease educational pressure. The latter addresses issues of unequal access to educational resources. In chapter six, I delve into more details on school admission and parental strategies. Finally, the last story promotes summer courses before elementary school entrance, some of which are offered by the Parents' Helper mobile application, its parent-company or the sister brand, Xue'ersi.

These stories recount parents' struggles to get their child admitted to the chosen school. Each description is allegedly written by mothers who give advice based on their personal experiences.<sup>104</sup> The author's name and email address appear at the bottom so readers can contact her for more details. However, there are very few details about the

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<sup>102</sup> In Chinese respectively 虎扑 et 最右

<sup>103</sup> In Chinese 鼓楼

<sup>104</sup> The signature usually includes the last name and motherhood status, for instance, Mother Zhang.

family living conditions, the prices of tuition fees or preparatory courses, or household members. These stories are both emotional and impersonal. They account for the struggles, the joys, and the challenges encountered by the mother and her child during the school admission process. These experiences are highly relatable because the authors provide minimal context. Some stories promote courses offered by the platform Parents' Helper by highlighting how the course content and the learning process were crucial to understanding school admission. These stories serve multiple purposes: to illustrate the challenges encountered during the school admission process, create a sense of shared fate and solidarity, and promote commercialized content offered by the platform.

I argue that private education companies promote parents' capacity to choose the right school for their child despite the nearest-school policy, which assigns a specific school according to the household's address.<sup>105</sup> The page on school admission is organized into four tabs: "school admission policies", "school presentations", "parents' must-read", and "resources."<sup>106</sup> All the information is geographically specific, based on the location specified by the user when opening the mobile app. The platform produces "white books" on specific themes around public primary school admission policies such as household registration, parents' interviews, admission guidelines, school district registration, and computer-assisted lottery allocation. These white books summarize Nanjing's local education policies to help parents understand the challenge they might face when enrolling their children in schools. The general rule to register children in a public school is the nearest-school enrollment policy. However, elite schools keep some spots for lottery students. Since 2019, the local education bureau has organized a computer-assisted lottery for all public and private schools in June. Before 2019, the lottery was organized for each school independently. The centralized lottery hinders parents' choice by restricting the enrolment in multiple schools' lottery. The Parents' Helper platform also provides short presentations of public and private schools to help parents decide which school they target. In general, these white books entertain the idea that parents have the power to select and secure the most suitable education resources for their child. By analyzing government policies on school admission and the

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<sup>105</sup> In Chinese 就近入学 [jiùjìn rùxué]

<sup>106</sup> In Chinese, these tabs are respectively titled : 升学政策 [shēngxué zhèngcè]、学校介绍 [xuéxiào jièshào]、家长必备 [jiāzhǎng bìbèi]、资料干货 [zīliào gānhuò]

distribution of education resources, the platform also plays the role of intermediary between the state and the parents. These white books simplify policies and regulations to make them accessible to parents. Parents are considered all-powerful in choosing their child's school and other educational resources but also quite incompetent in understanding state policies and local regulations.

In sum, the mobile application Parents' Helper, developed by TAL Education Group, is organized around two strategies: building a parenting normative framework and a parenting community to take advantage of parents' solidarity and anxiety. These strategies aim to sell commercialized content dispersed within the mobile application. The tab "School admission" illustrates how private education companies promote parents' choice in school admission despite state regulations. However, another type of company seized the opportunity of parents' school choice as a marketing strategy: the real-estate agencies.

# Parental school choice: a marketing strategy for realtors

During an interview, a mother told me that the easiest way to determine the best school in a city is to look at real-estate prices. Where apartments are expensive, there is a good school in the neighborhood. Real-estate agencies in urban areas are acutely aware that school rankings directly influence the housing market (Li 2012b). Consequently, they have developed a whole marketing strategy to become indispensable actors in parents' education strategy. I argue that real-estate agencies play the role of brokers as they proceed to explain education policies to parents in plain language.

The first step of this marketing strategy is disseminating education policies produced by the central and local governments. Real-estate agencies produce booklets and websites to explain the school admissions regulations. During fieldwork, I collected such a booklet from the real-estate agency *House365.com*.<sup>107</sup> This half-letter-sized booklet is 112-pages long and titled: *2018 Nanjing School District Housing Manual* (see Fig. 14).



**Figure 14. Cover page of the 2018 Nanjing School District Housing Manual published by House 365.com [Source: picture taken by the author]**

<sup>107</sup> In Chinese 365 淘房 [táo fáng].



The term “school district housing” is a catchphrase first used by parents and real-estate agencies.<sup>108</sup> Parents use the term to label apartments that give access to elite schools. Real-estate agencies sometimes designate a portion of the real estate market and sometimes qualify a type of apartment conveniently located within the catchment area of a good kindergarten, primary school, and high school. It can be translated into “education-apartment” when it designates an apartment (Wu, Zhang, and Waley 2016). Education-apartments can be located in a brand-new residential development or in an old neighbourhood. Some scholars use this emic term with an insider perspective to understand the parents’ residential and school strategies as a social phenomenon. The booklet gives an insightful presentation of local school admission policies highlighting the important role of the household registration as a familial resource.

## **Realtors as local policy mediators**

Realtors are committed to explaining local school admission policy to parents and playing the role of mediators between local authorities and parents. The first thirty pages of the booklet present extensive explanations of local school admissions policies. The first chapter, “The latest interpretation of popular terms about school district housing,” provides short summaries of recent education policies regarding school management or school admission. These policies aim to reduce education competition: first, the “grouping of famous schools” with neighboring schools in order “to reduce the gap between schools in the district by forming ‘education groups and opening branch schools of prestigious schools’”(365taofang 2018, 6); second, the “multi-zoning policy” that is “the allocation of admission spots at hot schools [that is highly demanded schools] by random assignment” (365taofang 2018); third, the “dynamic adjustment of schools districts” which implies the re-drawing of school districts every five years according to the demographic evolution of school-age children. Finally, “balanced class placement” intervenes directly in forming classes within the school. This policy bans the forming of experimental classes or key classes for performing students; instead, it fosters a constant redistribution of pupils according to their academic performance. The booklet produced by the 365taofang real-estate agency describes the consequences of these local policies on pupils, schools, and curricula. At the end of the first chapter, a

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<sup>108</sup> In Chinese 学区房 [xuéquā fáng].

long table lists all the school groups formed in Nanjing. The second chapter of the booklet, “Nanjing school district tips,” is a ten-page lengthy Q&A on school admission in Nanjing. The third chapter tackles the specific issue of private school admission. The fourth chapter is a two-page long ranking of Nanjing primary and high schools. Finally, the remaining hundred pages of the booklet describe Nanjing school’s catchment areas district by district.

The House365 real-estate agency thoroughly translates policies into plain language and turns them into familial strategies. However, this work is not genuinely disinterested; all the information guides parents toward purchasing an education-apartment. Parents are invited to abide by the school districting zones and finally buy an apartment within a famous school catchment area. The chapter on private school admission highlights the challenges encountered when choosing this path. Indeed, private schools enroll pupils across the city and reduce the attractiveness of education-apartments. Even though real estate agencies distribute the booklet for free, impartial information is rarely free.

## **Household registration: increasing realtors’ influence over parental choice**

The House365 booklet helps parents navigate the education system and promote the idea of parents’ power in determining their child’s school success, as in a parentocratic system. Since 1986 and the passage of the Mandatory Education Law, the complex school enrollment process has results from successive local and central policies (M.C. Tsang 2003). Local education bureaus control school choice by defining school enrollment zones. These zones supposedly ensure equal access to education for every child regardless of family background (Cheng 2002). However, for decades parents could circumvent this policy if their child had specific talents or if parents paid additional fees.<sup>109</sup> In January 2014, Chinese authorities promulgated stricter regulations for district-based school enrolment in primary and junior high schools.<sup>110</sup> In 2017, the stricter rule was implemented in nineteen major cities, including Nanjing. However, private schools are allowed to enroll students outside their catchment zone.

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<sup>109</sup> In Chinese, children with specific talents are called 特长生 [tècháng shēng].

<sup>110</sup> In Chinese, the district-based school enrolment 划片就近入学 [huà piàn jiùjìn rùxué].

According to the booklet distributed by the real-estate agency 365House, there are three conditions for a child to enroll in the public school corresponding to the child's residential address (see Fig. 15). First, the family household must be registered in the given school district, second, the parents should own an apartment in the given school district, and finally, the name of both parents should appear in both the household registration booklet and the apartment's property right certificate. The following drawings in the booklet illustrate the three conditions: the family together, the residential building and the last drawing symbolizes the household registration booklet, *huji*.



**Figure 15. Illustration of the three conditions to enroll a child in a public school (365taofang 2018) [Source: picture taken by the author]**

The booklet really takes the parents by the hand to guide them through the school admission process with a short description of the process following the drawings:

“On the day of registration, the school-age children’s legal guardians need to accompany the child and bring the originals and copies of the following documents: 1. household registration with the whole family on it; 2. property right certificate (referring to the house ownership certificate, the holder of which is the legal guardian of the school-age children) and land certificate; 3. vaccination certificate for children in Jiangsu Province; 4. birth certificate.”

This admission process aims to distribute education resources fairly among local residents who live legally around the school. It precludes non-local residents and tenants from enrolling their children. The household registration system, *hukou*, gives access to public services in the residential area where the household is registered. Any family or residential changes must be recorded. However, it is not easy to change the address on the *huji*.<sup>111</sup> The household must have an ownership certificate and apply to the local civil affairs bureau to get registered at their new address. This process is not automatic because some municipalities restrict access to their *hukou*. Registering new

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<sup>111</sup> In Chinese *hukou* is 户口 and *huji* is 户籍

households in some districts of Beijing or Shanghai is nearly impossible. These districts' public health facilities and schools are often better equipped and staffed. A point system regulates household registration and rewards highly educated, wealthy, and healthy households. The hukou is not “just” a question of housing anymore, but rather a question of selective migration. Municipalities choose which population they want to see living in their territory. This discrimination reflects the unequal provision of public services across the Chinese territory. In a nutshell, the household registration system distributes access to public services according to the family's social, economic, and cultural capital, thus reproducing social inequalities (Froissart 2008; Young 2013).

The *hukou* system divides the Chinese population into urban and rural households. Scholars have showed how this system produces inequalities by granting special rights to different categories of citizens (Froissart 2008; Young 2013). The academic literature studying the impact of the *hukou* on the education system mainly focuses on how it excludes children from rural-to-urban migrant workers from enrolling in urban public schools (Froissart 2003a; Salgues 2012; Yuanyuan Chen and Feng 2013; Zhou 2014a). However, I argue that the discriminatory power of the *hukou* system goes beyond the rural/urban divide and discriminates among the urban middle-class. The *hukou* system produces subdivisions within the urban population. Chapter six shows how the *hujū* is an obstacle for urban-to-urban migrant households and a resource for parents from the upper-middle-class.

Returning to the role of real-estate agencies, they pose as intermediary between public authorities and parents. The “Frequently Asked Questions” section of the booklet published by House365, deals with practical issues encountered by urban Chinese households. It translates into plain language official regulations governing, for instance, the school admission process, rules and procedures for household registration after changing address, or buying a new apartment, or criteria and implementation of the school districting zone by the local education bureau. Four pages are dedicated to the household registration issues when enrolling one's child in a public school in Nanjing. This section focuses on answering questions asked by putative urban middle-class parents with the means to shape their *hukou*. Many questions revolve around how to deal with a residential move, for instance, “After moving into a new apartment, what should I do if the previous homeowner has not moved out of its household registration?” The booklet suggests obtaining from the local authorities the removal of the household

registration within 15 days after the relocation. The booklet also explains that Nanjing uncoupled the household registration from the housing area to implement a point system. It gives some tips on how to change one's household registration.

## **A tripartite ecosystem: local authorities, private companies, families**

The booklet reveals an ecosystem involving local authorities, families, and private actors such as the real-estate agency publishing booklets and selling apartments. Scholars have observed that upper-middle-class families buy rundown apartments in the city center in order to obtain an ownership certificate and change their household registration to enroll in an elite school. Some families do not live in the apartment downtown but in more spacious houses on the outskirts. Some families let the grandparents live with their children downtown during weekdays and the family gathers together in a spacious house during the weekends. To avoid these practices, which increase real estate prices, families must prove that they own and live together in the apartment recorded on their household registration. Schools can organize home visits to verify that the family life corresponds to the official documents. The real-estate booklet helps parents to prepare for this visit:

Q/ How does the school verify whether the applicant is "actually living" or not? How should I respond?

A/ Every year, before enrollment begins, teachers will conduct home visits to verify whether or not you actually live in the school. You need to prepare documents such as your family registration, real estate certificate, and your child's birth certificate. The teacher will ask your child if he/she actually lives there and will also ask the neighbors to confirm if he/she actually lives there.

[...]

Q/What happens if I don't live at home and I'm found out during the home visit?

A/ Each school has different rules and regulations, which may result in the application not being approved or in the worst case, being assigned to another school. We recommend that you actually live there!

The school can go so far as to make inquiries in the neighborhood, confirming that the family is living in the apartment. The booklet exhorts parents to respect local regulations and live in the registered apartment. This advice is not genuine; the realtor advances its own interest inciting parents to buy and move into a new apartment to enroll in each school, primary, junior high, and senior high. The booklet sheds light on

family planning policies' impact on education access. It strongly reiterates that only children "in line with the national family planning policies" are allowed to enroll in public schools.

Generally, the booklet published by House365 exhorts parents to abide by the rules, which favors middle-class households. However, compared to for-profit education companies and successful authors such as Yin Jianli, real estate companies consider different socio-economic situations. One section deals directly with the status of non-local residents and migrant parents' temporary resident permits.<sup>112</sup> The booklet mentions wealthy households with multiple houses and struggling families whose house was demolished by the state. For the latter, the booklet asserts that if the family had not been relocated, the "relevant department" should produce a document to let the child enroll in the original school district. Real-estate companies pose as intermediaries between parents and public authorities, explaining procedures and criteria. However, they do not take this role altruistically; they are also furthering their own interests.

## **Realtors' school admission strategies: buying education-apartments**

As shown in earlier research, real-estate agencies are not genuinely interested in sharing knowledge (Laurent 2015). In 2015, the real-estate agency, *House365*, published a compelling infographic on its website (**Fig. 16**). The figure below represents the school admission process with two main options: public (yellow school on the left side) and private schools (green school on the right side). Three streams are possible to enroll in a public school: nearest-school enrollment, computerized lottery, or additional tuition. The figure awards medals to each stream, respectively: "the most reasonable," "believe in your luck," and "use your connections." Each medal represents the real estate agency's assessment of the strategy's potential for success. Short explanations under the medal mention that the lottery implies letting chance decide on one's child's schooling and therefore remaining passive and simply "believing in your luck"; while paying additional tuition fees implies relying on personal relations to circumvent the school district. The latter option necessitates "calling on your relations" and investing sufficient economic

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<sup>112</sup> In Chinese 外地人 [wàidì rén]

capital to pay the additional costs the school or director requires. Finally, regarding the first strategy, respecting the school district, the real estate agency awards it a very positive medal: the "most reasonable" option. The figure encourages parents to coordinate their residential and educational strategies, buy an apartment for each school level and abide by the school district. As for private schools, on the right side of the infographic, the real-estate company claims that recruitment depends 60% on the child's skills and 40% on the computerized lottery luck.

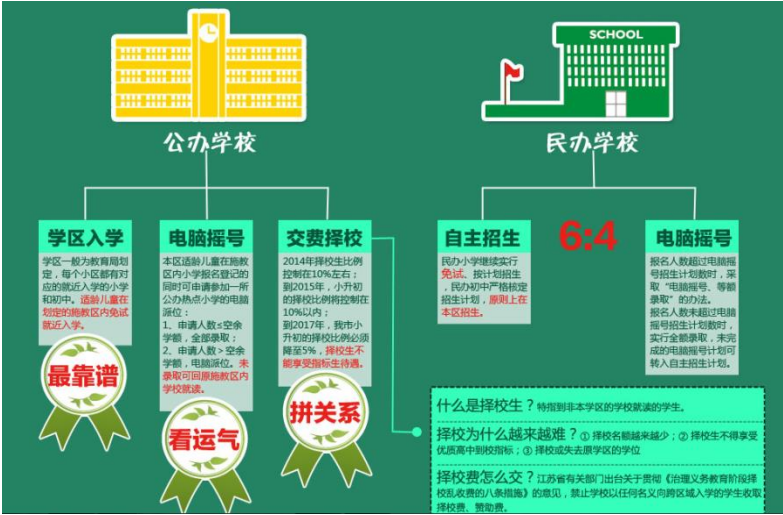


Figure 16. School admission according to House365 [Source: [http://nj.sell.house365.com/s\\_71301840.html](http://nj.sell.house365.com/s_71301840.html). Accessed on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2015]

House365 offers a simple explanation for the school admission process inciting parents to buy an apartment. The 2018-booklet details the computerized lottery process also called the computer allocation system. Some private and public schools earmark spots to be allocated through computer assignments. Parents can only apply to one school through the lottery. In June, the municipal education bureau randomly allocates pupils to the designated schools. Households must be registered, live, and own their place in the municipality. The booklet underlines the serendipitous aspect of the lottery, considering it an unreliable strategy for reasonable parents.

Finally, the booklet provides some tips concerning the education-apartment market. First, parents should distinguish an education-apartment close to an already-existing school from an education-apartment close to a project-school. In the latter situation, parents must verify the developer’s trustworthiness and financial stability. Second, the booklet warns about the false promise of some so-called education-apartments:

An [apartment] close to a school is not necessarily an education-apartment. Many home buyers have a misconception about education-apartments. They think that as long as there is a school around the house, it means it is an education-apartment, [they think that] as long as you buy a house near a school you can go to that school. In fact, the education bureau draws the school district according to the number of school-age students in the area that year. The education bureau aims to allocate educational resources reasonably. Sometimes the school just across the road may not be the one associated with the apartment.

The booklet warns parents that the term “education-apartment” encompasses a wide variety of properties, so they should be careful when investing in this type of asset. In sum, realtors, as intermediaries between the state regulations and families, present simplified explanations of local regulations, popularize the complex distribution of education resources and invite parents to comply with local regulations. They also advance their own interests inciting parents to coordinate their educational and residential strategies.



# Conclusion

While state regulations hit the tutoring market hard in the summer of 2021, I argue that an emerging parenting market is flourishing. First, this chapter shows how successful authors produce a normative parenting framework promoting intensive motherhood as a form of concerted cultivation with Chinese characteristics. Yin Jianli is quick to criticize public school education methods, highlighting parents' role in educating their children through games and activities as opposed to dull memorizing exercises and repetitive homework given by teachers. Second, for-profit education corporations, which expanded from the early 2000s to the 2010s by selling tutoring and extra-curricular courses, have reinvented themselves as parents' counselors. The Parents' Helper mobile application developed by TAL Education Group provides a plethora of information about formal and informal education and parenting, from local to national information. It relies on a personalized interface sorting out information for the user depending on its location and a child's age and promotes the consumption of parenting advice via the platform. Third, real-estate agencies have become intermediaries between the state and households by explaining the complex process of school admission and selling apartments that enable parents to access their dream school.

Private companies take advantage of the academic competition to sell ready-to-use parenting and education solutions to assuage parents' anxiety. The normative discourse on parenting diffused by private companies reinforces the state discourse, despite some divergence. Public and private actors emphasize parental responsibility for their child's education while claiming parents' innate incompetency in raising their child. The state and private companies offers a universal parenting ideal which obliterates gender, social, economic, and cultural conditions shaping family life. I highlighted some divergences as parenting is depicted by public actors as a public matter, legible and measurable based on clear criteria and by private sector actors as a commodified service, sellable, and competitive. Urban middle-class parents, who are the targets of the consumerist motherhood discourse and the government's nationalist discourse, are caught at the heart of these contradictions which creates in turn some space for personal interpretation and actions.

# Chapter 5. The Child-Centered Household: a Small Enterprise

“Being a mother in China is the hardest job,” declares Amy Wang, a trained engineer who became a professional mother.<sup>113</sup> As she says this, she laughs nervously as if to acknowledge the provocative nature of her remark. During our discussion, she used the word *zhiye*<sup>114</sup> to talk about motherhood, although this term generally refers to a job, a profession, and paid work. She emphasizes the challenges in this “job.” The adjective *xinku*, or “grave difficulty,” is usually employed for situations involving blood, sweat, and tears.<sup>115</sup> Amy Wang stresses that being a mother in China has become an exhausting laborious, demanding, and gruelling occupation, especially as women participate fully in the labour market. In response to the double imperative of intensive motherhood and labour force participation, Amy Wang devised an alternative solution. She transformed her mothering experience into professional expertise and became, what I call, a professional mother. Specifically, Amy earns her living by selling mothering advice. This chapter explains the emergence of this social phenomenon – professional mothers – and the impact of school competition on family structure and relationships.

Nearly three decades ago, Sharon Hays (1996) highlighted the “cultural contradictions” faced by American mothers. In a society increasingly oriented towards profit and the profitability of time and energy, women are expected to participate in the labour market and contribute to the family budget while at the same time devoting unlimited time and energy to the education of their children. I argue that, in China today, similar contradictions are at play. Parents are expected to work full-time jobs to provide for the family while educating two or three high-achieving children. More specifically, Chinese mothers are expected to gently and patiently raise high-achieving children who symbolize the family’s and the nation’s success while contributing to the monthly household income. Chinese fathers are expected to educate their children and enact male model of discipline, authority, and virility while working long hours to

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<sup>113</sup> Amy Wang is one of the few informants who explicitly asked not to be anonymized for my research.

<sup>114</sup> In Chinese 职业 [zhíyè]

<sup>115</sup> In Chinese, the word used by Amy Wang is 辛苦 [xīnkǔ]

demonstrate that they provide for their families. This chapter shows how families negotiate these norms in their daily life.

Since the early 1980s, the drastic reduction in urban family size has led to a concentration of family resources on the single child. In China, this situation is called the “4+2+1” model: four grandparents and two parents are mobilized to provide for the needs of one child who, in return, must meet the expectations of six adults. The one-child policy increased pressure on educational success for parents and children. In the mid-2010s, the policy shift to more children led to neither a rise in birth rate nor a decrease in family education pressure. Families remain small because the pressure on mothers to participate in the labor market and to educate successful children remains high.

Given the intense competition to achieve academic excellence, I show that the whole family mobilizes to support and raise high-achieving children. Yet, I argue that, in practice, mothers are portrayed as the only proper caregiver at the expense of other potential caregivers. These practices reinforce the broader and state-enforced discourse about the unique role of women in the structure of the modern Chinese family. In this chapter, I show how the familial ambitious educational goal is divided into smaller tasks distributed among household members under the mother’s supervision. To highlight the task division, I examine each household member’s role.

First, I show that grandparents have become indispensable in familial childcare arrangements. Whereas media and public authorities blame intergenerational childcare for neglecting children’s education leading to delinquency and school dropouts, grandparents nonetheless remain indispensable to the management of the daily logistics intrinsic to intensive parenthood. When both parents work full-time, they mobilize the grandparents to attend to the child’s daily needs (meals, clothing, and baths) and transport them to different activities.

Second, parenting practices remains highly gendered and parents do not play the same role in their child’s education. In chapter 3, I described parents’ traditional gender roles with sayings such as “strict father, kind mother” and “men outside, women inside”. Even though patriarchal discourses were officially questioned to a certain extent during the Maoist Era, patriarchal norms remained pervasive in families during and after the Maoist era. Fathers are still assigned to work long hours outside to provide the financial means for the family, and, specifically, they have to support and finance the educational

strategies devised by the mothers. However, an emerging discourse on “new fatherhood” promotes a more active role in children’s education for fathers. Some couples directly question gender norms, yet social institutions, such as schools, silence their voice.

Finally, mothers from the urban middle-class become family managers, organizing the household’s life like a small company, distributing tasks, and managing good relations among the household members. Mother managers are responsible for their child’s success; they specially focus on education. Yang Ke and Jin Yihe, researchers at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), coined the term “agent of education” (Jin and Yang 2015) to describe how Chinese mothers care for their children as future educational stars.<sup>116</sup> They derive a form of celebrity from their children’s academic performance by winning competitions such as the Mathematics Olympiad or writing contests. As agents of education, Chinese mothers negotiate the best deals, i.e., they meet with schools and extracurricular institutions, compare prices, are on the lookout for the best opportunities, supervise homework, track progress, and publicize their child’s performance to teachers and friends, on social networks, or in parent meetings. Some mothers go further by transforming their personal experience into professional expertise. I conceptualize the professional mother as the figure of the mother who starts a business by selling mothering advice or other services.

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<sup>116</sup> In Chinese they use the words 经纪人 [jīngjì rén]. It borrows the Chinese term that refers to artistic agents.

# **The grandparent: an indispensable yet suspect caregiver of China's future citizens**

As a consequence of financial constraints and the scarcity of public day-care, grandparents are indispensable actors in the childcare arrangements of most families. However, public discourse suggests that grandparents negatively influence the educational achievements of children. Article 17 of the Family Education Promotion Law, for example, stipulates that “parents should raise their children themselves,” implying that they should not outsource education to grandparents or nannies. Most parents encountered during my fieldwork were convinced that grandparent care would negatively impact their child’s education. Yet, they nonetheless felt that they had no choice but to mobilize older family members as part of the family system of childcare. Parents seek to mitigate the perceived negative impact of intergenerational education by restricting the involvement of grandparents to logistics and simple daily care tasks.

Urban middle-class households enact a new form of intergenerational solidarity, coined by anthropologist Yan Yunxiang as “descending familism,” in which grandparents help the younger generation to raise their children (Yan 2021). Descending familism reverses the traditional Confucian principle of filial piety, in which adult parents care for their elderly parents. This reversal goes as far as making grandparents subservient to their children. Parents restrict the grandparent to the most basic tasks, such as transport and daily need, while their educational experience is despised (Chen, Liu, and Mair 2011). Some grandparents complain about being exploited by their adult children (Goh and Wang 2019).

In urban areas, intergenerational childcare arrangements enact a shift in the practice of filial piety. Grandparents are considered a necessary evil rather than respected as experienced caregivers. I discuss how intergenerational care is framed as a harmful parenting practice. Thus, parents negotiate caregiving norms by minimizing the role of grandparents. Finally, some households resist the negative stigma around grandparents care and take full advantage of grandparents as caregivers.

## Grandparents jeopardizing children's future

The story of Wu, the father of a five-year-old girl, exemplifies the paradox experienced by Chinese households. On the one hand, Wu and his wife work full-time and cannot care for their child on a daily basis; thus, they mobilize the grandparents to help them. On the other hand, they want to limit the grandparents' influence on their child's education. When we discussed his daughter's extracurricular English course, Wu admitted that he does not know whether the teachers are native English speakers because he has never picked up his daughter. With regard to extracurricular activities, Wu's mother-in-law manages all the transportation. His daughter finishes school at 3.30 pm. Then, the school teacher brings all the children to a classroom to do their homework until 4.30 pm.<sup>117</sup> Wu finishes work at 5 pm, but he is back home at 6 pm. Given time constraints, Wu's parents-in-law pick up the girl from school, feed her and then drop her off at her extracurricular course at 6 pm and finally bring her back home before returning to their own home in Jiangning, a district on the outskirts of Nanjing. Wu admits that this schedule is very demanding for his parents-in-law. The three generations lived in the same apartment when the little girl was in kindergarten. However, Wu and his wife decided that it was not good for their daughter:

The elderly, personally, I don't think that the elderly can raise children. Um, I'm not talking about spoiling [but about education]. Maybe their conception [of education] is different. Their thoughts are too backward. They are too slow to accept new things and do not really understand [new things]. What they pass on to our child is different from what we pass on (...), for example, we are more open to the world. [The elderly] might not be [as open to the world]. They keep on their old conceptions. However, you know China is developing so fast, this development is not kind of fast, it is really fast. (...) [the society] has changed so much, eh, I don't think the elderly can raise [a child], their thoughts can't keep up. (...) But there is a reality, no way, we don't have time, we really don't have time [to care for our child daily]. Maybe I want to find a nanny, but maybe it is not possible to find this kind of nanny, it's very comprehensive, a nanny that can teach him, can take care of him, it's really hard [to find], right, it's hard.

Wu is adamant that the grandparents are too old to care for his daughter. Thus, he is looking for a nanny. He stresses that grandparents cannot understand the current Chinese society. Wu's story illustrates the pressure experienced by urban middle-class households to provide an excellent education to their children while balancing finance and time investments. The most financially and time-efficient solution would be to rely

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<sup>117</sup> In Chinese a 托管班 [tuōguǎn bān]

on family ties to educate the children, yet the intergenerational childcare arrangements are stigmatised so parents seek to reduce grandparent involvement to logistical task and minimize their involvement in the education *per se*. Childcare arrangements are divided into multiple mini-task assigned to different members of the family.

Amy Wang, cited in the introduction, explains in more detail the “grandparent threat” to her daughter’s education. She is a trained engineer who lived in France for five years with her husband and their young daughter. When the family went to Europe for her husband’s work, Amy resigned from her job and dedicated her time to raising her daughter. I met her when the family had settled back in Nanjing. Amy wanted to stay in touch with French culture and thus, attended some events at the *Alliance Française*, where I organized a short presentation of my research. Amy became a crucial informant for my research. Amy describes the destructive influence of her mother on her daughter:

**Manon:** How do grandparents influence the child’s education?

**Wang:** Um, let’s say that a child’s mobile phone drops on the ground. Mom says ‘pick it up quickly’, then grandma said, it’s okay, ‘I’ll help her pick it up (laugh)

**Manon:** They help too much.

**Wang:** Yes, and [when] my daughter comes back home [from school], first she wants to do her homework. Grandma says that it doesn’t matter. ‘We will play for a while’. Their conception of education is different, so it is not possible.

**Manon:** So you think it is not good, that is, it can affect your child’s education?

**Wang:** It will affect it, but it has also affected me, that is (...) when I was in France, I had to cook myself, until then, (...) until 36 years old I had never cooked myself, I just never needed to cook, it was always my mum who cooked. (Laugh) (...) So when I was a kid, I just studied, and I didn’t do housework, so I didn’t do anything, eh, I didn’t do housework, and then I only started to cook rice by myself this year, and then ... um, yes, that’s not good. My child should start cooking at the age of 10 (laugh)

According to Amy, intergenerational care threatens her daughter’s development, particularly her capacity to be independent. She describes how her mother fostered terrible habits, such as her cooking inexperience. Amy fears the potential negative influence that her mother could have on her daughter. She disapproves that the elderly try to attend to the child’s every need. She stresses that her mother’s generation tends not to let children do anything alone, hindering their initiatives. Grandparents are deemed too permissive, indulgent, and obliging towards their grandchildren. This belief led Amy and her husband to decide to live apart from her parents, when they returned from Europe.

According to my interviewees, the negative influence of grandparents is due to their backwardness and lack of understanding of education in contemporary China.

Zhang Bao, criticizes her mother, a retired primary school teacher, for many of the same reasons expressed by Amy.

**Zhang Bao:** Actually... that is, my mom used to be an elementary school teacher, but she cannot raise a child now.

**Manon:** Why?

**Zhang Bao:** Because the differences are too great. My mother was a primary school teacher for a few years when she was young, (...), but, now, she cannot use her ideas and her conception of education from that time to understand the education of children nowadays. Because China has changed so much over the years, that is, people's ideas have changed and these changes are too great, (...) I talked to her, and I hope she can respect our education methods, that is, I talked to her about several things, such as when she is teaching our child, she should use our method, she agreed, that's it, she cooperates with me, although sometimes she can't, but she will try to cooperate with me. There is no way to say ... that even if she has been a teacher, she still has some understanding, but she has no way to educate children [now], because the changes are too great.

**Manon:** You say she does not understand the current society?

**Zhang Bao:** No, she understands, but she just has some educational ideas. For example, I think that now, children should do things by themselves. But my mother sometimes helps [my daughter] to do [little things], but I said you [should not] help her, you don't have to guide her, she has to do it herself when she does her homework, you don't have to teach her, but sometimes she can't help it. Because my mother can play the piano, she can play the electronic piano, but playing the piano is not common. I don't understand music. I don't like music. My daughter has inherited that from her grandmother. She loves music. Now that she learns to play the piano, my mother sometimes coaches her, and every time she coaches her, my daughter becomes impatient, because she sometimes does it for her, and she will say that 'you should to play like this', then my daughter will not be happy. So later on, I found that, um, she may want to do something for her and help her, but sometimes it's too much to help, for example, to help her with food and get the good things, help her carry her schoolbag, this way, I said you should no help her. So there may be some differences in these areas. And there is also the difficulty of the exercises, that is, my mother said that the primary school exercises now, ah, so difficult! (Laughs)

From Zhang Bao's perspective, the significant economic and social changes in the country over the last decades disqualify the grandmother's professional experience. The mother established a form of cooperation between the three generations: she has the final word on the education methods; yet, the grandmother is invested in her granddaughter's education to a certain extent. The family's migration history also reveals a hierarchical relationship among generations. Zhang Bao's parents lived in Yangzhou, and her husband's family is from Xuzhou, both are middle-size cities in northern Jiangsu, the poorest part of the province. The grandparents' geographic origins put them in an inferior social position further discrediting their experience as parents. The young urbanite couple questions the ability of any of the four grandparents to understand the urban and competitive environment in which they raise their daughter.



Popular parent-media reflect the negative assessment of intergenerational childcare. An article published on the self-media *Dingxiang Mama* and read by more than a thousand hundred persons expresses parents' fears about intergenerational care:<sup>118</sup>

In our situation we probably cannot live apart from the grandparents, so, we are particularly worried that our child does not want to kiss us [but rather wants to kiss his grandmother] and we don't know what to do?

Not only, many mothers worry that if the grandparents take care of their grandchildren, the child would lose on the starting line, wouldn't he?<sup>119</sup>

So what exactly are the problems with intergenerational education? How should moms react to these problems? (R. Chang 2017)

These questions highlight parents' two main fears regarding intergenerational childcare. First, parents fear that they will be emotionally disconnected from their child. In the context of intergenerational childcare, parents fear that their children would be more emotionally attached to their grandparents than to their parents. Second, and more importantly, parents worried about the grandparents' influence on their child's education. In the same article, two experts explain that parents need to educate the grandparents so that the grandparents can educate their grandchildren. The authors concede that intergenerational childcare is inescapable in the current Chinese society.

Public schools also play a role in disseminating the discourse on the harmfulness of intergenerational childcare, an influence evident in Ying's family. Ying is the father of a five-year-old boy. During our discussion, Ying complained that his son developed poor eating habits because of his in-laws. Ying's work as an engineer forces him to work late, and his wife, a tourist guide, is often away from home, leaving the maternal grandparents entrusted with everyday childcare tasks. According to Ying, the grandparents allow his son to eat whatever and whenever he wants, resulting in him not being hungry for lunch and throwing tantrums at school. The teachers informed the parents of the son behaviour and pointed at the intergenerational childcare arrangement as a possible cause for it. Ying expressed his deep feeling of guilt during our long discussion. However, he does not see a way out of this situation.

Scholars also study the parents' perspective on intergenerational childcare. Xiao, an anthropologist at Beijing Normal University, shows that "the parenting experience of

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<sup>118</sup> *Dingxiang Mama* [丁香妈妈] is a mother-oriented self-media owned by the broader media network *Diangxiang yuan* [丁香园], which is the main Chinese online service provider in healthcare. *Dingxiang yuan* is similar to Doctissimo in France or WebMD in the United States.

<sup>119</sup> "To lose on the starting line", in Chinese 输在起跑线上 [shū zài qǐpǎoxiàn shàng] means to fail at the education race.

the elderly in [her interviews] is seen as outdated, flawed and even wrong” (2014, 161). According to the so-called scientific parenting discourses, the two main flaws of the elderly’s education methods are that the grandparents want to do everything for the child, thus threatening the child’s autonomy and independence. Second, the grandparents are too lenient and do not enforce rules, which fosters the child’s selfishness and fickleness. The education style of grandparents is deemed too indulgent for Chinese society’s social and educational competition.

The intergenerational gap reflects the last decades’ social shifts in Chinese society. The grandparents encountered during fieldwork grew up during the Maoist Era, whereas the parents were the first generation of the one-child policy, born in the 80s and 90s. They grew up during the Opening and Reform Era and experienced relatively rapid social upward mobility and the sudden improvement of buying power (Fong 2004b). Now that they belong to the urban middle-class, these parents fear for their children’s future. Although this generation of parents see grandparents as an obstacle to their child’s success, most parents work outside of the home and as such must rely on the older generation for childcare.

## **Balancing financial constraints and educational ideals**

Influenced by the official discourse on intergenerational childcare, parents from the urban middle class are constantly justifying and minimizing the grandparents’ involvement in their child’s education. To justify the mobilization of the elderly, the parents put forward the cost advantage of this childcare arrangement. Due to the lack of accessible public day-care before six years old, most Chinese middle-class households arrange childcare based on the trade-off between stopping work, employing a caregiver, or relying on intergenerational support (Li 2004; Tang 2017). Xiao argues that the “intergenerational parenting coalition is a family strategy adopted by urban families to cope with the privatization and marketization of childcare” (Xiao 2014, 168). Ong, the mother of a five-year-old girl and teacher at Nanjing University, describes intergenerational care as a necessary trade-off:

I think that no matter what kind of grandparents you have, there is definitely something you cannot accept regarding child rearing, but, really, there is no other

way. I can't say that I stop working to take care of her. The elderly take care of her, thus there will be some things that don't align with our conceptions [of education], but this is the trade-off we have to make due to our time dilemma.

A mother explains this situation in her influential blog, *Children's Books of Mummy San Chuanling*. In her article entitled "Grandma spoiling children doubles child's happiness" (San, 2016), with more than 90,000 readers, San answers the questions of a mother worried about the influence of her mother-in-law on her one-year-old daughter. San Chuanling affirms that a mother only has four options after the birth of her child: 1/ become a stay-at-home mother, 2/ look for a day-care center, which is likely to be private and expensive, 3/ hire a full-time babysitter, 4/ rely on elderly family members to help with childcare. According to San Chuanling, this last option is, by far, the better trade-off.

Think of the numbers. I calculated how much money my mother has saved me over the last eight years regarding childcare and cleaning costs. During the first three years, my child did not go to nursery school, and my mother looked after her and did a few household chores for a cost of 5,000 yuan per month, or a total of 180,000 yuan. Then for the last five years, she did the household chores without looking after my child for a cost of 3,000 yuan per month, or 180,000 yuan over the five years, representing a total of 360,000 yuan.

Despite this financial arrangement, San Chuanling still specifies that after her daughter turned three, the maternal grandmother stopped "raising" the child and was only mobilized for household chores. This quote highlights how parents negotiate between the discourse on the harmful influence of grandparents and their pragmatic need for free support. Parents try to mitigate the perceived negative impact of intergenerational education by limiting the grandparents' involvement in logistics and simple daily care tasks. Gao, the mother of two daughters aged 3 and 8, whom I met at a private learning center, distributes tasks among the household's members:

The grandparents should not be concerned with education, they just listen to me; they don't know much about education. They are only responsible for the logistics, getting meals ready, and accompanying the children to and from school, and that is all; that is their work. Generally, they do not participate in the children's education.

Gao belittles the grandparents' role, reducing it to the performance of elementary tasks. She draws a clear distinction between the daily chores, which she calls "logistics", and the responsibility for education (supervising homework, helping with learning, and

choosing schools and extracurricular lessons).<sup>120</sup> The grandparents take care of the children during morning and evening bedtimes, meals, and most importantly, transport them to and from school and out-of-school lessons. Parents delegate to the grandparents the tasks that appear to have the most negligible impact on the child's academic success.

## **Strategic residential arrangements: taking advantage of grandparents**

Intergenerational living arrangements are common among urban middle-class households. These residential arrangements do not follow a binary pattern between co-residence and non-co-residence (Kong and Wang 2013; Han, Whetung, and Mao 2019). Instead, around half of the households adopt forms of temporally limited co-residence, notably depending on the origins of the grandparents. When grandparents come from remote rural areas, they often reside with the young couple in the city for a few months after the birth of their grandchild. However, they rarely settle indefinitely. In some households, when both parents come from afar, paternal and maternal grandparents come in turn. Each older couple or at least the grandmother on each side comes to stay for a few months or years alternatively. Jiang, the mother of a five-year-old girl, describes the alternate involvement of both paternal and maternal grandparents:

[We] live together. Her paternal grandparents stayed with us for a little longer, and then they went home recently when something happened in their house. Then my mother, [my daughter's] maternal grandmother came over to help me with the child, because the child was to be picked up, so my husband and I would drop her off to school, and for picking up, she finishes too early, so my mother will pick her up and prepare dinner for the children.

In most households, residential arrangements depend on the parents' need for childcare. Grandparents travel across the country to help their descendants, subject to the arrangements of the mother who usually tries to limit the involvement of the grandparents to household chores. In some households, however, I observed strategic residential arrangements where the grandparents play a significant role in childcare and educational tasks. Bao Mu, the mother of a four-year-old boy and a newborn girl, takes full advantage of her parents and parents-in-law. She is a lecturer at a university in

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<sup>120</sup> In Chinese, the word "logistics" is 后勤工作 [hòuqín gōngzuò], this term comes from the professional lexicon.

Nanjing, and her husband is a business lawyer in a financial institution. The two families have been registered in Nanjing for several generations.<sup>121</sup> Bao Mu and her husband come from relatively wealthy families and earn high incomes. Yet, the young couple does not own an apartment. The mother devised a complex residential arrangement to take advantage of the family's resources. The paternal grandparents live in a spacious apartment in the city center, where they host the ailing great-grandfather. Meanwhile, they care for their four-year-old grandson, who lives with them most of the time. They accompany him to school and all his extracurricular courses.

However, despite the daily childcare arrangements, the young boy is registered on the booklet of his maternal grandparents with his mother to get access to a good primary school. Indeed, the maternal grandfather is a retired military officer. This high social status grants his children and grandchildren access to an elite primary school. Bao Mu herself attended this school as a child and wants her son to enroll in it as well. In this household, the young couple mobilized the grandparents' professional and social status to secure education resources for their children while also relying on the grandparents for childcare arrangements. The newborn daughter resides with a live-in nanny at her maternal grandparents' home, and the couple rotates between apartments.

I mentioned to Bao Mu the apparent complexity of her living and childcare arrangement, where each of her children lives in a different apartment, and the couple has no stable address. She responded to me unequivocally that she would not be able to live with her two children in one apartment; it would be too exhausting. Her answer reflects the social pressure around childcare and the crucial role of grandparents in relieving that pressure.

Alongside practical arrangements, Bao Mu mobilized the resources of her parents and in-laws to support the development of her children's education. In 2016, when Bao's son was only two years old, the paternal grandmother, who is also the boy's daily caregiver, wanted to teach him how to recognize Chinese characters with books such as the *Three Character Classic*, *Thousand Character Classic*, or the *Hundred Family Surnames*.<sup>122</sup> She wanted her grandson to recognize several hundred characters before enrolling in kindergarten. Bao Mu was quite reluctant to use these books. She preferred

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<sup>121</sup> Here, I refer to the household registration booklet as described in previous chapter.

<sup>122</sup> These books have been used to teach Chinese characters to children through poems since the Tang dynasty in the sixth century.

to open her son's horizon by focusing on outdoor and cultural activities. Bao Mu consequently negotiated with her mother-in-law to incorporate both traditional learning of the Chinese characters and outdoor activities in her son's schedule. Yet, two years later, Bao Mu gave in and began to teach him Tang dynasty poems. Her son's upcoming entrance into primary school increased education pressure, thus she did not want him to feel behind. This debate around classic books and outdoor activities illustrates the tension between traditional education models, also called *exam-oriented*, dominated by knowledge and memorization, and modern education models, so-called *quality-oriented* education, favoring the all-rounded development of the child. In the latter model, personal experience is much more valued. This tension was also present in Yin Jianli's book, discussed in the previous chapter.

In Bao Mu's household, the mother plays a central role in organizing family life around her children's education. Yet, the grandparents also actively influence the children's lives and education. The intergenerational residential arrangements play a significant role in the household's educational strategy and the social stigma around grandparents was never mentioned during our interviews. Bao Mu even recognized her mother-in-law is educational experience and changed her own practices. The high social status of the grandparents in this household might explain a higher level of intergenerational respect.

## **Grandparents resisting competitive family norms**

The new family norms pigeonhole grandparents as only being capable of undertaking daily logistical tasks. However, some grandparents resist the norms in different ways. Some grandparents refuse to be used as free labour during their retirement age (Zuo 2022). Some grandparents fight within the family to play a central role in their grandchildren's life and education. During my fieldwork, I met a dissident grandmother Fang, the grandmother of a four-year girl, who was eager to share her educational views with me. Perceiving herself as the primary caregiver at home, she complained about her son and daughter-in-law being unfit parents who did not care greatly about their daughter. Objecting strongly to corporal punishment Fang often stands between her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter to protect the child from being beaten. She regretted "not properly educating [her] son" and felt that despite all

the money she invested in his education, he did not study well. Now he works hard, but his low education level only grants him a rank-and-file job with a low salary. Long working hours are the only way for him to earn a living wage. Fang despises her daughter-in-law because she only “likes to dress up” and has “no education.” According to Fang, her daughter-in-law is short-tempered and has no idea how to educate her little girl. She gives an example about the morning routine, while the mother only yells to her daughter, “Hurry up, hurry up!” Fang proudly explained her education method. She decided to buy a clock and show her granddaughter when she should be ready by looking at the arrows on the clock. She explained that her method fosters her granddaughter’s independence.

Fang often quarrels with her daughter-in-law and her son about their parenting practices and the education they provide to their little girl. Fang is very invested in the education of her granddaughter, personally evaluating all of the kindergartens in the surrounding area.

**Fang:** I went to investigate around to fish for information, and then I found this cheap, not too far, public kindergarten.

**Manon:** How long did it take to investigate?

**Fang:** It took at least half a year, half a year, at least half a year. Every school around my home, within two or three bus stops. As long as there is a kindergarten, I will investigate, and finally this one, this one there is no sponsorship fee, and the tuition fee is very cheap.

In contrast with other households, Fang is very invested in securing the best educational resources for her granddaughter. She chose the extracurricular center where I met her because she liked the director, Amy Wang, also one of my informants, and her approach to education. She attends to the daily needs of her granddaughter and performs the expected grandparents’ tasks by picking up and dropping off the girl to all her activities. During the discussions in the waiting room of the extracurricular center, Fang was a very active participant. She always had parenting resources to share with everyone, such as articles she had read on WeChat. She followed several online public accounts to keep her knowledge on education up-to-date. This super-involved grandmother was an exception among the households I met during my fieldwork. However, her case contradicts the mainstream discourse on the backwardness and outdatedness of her generation. Fang was acutely aware of this discourse and constantly referred to it during our discussion to single out her situation.

Despite the diversity of intergenerational childcare arrangements, one commonality among most of my interviewees is their fear of the potential negative impact of the grandparents on their child's educational success. This discourse is also very present on the popular information platforms online. My fieldwork concurs with Xiao's model of a 'strict mother and kind grandparents', where the mother is a parenting manager and the grandparents are merely executive helpers (Xiao 2014).<sup>123</sup> Schools and media promote this shift, which excludes and discredits the grandparent experience and educational practices. Grandparents are not the only ones to be discredited and rejected by the media and institutional discourses: a father's educational investment or lack thereof is also pointed at for its negative influence on a child's future.

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<sup>123</sup> This model is an updated version of the traditional Chinese saying 'strict father and kind mother' 严父慈母 [yán fù cí mǔ] shifting toward 'strict mother and kind elderly' 严母慈祖 [yán mǔ cí zǔ]



# Fatherly involvement, motherly influence

As discussed in chapter three, the state-led campaign “Looking for the Most Beautiful Family”, showcases family stories in which fathers are the household’s breadwinner.<sup>124</sup> Fathers work long hours to provide for their families and consequently do not have the time and energy to dedicate to the education of their children. However, I observed different ways parents accept, negotiate and/or resist the gendered parenting norms, in which the campaign is embedded.

Within the context of my fieldwork, I have identified four types of involvement by fathers in the education of their children. First, the most pervasive situation is the ‘absent father’ model based on a traditional gender arrangement.<sup>125</sup> The father is largely absent from home as a consequence of working long hours to provide for his family. Although a father may participate in his children’s education by accomplishing specific tasks, the tasks nonetheless correspond to a gendered division of labour.

Second, the international discourse on a “new fatherhood” model emerged in the Chinese media.<sup>126</sup> This discourse advocates that fathers play a greater role in the education of their children. This line of thinking reinforces traditional gender roles, advocating for a manly and disciplinarian father. However, this discourse is constantly questioned because of alleged male incompetency.

Third, some parents negotiate a form of equality in the distribution of tasks. However, they do not claim gender parity and are apologetic about their gender arrangement. Finally, some dissident fathers are intensively involved in their children’s education but are stigmatized by the community. The school plays a significant role in upholding traditionally gendered parenting norms suggesting that households and social institutions reproduce a continued imbalance between men and women in

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<sup>124</sup> In Chinese 寻找最美家庭 [xúnzhǎo zuìměi jiātíng] This campaign is the modern iteration of the Five-Virtue Campaigns initiated in the 1950s, which set a normative framework on family relations and parenting standards.

<sup>125</sup> In Chinese: 缺席父亲 [quēxí fùqīn]

<sup>126</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, some NGOs in the USA and progressively some scholars “argued for the need to redefine father identity by promoting the notion of ‘new fatherhood’ [which meant that] men not only bring money home but are also expected to be caring, to be leaders and protectors of the family, to be good role models to their children, and to help develop their potential” (Liong 2017, 3). Some feminists scholars, such as Sara Ruddick in 1997, challenged that discourses “as a notion encouraging sexual distinctiveness as well as masculine and compulsory heterosexual parenting” (Liong 2017, 5)

childcare. I examine these four situations, arguing that the gender division of labour regarding the child's education highlights the mother's central role as household manager and education agent.

## **Traditional gendered parenting roles: the playmate or the absentee father**

The absent father model is the most common gender arrangement. The father focuses on providing the financial means to implement the mother's educational strategies. About half of the parents I interviewed described this type of asymmetrical situation, exacerbated by the fact that the mothers also contribute to the household budget and bear a double responsibility. The model of the absent father who is not involved in his child's education is firmly rooted in the discourse of my interviewees and social institutions. When questioned about the father's involvement in developing schooling strategies, most mothers replied that "he couldn't care less".<sup>127</sup> However, the father's professional situation directly influences the education strategies implemented by the mother. For instance, when Josh, an American expatriate married to a Chinese woman and father of two boys, lost his job and experienced a short period of unemployment, the children had to give up some of their extracurricular activities.

Recently in February I got laid off, lost my job, and also I wanted to spend more time with them, and so we told [the children], we don't have as much money, you need to choose and reduce some [extracurricular courses]...

The father participates in the implementation of the best educational strategy by providing the necessary financial resources. Urban middle-class households must maintain a sufficiently high income level to support the cost of extracurricular and other supplementary courses. Due to the heavy financial responsibility, most fathers do not get involved in the daily implementation of their children's education.

Josh's temporary unemployment gave him more time to spend with his son. During our discussion, I understood Josh to mean that he had more time to play with his children. Fathers become children's playmates. When they are not busy outside with their money-earning work, they only have time and energy to play with their children. For instance, Wang underlined the importance of the financial role of the father. She

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<sup>127</sup> In Chinese: 不管 [bùguǎn]

asserted that the father is also more laid-back regarding the child's education, shifting the traditional saying to "strict mother and kind father." The father is a playmate, and the mother is the educator and disciplinarian.

Yes, now this is the situation, the father rarely gets involved, the mother is doing it all, the child's education, the household chores, and the mother also has to work, as well as to participate in other activities, the mothers' duties are very heavy, the dad has only one duty, he has to work, earn money, that's it (laugh). (...) A dad does not have the same pressure as the mother, the dad is very laid-back, the mother has to be strict, and the dad is quite relaxed, the father['s involvement] is really minor, ... he really does not care. (...) They consciously do not participate in the kids' education (laugh), because supervising the kids' study is something very painful. A lot of mothers send very cute message on WeChat, but then [when] a mother is supervising her child, when you talk about supervising her child, it is often a light, light discussion, but really when you check the homework you can get really angry.

Parents' traditional gender roles remain prevalent among urban middle-class households. However, as in many countries during the modernization process, when Chinese women started working *outside*, fathers had to progressively assume a more significant parenting role (Abbott, Ming, and Meredith 1992; Hare-Mustin and Hare 1986). The mother has become the disciplinarian educator, turning the saying "strict father, kind mother" upside down. The father remains the primary breadwinner, and his *outside* competencies are valued. For instance, Wu's household mobilizes the father to benchmark schools, learning centers, and teachers for extracurricular activities. He stressed his competency in this matter thanks to his professional experience as a banker.

Maybe I did it. Yes, it may be a matter of experience. That is, the choice of these things may be based on my experience outside. I can see if ... Seen from the first glance whether it is good or bad, learning is different, learning, teaching children to learn, uh, you have to be attentive to details, my wife is better than me, so she should be the one teaching, right? I am better at this kind of external [tasks], it must be that I go to deal with these outside choices...

During our discussion, Wu admitted that he did not drop off or pick up his seven-year-old son to and from school or any extracurricular activities; instead, his wife did most of the daily care and supervision of education-related activities. He also underlined that he was not good at school when he was a child. Thus, he cannot supervise his son's schoolwork. However, Wu participates in devising school choice strategies by taking advantage of his professional "experience outside." His selective involvement reproduces the traditional division of labour with the mother in charge of the inside and

the father in charge of the outside, except that some outside tasks are ordered by the inside.

One of my informants, Sao, the mother of a fourteen-year-old girl, describes a traditional gender division of childcare tasks while advocating for the recognition of the mother's work raising children. She is heavily invested in her daughter's education. During the interview, she enjoyed sharing her expertise regarding parenting norms.

Outside the male leads, inside the female leads. (...) So, the dads go out to earn money. Moms are at home to care for their children, but it is not easy for the moms. Moms also have to work. So, moms have two jobs, with one job which does not earn money. When you bring up your child, who pays you? You don't make [money], so she works in a work unit, and she has to continue working at home, whereas the father works outside. It is not easy [for the father] to earn money, so (...) if it is not a proactive and involved father, you see, sometimes he travels for a week or two, and if he doesn't go on a business trip, he might go to work early in the morning, returns late at night, and works overtime. So [our daughter] is already in bed. She really seldom talks with her father.

Sao underlines the heavy burden weighing on the mother's shoulders and the economic inequalities experienced by women because of the invisibilization and the lack of financial retribution for care work. However, she does not question the gender division in childcare; she regrets the lack of bonding between her daughter and her husband. Later in the interview, she underlines that her husband cannot or does not participate in school planning and implementation because "he does not know many things, he does not do it." Thus, she is the only one with parenting knowledge and experience.

The whole household organization serves as a master plan to provide the best education to the children. For most of my informants, the couples reproduce a gender division of housework. The fathers work long hours to provide the financial means to implement the educational strategies devised by the mother. They participate in specific tasks which reinforce gender division. The fathers are sometimes playmates and sometimes outside brokers. Despite their awareness of the evident inequalities engendered by the unbalanced division of tasks, mothers have internalized their role as meticulous supervisors and managers who bear the responsibility for their child's educational success.

## The “new fatherhood” discourse and “male incompetence”

The notion of “new fatherhood” is an alternative model in which “men should not only bring money home but are also expected to be caring, to be leaders and protectors of the family, to be good role models to their children, and to help develop their potential” (Liong 2017, 3). Since 2013, to restore the father’s role in children’s education, a TV reality show titled “Where do we go Daddy?” features male celebrities who are fathers, going to the countryside with their offspring for 72 hours.<sup>128</sup> The show, imported from Korea and broadcasted by Hunan TV, one of the leading Chinese entertainment channels, shows famous fathers caring for their children and facing predetermined challenges. While satisfying the public’s desire to spy on social elites, the TV show enacts the difficulties and emotional upside of the fathers’ role in child rearing and education (Gui 2013). While the show amplifies a new model of fatherhood, it simultaneously highlights the incompetency and absence of fathers in general.

In her best-selling book, *A good mother is better than a good teacher* (2016), Yin Jianli advocates for the fathers to be present and involved in the life of their child, but nonetheless upholds the norms that mothers should be responsible for major decisions regarding welfare and education of their children. Indeed, when the fathers do assume some initiative, the author highlights their incompetence. For instance, in a chapter regarding homework supervision, the father tears up his daughter’s workbook for being too messy. At the end of the chapter, the mother underlines the father’s wrong parenting practices and the father consequently apologizes. The following drawing illustrates the conclusion (see Fig. 17), highlighting the father’s embarrassment in his bearing, with the hand over the head and a drop of sweat on the cheek.

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<sup>128</sup> In Chinese, the TV show is called 爸爸去哪儿? [Bàba qù nǎ'er?]



**Figure 17. The mother underlines the father's mistake and the father apologizes (Yin 2010, 230) [Source: picture taken by the author]<sup>129</sup>**

One of my informants, Xiao, the mother of a teenage girl, explained that although fathers may be capable of doing things correctly, they are generally absent from the decision-making process for education.

As for the father, I think that the absence of a proper role for fathers in China is still an important issue. But there are also many fathers who are interested in their child and pay close attention to them, they can do it well, even, maybe, better than the mother. But there are some fathers who just don't care about it, they just completely neglect accompanying the child, caring, guiding, and understanding the child's psychology. I think that around us, the father's role is essentially missing.

This quote illustrates Xiao's conception of parenting as "accompanying, caring, guiding, and understanding child's psychology," which is impregnated by a scientific and child-centered approach to parenting that requires expertise in childhood psychology and development as highly time-consuming parenting practices. Fathers' parenting competencies are invalidated based on the widely accepted parenting norms, such as intensive scientific parenting. In another family, Zhang Bao highlights the incompetency of her husband, who cannot help their six-year-old daughter complete her homework.

During the vacation week of the National Day, [my daughter's] dad took her back to his hometown. I couldn't go because of my work. I was in Nanjing, and she brought

<sup>129</sup> In the dialogue: the mother says: "Dad also did something wrong today and shouldn't tear up the workbook. Yuanyuan didn't write her homework neatly today, it's not a really good experience. She learned that it takes the same amount of effort to write her homework neatly as to write it in a disorderly manner, but she feels better when she writes it well. How would you know this without trying it?"

Dad answers: "Sorry Yuanyuan! Dad was wrong!"

In Chinese, the mother says: 今天爸爸也做得不对，不应该撕作业本。圆圆今天把作业写得不整齐，不是正好做了一个试验嘛，知道了把作业整齐和写得乱，用的力气一样，但写好了心情更好。如果不试试，哪能知道这些呢，是不是？

The dad answers: 对不起圆圆！爸爸错了！

some homework to her dad's hometown. After finishing it, she asked her father to check it, the results (...) Just to check it, check her homework. My daughter wrote me "Dad won't". Her dad took a picture and sent it to me ... the math problems with a question mark, and her dad wrote "Ask your mother at home". Then when they came home, I said "Those are first-grade questions. Why didn't you do it?" He said that he could not understand it, that is, he may know, but he could not explain it clearly...

In this anecdote, the father is not incompetent. He admits that he understands the question but does not feel he can explain it to his daughter. He delegates the homework supervision entirely to his wife. Despite the mother's high workload and the distance, she is solely responsible for supervising her daughter's homework. The father does not recognize his wife's workload nor does he feel an obligation to share the burden of their child's education with his wife.

The "new fatherhood" model has also featured in recent debate regarding the alleged masculinity crisis among Chinese teenage boys. According to some scholars and state discourse, fathers should not only be more involved in their son's education but that they should be strong and determined leaders as the head of the household (Zhang 2021; Xinyu and Chen 2021; Zheng 2011). Characterized by essentialist assumptions regarding about sex differences, the so-called masculinity crisis directly influences parenting practices. Sao, for example, mentions the father's role in raising teenage boys, even though it does not concern her family as she has one single daughter.

Sissy boys are too feminine, now more and more. Why? [They are] not manly, why? Because [they are cared for by] mothers, grandmothers, female helpers in the kindergarten. [There are] more female teachers than male teachers in the elementary school, so [boys] spend all day [with women]. [Their] father is out to earn money, so a male child cannot be like a boy, right, so I think if [your child is a boy], he must be raised by his father after the age of five. Otherwise, the child will go wrong later. His father should be his role model.

Sao points to the all-female cast of caregivers surrounding children in China nowadays to explain the alleged masculinity crisis among teenage boys. She underlines the father's role in embodying a male model. In her interview, the idea of a male child "going wrong" is associated with being "a sissy boy." She implies the existence of natural and essential differences in men's and women's social roles, and the importance of men expressing their virility.

The comments of Zhong En, the mother of a twelve-year-old boy, similarly reflect this assumption, leading Zhong En to change her parenting practices by reducing her involvement and leaving more space for the father.

I read some books. (...) Adolescent boys are better brought up by their dad, because [when their] puberty start, there are many things that are not easy to talk to with mom. After all, I am a woman, I'm gentler, if he stays with me, he would not get a taste of masculinity. I hope his dad will step in. Now, his dad is not as busy as he used to be. He is back at night now and can often accompany him and take him. I want him to bring his son to sport, for instance to play some basketball. (...) The mother is too delicate, and a boy will feel annoyed. The mother's care is too meticulous. There should be some general [manly] direction. When I have some suggestions [to make about education], I will tell my husband and let him [explain them to our son].

Zhong En did not tell me which books she read to arrive at these conclusions. However, she seems invested in a parenting arrangement where she plays a supporting role in the daily care of her son, so that he can spend more time with his father. However, her description reveals that she remains the mastermind of the child's education. She maintains her influence by suggesting activities and methods to her husband, who then implements them.

The "new fatherhood" discourse, promoted by mass media, scholars, and other social institutions, directly influences parenting practices. It advocates for the greater involvement of fathers in their children's education. This discourse often accompanies a critique of fathers' incompetency in fulfilling their tasks. Finally, fathers must embody a strong male role model for teenage boys. However, I argue that mothers keep a crucial role in managing the household at the service of the child's education.

## **Gender Equality: a counter-narrative requiring justification**

Some interviewees offer a counter-narrative, stressing a form of gender equality negotiated by the couple. However, these interviewees always felt the need to acknowledge the mainstream male/female configuration and justify their seemingly abnormal gender arrangement. In these situations, the fathers willingly cooperate with the mother regarding the education of their children. Generally, these parents propose a counter-narrative of equality and dialogue within the couple. Given the dominant norm of the absent father, they seek to justify the norm of equality prevailing in their couple. Zhui Dong emphasized that she and her husband collaborated and shared responsibility for managing their child's care and education. She also highlighted the degree to which her household is unique because she has a hectic professional schedule that prevents



her from carrying out all of the time-consuming activities involved in supervising her son's education. She was perfectly aware that, for most families, the father's professional career is more important than the mother who usually sacrifices her career path to care for the child's education.

We cooperate like that. My husband work is more flexible than mine, so he goes to fetch our son from school every day. We share the work, for example for essays, for writing, my husband can help our son, because I'm not very good at writing. My husband can supervise him for essay-writing [...], I mean in Chinese, and also in maths problems, in the Math Olympics, his father can coach him. I concentrate mainly on planning. In other words, I know what activities to do at each stage, which establishment to choose next, I am in charge of planning, I'm responsible for making certain decisions. Well, I'm also in charge of English. English is my responsibility. [...] We cooperate very well. In fact, there are not many families like ours. Generally, men have a relatively busier career [than do women]. They might not have the time to look after their children. We're a particular case because my work is intensive, sometimes I get home after five o'clock, sometimes at nearly six o'clock, so we have divided the work [childcare tasks]. So, the cooperation is always good.<sup>130</sup>

For Zhui Dong, there is good cooperation with her husband concerning their eleven-year-old son: the tasks are assigned based on each parent's skills. The mother is more focused on planning and developing strategies while the father supervises the homework.

In families that adopt some form of equality in their approach to childcare and education, the parents have different strategies to share the childcare tasks. For example, in another household, the mother, Qu, is interested in her daughter's overall mood; she defines herself as a fairly relaxed mother, while her husband pays more attention to marks and exam results. In general, fathers are responsible for cognitive tasks, such as supervising homework (cf. Zhui Dong and Qu), or tasks performed outside the home, such as buying an apartment or undertaking a comparative analysis of learning centers. The mothers carry out emotion work and planning. In some households, I observed another type of distribution, where childcare is transferred from one parent to the other according to the child's age. Usually, from birth to 10 years, the mother looks after the child (everyday care, emotion work, and educational activities). The father gets involved in education when the child starts junior high school. This division of tasks is the fruit of discussion and negotiations. For Rao, the division of labour changed when her son started junior high school:

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<sup>130</sup> Chinese families usually have their evening meal early, at around 5 or 5.30 pm, and then the children often go to bed at about 9 pm.

Yes, yes, because the education methods of the two of us are quite agreeable. The two of us often discuss it. Reach a consensus. (...) In China, many fathers work outside the home, and the mother takes the children home. I don't know what it is like in France. (...) [My son's] father started taking over [my child's education] in junior high school. At this stage, he may communicate better with his father.

In all these situations, the mothers stress that their husbands' involvement in their children's education resulted from discussions within the couple. In these interviews, parents acknowledge being counter-stream households.<sup>131</sup> This equality is considered marginal and needs justification. For instance, after asserting that she and her husband are equally involved in their child's education, Ong explains that her husband's parents and grandparents are all teachers. Thus, his family is quite knowledgeable regarding the child's education. This family story justifies the father's involvement in the child's educational success. The acknowledgment of the mainstream narrative contrasts the father's involvement in the child's education from the mother's socially accepted role as solely responsible for the child's educational success. These mothers offer a counter-narrative of more balanced gender parenting practices.

## **Dissident fathers in practice**

Finally, in the last configuration, the father is more involved in the child's education than the mother. Some fathers resist the gendered division of parenting and participate actively in education strategies to ensure their children's academic success. In a survey of urban middle-class fathers in Peking, Chuang et al. (2013) found that fathers devote more time and energy than in the past to their children's education. However, fathers are often criticized and discredited when their involvement exceeds their wife's involvement in their children's education.

During an interview with the Ying couple, the father showed deep concern for his son's education. By way of contrast, his wife did not show much interest in the discussion. Her responses were laconic. Yet, she resolutely discredited her husband's responses because of his social background. As a well-educated, Nanjing-born professional, she asserted knowing all of the city's educational resources very well. Her husband comes from Yinchuan, in the remote northwestern province of Ningxia, where, as he admits, the educational conditions are dire. His wife underlined that her husband's

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<sup>131</sup> In Chinese 商量 [shāngliáng]

upbringing in a rural and remote city automatically disqualified his judgment on and suggestions for their four-year-old son's education. He conceded that he adopts his wife's parenting practices because of the poor economic conditions of his family background.

After our first interview, the father contacted me to meet again in order to discuss his son's behavioral problems. Setting a second appointment with me demonstrated his eagerness to meet with people he perceived as education experts. I agreed to meet but explained the limits of my expertise. During this second discussion, which lasted an hour, he underlined the negative influence on his in-laws on his son's eating habits. He explained that while he tried to enforce rules in his household, he lacked confidence in his capacity to be a good father. He repeated that his social background seemed to disqualify him from household decision-making. However, he also stressed his efforts and research to adopt the best education methods. In this case, both class and gender are limiting the father's capacity to participate. The father's family background is partially offset by higher education degree and his employment as an engineer. Thus, he has access to enough cultural, financial, and social capital to adopt an urban middle-class lifestyle, enrolling his son in extracurricular courses and attending lectures on children's cognitive development. However, his gender also sets him apart, excluding him from playing a greater role than he might otherwise.

In addition to household dynamics, public schools also discredit or actively resist the involvement of fathers in their child's education. Pao's experience in his son's education clearly illustrates the school's role in disseminating gendered parenting norms. Pao, the father of a twelve-year-old boy at an elite school in Nanjing, told me how he gave up attending parent-teacher meetings because of social pressure. During his son's first three years at primary school, Pao attended all the events organized by the school (activities and meetings). He noticed that he was the only father present amidst a crowd of mothers. One day, his son asked him why he was the only father who attended all the meetings, whereas the other fathers only turned up occasionally. One of his classmates had started teasing him at school, implying that his father did not work as hard as the other fathers. In fact, Pao's working hours were more flexible than his wife's, making it easier for him to be available for parent-school activities. In the end, Pao stopped attending school events to avoid stigmatizing his son. Now he only goes when the presence of both parents is required. This story illustrates how gendered parenting

norms are disseminated within the school and how resistance to these norms generates social disapproval from peers handed out from the parents to the children.

A second anecdote shared by Pao shows how the schools further reinforce gendered parenting norms. During his son's enrolment at school, Pao specified that he wanted to be the contact person with the school, while his wife preferred to keep her distance. However, he described the situation when the school set up a WeChat group to promote communication between parents and teachers:<sup>132</sup>

My wife didn't want to join [the group] to begin with (...) [laughs]. However, the teachers ignored my messages and refused to speak to me directly. (...) As soon as she joined the group, the teacher started sending her messages without including me. [laughs] (...) [The teachers] think that the mother should take care of education, all right, but in fact I look after our son more, (...) but the teacher didn't care at all, the teacher said to himself "Ok I'm going to talk with the mother". As soon as she joined the WeChat groups, [the teachers] contacted my wife [laughs].

Despite the father's active involvement in the online discussion, the teachers persisted in communicating exclusively with the mother. The school actively reinforced gendered parenting norms and insisted on the educational role of mothers. The mothers should be involved in parent-teacher communication.

Regardless of emerging media and state-led discourses promoting the father's involvement, fathers are dissuaded from participating in their children's education. Childcare and education remain the natural prerogative of women. All four gender narratives described in this section place mothers as the central figure in the education of children. Yin Jianli declared in an article published in 2014 that "when a child loses their father, they lose the integrity of the world, but when they lose their mother, they lose the whole world. Fathers cannot completely replace mothers and grandparents even less so!" (Yin, 2014).

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<sup>132</sup> WeChat is a mobile phone app, roughly equivalent to WhatsApp, except that it is more broadly used by public institutions.

# The professionalization of motherhood

Over the last three decades, the high pressure for children to achieve educational success has directly contributed to, what I call, the professionalization of motherhood. I use the concept of professionalization from the perspective of power over knowledge and practices. Building on Friedson (1970) quoted by Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008), I define professions as “occupations that have a dominant position of power in the division of labour in their area of practice and thus have control over the content of their work” (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008, 282). This definition builds on Hughes’ (1963) definition that “the professionals claim the exclusive right to practice ... and to give the kind of advice derived from their special lines of knowledge” (Hughes 1963, 656).

There are two main bodies of literature that study professions. First, some scholars focus on the legal and institutional recognition of occupations in medical care and social work. They provide a functionalist definition of professions with descriptive features, such as “a systematic body of knowledge; professional authority recognised by its clientele; community sanction; a regulatory code of ethics; and a professional culture sustained by formal professional associations” (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008, 282). The official granting of a license, that is a legal permission to practice, and a mandate, that is a recognized mission, is the fruit of a negotiation between the state and the profession (Hughes 1963).

Second, another body of literature focuses on “how occupations establish and maintain dominance in areas of practice when confronted with threats to their status from competing interests, whether these are threats from other occupational groups, government, the bureaucracies that employ them, or their clients” (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008, 282). I rely on the latter literature to argue that a power struggle is underway over mothering practices in contemporary China. Both government and private corporations seem to threaten parents’ status as competent caregivers. In reaction, some mothers use their exclusive experiences as main caregivers to reclaim knowledge production over parenting practices. They assert their capacity to provide the best care to ensure their children’s future.

## **Mothers as family managers**

Since the 1980s, the average Chinese household has been composed of a heterosexual couple with one child. Both parents work and contribute to the household budget. Indeed, China has one of the highest female employment rates in the world (Maurer-Fazio et al. 2011). The Japanese sociologist Emiko Ochiai (2008) studied the connection between women's labour market participation and the process of modernization. She argues that in the West, modernization initially accompanied a division between the public and private spheres and a weak presence of women in the labour market, especially during their reproductive years. This phenomenon explains the M-shaped figures of the female labour force participation by age. Women participate in the labour market before their thirties and after their forties.

Ochiai shows that China has followed a different trajectory. During the modernization process, Chinese women "continue to work during the period of childbirth and childcare" (Ochiai 2008, 27). They have done so ever since the establishment of the PRC in the 1950s. However, this situation is now changing. A growing number of women in urban China voluntarily or involuntarily leave the labour market. Two studies, one by the ACWF and the other by the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, have shown an increase in female unemployment in urban areas since the 1980s (Xiaoying Wu 2014, 63). During the economic reforms, women were the first to suffer from unemployment due to the closing of state-owned enterprises. Over the last decade, many women have reduced their workload or resigned from their jobs to care for their children full-time.

Surveys show that several factors have increased the probability for women to either fully relinquish paid labour outside the home or work part-time to devote themselves to the education of their children. The general wealth of the family and the fathers' income are correlated with the implementation of intensive parenting practices. Upper-middle-class households adopt parenting practices that require more parental time and investment, pushing mothers to leave the labour market. Education levels also affect women's non-employment. "While the absolute levels of non-employment remained lower among college-educated mothers than the other two educational groups, the probability of non-employment among college-educated mothers increased

more steeply over time” (Mu and Tian 2022, 68).<sup>133</sup> Finally, women tend to exit the labour market when their children are aged 0 to 2 years old, notably since public daycare centers closed in the 1990s with the privatization of most work-units.

Given the cost of living and raising a child in urban centers, this option to exit the labour market is only possible if the husband’s income is high enough to provide for the family’s needs. Wu Xiaoying from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, identifies two types of housewives among urban middle-class households: first, women who avoid the need for employment by marrying a man rich with financial resources to support the entire household; second, women who are dissatisfied with their professional careers and whose husbands earning power obviates a second income (Xiaoying Wu 2014, 66). During fieldwork, I met several mothers who had adapted their workload to spend time educating their children. For instance, Sao chose to reduce her work schedule and work part-time for five years to dedicate more time to her daughter’s education; she said to her boss that her child is more important than her work.

Until the third grade of primary school, so from when she was five to third grade in primary school, yes, I was *part-time* [in English]. Afterward, I told my boss, ‘I don’t care how much money you give me. My sole demand is the schedule. You organize my work according to my personal schedule. If at this time I can work, you can give me some work, but when my child finishes school, I don’t work. I go home.’ Because my daughter is my primary work, I prefer that she comes home earlier, so I can educate her. The school teacher also educates her, but obviously, it is not the same, first because I am her mother, so when I educate her, it is with love, *love* [in English], also when I educate her, it is one-on-one. In contrast, her teacher has a few dozen children at school, right? Moreover, the teacher teaches for a whole day, so it is very tiring. The teacher is on a tight schedule, then parents hurry to pick up their children, and the teacher minds her own business. I think it’s not appropriate to finish school at 4.30pm, I think it’s better to finish at 2.30pm. I chose a school like that, which finishes at 2.30pm, so that after school I could take her do some sport, then we go home to play piano.

Sao sheds light on the different elements that make a mother’s job: first, the importance of emotions over material interests. She has not resigned from her job, yet, but her mothering practices have transformed her relationship to her job and to the labour market. The household economic situation allows Sao not to care about how much she earns from work. She focuses on how much time she has to educate her daughter. She highlights the emotional labour involved in educating a child: education

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<sup>133</sup> This article examines the determinants explaining the increase in stay-at-home mothers in urban China from 1982 to 2015 based on data from Chinese censuses and Chinese General Social Survey. Regarding education, the population is divided into three groups: mothers with an education of junior high or below, mothers with a senior high education and mothers with a college education or above.

requires love. Like Amy Wang, cited in this chapter introduction, Sao considers motherhood a job, even her primary job.<sup>134</sup> Thus, educating her daughter comes first before any other task or requirement.

Second, Sao stresses the importance of spending time with her daughter and actively participating in her education. She mentions that she accompanies her daughter to piano lessons. The mother does not play the piano; however, she attends her daughter's piano class, takes notes, and supervises her daily practice. She intentionally chose a school that finishes earlier to spend more time with her daughter.

Finally, Sao's interview reveals an ambiguous relationship between parents and public schools. In the previous chapter, I showed how the best-seller Yin Jianli openly criticizes public school teachers for their backward teaching methods. In her interview, Sao provides a more nuanced approach. She underlines the constraints experienced by public school teachers and contrasts them with the mother's role. Later in the interview, she distinguishes the teacher's job from the parents' job with an agricultural metaphor.

Parents are like *farmers* [in English]. We are in charge of *the grains and rice, [making] it better* [in English]. What do the teachers do? The teachers *cook the rice, make it delicious and nutritious* [in English], and arrange it so that it looks nice. So if I am the Chinese language teacher, the parents give me this rice, and this rice is really good, then as the Chinese language teacher, my responsibility is to steam it into fragrant rice, right? The math teacher, the parents give him good rice, and what does the math teacher [do]? [Make] fried rice with scrambled eggs.

This metaphor shows that parents are responsible for growing the children's innate qualities of the children through a long process requiring patience and expertise. Parents cultivate the best children, and teachers work on children to let them express their nature. This task division underlines the crucial role of parents and family education as an indispensable prerequisite.

Other mothers have combined part-time paid work with fulltime professional mothering. Dong, a former high school English teacher, for example, resigned from her full-time job to care for her son while keeping a part-time professional activity. The family moved to the suburbs when their son was born to reduce residential costs. However, the family quickly moved back to Dong's parents' apartment in the city center to enroll the boy in a good daycare and an elite school. The frequent moving and the need to care for her son and ailing father, forced Dong to resign from her job. She

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<sup>134</sup> In Chinese she uses the term 工作 [gōngzuò] which means work.



describes herself as a housewife, although she works part-time giving English lessons, recruiting her pupils among her acquaintances and her husband's colleagues. Dong capitalizes on her skills to maintain a professional activity while primarily concentrating on her only child's education. Her husband is a manager in a good state-owned enterprise, his salary is sufficient to support the household.

Only wealthy households can afford the single-earner arrangement. The father's income must be high enough to provide for the family. Regardless of a household's financial arrangement, mothers remain the household managers. Mothers distribute tasks among household members and keep the most crucial responsibility: the children's education.

## **Mothers as education agents embedded in an international environment**

Urban middle-class mothers become "education agents" at the service of celebrity children who win prizes and recognition during school and extracurricular competitions.<sup>135</sup> I argue that being a good education agent can provide a form of professional recognition to the mother. A child's educational success becomes the proof of the mother's professional expertise as an agent. The competitive environment increases pressure on professional mothers to constantly improve their practices and look for new methods to raise healthy, happy and performing children, or what the state discourse calls "quality children". Mothers do not hesitate to make international comparisons to benchmark the most appropriate methods for their children. The thirst for scientific knowledge and educational tools is not limited to the Chinese environment, but rather embedded in the international circulation of parenting norms.

Zhui Dong, the mother of an eleven-year-old boy, attending one of the best primary schools in Nanjing, explained how she had to educate herself as much as possible to be a good mother. She uses the same word as the one for academic research:<sup>136</sup>

My husband and I have to do better than the others, we have to do more research on education. When our boy was young, I have used American children's books to

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<sup>135</sup> In Chinese, the term "education agents" translates by 教育经纪人 [jiàoyù jīngjì rén], this concept is coined by Jin Yihong and Yang Di (2015)

<sup>136</sup> In Chinese 研究 [yánjiū]

educate him. [...] I started educating him when he was a few months old, I only use things from American authors. So, he has a lot of skills, like American children, he even surpasses them, that is why.

This excerpt reveals the considerable research Zhui Dong conducted to educate her son. Despite all her efforts, she worried about her child's bad temper. Later, she explained that her son is intolerant of other children and quick to anger, raising her anxiety that her son cannot fit in the standard system. During my interviews, all the mothers talked about the books, podcasts, and conferences they had read, listened to, or attended to improve their practices as mothers.

My interview with Zhui Dong also brings to light the international circulation of parenting norms. She emphasized reading American books to learn about best parenting practices and educate her son. Certain educational practices are associated with a Western liberal parenting style, for instance, letting children manage their time between homework and games or not forcing them to participate in boring activities, even if these activities are crucial for their educational career. However, according to the parents I met, these practices can only be applied in Western societies where social competition is less intense. According to them, these practices are inappropriate in the highly competitive Chinese educational system. Paradoxically, Chinese parents declare using liberal parenting practices to surpass American children, as Zhong Dui stated. Teresa Kuan (2015) shows that Chinese parents are aware of these contradictions but use native or foreign parenting norms strategically to justify their parenting practices.

During our interview, Amy Wang explained that China has entered an “era of competitive motherhood.” She used the word *pinma*, the second part means mothers, while the first part *pin* means “to risk one’s life (in battle, work, etc.)” or “go all out in doing something”, in gambling it means to “stake all”. Mothers go all out to raise excellent children; they put all their stakes – hopes, resources, and expertise – into their children’s education.<sup>137</sup> Based on anthropological fieldwork among middle-class parents in the provincial capital of Kunming, Teresa Kuan argues that mothers have a best-efforts obligation rather than an obligation of results. Kuan uses the concept of the “art of disposition” to explain that mothers focus on establishing the right environment and the right conditions [*tiaojian*] (2015, 110) for their child to become excellent. For instance, mothers felt they should create the right conditions for children to express

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<sup>137</sup> In Chinese, the word *pinma* translates by 拼妈 [pīn mā].

their talents. In her research, she suggested the competition between mothers is not based on concrete and objective results but rather on the efforts each mother puts into educating her child and securing resources.

Among my informants, some described a similar process, in particular when it comes to enrolling their children in extracurricular courses. Children are encouraged by their parents to try many different courses, such as calligraphy, ballet, painting, piano, programming, or gymnastics in order to find the child's unique talent. Thus, mothers enroll their children in many extracurricular courses to show their efforts in finding their child's talent. Zhao En, the mother of a twelve-year-old boy, asserts that it is "[her] duty is to unearth [her's son] personal strength".<sup>138</sup> Mothers feel they should do their best not to regret anything, even if their child fails. According to Kuan (2015, 117), mothers experience "agent-regret" when they fear not doing the right thing or when they regret not having done the right thing. Most of my informants clearly expressed that their greatest worry is not having done enough.

One newspaper article uses the child's perspective to emphasize the importance of constant effort. The article makes up the phrase the "if-my-mother-had-known-it [type of] regret" (Yu and Zhu 2014).<sup>139</sup> This fear of regret and its counterpart, the best-effort obligation, foster a competitive environment among urban middle-class mothers. To avoid regrets, mothers spend their time and money lavishly to provide the best education to their children.

## Trajectories of professional mothers

In the late 1990s, one enterprising young woman recognised and targeted [the child rearing] niche market by offering private education to children from 0 to 3 years of age. She had calculated the market potential of such a venture: "Think about it. There are 70 million 0-3 year-old toddlers in China with over 10 million in more affluent urban areas. If their parents pay Y2, 000 (US\$241) for each of them every year to attend early education programmes like ours the market size is around Y20 billion (US\$ 2.4 billion)." By September 2002, she had established 43 educational Oriental BabyCare stores in 32 cities nation-wide of which 10 were wholly owned by her company and the remaining 33 were franchised stores. Similarly, the registered capital of Y500, 000 (US\$60,240) that she invested in her pre-school had billowed into annual revenue of close to Y50 million (US\$6 million) with a profit margin of up to 20 per cent. (Croll 2006, 192)

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<sup>138</sup> In Chinese: 我们的任务就是发掘他的特长。

<sup>139</sup> In Chinese: 将来不留‘如果当初我妈知道就好了’的遗憾”。

Jia Jun, who founded Oriental Babycare, was one of the first professional mothers in China.<sup>140</sup> She raised two children while opening the first private daycare provider in China, using her personal experience as a mother to promote her facilities (Suho 2017). To reconcile financial constraints and intensive motherhood, some urban middle-class mothers transform their accumulated expertise into an income-generating activity and become what I call *professional mothers*. Their motherhood expertise becomes highly profitable. This phenomenon can be akin to the Mompreneurs movements, which emerged recently in France and the United States. The Mompreneurs movements bring together women who have chosen not to work during or after their pregnancy to create their own business. These self-help movements promote entrepreneurship among stay-at-home mothers. Scholars showed that the Mompreneurs movements emerged for two main reasons: young mothers sought to find a balance between intense maternal practices and income-earning activities; and they faced discrimination and challenges in staying or re-entering the job market after pregnancy (Landour 2019; Stone and Lovejoy 2004; Boushey 2008). Thus, they find it easier to start their own business than they do to find a suitable employer. Many mothers radically change professional sectors, for instance, from accounting to craftsmanship.

I coin the term professional mothers to designate Chinese urban middle-class mothers who start their business because they are distinct from the Western Mompreneur movements. They define their entrepreneurial activity specifically as deriving from maternal expertise. They are part of the upper urban middle class, and their professional retraining is made possible by their husband's financial contribution to the household. They often start by creating a self-media on the online platform WeChat to share advice, strategies, and practical tips. Then, they publish a book or pamphlet which presents their unique educational approach. Some examples are Yan Jianli, who published the best-seller *A good mother is better than a good teacher* in 2010, San Chuanling, who published *Towards a Happy Education* in 2018, and Amber Jiang, with the book *Getting Ashore* published in 2020.<sup>141</sup> All three mothers capitalized on their personal experiences to offer advice and propose unique educational solutions. Finally, professional mothers sell in-person and online training for parents.

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<sup>140</sup> In Chinese 东方爱婴 [dōngfāng ài yīng]

<sup>141</sup> In Chinese *Towards a Happy Education* translates by 通往幸福教育 [tōng wǎng xìngfú de jiàoyù] and *Getting Ashore* translates by 上岸 [shàng'àn] The title of the book refers to a popular term for passing China's civil servant exams or getting into a top school, both seen as tickets to a good and stable life.

To start their business, professional mothers need to establish their expertise. The legitimacy and recognition of this expertise most often originates in the academic and social success of their offspring. For instance, the enrollment of Yin Jianli's daughter in one of the country's best universities reinforces her mother's legitimacy in selling mothering advice. Amber Jiang benefits from a similar form of legitimacy from publishing her book after her son entered a good Beijing middle school thanks to her grueling efforts. A critical step in the professional mother's public recognition is earning the unofficial title of professor.<sup>142</sup> For instance, in the Question & Answer sections of her book, Yin Jianli is referred to as "Professor Yin." The label "professor" is widely used in China beyond school and university settings, indicating the public recognition of specific expertise and a form of intellectual superiority. During the fieldwork, I encountered two emerging professional mothers called "professors" by their interlocutors.

## Teacher Sang

Sang was a journalist at *Nanjing Daily* and a mother of a young teenage girl attending the city's best high school, *Nanjing Foreign Language School* [NFLS], when her daughter started gathering information about going abroad for college. Sang realized there was a lack of space for students and parents to share information. In 2015, she created a self-media on WeChat, called *NFLS News*, and she shared information she gathered from other websites.<sup>143</sup> When the self-media grew popular among *NFLS* students and parents, Sang thought it was not enough. In December of the same year, she rented an apartment in front of the school to create a sort of club for students and parents called: *NFLS's Parents Helper* (see Figure 18).<sup>144</sup>



**Figure 18.**  
**Logo of the**  
**self-media**

At that point, Sang resigned from her job as a journalist. She convinced one of her coworkers, a young woman, to join her in her new adventure. As of 2019, the club *NFLS's Parents Helper* was employing two people. The club branched into three or four self-media and organized at least three weekly events. During these events, academically

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<sup>142</sup> In Chinese 老师 [lǎoshī]

<sup>143</sup> In Chinese 南外新鲜事, [nán wài xīnxiān shì], the two first characters nanwai are the Chinese abbreviation for NFLS.

<sup>144</sup> In Chinese 南外家长帮, [nán wài jiāzhǎng bang]. This self-media is not connected to the website jiazhangbang (Parents' Helper) created by the Chinese education companies: Xueersi.

high-achieving students and their parents are invited to present their successful trajectory; they explain their educational choices and strategies and advise parent-participants. One of the most popular weekly events is *The Classroom for Good Parents*.<sup>145</sup> During my fieldwork in 2018, I attended several events organized by the network and interviewed the two staff.

The trajectory of Sang as a professional mother shows how she used her professional skills as a journalist to shift her career. She resigned from her job and created this club after identifying a specific unanswered parent need. In so doing, Sang aimed to share her personal experience to help other parents and created a business centered on best parenting practices. Her new business is not disconnected from her former professional career. The network uses online advertisements to sustain the staff salary, the rent of the apartment, and all miscellaneous fees. Once a month, the network organizes a paying event in a fancy location to attract more parents and advertise the network.

## Teacher Wang

Amy Wang, whose quote opens this chapter, is a trained engineer. After a stay in France, she opened *La Source*, a small business proposing a childcare center and extracurricular activities. I met her in 2017 during a conference in which I presented on the topic of parents' school fever in urban China. In 2018, Wang became a central informant for my research. After her engineering studies, she married an engineer, who was sent to France when their daughter was three years old. Over the family's three-year stay in France, Amy discovered the French parenting style and education system, which she describes as free and open. She told me about her daughter's school outings, nature discovery, and extracurricular activities. She often stressed that French schools did not sanction these activities with a score, unlike Chinese schools, which constantly compares children.

In 2015, the family moved back to China and invested a considerable sum in purchasing an apartment near an excellent primary school in Nanjing. Her husband was now working in Shanghai, where he rented an apartment, only returning to Nanjing for the weekends. Amy lived in Nanjing with her daughter. She explained that she no longer

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<sup>145</sup> In Chinese 好家长课堂, [hǎo jiāzhǎng kètáng]

wanted to work as an engineer because “as an engineer, [she] didn’t have the time to look after [her] daughter.” So she decided to open a learning center, *La Source*. During our discussions, she explained that decision: “I can free up time ... look after my child and meet many parents to talk about how to educate our children [laughs].”

This career change enabled her to devote more time to her daughter’s education, and to discuss parenting practices with other parents. The learning center is a converted apartment, with a large waiting room containing a few benches, a small office where Amy does the administrative work for her business and a play area for the children (see Figure 19). Pictures of activities made by the children decorate the walls, and some pictures feature Amy’s daughter during her three years in France. A chart on the wall presents the different stages of a child’s development from 0 to 6 years old and the recommended activities for each age (see Figure 20). This chart precisely indicates the courses a child should attend to best prepare for primary school, mainly supplementary courses offered by private companies. These courses complement the mandatory public education system. Thus, this chart underpins the consumerist discourse around education. In a nutshell, these recommendations reinforce the prescriptive and highly competitive environment in which urban middle-class parents raise their children.



**Figure 19. Waiting Room at La Source**  
*[Source: picture taken by the author]*



**Figure 20. Decoration on the wall of the waiting room**  
*[Source: picture taken by the author]*

For three weeks, I spent several evenings each week in the waiting room talking with parents and grandparents. The waiting room serves as a salon to discuss parenting and educational practices. Parents compared the number of extracurricular activities their children attend; they share advice and information about schools and private education institutions. Although Amy had no university education in teaching skills or

child development, her parent-clients gradually considered her an expert in parenting practices. Fang, the dissident grandmother, is one of her “loyal fans,” Fang explained how she chose *La Source* for her granddaughter.

In the beginning, I just came because it is very cheap, cheaper than [other institutions] in the neighbourhood [...] then I came in, [because] it feels that Amy [is an] education teacher although she does not entirely master the topic. I thought it would be good to follow her lead, especially in early childhood education, that is, pre-school, [...]. I will continue to let my granddaughter learn drawing here during the vacation. I found out that the teacher she hired, Mrs. Dong, is really good and dedicated to children. During her class, she kneels to be at the same height as the pupils, I had never seen a teacher who kneels, she squats down, so students are parallel, and communicate with students, a class so I praised Teacher Wang, she is so good, so I plan to enroll my granddaughter in her English class once a week. I really like her educational philosophy, methods...

According to all the parents I met at *La Source*, Amy’s expertise in the field of education was one of the main reasons they chose this particular learning center. The title “Teacher Wang” reveals the parents’ respect for Amy’s expertise. Discussions between Amy, the parents, and the teachers also took place online, where parents talk daily about their children, and Amy shares scientific and popular articles.

Wang progressively became a professional mother, exploiting her personal experience as a housewife in France. Her knowledge of a foreign educational and parenting system gives her a certain aura in the eyes of the parents. Amy has become an entrepreneur by transforming her maternal know-how into recognized expertise, which she reinforces through ongoing discussion with parents and her reading, and by creating an income-generating activity around her expertise, notably in the form of social network of parents.

The trajectories of these two local professional mothers differ sharply; they do not offer the same service to the same audience. Sang organizes events for an upper-middle-class audience. She selects parents whose children attend the best schools to share their experiences. An interviewee I met during one of the *Classroom for Good Parents* shared her skepticism about these events, where presenters offer perfect stories, and thus increase the anxiety of the audience. Wang opened a local learning center where the waiting room transformed into a salon for parents. There is not much selection except course fees which are notably low compared to other institutions. Wang and Sang express a gendered and classed form of agency, at the expense of other mothers who



may feel they can never measure up. In other words, their work as professional mothers contributes to the often harmful discourse of self-improvement, in a local and global climate of ever increasing competition and sacrifice. I argue that Wang and Sang transform their personal experience into sellable services and reputations. In this way, professional mothers reclaim knowledge over parenting practices. Their services compete with private education companies and public schools for parents.

# Conclusion

In a climate of fierce social competition, urban middle-class families are entirely devoted to their children's education. Under the mother's supervision, each member accomplishes a specific task at the service of a common goal, to raise a high-achieving child. While suspected of having a negative influence on the education of children, grandparents are nonetheless indispensable to managing household logistics and transportation. They bring the child back and forth to and from school and other educational institutions. The involvement of fathers in housework and children's education increased marginally in the last decades. As in many patriarchal societies, their main task is to provide the financial means to support their family. This contribution is all the more critical as educational strategies become increasingly expensive. Contradictory discourses call for greater involvement of fathers in childhood education while simultaneously highlighting their ineptitude.

To conclude, mothers are the centre of the household's daily arrangement. They coordinate the contribution of each member, even as most mothers manage to maintain a professional career. Mothers must devote their time, energy, and money to their children's education. National and international discourses shape the professionalization of maternal practices in urban China: good practices must be scientifically proven, and generally involve a substantial financial investment. Mothers are responsible for their child's academic success, a task they cannot delegate to either fathers or grandparents.

Some women invest in their roles to the extent that they shift careers and become professional mothers. They use their personal experience to sell advice to other parents. The professionalization of motherhood depends on the child's achievement and the financial, cultural, and social capital pre-existing in the households. Professional mothers reclaim the capacity to produce knowledge on parenting practices. In the next chapter, I show how parents devise educational strategies to circumvent education policies and build informal networks.



# Chapter 6. Parentocracy: the Limited Empowerment of Middle-class Parents

Parents from the middle class are actively involved in their child's educational success. In the previous chapters, I showed how the state and private actors are involved in family intimacy and how the child's education shapes intra-family relationships. In this chapter, I argue that urban middle-class parents strategize around local regulations to secure the best educational resources for their children. Parents challenge or circumvent the nearest-school policy, the policy that stipulates that children should enroll in the school assigned to its home address according to zoning drawn by the local education bureau. This rule, first established in the Mandatory Education Law in 1985, has been restated and reinforced by numerous decrees and official notices because parents have been playing a game of cat and mouse with the government to bypass this rule.

Parents use local regulations along with their own resources to implement their individual education strategy. Jin and Di (2015) argue that parentocracy, is a widespread phenomenon in urban China undermining equity and fairness in the distribution of public educational resources.<sup>146</sup> Parents "turn into consumers of educational output, [they] determine what kind of education their children will receive" (Jin and Yang 2015, 62). Despite the government's official discourse regarding equal access to education and its attempt to regulate the education market, parents devise complex residential, social and financial strategies to serve their children's education (Wu 2012, 2008). The phenomenon of parentocracy is not a master plan engineered by parents from the middle class; it is rather produced through public policies which diversify educational options and put schools in competition with each other. Public and private actors foster consumer-like behaviour in parents from the urban middle-class; parentocracy sustains

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<sup>146</sup> Cf chapter 2 for a discussion of the concept. According to Brown 1990, the concept of parentocracy designates an education system "whereby the education a child receives must conform to the *wealth* and *wishes* of parents rather than the *abilities* and *efforts* of pupils" (Brown 1990, 65, italic in the original text)

feedback loops that reinforce social segregation in schools. Private companies and real-estate agencies play the role of intermediaries and exacerbate inequalities. I argue that, to some extent, all these actors are reinforcing school segregation and undermining the balanced distribution of educational resources in China's urban centers.

The first step parents take when devising their educational strategies is to gather information about the resources available, compare prices and quality, and ultimately determine which school best suits their child. During this benchmarking period, the social and cultural capital of the parents are crucial. These resources determine the type of information that parents will be able to gather. Van Zanten (2009) showed that French parents conduct a near scientific inquiry into schools and other educational resources. She identifies two processes influencing the inquiry. First, the "dispositional effect" influences parents' goals (Van Zanten 2009, 77). Parents' values and ideals affect how they define their child's ideal school. Second, the "positional effect" means that the parents' socio-economic position limits their access to information. The positional effect heavily affects Chinese urban middle-class parents. Lower middle-class households have more limited access to knowledge and information than parents from the upper middle class. Different actors are involved in the process of gathering and compiling information: parents who investigate and share tips; the government who seeks to control how information is publicized and disseminated; and private actors who sell information and other products. In the education market, information is crucial; it gives parents the power to select the right path for their child. Information and knowledge become an empowering resource for parents.

Second, after sorting out information and choosing the ideal school for their child, parents must strategize to get their child enrolled in the targeted school. As a mother from the upper middle class explained, gathering information is not necessarily the hardest step in the process; it is when the parents, most often the mother, devise the strategy and then implement it, that poses the greatest challenge.<sup>147</sup> These strategies depend on the resources available to the household. I argue that some households can prioritize their educational strategy over their residential strategy, they can afford to buy an education-apartment anywhere in the city, thus they overcome the constraints of the school districting.<sup>148</sup> Some lower-middle-class households cannot afford to subject

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<sup>147</sup> In Chinese 思路 [sīlù]

<sup>148</sup> An education-apartment, in Chinese 学区房 [xuéqū fang], is an apartment strategically located to give

their residential trajectory to their education strategy, so they comply with the nearest school policy and influence their child's educational trajectory with more localized strategies.

# Gathering information: a process of social distinction under state control

Recent news stories reveal the undeniable tension in the Chinese education market regarding information and competition. In 2020, in Hangzhou, the capital of the wealthy province of Zhejiang, a new local regulation prohibited schools from sharing students' grades and class rankings on WeChat led to heated debates online. The local policy aimed at regulating information shared on parent-teacher groups in order to reduce the anxiety of parents and students and protect personal privacy. However, parents underlined the indispensable role of competition and ranking to stimulate students (R. Liu 2020). This story shows that state control over information is a constant source of tension. The state aims to reducing parent anxiety yet maintains schools' and students' competition, with competitive admission procedures to enroll in high school and university.

In this fiercely competitive and constantly evolving environment, parents' networks are a crucial tool for parents to strategize and implement an education plan for their child. All of my interviewees mentioned how word-of-mouth and connections allowed them to access the most appropriate education resources for their children. They underline how social capital is the only way to access most good public kindergartens. Despite the Chinese governments' (local and national) constant attempts to regulate the education market and formalize the procedures, it seems that informal ties remain the central resource for parents' regarding school choice.

In the context of state control over information, parents turn to their social circle to research parenting practices and compare educational options. All of my interviewees mentioned word-of-mouth as their first source of information.<sup>149</sup> Parents share different types of information: advice on parenting practices to improve their child's talents or to correct a child's behavior; and practical information and recommendations on educational resources (schools and extra-curricular activities). Social position determines the scope of the investigation and the size of the social circle providing information. I argue that the lower-middle-class parents share practical tips and conduct

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<sup>149</sup> In Chinese word-of-mouth translates by 口碑 [kǒubēi].

a more localized inquiry into educational resources. They investigate schools and learning centers close to home. The lower-middle-class parents' social circle is often limited to family members and neighbors. For their part, upper-middle-class households broaden their social circle to discuss ideal parenting practices with select performing parents. Their purchasing power enables them to buy apartments to implement their educational strategies; thus, they survey citywide educational resources and broaden the horizons of the possible to the whole city of Nanjing.

## State control over information

According to interviewees, the first criterion parents use to assess the quality of a primary school is the rate of student admission to top-ranked high schools. In Nanjing, schools rank according to the students' rate admitted at Nanjing Foreign Language School (*Nanwai*) and Nanjing Normal University Affiliated High School (*Nanshi*). The Chinese government is acutely aware that this ranking is the first criterion for appraising schools. Thus, to reduce the pressure on educational resources, the government seeks to control the information regarding school ranking and school enrollment in high schools. In the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, Article 10 reads, "The ways and means to test and evaluate student performance and to appraise school operation shall be reformed. (...) Schools can neither be ranked according to the rate of students' admission to higher schools, nor the enrollment indexes" (Ministry of Education 2010, 15). However, despite government efforts to regulate this trend for decades, this policy has had minimal impact. The interests of central and, local government administrations are not always aligned. On the one hand, local education bureaus are rewarded by their hierarchy for implementing a "balanced development of educational resources" frequently described in policy documents such as the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*.<sup>150</sup> This balanced development implies restricting school ranking to "harmonize" educational resources. On the other hand, local education bureaus want to show that they offer high-quality education within their territory. Public funding tends to favor renowned public

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<sup>150</sup> In Chinese 均衡发展 [jūnhéng jiàoyù fāzhǎn]



schools which maintain high rankings. School administrations, whether private or public, are looking to attract the best students to improve their ratings.

Mu, the mother of two girls met at *La Source*, summarizes the situation: “Official websites can't let you rank. It's all from non-governmental sources; they provide statistics on how many students have enrolled in *Nanwai* [the best high school in Nanjing], how many students in the school enter into *Nanshi High School*, how the school scores are like [everyone knows them] (...) this kind of website also exists.” Mu is aware that school rankings are officially forbidden. However, she knows that most parents get around the ban and obtains these rankings from local authorities, schools, teachers, or private companies. Later in the interview, she expressed her wariness about unofficial rankings.

Teachers and school staff know that the schools and the students' ranking are their best arguments to attract good students. Some teachers openly share the school results with parents, as explained by Kao, a wealthy working mother. A manager in a Japanese import/export company, Kao, invited me to her office in downtown Nanjing to conduct the interview. She explained that she rejected the social competition in the Chinese education system and enrolled her twelve-year-old son in a private boarding high school that favors creative activities. Regarding school rankings, she told me that:

School ranking, um..., now generally speaking it is like this, the government may not let you rank, but the teacher actually knows, teachers must know the ranking, the problem is whether you, the parents want to know, the teacher will definitely know, the class of 30 children, for example, today after the language test, the students approximate ranking from 1 to 30, the teacher must have a number in mind, but now they are not allowed to make this ranking public ...; now the government does not allow you to make it public, but the parents discuss with the teacher, then the teacher might feel that this policy is actually increasing the parents' anxiety, and the teacher, in fact, thinks that “I might as well get the ranking out today, I'll just copy-paste [the ranking] directly in the online group, so you, parents, all know it.” But it is true that, for example for children who are at the back, [the teacher] might feel that, it might discourage the children [in the back], that's because now, from the first to the ninth year of compulsory education, you should not divide [and rank] the children, but if they do so, in fact, it increases the teacher's workload, but the parents still want to know.

Kao described the ambiguous role of teachers as being caught between a rock and a hard place. The government bans the publication of school and student ranking, be it on paper on schools' properties, on parents-teacher online groups, or the school's website. This ban reduces school competition, education pressure, and parents' anxiety.

The uncertainty of one's ranking and the fear of falling behind or "losing on the starting line" as some parents formulate it, feed into a craving for more rankings on the parents' side.<sup>151</sup> Thus, teachers accommodate government directives and parental pressure. In this intensively competitive environment, the teachers are not the only ones to produce and publish rankings. Private actors, such as realtors, benefit from parents' appetite for rankings and publish school rankings to sell apartments.

## **Practical and local information shared by the lower middle-class parents**

Fang, the proactive and enthusiastic grandmother, first introduced in chapter five, illustrates how lower-middle-class households conduct a local inquiry into educational resources. Considering the family's limited budget, she described her investigation as choosing her granddaughter's preschool.

**Fang:** I wanted to save money but I also wanted a good school, so before I enrolled her, I went around to investigate, and then when I had a clear view of the situation, I found this cheap, not too far away, public kindergarten.

**Manon:** How long did it take to investigate?

**Fang:** At least half a year, half a year, at least half a year, to check each school around me, that is all the kindergartens within two or three stops by bus, I went to investigate, and finally investigated this one, which does not charge sponsorship fees [i.e. extra fee for admission], and the tuition is also very cheap.

**Manon:** So, there's no website where you can get advice about these kindergartens and ask questions?

**Fang:** There is a website, but we are [here she means her as a grandmother] too old to use the website, so we asked the questions ourselves. (laugh)

Fang described a long and tedious process of benchmarking during which she went door-to-door to investigate all of the kindergartens located two-bus-stops away from her home to assess which one had the best value for money. This investigation illustrates a lack of reliable and comprehensive information about each school's admission process and tuition fees. This uncertain and ever-changing environment is fostered by the lack of regulation and enforcement of standards in the early childhood education market. Thus, Fang has to gather the information herself, whereas, in the upper middle class, information is gathered and shared during semi-public events.

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<sup>151</sup> In Chinese 输在起跑线上 [shū zài qǐpǎoxiàn shàng]

On August 2018, I was introduced by Amy Wang to the private online group of parents who enrolled their children at *La Source*. In late August, I witnessed the anxiety of mothers before classes started in their child's kindergarten. On August 25<sup>th</sup>, a mother asked advice as to which stamp to buy to print her child's name on his clothes. Here is an extended excerpt of the online discussion among four mothers:

**Hu** 11h33 Hi everyone, what do you use to mark your children's school bags? Last time I saw you said you bought a "stamp" online and printed it on? What does the one you bought look like? Can you send it to me?

Like that? (...)

**Tang** 15h25 I bought embroidered name-tags which I will sew [to the clothes] by myself.

**Tian** 15h26 Check on the back of the children's school bag, there is a place where you can write the name

**Hu** 15h26: Oh, oh, so many ways

**Tang** 15h26 You can probably write with an oil-based pen.

**Hu** 15h26 So do all of you use the child's own name also on quilts or other items?

**Tian** 15h27 Uh-huh, yes

**Tang** 15h27 Yes, I also used embroidered name-tags and then saw them on the clothes.

**Tian** 15h28 Now it's too late to buy embroidered name-tags for clothes! I'm going to embroider the name by myself 😊...

**Hu** 15h29 Still need to sew with a needle

**Tian** 15h30 Yes

**Hu** 15h30 Looks easier to stamp 🙄

**Tang** 15h30 Moms are all-powerful<sup>152</sup>(...)

**Hu** 15h34 Everyone bought a lot [of different things]! (...)

**Xiao** 15h40 Don't worry too much. In fact, children are more adaptable than we think.

**Tian** 15h40 Towels and drinking cups generally require children to remember where to put them, and each kindergarten is different.

**Xiao** 15h41 Sometimes it's the adults who are really worried.

**Tian** 15h 41 Yes, I think the first day of school, the teacher will explain everything clearly

**Hu** 15h41 Compared to schooling at La Fontaine, what else do we need?

**Xiao** 15h41 I bought a set of quilts flocked from the Nanyou Kindergarten. (...)

**Tian** 15h47 The main thing is the child, the child's adjustment to the kindergarten, the rest is all easy to manage

**Xiao** 15h47 I am afraid of the air-conditioning and the cold mattress. I really want to accompany her on the first day. 😞

**Tian** 15h48 Children should also be taught to go see the teacher to solve problem.

**Hu** 15h 48 Same. I took a week of leave.



**Figure 21. Screenshot sent by Hu on the parents' chatroom about clothes stamp**

<sup>152</sup> In Chinese : 妈妈都是全能 [māmā dōu shì quánnéng]

**Tian** 15h49 In some kindergarten the first day is only a half day, and then it is all day long, I don't know how it is arranged in Nanyou Kindergarten.

**Hu** 15h50 This morning I went to pick up the school bag, they said [the welcoming day] last the whole day. I was in over my head, one whole day

**Xiao** 15h51 I'm going to take her on a two-day trip before school.

**Tian** 15h53 🙄 During the children's lunch, we, adults just sit there and doze off? 🙄

**Hu** 15h53 I guess school should be over early.

**Xiao** 15h53 Probably at least until 3 or 4 pm. I don't know if we can shift [the chaperone] person in the middle of the day.

**Tian** 15h54 🙄🙄🙄 It should be okay [to shift chaperone]. (...)

**Tian** 15h55 This is the day schedule for another kindergarten, so you can have a look, to have a general idea.(...)

**Tian**15h55



**Figure 22. Screenshot sent by Tian regarding the timetable in another kindergarten**



**Figure 23. Screenshot sent by Tian regarding the timetable in another kindergarten**

In this extended excerpt, mothers exchange a range of information online, ranging from educational products to hygiene, health, and logistics about the first day of school. Hu asks several questions as she worries about the preparation for her child's first day in kindergarten. The time logs show how quickly mothers answer and share their advice. Tang also underlines how mothers need to master many different skills to be a mother, as they need to master using a needle to sew name tags on their child's clothes. During the discussion, a form of solidarity among the three mothers emerges as Xiao and Tian try to assuage Hu's anxiety by asserting that she can trust her child's ability to adapt to a new environment.

Amy Wang, the director of *La Source*, created this online group to share information about children's daily activities during the summer preschool. However, mothers reclaim this group to share tips and advice. When discussing the hygiene of towels and quilts, they demonstrate a shared sense of individual responsibility regarding their child's well-being. Hu is annoyed that she will not be able to provide a

napkin and tableware for her child. She seems not to trust the kindergarten to maintain high-enough cleanliness standards.

When discussing the first day at kindergarten, they rely on peers as a source of information. There is no mention of official information. Hu went to the kindergarten on the morning of the same day. Thus, she shares the information she has just gathered about the timetable for the first day of class. Tian is the first to provide external information from another kindergarten to give a general idea of the first day of school. The timetable is extremely precise, with activities changing every 20 minutes (nap, waking up, snacks, sport activities, community activities, and snacks). The last activity involves children choosing a toy. Parents are welcomed into the school on the first day to accompany their children. Hu, who seems the most worried, took a week of leave to make sure of her availability during her child's adaptation period in kindergarten.

In this example, mothers rely on their social circle to share concrete and instrumental information about daily life in kindergarten. These mothers do not conduct a systematic comparison on activities organized by the school, and do not introduce ideal and theoretical educational methods. They focus on practical and urgent questions.

## **A Classroom for Wealthy Parents**

Similarly to lower-middle-class parents, upper-middle-class parents gather information from online parents' groups and the immediate circle. However, they broaden their information through semi-public events such as the ones organized by the network *NFLS's Parents Helper* created by Sang. This network organizes events such as the *Classroom for Good Parents*, *Study abroad at an early age*, and *Early childhood education*<sup>153</sup>. I attended the first *Early Childhood Education* session in the fall of 2018 and collected the reports from the subsequent sessions. During these events, a parent, often a mother, explains how her child has been successful and shares advice about improving a child's talent. I conducted several interviewees with parents who attended these events. These parents are mainly from the upper middle class, managers in public services, and national or international corporations.

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<sup>153</sup> In Chinese, respectively 好家长课堂, [hǎo jiāzhǎng kètáng], 低龄留学[dīlíng liúxué] and 幼升小 [yòu shēng xiǎo]

Parent events are semi-public; any followers of the self-media NFLS's Parents Helper can register and attend a session depending on seat availability. Hundreds of sessions have been held in an apartment rented by Sang, the self-media founder. An expert-parent shares his or her advice and best practices to an audience of strangers, who listens attentively and sometimes even takes notes (Fig. 25). On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, the Zhao couple drew from their parenting experience to provide parenting advice to the audience. According to an advertisement for the talk, the Zhao couple work at China Eastern Airlines. The father is an aircraft pilot, and the mother, a former flight attendant, is a full-time mother.<sup>154</sup> The ad portrays the parents as “expert-parents” because their three-year-old son is very independent: sleeping in his bedroom since his first month and reading on his own for half an hour every day. Their son is also very good in English, and finally, to top it all off, he has been “admitted to two foreign language kindergartens in Nanjing” for the following September. According to the ads, the couple will “share their thoughts on how to cultivate a child’s concentration and self-control (...).<sup>155</sup> They discuss early childhood problems, such as parent-child separation, sleeping alone, English language initiation, flash card training, pediatric medicine, psychological advice, child psychology, and so on” (NFLS Parents Helper 2018b).

In a report published on the self-media after the talk, two photos give a sense of the event setting: the expert-parent couple presenting (Fig. 24) and the crowded audience of mostly women (Fig. 25) (NFLS Parents Helper 2018a).



**Figure 24. Zhao Yi and his wife** [Source: picture taken by the author]



**Figure 25. The audience during Zhao's talk at NFLS** [Source: picture taken by the author]

<sup>154</sup> In Chinese 全职母亲 [quánzhí mǔqīn]

<sup>155</sup> In Chinese respectively 专注力 [zhuānzhù lì] and 自控力 [zìkòng lì]

Zhao Yi's advice on childrearing is entrenched in a liberal conception of parenting, coined by Anette Lareau in her study of the American middle class, as "concerted cultivation" (2003). Zhao Yi promotes the idea that children and parents are equal, advising parents to kneel or squat when speaking to their child to be at the same height as their child. He recommends avoiding saying 'no' to a child and using positive reinforcement to strengthen the child's self-confidence. In the following excerpt of the report, Zhao Yi shares how they nurtured their child's concentration capacity:

Xi Yangyang [the couple's son] is now less than 3 years old and, currently he can complete a 12-piece puzzle in 3 or 4 minutes; when he is bored, he picks up a book by himself and reads on his own for half an hour; Xi Yangyang and his mother can read together for up to two hours. We feel that his current concentration capacity is very good.

Regarding the development of children's concentration, we think the most important thing is to let the child do whatever he wants, the parents should make sure that the surrounding environment is safe, and then they should not disturb him, and leave it fully to the child to manage his own time.

Initially, when I was reading to Xi Yangyang, he would not sit still, at that time I would read by myself, or entertain myself, and sometimes guide him. Slowly, he was able to sit down very quietly. Now, with the finger reading method, Xi Yangyang is able to read a book of more than 60 pages with me. The most important thing is that as long as the child doesn't say stop, I won't stop and will keep reading to him.

When I take Xi Yangyang out to play, if Xi Yangyang stares at a toy for a long time, I will wait and observe silently, not saying anything, not like many parents who may say, "Let's go, go look at something else, something else is more fun."

As a parent, do not force the child, do not disturb the child, do not impose your preferences on the child, take the child out for the moment, parents should realize that the play time belongs to the child. In a new environment, a child's eyes will look for and study everything he likes. What all parents need to do is to make sure the surroundings are safe as well as just observe silently. Forcing the child for a long time will make the child distrustful of the parents. (NFLS Parents Helper 2018a)

In this excerpt, Zhao Yi draws from his experience to provide seemingly universal advice on cultivating a child's ability to concentrate. He uses scientific vocabulary such as "observe" to frame his advice. Later in his speech, he says that he "uses practical experience to prove that parent-child separation [in different rooms to sleep] and a good sense of security are not at all incompatible" (NFLS Parents Helper 2018a).<sup>156</sup> Expert-parents, such as Zhao Yi, reclaim the capacity to produce knowledge about parenting practices by themselves, beyond the medical, academic and governmental circles, and yet they are deeply informed by them nonetheless.

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<sup>156</sup> In Chinese "我们用实践经验证明正确的亲子分离和安全感完全不相冲突。" [wǒmen yòng shíjiàn jīngyàn zhèngmíng zhèngquè de qīnzǐ fēnlí hé ānquán gǎn wánquán bù xiāng chōngtú.]

There are contradictions in Zhao Yi's discourse regarding gender balance in parenting practices. He asserted the importance of "a unified parental battle front," and highlighted his role as a father. However, he admitted that his wife is spending much more time with their son as she quit her job to become a full-time mother. He is away for half a month due to his work, thus he recognizes "the hardships of being a full-time mother"(NFLS Parents Helper 2018a). Yet, the report is written entirely from the perspective of the father who is presenting the couple's parenting practices. This mansplaining discourse is even more striking when the father explains that his wife is "not like any other fulltime mother" because she cultivates and accompanies their son's natural growth rather than merely raises their son. At the same time, his wife, present at the public event, does not utter a word. The father's discourse highlights the gender dimension of parenting practices in daily life family. The daily gender roles reproduce a similar gender division as the one presented in chapter five and six, where the mother devises an educational strategy and manages the child's daily activities. This event organized by the NFLS network is an example of parent-experts from the upper-middle-class sharing their parenting practices.

On October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018, I attended a talk from the NFLS network, during which Shi Hui, an educational professional, working as a language teacher at one of the best primary schools in Nanjing, talked about parents preparing their children to enroll in primary school. The advertisement for the event claimed that "Mrs. Shi Hui will give some advice (...) on the qualities and abilities which parents should focus on developing in their children before school age. She will talk about how they should prepare their children to better cope with learning and life in elementary school". Despite her experience as a teacher in a renowned primary school, Shi Hui draws on her personal experience as a mother to give authority to her advice. She mentions her child as an example (8 times) more than twice more than her experience as a teacher (3 times) supporting her recommendations. She barely talks about the primary school where she is working. Her personal experience as a mother gives greater standing to provide parenting advice.

Shi Hui provided detailed recommendations about daily life routines during her talk. At the heart of her method is "cultivating good habits" such as tidiness, timeliness,



seriousness, rule-compliance, and good reading habits.<sup>157</sup> Shi Hui underlines the role of parents in their child's development: "Parents need to be personally responsible for their children's learning, and leaving it to the elderly is not an option."<sup>158</sup> Parents should accompany their children in their studies as early as possible. Mrs. Shi Hui advocated studying in advance: "Studying is hard, study in advance (...). My own children had no breaks from fourth grade to high school, and there were no summer or winter vacations because the holidays were used to study the next semester's curriculum in advance."<sup>159</sup> Shi Hui's story shows that not all the events organized by the NFLS self-media align with the liberal parenting practices promoted by the Zhao couple. Despite these differences, childrearing practices are always presented as universal. Expert-parents and education professionals do not mention the social, cultural, and economic capital needed to raise a child. Here the expert-parents and the audience are mainly upper-middle-class households.

After a talk on *Study abroad at a younger age*, an upper-middle-class mother explained why she attends these events: "it helps me a lot to hear what they think about international schools for children's growth and judgment, because one's ideas are limited if one is confined to one's small area."<sup>160</sup> Attending talks allows upper-middle-class parents to broaden their perspective on school choice and educational success. However, these information sessions are not all positive. As one mother shared with me, the diversity of information sources increases parents' anxiety, and in particular increases a mother's labor: "there are so many [discussion] groups (...) too many sources of information, some information is true, some is fake, some are just guesses". The lack of formal and official sources of information creates a competitive space for knowledge production regarding education. Public and private actors compete to help parents cope with and sometimes circumvent regulations. Parents themselves reclaim knowledge production, even as they remain subject to its gendered and class boundaries.

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<sup>157</sup> In Chinese 培养良好习惯 [péiyǎng liánghǎo xíguàn]

<sup>158</sup> In Chinese: "孩子的学习需要父母亲自去管, 交由老人是不行的。" [háizi de xuéxí xūyào fùmǔ qīnzi qù guǎn, jiāo yóu lǎorén shì bùxíng de.]

<sup>159</sup> In Chinese: "学习很苦, 提前学习 (...)我自己的孩子从小学四年级一直到高中, 基本就没有休息, 没有寒暑假。因为假期要用来提前学习下个学期的课程内容。"

<sup>160</sup> The title of the talk in Chinese is 低龄留学[dīlíng liúxué]

# Parents' power in shaping their child's school trajectory

In an intense and competitive educational environment, parents play a critical role in shaping their child's schooling trajectory by mobilizing all of their available resources to implement their school strategy. In November 2018, a five-year-old boy's application to enter Shanghai's Star River Bilingual Primary School made headlines. The parents compiled a 15-page resume to track their child's performance (Wong 2018). This news story illustrates parents' intensive involvement in their child's school trajectory. I argue that, during the process of resource mobilization, parents demonstrate their agency in coping with and sometimes circumventing school admission regulations.

Upper-middle-class parents initiate complex residential, social and financial strategies to secure the best educational resources for their children. Their considerable resources enable them to bypass government directives. They purchase successive apartments to get their child admitted in the ideal school while abiding by school districting zones. Their extensive financial resources subvert the goals of the education policies which aim to control parent school choice. Some wealthy parents exit the public school system by choice or resignation. By way of contrast, lower-middle-class parents cope with the school districting and the public school admission processes. They compensate their lack of financial resources with social and cultural capital. Some parents from the lower middle-class also experience some-kind of class-based discrimination.

## “School-Choice parents:” agency and resource mobilization

Some parents refused to participate in the study, objecting that they did not choose their child's school. They claimed not to belong to “school-choice parents” who buy an education-apartment that gives access to an elite school.<sup>161</sup> This term is widely used by

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<sup>161</sup> In Chinese, school-choice parents translates by 择校家长 [zé xiào jiāzhǎng]. An education-apartment, in Chinese 学区房 [xuéqū fang] is an apartment strategically located to give access to several elite schools. Cf Chapter 4 for a discussion of the concept.

parents in China, whether from the upper or the lower middle-class. Yet, it contains a negative connotation, none of my interviewee claimed to be “school-choice parents”. I assume that this saying also reveals a certain class-based consciousness – an awareness and critique of the privileges leveraged by wealthy elites.

## Household registration as a family resource

During my fieldwork, several parents mentioned the household registration as a resource to enroll their children in their targeted public school. Dong, a former English teacher who quit her job to become a stay-at-home mother, explained the family residential trajectory. After a few years of living on the outskirts of Nanjing, the couple moved into Dong’s parents’ apartment to secure a spot in an elite primary school in downtown Nanjing. However, because the school regulations require that the parents own and reside in the same apartment, the grandparents consequently bought and moved to another apartment so that only the couple and their son would appear on the household registration.

**Dong:** I originally lived here [in downtown Nanjing], but ... when I got married, I lived with my husband in Jiangning district, it's far away from here, but Gulou district is the best education place, so we moved our home back to my parents, and my parents ...uh, my parents’ house is an education-apartment, I don't know if you know this concept?

**Manon:** Yes

**Dong:** Nearby, there is a pretty good primary school, Sanpailou Primary School. (...) It is not the best in Nanjing, but it is not bad.

**Manon:** So, you had to change the household registration?

**Dong:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, the *hukou* (...). So [first] we moved from Jiangning to Gulou, then my parents bought another flat nearby, and we moved our *hukou* into my parents’ house (laughs), yeah... They bought the house first, then they moved their *hukou* out, and then we could move our *hukou* in. The school admission requirements for this primary school are pretty strict (...) it also depends on the propriety rights. Only the child’s parents’ name should be on it, and without other people. So my parents had to move their *hukou* out and only then I and my husband could formally move in. (...)

**Manon:** It should just be you, your husband and your kid.

**Dong:** Right, of course not all schools have this kind of requirement, but the slightly better schools will be stricter.

**Manon:** So, do you live with your parents now?

**Dong:** We are not living together, but they live nearby, so I’m living in their house.

**Manon:** Then, does your kid live with you or with your parents?

**Dong:** Both, he lives [a bit in both apartments]

Dong’s story illustrates how the upper-middle-class transforms the household registration into a resource to secure better educational opportunities for their children.

Having a *hukou* from Nanjing is a social class indicator. Dong's story also illustrates intergenerational solidarity. The grandparents moved out of their own apartment in order for the young couple to register their household and thus ensure that the three-year boy would be admitted to the target school. During my discussion with Dong, I could not clarify how she obtained the propriety rights certificate and whether she had to buy her parents' apartment from them. Yet, the grandparent's wealth secured the best educational opportunities for the grandchild. This intergenerational wealth is evidence of social reproduction. As discussed in Chapter five, Bao Mu's family also benefitted from the resources of grandparents. In this case, Bao Mu placed the three generations on the same household registration to benefit from the maternal grandfather's status as a retired member of the military to enroll the grandchild in the primary school reserved for military families. In these two stories, the two mothers rely on the intergenerational transmission of family resources and, in the case of the military, professionally conferred privilege.

For some upper-middle-class households, the household registration is central to complex long-term strategies. Wu and his wife are both bankers. Wu comes from Nanjing and his wife comes from Shanghai. They decided to register their child in Shanghai with his mother's family. They thought it would be easier for him to get admitted to one of the prestigious Shanghai universities. However, and long before entering university, the family first struggled to enroll the six-year-old boy in a Nanjing public primary school as a consequence of his lack local registration:

**Manon:** Well, because he has a Shanghai *hukou*, he doesn't have a Nanjing *hukou*?

**Wu:** He's not local.

**Manon:** But you are.

**Wu:** I am, it's useless. Don't you know?

**Manon:** I know, but I thought maybe...

**Wu:** It's that he is not on the *hukou* with me. (...) [he is with his] mother, yes, his mother is in Shanghai. so.....

**Manon:** Is it a better *hukou*, or not?

**Wu:** It's not sure, it's not sure; it's just the Shanghai *hukou*. For the time being, it may be a bit helpful for the university entrance examination, but at present, he is still young.

**Manon:** Well, why did you choose this, or did you choose not?

**Wu:** Why did we choose the Shanghai *hukou* instead of mine, right?

**Manon:** Right.

**Wu:** At that time I thought a Shanghai *hukou* is a bit better, maybe for after, something like that, it may be helpful for this kind of university. It might help. Of course, I also think that the household registration may not exist in the future, but at least for now, it may be very...

**Manon:** If it exists...

**Wu:** If it exists, it will be very helpful, right, so it doesn't matter if he is in Nanjing, for example, if he studies well enough, he can take the exam [the university exam for Shanghai University], right? Taking the exam there is something, (...) [but now] because he has an external hukou, so I can't him in any kind of school, I have to pay a sponsorship fee.

In his answers, Wu seemed hesitant regarding their initial decision. He explained the rationale for this decision. The university entrance examination distributes contestants to universities across the country according to their scores. The examination also includes quota by region, first favoring the local students and, to a lesser extent, students coming from poorer regions. Thus, the local household registration gives a comparative advantage to getting admitted to a local university. It is a long-term strategy for the parents of a six-year-old boy living in Nanjing. Wu also thought the household registration system might be rescinded earlier, thus this question would not matter. The high wages of the household enable him to bear the present cost of this long-term bet on the future. Indeed, he has to pay a high sponsorship fee to enroll him in a good primary school because his son is not registered in Nanjing.

## Household residential trajectory as shaped by educational strategies

The nearest-school-enrollment policy gives some agency to upper-middle-class parents to choose their child's school by using their residential trajectory as a resource.<sup>162</sup> Urban studies scholars have shown how school districting policies reinforce spatial segregation (Wu, Zhang, and Waley 2016; Wu, Edensor, and Cheng 2018). They conceptualize the phenomenon of *jiaoyufication*, which is an “education-led gentrification” (Wu, Zhang, and Waley 2016, 3512).<sup>163</sup> This phenomenon explains both the high real estate prices and the lack of refurbishment in downtown Nanjing. To enroll their child in the targeted public school, the parents need the local household registration and the ownership certificate for an apartment in the targeted school district. Wealthy households invest in real estate property to obtain a property rights certificate and get their child admitted to a target primary school. However, they do not spend time or money on maintenance; they also do not get involved in the local life or

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<sup>162</sup> The nearest-school-enrollment policy translates by 就近入学 [jiùjìn rùxué].

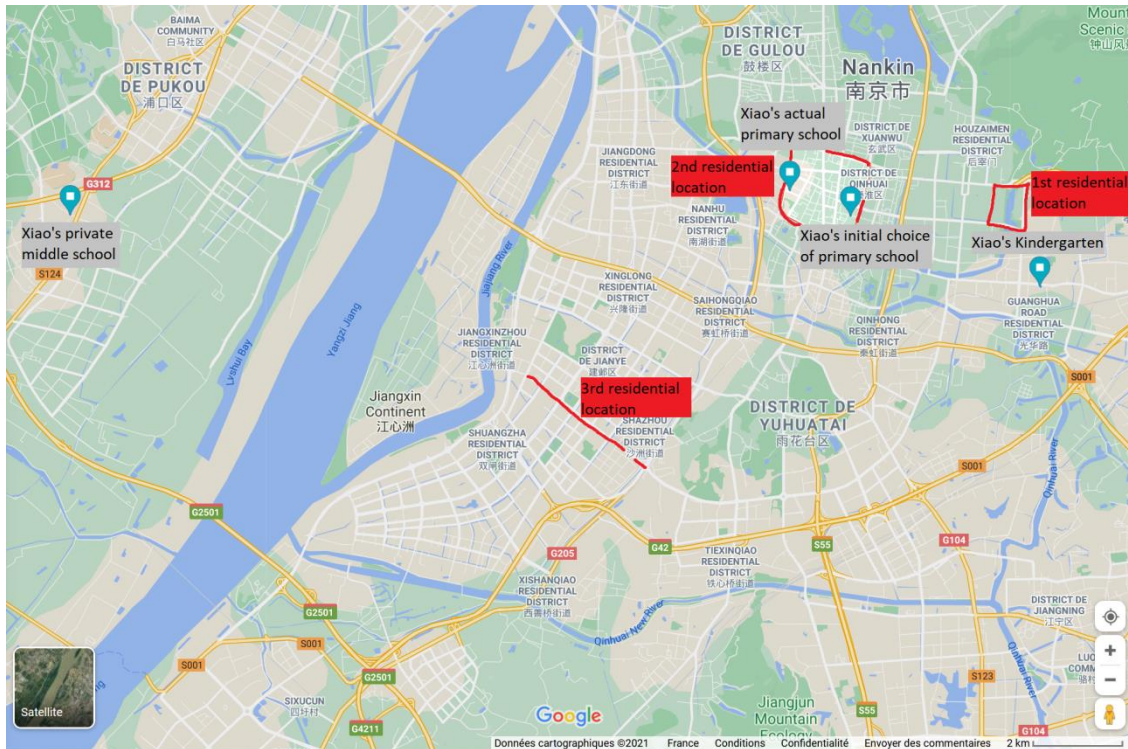
<sup>163</sup> The word *jiaoyufication* is created as a variant of the word gentrification combining the Chinese word for “education”, 教育 [jiàoyù], with the tail of the word gentrification.

any neighborhood association. Finally, they move out when the child reaches senior high school, for which admission is based on a competitive examination. The *jiaoyufication* process resembles gentrification because it involves the displacement and class conversion of neighborhoods, reinforcing spatial segregation and property speculation. However, it diverges from gentrification by the lack of urban renewal.

In Nanjing, several of my informants mentioned the poor quality of apartments near three of the best primary schools. Parents designate these apartments with the phrase “education-apartments”. This new product in the real estate market has a broad and fluid definition. It can be rebranded for old apartments near good schools or a selling argument for new urban developments. Some parents take pride in living in an education-apartment whereas others reject this name even though they live within the catchment area of a good school. The phenomenon, observable in most major cities in China, is a consequence of the privatisation of public housing in the 1990s and the spatial distribution of education resources (Wu, Zhang, and Waley 2016; Wu, Edensor, and Cheng 2018). Beyond the impact on the urban landscape, I argue that the phenomenon of *jiaoyufication* also reveals the agency of upper-middle-class parents in shaping their child’s school trajectory and ensuring their child’s social status.

Xiao’s story shows how parents navigate the education system and used real-estate investment to secure spots in targeted schools. Xiao was living around *Yueya Lake* on the right side of the map below. She bought an apartment there for her daughter to attend an excellent public kindergarten in this district. A year before her daughter finished kindergarten, Xiao bought an apartment in downtown Nanjing, in a district called *Xinjiekou* (left of *Yueya Lake* on Fig. 26). She had planned for her daughter to attend *Huowa xiang* primary school, which is affiliated with one of the best schools in Nanjing *Youfu West Street*. *Youfu West Street* primary school is ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in the ranking published in the 365taofang real-estate agency booklet. Any school affiliated with *Youfu West Street* primary school is considered a good choice. However, Xiao missed the date for the entrance interviews. Even though she was living in the right school-district, she could not enroll her daughter in the initially targeted primary school. Xiao had bought an education-apartment in downtown Nanjing, in *Xinjiekou*, close enough to other excellent primary schools, such as *Shigu Street*. She managed to enroll her daughter in *Shigu street* primary school by using a personal connection. Xiao describes this school as part of the “second-circle”, it does not appear in the ranking of the real-estate agency booklet.

Finally, when her daughter reached twelve years old, she joined a private middle school with a boarding school located in the *Pukou District*, on the left side of the map below. At the time of the interview, Xiao's fourteen-year-old daughter lives at her school during the weekdays. The parents moved to a spacious apartment in the affluent district around *Hexi Street*, at the center of the map.



**Figure 26. Map of the residential and educational trajectory of Xiao and her daughter extracted from Google map.**

*Elements in red figure the residential trajectory of Xiao's household, elements in grey figure Xiao's daughter educational trajectory*

During the interview, Xiao described the household's residential trajectory. She underlines how this trajectory is connected to her daughter schooling.

**Manon:** Did you live near the [primary] school?

**Xiao:** Not far, I would ride the bike for 10 to 15 minutes.

**Manon:** Which school-district did your house belong to?

**Xiao:** It's called Huowa Xiang Primary School. It was not a very good school, but now it has become an affiliated branch of Youfu West Street primary school, because I initially wanted to go to Youfu West Street Elementary School. I used to live on the side of Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in the east of the city [near Yueya Lake]. Later I bought [an apartment] at Xinjiekou. One suite, but this house does not have a [specific] school district, that is to say, Huowaxiang Primary School, but this place is very close to Youfu West Street Primary School and not far from Shigu Road Primary School. I chose Shigu Road Primary School because of that. Not far away, it is more convenient to go there.

**Manon:** So where do you live now?

**Xiao:** Now I live in Hexi. I used to be in the center of the east of the city. Now I am in Hexi.

**Manon:** So you moved three times

**Xiao:** Yes, we moved three times, it has something to do with the child's growth experience. For example, here, she was born, I bought the house there [near Yueya Lake], from kindergarten until she was six years old. Then we moved because she was going to primary school.

**Manon:** Do you need to buy the house in advance?

**Xiao:** Yes, it must be a year in advance. Primary school is six years. After six years, I moved again. I moved to the place where I live now. I moved three times.

**Manon:** It means that you have to move every time your daughter changes schools.

**Xiao:** Yes, to get closer, but I am not entirely for my children, because Xinjiekou is also where I work. I consider that it is very convenient, and it is also very convenient. I consider both.

Xiao purposefully moved apartments several times to secure the best educational resources for her daughter. She navigated the school districting process and the real estate market to her own advantage. Her husband's work as a real estate agent most probably helped the household to buy three apartments successively. I have met parents, who were not working in the real-estate market, and who also had the financial means to buy the right apartment at the right time to secure a spot in a targeted school. During my fieldwork, the upper-middle-class parents who managed to buy an education-apartment were called "school-choice parents" by lower-middle-class parents who do not have the financial means to buy such an apartment.<sup>164</sup> School-choice parents shape their household registration and their residential trajectory to sponsor their child's educational trajectory while formally complying with the nearest-school-enrollment policy. The mobilization of considerable financial capital empowers the upper-middle-class to secure access to certain education resources, and thus strengthen social segregation. The upper-middle-class parents hold some power over their child's educational trajectory. This parentocratic system is both fostered and hindered by the school districting process. Some upper and lower-middle-class parents demonstrate a certain level of agency in their school strategy, using financial and social capital to bypass the school districting system.

## Exiting the public system to escape pressure

Some wealthy households exit the public education system because they are dissatisfied with school offerings. Kao, the mother of a young teenage boy who just

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<sup>164</sup> The phrase school-choice parents translates by 择校家长 [zé xiào jiāzhǎng].



entered middle school, works as a manager in a Japanese logistics company. She invited me to her office in downtown Nanjing and explained why she chose a private middle school for her son.

**Manon:** So, this junior high school is a private middle school?

**Kao:** Yes, private.

**Manon:** So, why did you choose this middle school?

**Kao:** mmm... First, it is because a friend of mine presented the school to me, she told me that the founder of the school studied in one of the best high schools in Nanjing. He founded this school in Nanjing, and it quickly became the best in Nanjing. Then he went to Shenzhen, where he founded a private school, that became a very good school. Now, he is back in Nanjing, where he founded another school, one focused on individual development. I appreciate this [approach]. Second, it is because of the way he manages the school, he is so much more open. He does not just say "I want children to do that and that" and finally just focuses on Chinese, mathematics, and English. He really uses themes to develop children's skills and push them to get higher scores. His school organizes many activities, such as speech, or... something modern... such as AI. He also teaches young children to research information during their summer vacations. For instance, this year, pupils should research on the shared bike industry and Artificial Intelligence. They have to do research, then prepare a ppt, and give a presentation about how AI will develop, and affect us. These topics are always about the future. There is no right or wrong. They teach the children to try. Of course, a traditional public school might ask the children to read a book during summer vacations and then ask pupils to do an exercise. However, it does not give the same orientation for our child's development. (...) I want my child to have his own ideas. We never told him what he must or mustn't do when he was young. In China, most people walk on the same road for the college entrance examination. I didn't want to limit his options to that road. (...) His level is not ... I mean, his textbook knowledge is not a really good level, also we didn't enroll him in any extra-curricular courses. He has a primary school level. I didn't enroll him in "cram school" to improve his grades. Most parents now bring their children to cram schools on Saturdays and Sundays. We do not plan anything on Saturdays and Sundays... (...)

He only went to one extra-curricular course because he really likes programming, so he went to a course called C++.

**Manon:** How do you enroll in this middle school?

**Kao:** (...) To enroll in this middle school, he had to take an exam on May. (...) There is not much to prepare because it is really on the knowledge learnt in primary school.

**Manon:** How much does it cost?

**Kao:** Well, the tuition fees are quite high. It is 17,000 RMB per semester.<sup>165</sup> (...) it's very high in Nanjing. However, the school is divided into two tracks: a domestic track and an international track. (...) We chose the domestic track. The international track is around 37,000RMB per year.<sup>166</sup>

**Manon:** so you still want your child to pass the Chinese college entrance examination?

**Kao:** Yes, I still want him to take it.

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<sup>165</sup> On August 2022, 17,000RMB ≈ 2,450€ ≈ \$3,225CA

<sup>166</sup> On August 2022, 37,000RMB ≈ 5,342€ ≈ \$7,020CA

This discussion sheds light on the choice process and the role of the social circle. A friend influenced Kao to choose this middle school. Her choice also reveals her criticism of traditional public schools, which focus on examination-oriented knowledge such as Chinese, Mathematics, and English. Instead, she fostered her son's interest in new technologies and appreciated the technological and futurist orientation of the private middle school. The high tuition fees did not hinder her plan. This double-income household can afford to exit the public education system and pay for an expensive private middle school.

The upper-middle-class households transform their assets into resources to implement their educational strategies. These assets can be material, intergenerational, financial, or social. They give parents the power to emancipate themselves from local constraints such as the school districting system.

## **Parent empowerment: resources and institutional limits**

Middle-class households with fewer financial resources cannot wholly emancipate their strategies from state regulations. Lower-middle-class parents are constrained by regulations and institutional bargaining between local and central power. Despite their limited power, they also devise strategies to circumvent some regulations. I argue that their agency, albeit limited, highlights the acute awareness of middle-class parents regarding their educational policy environment.

First, some lower-middle-class households use their social capital to implement their educational strategies. Scholars have produced extensive research on the role of *guanxi*, social connections, in China, to access certain resources (Davies et al. 1995; Guthrie 1998; Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002; McNally, Guo, and Gu 2007). Some scholars focused specifically on the role of social connections in accessing educational resources and obtaining a school admission to a good school (Wu 2013a). My research concurs with the observation that the family social capital is particularly useful to get admitted in specific schools.

Schools can also benefit from parents' educational strategies. The collection of admission fees provides a substantial increase for the school budget. The state bans

schools from asking for miscellaneous fees in order to implement accessible and equal access to education. However, the local government's school budget often does not cover all daily education expenses. So, schools rely on parents for extra-budget funds (Wang 2003).

Finally, some middle-class parents are excluded from the public education system due to their household registration. Scholars have extensively studied how this system excludes rural-to-urban migrant households from social services in urban areas (Froissart 2003b; Hannum 1999; M. Zhou 2014a; Salgues 2012). However, to date the urban-to-urban migrants have attracted very little scholarly attention. I argue, that households registered in another city are excluded from the public education service in the city where they reside. This geographical discrimination is felt as an injustice by urban-to-urban migrant families.

## School admission: the role of social capital

Parents can use their social capital to enroll their children in a targeted school. This capital is helpful in different ways. First, social capital helps parents to obtain information on the admission process. Since the passage of the 2014 and 2016 regulations, most schools publicize their official admission procedures, and only students from the district are supposed to be accepted. However, with some relations, parents can have information on hidden procedures for out-of-zone students. Second, if parents know the right people, they can ask them to write a *memo* to let their child enroll in the targeted school. These pupils are called *memo-students* (Wu 2012). Third, the same kind of relations can help parents waive or reduce the sponsorship fees. It is in this way that social capital is transformed into economic capital. Zhui Dong, the mother of an eleven-year-old boy working in an automotive spare parts company, explains how she used her connection to enroll her son in a good kindergarten.

**Manon:** How did you get your child admitted to this kindergarten?

**Zhui Dong:** It's very difficult to get in. It's almost impossible to get in. This is what we Chinese people often say, you have to rely on relationships. It's not like buying a house close to an elementary school so you can enroll in that school, an education-apartment. For this kindergarten, the most important thing is connections. The principal of this kindergarten has some kind of quota. (...) I don't know if there is such a thing abroad. Here it is like that, [you need to know] someone who knows the principal well. If your connection has a good relationship with the principal, he might let your child in. Sometimes, you look at three or four levels of connection to

get your child admitted. So basically, very few people can enter this kind of kindergarten.

**Manon:** You succeeded. (...)

**Zhui Dong:** In China, to enroll in this kind of kindergarten, you need to find someone, a connection. You only get admitted to a standard kindergarten if you do not have a connection. If you find a relationship, then you need to pay a lot of money (...) so it is very difficult to get admitted in this kindergarten. (...) Also It is really hard to enroll children in kindergarten in Nanjing. So I guess we were lucky that one time, more fortunate.

Zhui Dong explained how the family social capital is a crucial resource for enrolling in a kindergarten. Someone she knew introduced her to the principal to get her child admitted to the kindergarten. However, she still needs to pay fees. Scholars have extensively studied the role of social capital and personal connections in Chinese politics (Pye 1995; Dittmer and Wu 1995; Guo 2001) and the business sphere (Guthrie 1998; McNally, Guo, and Gu 2007; Davies et al. 1995). *Guanxi* can be defined as relationships based on “reciprocal obligation and indebtedness” (Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002, 7). Some scholars have also highlighted the role of social capital in school choice (Wu 2013a; Crabb 2010). This resource is all the more important for parents who cannot just buy their way in with money or its residential equivalent, an education-apartment. Social capital becomes a central resource for lower-middle-class parents. Nonetheless, this resource is dependent on the strategy of the school principal, who might want to extract financial resources for the school from out-of-zone families.

## Schools financial needs feed into parents’ anxiety

Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted the ambiguity of teachers’ and schools’ approaches to the publication of student rankings. The same ambiguity applies to fees. The tension between the central government’s goal and the local governments’ interests creates opportunities for schools to collect money from parents, especially from out-of-zone households. School principals use different tools to increase their extra-budgetary funds. These tools are most often semi-legal. First, they can require sponsorship fees for out-of-zone students. These fees are usually called donations to appear legal. The name *donation* gives the impression that parents give money to their child’s school without expectations. Parents also call them sponsorship fees, meaning that the children are sponsored by their parents.<sup>167</sup> The central government tried to regulate all school fees –

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<sup>167</sup> In Chinese, the word donation translates by 抚养费 [fǔyǎng fèi].

i.e., book fees, meals, homework, or just some refurbishment projects (Zhang 2011). However, these donations often occur before the child is officially enrolled in the school. These donations look more like tuition fees to get admitted than a philanthropic gesture (Wu 2013b). Second, some schools open extra-curricular institutions or preschool classes. Officially these institutions are only affiliated with the school. However, in practice, the administration and sometimes even the teachers are the same. The after-school or preschool classes require high tuition fees, which bring extra-budgetary funds for the affiliated school. Most often, pupils attending these extra-curricular courses access the public school afterwards. Fang, the dissident grandmother first introduced in chapter five, explained how a public kindergarten opened a preschool to recruit pupils. However, her household cannot afford to pay the preschool tuition fees and to enroll their young girl:

Oh, [to enroll] in public kindergartens (...) you must be in the preschool, for example, if you want to enroll in the kindergarten at 3 years old, you can start going to preschool at 2 years old, but you also pay nearly 2,000RMB per month for early preschool, and then you secure a spot [in the kindergarten].<sup>168</sup>

Preschool tuition fees constitute an obstacle for lower-middle-class households to enroll their children in kindergarten. Xiao's affluent household could afford these fees and enrolled her daughter in an excellent kindergarten. As the story of Xiao shows, schools are not respecting the law. They create additional obstacles for parents to enroll their children, such as participating in interviews or submitting lengthy forms. In sum, elite schools aim to publish rankings and maintain public recognition to attract and recruit out-of-zone pupils, which brings extra-budgetary funds. Despite government regulations intended to minimize disparities, elite schools often successfully circumvent the regulations, and thus exclude lower-middle-class households and reinforce social reproduction in the process.

## The "choice of no-choice:" urban-to-urban migration

For the lower-middle-class, sponsorship fees produce a discriminatory situation. This discrimination is even stronger for urban-to-urban migrant households. Niu is a single mother raising her six-year-old daughter. Her household is registered in another city. Now, she works as an accountant and recently married the owner of a coffee shop

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<sup>168</sup> On August 2022, 2,000RMB  $\approx$  290€  $\approx$  \$380CA

in Nanjing. She explains that she had to choose a private primary school because she does not hold a local *hukou*.

**Manon:** So why did you choose a private primary school?

**Niu:** The situation is a bit complicated, because we are not a registered household in Nanjing. It is very difficult for my daughter to enroll in a public school in Nanjing. So I simply have to bite my tongue, and pay to send her to a private school.

**Manon:** Is it expensive?

**Niu:** It's expensive. I really have to spend a lot of money.

**Manon:** Is it a good primary school. What do you think?

**Niu:** I don't know how to evaluate if a school is good or not. I "chose" this school. There is no other choice. If she could attend a public school for less money, I would have certainly let her enroll in a public school (...) but can't because of our registration. I do not hold a Nanjing registration, she is not a Nanjing local, so she can't attend a public school in Nanjing. I can only enroll her in a private school. Since it has to be a private school, [I enrolled her] in the best one in the private sector. It's like this; it's a choice of no-choice. Isn't it for her that we moved? We moved to live close to the school. I bought a house for her to attend a kindergarten. I moved again for her to attend primary school.

Niu described how her daughter's school trajectory determined her residential choices. This mother had the financial means to buy an apartment close to the kindergarten and then another apartment close to the primary school. She can afford to pay for a private primary school. However, she underlined the strain the household registration system put on her life and her child's school trajectory. She stressed her lack of choice and her helplessness. For the lower-middle-class households who have migrated from one city to another, the household registration creates a complex system of exclusion. This policy divides the population between rural and urban residents and reinforces geographical and social hierarchies among cities. During my fieldwork, I met two other mothers who described the same helplessness and absence of choice due to their household registration. They all felt like they had no choice but to enroll their children in a private school.

# Conclusion

The increasing regulations on the education market in the last ten years has unleashed a game of cat and mouse amongst the central government, local authorities, schools, parents, and private actors. These regulations concern information, ranking, admission procedures, and fees. The state aims to reassert its control over the education content and reduce the schooling competition. These objectives especially target urban areas where schools and households should educate performing children who will become filial citizens. However, local interests are not always aligned with those of central state. Thus, these conflicts among public authority open windows of opportunities for parents to implement their own strategies. State discourses around the central role of parents' in their child's education reinforce parents' agency.

Upper-middle-class parents are best positioned to navigate this terrain, mobilizing their affluence to emancipate themselves from state regulations, organizing parents' networks to share tips and parenting advice, and successive education-apartments to enroll their children in the best schools. Some parents exit the public education system to choose private institutions offering domestic or international tracks for high tuition fees. Lower-middle-class households have fewer options and adapt their educational strategies to provide the best educational resources for their children. In sum, the current parentocratic system heightens class discrepancies, reinforces social reproduction and increases the competitive environment in education. In the next chapter, I show that parents are acutely aware of these phenomena. They complain about state policies and sometimes even protest.

# Chapter 7. Middle-class Parents from Entitled Consumers to Policy Critics

In the summer of 2020, parents from Nanjing No. 1 High School students protested in front of the school with signs demanding the principal's resignation. They complained about the high school's low scores on the college entrance examination. One slogan was "Audi goes in, Alto comes out".<sup>169</sup> Audi, the famous luxurious German car brand, symbolizes elite students enrolling in Nanjing No. 1 High School, and Alto, a low-cost Chinese car brand, symbolizes high school students coming out with an average score on the college entrance examination (Jade 2020).<sup>170</sup> Parents blamed the principal who reduced supplementary classes, examinations, rankings, and even course time and regulated extra-curricular tutoring books. The protesters framed the high school failure as evidence of the conflict between two education models: "quality education" and "exam-oriented education".<sup>171</sup> On the one hand, the reduction of homework, cramming, rote learning, and course time accompanied by more activities oriented toward physical, aesthetic, and moral education symbolize "quality education". On the other hand, exam-oriented education is epitomized by Hengshui High School, in Hubei province, northern China, with a strict discipline where pupils spend twelve hours a day, six days a week, solving test exercises preparing for college entrance examination.<sup>172</sup>

This opposition between "quality education" and exam-oriented education is all the more visible in Nanjing in 2020, because while Nanjing No. 1 High School was criticized for producing low results on the college entrance examination, the same year, Nanjing No. 29 High School, which adopted the Hengshui model few years ago, published very high scores on the college entrance examination. After the protests, Principal You

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<sup>169</sup> In Chinese "奥迪进去，奥拓出来" [àodí jìnqù, àotà chūlái]

<sup>170</sup> Nanjing No. 1 High School is one of the four historical elite high schools in Nanjing. Established in 1907 during the Qing dynasty, the high school has been an "experimental" high school for decades. Experimental schools benefit from higher funding and attract attention from politics and bureaucrats.

<sup>171</sup> In Chinese, respectively: 素质教育 [sùzhì jiàoyù] and 应试教育 [yìngshì jiàoyù]

<sup>172</sup> I mentioned Hengshui High School in chapter 4, because the model teacher showcased by the mobile application *Parents' Helper* came from this high school.



Xiaoping of Nanjing No. 1 High School, issued a “Notice to parents of senior year pupils of 2021,” introducing a series of measures to bring back the exam-oriented education model, such as extended evening self-study time, and reinforced training for top students.

The central government and some local governments, like the Nanjing Municipal government, promote quality education as the solution to reduce school pressure and parents’ anxiety and argue that the low results on national examinations are due to the poor implementation by schools (Yang 2020; Jade 2020). This discourse increases the gap between street level bureaucrats, such as the teachers and school principals, and the central authorities, giving more opportunities for parents to contest education policies.

The story of the Nanjing No. 1 High School also illustrates parents’ acute understanding of education policies, their high investment in the education of their child, and a deep-seated feeling of entitlement. I argue that emboldened by their investment, parents do not hesitate to question education policies when they feel wronged. I show that devising educational strategies requires parents’ constant reflexivity, which prompts them to formulate demands regarding the education system or other institutions.

First, I show that urban middle-class parents actively question education policies aiming to balance the distribution of educational resources and reduce school pressure because these policies undermine a competitive system in which they feel their children can succeed. By questioning education policies, parents reactivate a process of political socialization. They call into question their perceptions of how power is arranged in the education system and how it should be organized.

The emergence of online parents’ communities reinforces the process of socialization. Closed online spaces initially created to exchange educational tips among parents from the same school or the same class can quickly transform into spaces to complain about the most recent policy or a change in the school district. Second, I show how, in some specific cases, these complaints can transform into civic activism influencing local bureaucrats and education policies. Some urban middle-class parents decide to take actions either by monitoring teachers on a daily basis or occasionally by protesting in the streets. These actions are fostered when parents gather in a closed online or offline community and identify specific targets who threaten their interests.

# Parents' perception of education policies and their influence on social hierarchies

To initiate a discussion on education policies, I asked my informants to read the news article about an elite public school summoned to accommodate migrant workers' children (Qiu 2018). After parents from the elite school protested, the school decided to build a fence to separate its 400 pupils from the 800 relocated children. The article published by *The Paper* in the summer of 2018 quickly received more than 4 500 comments. This story, which I recount in the introduction of this dissertation, raises issues around social hierarchies and the distribution of education resources. It also illustrates how urban middle-class parents' reactions can influence local policies. Sharing this article allowed me to appraise urban middle-class parents' opinions regarding three contradictory policy discourses: the need to offer an elite education, the fight against illegal migrant schools, and the legal obligation to ensure that all children attend school for nine years. While parents acknowledged the unequal distribution of education resources and its impact on migrant workers' children, they were very critical of the Education Commission's decision to resettle the migrant children in the elite experimental school.

My informants' reactions to the story revealed two discursive frames around the distribution of education resources. According to Kuypers (2006), who builds on the Goffman method of frame analysis, "framing is a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner. Frames operate in four key ways: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Frames are often found within a narrative account of an issue or event, and are generally the central organizing idea" (Kuypers 2006, 8). During my interviews, the discussion triggered by the news article on the Suzhou elite school showed that lower-middle-class parents and upper-middle-class parents do not use the same framing to interpret the events. Lower-middle-class parents focused on the necessity to separate urban middle-class children from rural-to-urban migrant workers'

children. They emphasized the poor quality family care experienced by migrant children to justify that they should not mingle with middle-class children. Lower-middle-class parents fear that migrant children might have a negative influence on their children. By way of contrast, upper-middle-class parents believe that the quality of education resources depends on the investment made by households to secure these resources. The middle-class households invest money and energy to secure a spot in the best primary school in Suzhou and must have the best schooling experience. They are owed a return on their investment and should not have to share these education resources with underserved children.

## **Social segregation: the fear of “market-pupils”**

When we talked about this piece of news, most parents focused on the title: “More than 800 “market-pupils” are being resettled; Suzhou’s century-old school plans to set up a ‘separation wall’ in the building” (Qiu 2018).<sup>173</sup> “Market-pupils” is a contraction of the expression “fresh-market primary school/students” used on the Internet to designate a school in which parents are working in a fresh-food market.<sup>174</sup> By extension, it means a school for working-class, poor, and often rural-to-urban migrant households. The influence of “market-pupils” over the education system regularly triggers online debates among parents. In May 2016, a parent posted this description about market-pupils on a parent blog: “the emergence of ‘market-pupils’ is due to a large number of migrant children in the student body. They [here “they” designates the pupils’ parents] have low financial resources, busy work schedules, little knowledge, low quality, and do not care about their children.”<sup>175</sup> In 2018, migrant workers’ children with Shanghai household registration and 120-point residence permit will account for the majority of the student population. Consequently, ‘market-pupils’ won’t designate a specific population anymore. The gap between ‘market-pupils’ and ordinary primary school pupils will become smaller and smaller” (Mama Bang 2017). It is impossible to assess the statistical truth behind these assertions. However, this description illustrates how some parents, often from a middle-class background, perceive working-class families:

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<sup>173</sup> In Chinese: 八百余名“菜小”生被安置，苏州百年名校拟校内设“隔离门” [bābǎi yú míng “cài xiǎo” shēng bèi ānzhì, sūzhōu bǎinián míngxiào nǐ xiàonèi shè “gélí mén”]

<sup>174</sup> In Chinese: 菜市场小学 [cài shìchǎng xiǎoxué] which becomes 菜小 [cài xiǎo]

<sup>175</sup> Cf. Chapter 2 for a discussion on the notion of population’s quality.

working-class parents have heavy work schedules and no financial capital to compensate for their absence. Moreover, they do not have the cultural capital or often even the awareness to educate their children. According to this blog post, the “low quality” of working-class parents reflects on their children. This post illustrates middle-class parents’ fear a catch-up effect from working-class households. In other words, the market-pupils accessing public schools in downtown Shanghai threaten urban middle-class households’ privileged social position.

Some informants in Nanjing underlined the role of family education in determining people’s quality. According to Hu, mother of a six-year-old girl who has low-grade job at a state-owned enterprise, a child’s quality depends on the quality of the parents. She assessed the quality of the parents based on their parenting practices.

**Hu:** Yes, I think for the child from birth to elementary school, during this period, family education is more important than school education, because the child forms its values, including its habits, in the early days. (...)

I think the most important element of the so-called famous school is the composition of the student body, (...) because the teachers in the famous school cannot be all good teachers. There are good teachers, and some not that good teacher. But, with the student body, you can see the quality of the students. There might even be not so good teachers, but the overall level of the student is still higher than other places, because the quality of the children in that area is high, (...) it is because of the family’s influence. This is like that in Nanjing, in Shanghai or in Beijing, the same is true. High quality parents, who are highly educated parents, will choose a good school district to enroll their children because they have a circle [a community]. They hope to live together in a community with people who have the same lifestyle, which provide a good learning environment for their children. Not like me, the environment where I live in now, in the nearest primary school, you have a lot of migrant workers, we can say rural-to-urban workers, who are running small businesses, like selling vegetables.

**Manon:** Their children were attending the same kindergarten with your daughter?

**Hu:** Mmm... no, we didn’t have them in our kindergarten, because it was quite hard to get into our kindergarten in our area. As a parent, your child must be a certain level to get in, but they form the students’ body in the nearest primary school in the area where we live, it is an ordinary public primary school. In normal kindergartens and elementary schools, the quality of the student is not good, because in the surrounding area, you have a lot of people with small shops, or even the children of migrant workers. I think the key issue in these families, is that the parents don’t have time to take care of the children and educate the children. Then, I don’t say the children are bad, but that they may be with your children... their discussion topics...

**Manon:** Not quite the same.

**Hu:** Yes, the content of their discussion, for instance, often they are spending more time with their grandparents watching TV at home, then, they talk about cartoons. Many cartoons have a very poor quality. So I think the discussion with your child has an influence on its education, but also on its habits. If you are a high quality parent, you obviously want to cultivate good habits in your child, you are really concerned about their habits. You ask your child to talk with civility and politeness, and you let him do his things by himself. (...).

In the discussion, Hu explains that family education shapes the discussion and habits of children at school. She links the “poor quality” of the migrant families and street-vendors families with parents’ lack of time to care for their children, underlining that the children are not innately bad; however, parents cannot care for them enough. They do not cultivate the “right habits.” Hu denigrates intergenerational care because grandparents let the child watch poor-quality cartoons. Another informant explained that it is difficult to discuss with parents from different social backgrounds. They might easily resort to violence to solve minor behavioural problems. My informants were unanimous in their critical assessment of working-class and rural-to-urban households.

Lack of care and bad parenting practices result in the bad quality of the student body in some “ordinary schools.” Hu asserts that school quality depends on the student body, which hinges on family education and parents’ practices. Consequently, Hu justifies that high-quality parents select their child’s school based on the student body and discriminate against “market-pupils.” They want their child to spend time with children from equally high-quality families and distinguish their children from working-class ones. She underlines the role of the social circle and community in school choice. In sum, Hu explains the process of social distinction occurring in the Chinese education system. The central government’s policy to guarantee equal access to education for all Chinese children threatens the social distinction advocated by the urban middle-class parents.

The article’s title on the Suzhou school explains that “More than 800 ‘market-pupils’ are being resettled,” highlighting the pupils’ number and status.<sup>176</sup> The verb “resettled” remains vague, rendering the Education Bureau invisible, despite its formal role in the resettlement decision. The second part of the title, “Suzhou’s century-old school plans to set up a ‘separation wall’ in the building,” describes the elite school, Qinxī Experimental Primary School, with a long history which implies the school’s high quality. Moreover, the school plays an active role in solving the problem when it decides to build a separation wall. Here the wall describes a fence dividing the buildings and the courtyard into two distinct spaces.

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<sup>176</sup> The full title of the article is “More than 800 ‘market-pupils’ are being resettled; Suzhou’s century-old school plan to set up a ‘separation gate’ in the building” (Qiu 2018). In Chinese: 八百余名“菜小”生被安置, 苏州百年名校拟校内设“隔离门” [bābǎi yú míng “cài xiǎo” shēng bèi ānzhì, sūzhōu bǎinián míngxiào nǐ xiàonèi shè “gélí mén”]

The body of the article states the facts as follows: in March 2018, the Gusu Education Investment Company, owner of the land on which the “fresh-market” Lixin Primary School was established, sued the school because its lease expired. In July, the court ruled in favor of the investment company, summoning Lixin Primary School to vacate the premises. In August, the Culture and Education Commission announced that the pupils of Lixin Primary School should be resettled in Qinxi Experimental Primary School, a “century-old” elite school in Suzhou. The article describes the reaction of the middle-class parents from Qinxi Experimental Primary School who felt wronged. They invested a great deal of money to buy an “education-apartment” close to this elite school.<sup>177</sup> Consequently, it was “not fair” that this famous elite school should accept “market-children”.<sup>178</sup> The parents expressed their discontent online and in the streets by protesting at the school’s gate. In mid-August, to assuage the anxiety of the middle-class parents, the Qinxi Experimental Primary School decided to build a fence to divide the buildings into two parts. This fence clarifies the situation; the buildings host the two schools; however, each school’s pupils, teachers and management staff remain distinct. It is not a merger but merely cohabitation within the same premises.

In reaction to the Suzhou story, Mu and Mao, two mothers of young children I met at La Source, agreed that there is much unfairness in the current Chinese education system and specifically discrimination targeting working-class households.<sup>179</sup> However, they argue that middle-class children and rural-to-urban migrant children should not be educated together.

**Mu:** After reading this article<sup>180</sup>, I think, yes, it is unfair, but these things happen a lot. Although everyone is equal, I feel equal, and equality like this is still...this kind of unfairness happens often. Now that I am older, I have seen so many stories like that, I think it is commonplace. If this kind of thing happens to me, if I am in a good private primary school, I will definitely have that kind of reaction.<sup>181</sup> I definitely don’t want my children to be with [migrant workers’ children], but if I am in this situation [migrant workers], I must think about it again (...) It depends on which side you are standing on, which position you must stand on, the mentality is different, who is your child, you are thinking about it from that position.

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<sup>177</sup> An education-apartment, in Chinese 学区房 [xuéquū fang] is an apartment strategically located to give access to several elite schools. Cf Chapter 4 for a discussion of the concept.

<sup>178</sup> The term “not fair” translates by “不公平” [bù gōngpíng] in Chinese is used by a mother interviewed by the newspaper.

<sup>179</sup> Mu and Mao are young professionals working for small private companies, Mu is a clerk and Mao works in finance, both their husbands hold higher-up position. Mu’s husband works as an engineer and Mao’s husband is a manager in a small private company.

<sup>180</sup> Here she is talking about the news article on the resettlement in Suzhou schools.

<sup>181</sup> In fact, Qinxi Experimental Primary School, the host elite school, is a public school.

But this way of doing [building a fence] it is too obvious. I think it's a bit too much (...).The unfairness exists, but it does not need to be so clear. It really makes the children of both sides unable to stand it.

**Manon:** What do you think about the decision of the Education Bureau to resettle the children in the Qinxu Experimental Primary school? Do you think there is any other way to get these children into school?

**Mu:** It is only temporary, but I think it will definitely be bad for both parties for a long time, they need to be separated.

**Mao:** To be separated is a little better.

Mu knew about the story before I showed it to her. She talked a lot about how the government was not doing enough for the working-class children, particularly for the left-behind children who stay in the home village when rural-to-urban parents work in urban areas. She emphasized the government's responsibility to provide education to all children. However, she underlined that putting all the children in the same school was not a good solution. She also underlined that the article lacks information about how the events unfolded, for instance, who exactly took the decisions and why. After our discussion, Mu sent me several articles recounting similar stories of neglect and discrimination against working-class children. Despite her indignation regarding the condition of migrant children, she was adamant that her own children should not be educated alongside with working-class children. Mu and Mao hold the same opinion as Hu regarding the need for social segregation. Children from middle-class households and working-class migrant households should attend separate schools. However, this segregation should not be visible; the fence is "too much."<sup>182</sup>

Mu, Mao, and Hu belong to the lower-middle class. Their income enables them to invest in the education of their children, by choosing extra-curricular courses and a good private kindergarten. However, they cannot buy successive education-apartments to free themselves from local regulations. Their children attend the neighboring primary school. The decision of the Suzhou local education bureau illustrates parents' fear of local state intervention that undermines middle-class parents' influence over their children's education and threatening social hierarchies.

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<sup>182</sup> In Chinese, she uses the phrases 太明显 [tài míngxiǎn] which means too obvious and 有点过 [yǒudiǎnguò] meaning too much.

## State-society relations based on consumer behaviour

For most of the upper-middle-class parents, the issue of the distribution of education resources is primarily a financial question. Wealthy households buy their admission to elite public schools with expensive education-apartments. The school admission and the quality of education in the targeted school are “fair” returns on investment, as explained by Zhang An, mother of a seven-year-old boy and manager in an insurance company. Zhang An’s household has a stable and affluent social and economic status, as her husband is an officer in the People’s Liberation Army.

**Zhang An:** It may be more of an economic dispute. I feel some people spend [a lot of] money to buy an education-apartment, and then some people who didn’t buy an education-apartment [enroll in the same school], you really feel that it is not fair. This is a social phenomenon. For this school you are undermining its foundation, of course it arouses public outrage. Because they opened 800 places, then how do you solve the issues posed by these 800 people? This actually really questions fairness. I think, if you do that then you need to solve the problem of breaching the school districting policy. Otherwise, other breaches will occur, for sure. If you implement a strict school districting then public primary school should only admit children from the district. If you get rid of the school district for some children, in some situations, then you get rid of it in general. Think of it, if they had asked these 800 children to pay admission fees, then people would have had a sense of fairness. Then there is another issue. What do you make of the other [working-class children] beyond these 800 children, they should access education also. It is not fair to them. (...) The problem is the system, you don’t really solve the systematic issues which lead to this situation.

In the discussion, Zhang An first uses the word “balance” and then the word “fairness.”<sup>183</sup> Wealthy households buy expensive education-apartments which give them the right to attend the nearest elite school. Any disturbance to this process questions the fairness of the market, and parent-investors are fooled. According to Zhang An, the state should not disturb the “fair” distribution of education resources by the market. Zhang An’s argument relies on a liberal conception of the state-society relationship. The market distributes the resources among members of society, and the state protects the private interests of individuals. In this perspective, school districts provide a regulatory framework for organizing the education market.

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<sup>183</sup> In Chinese she uses the word 平衡 [pínghéng] and 公平 [gōngpíng]. The latter can be translated by “impartial” or “fairness”.



Wong, who works in the finance sector with a comfortable household income, bought an education-apartment to enroll her daughter in one of the best schools in Nanjing, Li Primary School. After reading the article, she explained that a similar story unfolded at her daughter's elite Primary school.

**Wong:** I think the authorities have not handled this well. When my child's school was under renovation, the school moved temporarily to another campus. It was a so-called "market-school". If the parents are all migrant workers, they are a vulnerable community. But the noisy ones [the middle-class parents] are relatively powerful, they have more social resources, and the right to speak. I think the matter has not been dealt with reasonably. I believe whether it is a good or a bad school, children are not really different, even if society thinks this is a famous school and the other is an ordinary school. But I think there is no difference between children in the two schools. In the end, how do children become different? Their differences are ultimately caused by the influence of school, family and society, especially for primary school students. I feel that when they enroll in primary school, children are not different. When my child's school was mingled with the children from a different school, the children of the two schools would go to school together, they were mixed together, that is a real merger.

**Manon:** Was it Li Primary School?

**Wong:** Yes, our school borrowed the classrooms from another school and mixed the classes.

Wong's perspective differs from the mainstream opinion on social class and population quality. She rejected the idea that young children in primary school are different because of their social origin. She asserted that they are similar, so she did not seem worried about the negative influence of working-class children on her daughter. Her assessment of the authorities' failure focused on market disturbance.

**Wong:** For parents who bought an education-apartment in the school district, there might be a feeling of unfairness. They think "I paid a high price. It should be like that or like that. I spend such a large amount of money for this product." And, the product change, [here the product is the elite school]. The change might not effectively affect the users, maybe there is no real change, [the school has not changed since children are all the same] ... but for parents [who invested a lot of money], they feel that there is uncertainty, they don't know [the effect of the change], so they feel that it is unfair. (...) This is the case, and some parents are particularly emotional.

Another thing is the separation fence. In fact, I don't know exactly the reason for it. If the teachers and children of these two schools were initially independent, it might be possible that the separation makes it more convenient for the management or something? That might be the reason. However, the parents may still not be able to accept it. None of us know the real internal reasons, including media reports, even though they conducted all-round research, and we still do not know. (...) After all, the management of the two schools has its own work and rest schedule, their rules and regulations are different. The children activities are also different in many aspects. Is it possible to say that this is only for the convenience of the management? Otherwise the children would run to the other side of the school, and it would not be

convenient for the teachers to get them, could it be the reason? I'm not sure about this.

If we consider what the parents said, from a one-sided point of view, I can also understand them, because they spent a really high amount of money. They feel that they should get the product that they had mind when they bought it. They feel like they bought something else, but they were not told that it changed. They feel "if you change the product that I bought, you should at least solicit my opinion, you should ask what I think." Maybe that's what they think. However, I think there is not much difference between the children of the two schools. There are no good children and bad children. What impact can it have when children play together at school? In fact, there is no consequence. There is no difference, especially in primary school. At this time, children are blank pages, they are pure white. Maybe in high school, the difference between the children can be greater. I know, that in some schools, even abroad, one school is one school...

According to Wong, buying an education-apartment to enroll in a targeted public school is like buying a product at the supermarket. The parent-investor should get value for money. School admission is no longer a public policy problem but a marketable product. According to Wong, the features of the targeted school should not change from the moment parents invest in getting their children admitted to this school and the moment they take full advantage of their investment. Wong underlined the necessity to listen to parents who have already invested in the elite school. She offered a renewed conception of the state-society relationships between the urban middle-class and the state based on liberal assumptions, such as consumer-producer accountability and responsiveness to investors' requirements. In general, parents do not question the whole education system, but adopt a rather pragmatic, instrumental and individualistic perspective. They demand to receive the services which justify the price they paid for their real-estate investment.

## **Questioning education methods in elite schools**

Parents are critical of current education policies implemented by the government, specifically, policies upheld in the name of the happy education framework.<sup>184</sup> This framework promotes a liberal conception of education methods, aiming to reduce education pressure in general by curtailing extra-curricular courses and homework. In the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, Article 10 explicitly tackles how schoolwork burdens primary and middle school students:

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<sup>184</sup> In Chinese 快乐教育 [kuàilè jiàoyù]

Heavy schoolwork is harmful to the mental and physical well-being of youngsters and children. Reducing the schoolwork burdens on students is the society's shared responsibility. Governments, schools, families and communities must jointly address the problem by addressing both its symptoms and root causes. Schoolwork burden reduction shall be implemented at primary and middle schools. We shall enable the students to learn in lively ways and grow up happily and healthily. Primary school students should be the first to have their heavy burdens cut down.

Governments at all levels shall regard reducing heavy schoolwork burdens as a major task for education work, as well as a goal that calls for overall planning and all-dimensional implementation. Textbook contents shall be readjusted and their degree of difficulty redesigned on a scientific footing. (Ministry of Education 2010, 15)

The 2021 crackdown on private tutoring companies draws on the happy education framework. In his speech on July 2021, Xi Jinping explains that “on the one hand, parents hope that their children will be healthy physically and mentally and have a happy childhood; on the other hand, they are afraid that their children will lose out at the starting line of the school competition” (Chang 2021; Li 2021b). He highlighted the opposition between a healthy and happy childhood and school competition. The harsh regulations enforced on the education market since 2021 show the state's orientation toward a happy childhood. However, the state has not stopped organizing competitions for high school entrance and college entrance admission. My informants were very skeptical about the implementation of a happy education.

**Zhui Dong:** Happy education, I think happy education is unrealistic. Whether you are in China, the United States, or abroad, if a child experiences a happy education, then his future competitiveness will be very weak. What does it mean when we talk about happy education? It should not be too radical. You cannot focus only on a happy education. You cannot wholly avoid learning how to take exams and escape competitiveness. There should be a balance. (...) Even Li Primary School organizes some “Happy Education” activities. Even at home, we also arrange activities that are not focused on studying. There should certainly be some happiness in education, but it should not be too much happiness. (...) If education is too much about happiness, then, in the end, when your child faces high school or college entrance examination, well... he is not competitive compared to other children, he will be eliminated. So at any time (...) you should find a balance.

**Manon:** A balance (...) happy education also includes the reduction of homework. (...) Do you think there is much homework at [your son's school]?

**Zhui Dong:** Well, happy education is like this, (...) in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, there is a lot of homework, and after the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, there is much homework, in some schools, for instance, Langya Road Primary School. (...) But in ours, and in most schools, there is much homework. Then, to incarnate “Happy Education”, our school uses different methods, for instance, an art festival, our son participates in the art festival, he can apply to present his personal paintings, and then the school organizes an exhibition. Then, he can show his work to his family and friends. (...) Sometimes during summer vacation, we bring him to see porcelains exhibition, and make some ceramics. We also take him hiking in the mountain and things like that. (...) So, even at home, it cannot be just about studying, and solving exercises. There are some laid-

back moments. However, you cannot allow for too much happiness... Of course, if you don't want to go to Nanjing Foreign Language School [the best high school in Nanjing].<sup>185</sup> Then you probably can ... well if you only just want to get admitted to the nearest high school, for instance No. 29 High School is a pretty good school, then you don't really need to take the examination to enroll in Nanjing Foreign Language School. But why ... then it might "Happy Education", if you don't take the examination for Nanjing Foreign Language School, then you can have "Happy Education". But we think our son should have a goal (... ) why would some people try to get admitted to Harvard, and any Ivy League universities? These children have the ability to compete, and their parents want to open multiple opportunities for their future. So, we want our son to compete, to fight for it, and more importantly, we want to foster his sense of purpose because you should have a goal in life. If you don't have a goal, you are confused during your studies; you don't know which direction you want to take in the future. But, if you have a goal, at least we set a goal for him. Then even if he does not pass the exam, he knows that if he puts in the effort, he can reach this goal.

The phrase "happy education" has become a label for all kinds of activities that are not focused on exam subjects, such as Math, English, and Chinese. Zhui Dong's depiction highlights the opposition between "exam-oriented education" and "happy education." The former prepares children to set ambitious goals, take exams and succeed in a competitive education system. Interestingly, the elite American higher education, Ivy League Universities, is presented as a continuation of the elite Chinese education system. According to Zhui Dong, children need to focus on studying and taking examinations in order to reach these elite schools. The label "happy education" embraces artistic and sports activities during break time. These activities should not detract children from their initial objective: passing competitive examinations to enroll in elite schools, such as Nanjing Foreign Language School. Zhui Dong associates "happy education" with a lack of competitiveness and a purposeless attitude. Her education aims to balance a strong focus on studying and some fun activities. Zhui Dong is very critical of the state's implementation of the "happy education" framework in schools.

The opposition between "happy education" and "exam-oriented education" also reflects the urban middle-class parents' assessment of private and public schools. Most parents associate "happy education" with another label "quality-oriented education," as opposed to "exam-oriented education."<sup>186</sup>

Xiao is invested in her daughter's education. In chapter six, I discussed how this family residential trajectory was devised in order to access the best educational

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<sup>185</sup> A competitive examination regulates the admission to NFLS.

<sup>186</sup> In Chinese, these labels translate respectively in 快乐教育 [kuàilè jiàoyù], 素质教育 [sùzhì jiàoyù], and 应试教育 [yìngshì jiàoyù]

resources for their daughter. The teenage girl attended an excellent public kindergarten and primary school and then went to a private boarding high school. Despite their apparent similar economic and social status, Xiao adopted a radically divergent strategy from Zhui Dong regarding their children's education. Xiao rejected the exam-oriented public schools to choose a private school. She hopes this school broadens her daughter's horizons and builds her real-life experience.<sup>187</sup>

As her daughter experienced both public and private schools, Xiao explained how these schools implement different education methods. According to Xiao, schools cannot implement "quality-oriented education" simultaneously with "exam-oriented education" because competition is too fierce. Thus, she asserted that private schools focus more on children's individuality and less on grades and competition. Private schools nurture children's behaviors and skills rather than feeding them with knowledge. By way of contrast, public schools put more pressure on children to get high grades. According to Xiao, parents know these differences and should be aware that they have much less control over the administration and education methods in the public system. She dismissed Suzhou parents' complaints about the resettlement of market-pupils in their elite school by saying that these wealthy parents should have chosen a private school to avoid this type of inconvenience.

Xiao directly criticized government policies regarding distributing educational resources and implementing education methods. She explained that "the government is treating the symptoms without treating the disease. They do not solve the problem; they just adopt policies that are often dogmatic. These policies foster the trend that money is increasingly important in the education system. It just amplifies parent anxieties, then the government tries to cool down the temperature with small adjustments." Her criticism specifically targeted "homework reduction" policies, which mainly transfer the burden from the school onto the parents' shoulders. During our discussion, Xiao pointed out that if the school does not give enough homework, it does not prepare children well for examinations, thus parents have to compensate with extra-curricular courses.

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<sup>187</sup> In Chinese, she uses the word 经历 [jīnglì]

Urban middle-class parents' heavy investment in the education of their children directly contributes to their awareness of government's actions and policies. Urban middle-class parents aim to protect their children's interests by defending their class privileges. Parents are acutely aware that their goal is not always aligned with the state's policy goals. The story of the Suzhou school illustrates the conflicting interests between the state, represented by the local education bureau, and the urban middle-class households. These conflicting interests reactivate the process of political socialization among urban middle-class parents who express strong opinions regarding education policies, whether about school access or education methods.

Most of the lower-middle-class households expect the state to protect their privilege by preserving social hierarchies. Parents recognize that all children should access education; however, lower-middle-class parents fear that working-class children might catch them up on the social ladder. They implicitly assume that the education system should maintain the social distinction between working-class and middle-class children. The upper-middle-class households present a neoliberal conception of state-society relationships, where the interests of parent-investors should be protected in the name of market fairness. In general, urban middle-class parents hold the state accountable for protecting their class interests and maintaining a competitive education system in which their children succeed. Urban middle-class households are very critical of education policies threatening the perceived competitive fairness in the current education system.

# Parents as social activists

Under certain conditions, urban middle-class parents go further than merely complaining about education policies and step in to influence the implementation of education policies. Chinese urban middle-class parents can also take action on behalf of their children to protect the households' interests. I argue that taking on these actions is a potential consequence of the political socialization. I identify two factors which foster this form of social activism among urban middle-class parents. First, parents have identified a specific target which they hold accountable for their children's daily successes or failures. These targets are usually teachers, principals, and local education bureaus. Parents consider that these actors can potentially threaten their children's interests. Parental activism does not directly question the state or the Chinese regime. Indeed, some of the targeted actors represent local instantiations of the state while some belong to the private education market. The growing number of online parent groups gathering mind-liked parents is another factor fostering parental activism. Online parents' groups offer venues for action and coordination. As Langner, Greenlee, and Deason mentioned in their framework on "politicized motherhood" (Langner, Greenlee, and Deason 2017), as a "tool to connect," the Internet contributes to the emergence of a shared awareness among parents facing similar problems. Finally, I identify two types of action taken by parents: on a daily basis, parents interact with teachers to monitor the learning process of their children; occasionally, parents take more direct actions when confronted with specific decisions deemed unfair.

## Daily monitoring of children's education

All my interviewees mentioned the existence of online groups that are used to communicate with their child's teachers. Every year, the teacher creates a group on a mobile application such as WeChat or QQ and all the parents of the class should join in. As Pao's stories in Chapter 5 account, the schools reinforce gendered parenting norms by privileging contact with the mothers in these online groups; in rare cases, both parents and sometimes grandparents join in. There is a great variety of practices

regarding what information is shared and who intervenes in these groups.<sup>188</sup> Parents help each other by sharing information on resources and addresses. Parents sometimes ask questions to the professor or complain about a specific issue. The most common daily interactions involve teachers informing parents about homework and assignments children must do and the school books or clothes (swimsuit, sportswear and so on). These online groups decrease the children's responsibility to prepare for school and shift this responsibility to the parents. In November 2018, the Ministry of Education published regulations to restrict the content and usage of these groups. Officially, it is now banned to share individual information about one student, for instance, individual students ranking, and to use these online groups after work hours.

When children are young, in kindergarten and primary schools, parents expect to receive photos and videos about their children's activities on a daily basis. During fieldwork, I was invited to join the online parent group at *La Source*, Amy Wang's local learning center. Discussing with the professor from the learning center and reading the group posts, I observed firsthand the pressure parents apply on counselors and teachers. Teachers posted videos and pictures of all activities organized for the children every day. Amy Wang or a colleague would post the menu for each meal. One day, Amy Wang posted a picture of six children eating rice at lunch. The mother of a three-year-old girl complained on the online group that her daughter was eating with her hands rather than with a spoon. She clearly expressed her dissatisfaction that counselors were not correcting her daughter. This mother worries that without correction, her daughter would incorporate wrong eating habits. This daily, nearly hourly reporting enables parents to monitor and possibly complain about how activities are organized and how teachers educate their children. This pressure directly influences how teachers interact with children.

One of my informants, Qu, was a mother and a kindergarten professor. This dual role gave her a privileged position to understand the anxiety of both teachers and parents. She explained to me how stressful online groups could be for a professor. She has to be available to 40-50 children in the classroom and 80-100 parents every day and every night. Sometimes parents contacted her late at night to verify whether their child's school bag was well-prepared. Every September, she informed the parents that she would not answer messages after work hours; yet, parents continued to send late

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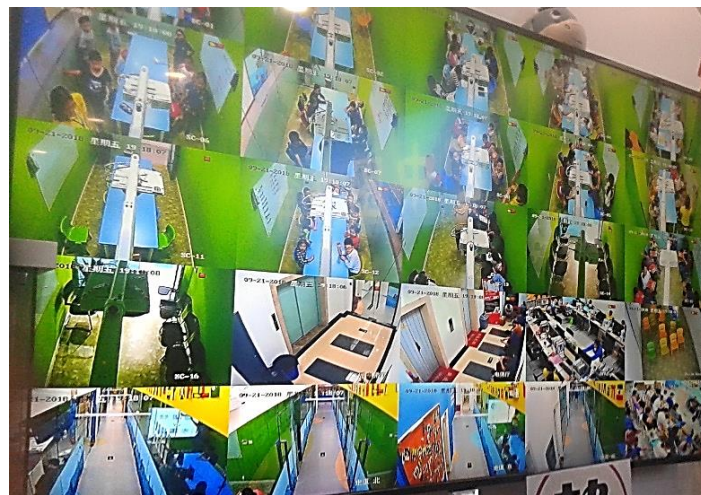
<sup>188</sup> Cf. Chapter 6



messages. She continuously verified if a message was urgent and answered those even after hours.

The pressure on the professor is even higher in private learning centers because it is a client-service provider relationship. During the observation at *La Source*, one teacher explained that she had to be lenient with the children and put up with their behavior because she feared parents would unsubscribe from the course. The teacher regularly mentioned how she feared parents' judgments over the activities at the learning center. The monitoring of activities can reach impressive levels. As I visited a brand-new English learning center for 3 to 12 years old children with one of my informants, I observed the presence of cameras in every classroom. A screen in the waiting room displayed the video feed from classrooms, offices, and corridors around the learning center (see Fig. 27). Parents and grandparents waiting for their children or grandchildren could monitor the teachers and everything happening in the learning center and the classrooms in real-time.

After discussing with my informants about this video camera surveillance, I understood that this constant monitoring has been set up after several scandals of mistreatment in other private learning centers. Consequently, this brand-new learning center allowed parents to monitor classrooms in order to restore parents' trust.



**Figure 27. Waiting room screen with video feed from the learning center** [Source: picture taken by the author]

In fact, during my observation no one in the waiting room was watching the TV screen. However, its existence proved the learning center's full-transparency policy. These examples show parents' power over learning centers and public school teachers who are under constant pressure to satisfy demanding clients.

## **Occasional direct actions to reverse deemed unfair decisions**

When confronted with decisions they deem unfair, parents tend to take more direct actions. I identify two types of actions: 1) street demonstrations in front of the office of the presumably responsible local actor and, 2) legal proceedings. All these actions happen after shifts in policy or regulation which disturb a longstanding equilibrium. I argue that urban middle-class parents protect their interest by calling for a status quo maintaining a highly competitive education system which opens opportunities for the implementation of their strategies. The urban middle-class parents often use pre-existing laws or state discourse to justify their actions. This strategy recalls the notion of “rightful resistance” (O'Brien and Li 2006) used to designate “a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the states, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public” (O'Brien and Li 2006, 2). Urban middle-class parents, like rural Chinese observed by O'Brien and Li, use rightful resistance to defend their interests.

In this dissertation, I mentioned several stories of middle-class parents taking to the street to protest against the decisions of local authorities. The stories were used to illustrate the complex relations between parents and the education system. Here, I show that the public display of discontent through street protests is evidence of the reactivation of parent's political socialization, as they question power relations around them. In chapter 1, I recount briefly why parents from major cities protested, in May 2016, against quotas applied to the university entrance examinations favoring students from poorer regions. Urban middle-class parents consider that the university entrance examination is a fair method to distribute children among universities and streams. They claim that positive discrimination measures in favor of underprivileged students are a breach of equity. While the central government implemented this policy in the name of more equality in the education system, protesters held signs with the slogan

“education equity.”<sup>189</sup> The Chinese phrase can be translated by “education equity” or “equal access to education” in official documents. It has become a central element in the discourse of the state and the parents since the early 2000s. In the *Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, which determines the orientation of education policies for the decade, the phrase “education equity” was mentioned 18 times. However, the definition of the phrase remains ambiguous. The state does not clarify whether equity means simply distributing education resources equally among the population or if it involves compensating for the initial social inequalities with positive discrimination measures. This ambiguity enables urban middle-class parents to reclaim the government’s discursive frame, “education equity,” to defend their class interests. This discursive process gives parents a sense of legitimacy to take their claim to the streets.

Urban middle-class parents also use the phrase “education equity” to mean “education fairness”. In all parent protests I mentioned and I heard of, the questions of fairness and justice were connected. In Suzhou, when middle-class parents complained about the elite schools hosting an underprivileged school, they asked for “education fairness.”<sup>190</sup> Urban middle-class parents believe that they bought their admission into the elite school with an expensive education-apartment. As I showed in the previous section, they call for “market fairness” to obtain a return on their real-estate investment rather than “education fairness”. Despite its definitional fuzziness, the notion of education equity stimulates the parents’ political imagination and triggers political action. Parents have protested local authorities whose decisions presumably engendered an unfair situation. Local education bureaus and school administration are common targets. The story of the Suzhou school shows how parents exploit the division between the local education bureau which decided to resettle the migrant children and the elite school’s administration which decided to build a wall to separate the premises in response to parent demonstrations.

The protests mentioned in the introduction of chapter 7 are a compelling example of direct actions that had an immediate consequence on the implementation of education policies. Parents complained about the poor results of a renowned high school. They associated these results with the principal’s decision to implement “quality

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<sup>189</sup> In Chinese 教育公平 [jiàoyù gōngpíng]

<sup>190</sup> See in the Introduction of the dissertation and introduction of chapter 7.

education” measures. After the parent protests, the principal issued a letter of apology and rescinded the measures. This story shows parents’ in-depth knowledge of education policies, and their awareness of how these policies are implemented at the local level. Their quick mobilization, just days after the publication of the poor examination results, demonstrates a close community with an already established medium of communication, such as online chat groups. Finally, the public reaction from the school principal shows that street-level bureaucrats need to justify and even question their actions by considering the opinion of parents. Parents are not only the targets of education policy; they also provide feedback on the implementation of these policies.

Legal pursuits are another tool used by parents to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with policy decisions. In 2015, in Nanjing, a father twice sued local authorities requesting the Jianye district education bureau to revoke the school districting (Ren 2015). In April, he sued but his petition was dismissed because his daughter, Mengmeng, was under the age of six, so she was under the school-age for primary school enrollment. The father does not have standing to sue the education, because his rights are not directly affected. In September after his daughter’s birthday, Mengmeng’s father sued the education bureau again. He petitioned against the school districting by explaining that the closest school to his home was the North Campus of Xincheng Primary school, yet his daughter was required to enroll in another school. His lawyer provided precise geographical data to justify the plaintiff’s petition. However, the court decided in favor of the local education bureau explaining that school districts did not depend only on geometrical and geographical data but also on demographic, financial, and urban factors (Ren 2015). The urban middle-class father reframes his own personal interest, that is to enroll in the closest school, which happens to hold a much higher rank than the other school, into a rational argument calling for the common interest. His lawyer’s oral argument underlines that in the *Compulsory Education Law* promulgated in 1986, article 13 stipulates that all school-age children should enrol “in the school closest to the location of their household registration.”<sup>191</sup> This story illustrates how urban middle-class parents mobilize legal arguments and provide their own interpretation of the law to defend their argument. This story attracted media attention, and sparked an online reaction. On Weibo, parents expressed their support for

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<sup>191</sup> In Chinese: 适龄儿童、少年在户籍所在地学校就近入学。[shìlǐng értóng, shàonián zài hùjí suǒzài dì xuéxiào jiùjìn rùxué.]

the plaintiff and indignation regarding the court decision.<sup>192</sup> This online reaction observable after other similar stories shows how an individual case also relies on the mobilization of wider public support to legitimate its claim.

These stories are examples of how urban middle-class parents take action when confronted with a decision they deem unfair. Legal pursuits and street protests are the two main forms of mobilization used by urban middle-class parents. All these actions are legitimized by slogans that deploy state-discourse and legal arguments. It is in this way that parent mobilizations embody forms of class-based resistance in urban areas.

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<sup>192</sup> A Chinese social media platform which is often compared to the American mobile application Twitter

# Conclusion

Parents act as active citizens and entitled clients to exercise pressure on education service providers. They constantly monitor what their child is doing, which is both a form of empowerment, and an increased responsibility. Parental monitoring becomes the warrantee that education policies are enforced at the local level. Parents' heavy investment in the education of their children raises their awareness about education policies and local regulations. I argue that this high awareness for policies reactivate the process of political socialization defined by Galsberg and Deri as the "process by which individuals learn and frequently internalize a political lens framing their perceptions of how power is arranged and how the world around them is (and should be) organized; those perceptions, in turn, shape and define individuals' definitions of who they are and how they should behave in the political and economic institutions in which they live" (Glasberg and Deric 2011, 47). This reactivated political socialization can lead to forms of civic activism, such as street-protests or legal pursuits against local authorities.

Parents are especially critical of education policies which aim to balance the distribution of educational resources and policies which question the competitive system in which their educational strategies thrive. Urban middle-class parents have internalized a political frame around the phrase "education equity." Yet, according to them, this frame appears to describe a highly competitive education system which distributes power and education resources according to family investments. This frame of "education equity" is used by parents to influence the education provided to their children.



# Conclusion

In this conclusion, I summarize the key points and arguments presented throughout this dissertation. Then, I present the main contributions of this research by highlighting the commonalities and the original features of the Chinese case compared to other countries. I also explore directions for future research.

## Summary of the dissertation

This dissertation calls for the recognition of a specific scholarship on parenting, parents' activism, that is distinct from the literature on motherhood and maternalism. In the first chapter, I argue that we are in the midst of a new era of politicized parenting characterized by a broader understanding of the parent-identity; nationalist discourses using the family as a metaphoric and substantial tool to strengthen national cohesion and rejuvenate the population; and education policies that responsabilize parents to fight against social inequalities. These phenomena have led to a reconfiguration of the parent-subject as the savior of the nation. The increasing social and political pressure weighing on parents' shoulders reactivates the process political socialization among parents who perceive more acutely their political role in society. Thus, an increasing number of parents engage in advocacy work and social activism on behalf of their children.

I adapt this analytical framework to understand the role of parents in Chinese state-society relationship. I argue that urban middle-class parents are central actors in the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation called for by Xi Jinping with its slogan the *China Dream*. Nationalist policies combined with education reforms increase families' responsibilities in the nationalist rejuvenation project. Successive state-led Five-Virtue Family campaigns and the recent "Finding the Most Beautiful Family" produce a normative discourse on the family as a social institution at the service of the nation. As I showed in chapter 3, these political campaigns support the organization of nation-wide family pageant competitions. Competitions and moral discourses are tools for the state to govern its population from a distance (Bray and Jeffreys 2016). The normative



discourse of universal and ideal parenting practices sponsored by the state obliterates the capacity to perceive gender, social, economic, and cultural conditions shaping family life. Despite the reliance on seemingly neutral evaluation measures to assess the quality of parenting practices of seemingly ordinary families during national competitions, the performative strength of the discourse of exemplarism is embedded in urban middle-class subjectivity.

For-profit private companies reinforce the state-led normative discourse on parenting practices. I highlighted some divergences in their discourse as parenting is depicted by public actors as a public matter, legible and measurable based on clear criteria and by private sector actors as a commodified service, sellable, and competitive. Private companies assess successful parental strategies based on a child's school success. High-achieving children epitomize exemplary parents who implement efficient strategies and make limitless investments. Part of these investments goes into parenting advice, strategic residential choice, and extra-curricular courses. Urban middle-class parents, who are the targets of the consumerist motherhood discourse and the government's nationalist discourse, are caught at the heart of these contradictions which create some space for personal interpretation.

Given the intense competition to achieve academic excellence, I show that the whole family is mobilized to raise high-achieving children. In chapter 5, I show how the family ambitious educational goal is divided into smaller tasks distributed among household members under the mother's supervision. The grandparents are in charge of logistics and daily needs. As state-led, media and family discourses disqualify the grandparents' parenting experience as irrelevant in current China, mothers keep grandparents involvement in a child's education to a strict minimum. As in many patriarchal societies, the father's main task is to provide the financial means to support their family. This contribution is all the more critical as educational strategies become increasingly expensive. An emerging discourse on "new fatherhood" calls for greater involvement of fathers in their child's education. Yet these discourses also simultaneously highlight fathers' lack of expertise in education. Finally, I detail the central role of mothers which explains why more and more Chinese mothers leave the labour market to care for their children (Chen 2019). Mothers become household managers and specialize in the most crucial task, their children's education. Some resourceful mothers transform their legal, biological and social motherhood status into a

profitable economic occupation. I show that this professionalization process of mothering also empowers mothers who reclaim the capacity to produce norms on parenting practices.

In the last two chapters, I show how the inflation of education policies aiming to regulate the education market in the last ten years has unleashed a game of cat and mouse amongst the central government, local authorities, schools, parents, and private actors. I argue that when the goals of the central authority and local interests are not aligned, the issues of implementation of education policies open windows of opportunities for parents to implement their own strategies. A child's educational trajectory performs the family's social position. The state discourse around the central role of parents in their child's education reinforces parent sense of entitlement to question education policies. This reactivation of the political socialization process can lead to forms of civic activism, such as street-protests or legal pursuits against local authorities. Parents question education policies which threaten their child's educational success.

## **Research contributions and directions for future research**

This research sheds light on the shared experience for urban middle-class households around the world in the face of a heightened social pressure to raise performing children. I use the Chinese case as an example of a much wider international phenomenon. Second, I highlight the local characteristics of the Chinese case, despite the influence of global discourses. This dissertation advances our knowledge on state-society relations in China and how the state governs its population from a distance. Finally, this research contributes to the literature on comparative politics by shedding light on political actors which have not yet been conceptualized as such: parents.

## **A shared experience for the urban middle-class households around the world**

My contribution to the study of the Chinese urban middle-class households is to consider them not as an exotic and exceptional population compared to other countries. I show that Chinese urban middle-class parents are influenced by global discourses on intensive motherhood and scientific parenting even though they have limited access to global media platforms. Another striking feature common to urban middle-class parents in many developed countries is the energy and resources spent devising and implementing strategies to circumvent school districting policies. When I presented my research to friends and families around the world, the first reaction was to describe and compare educational strategies implemented by parents around them. The Chinese experience is not idiosyncratic but rather comparable.

Scholars have shown that in France parents negotiate the implementation of the school catchment zones (Barrault-Stella 2017; Barrault 2013) and that the same phenomenon occurs in American cities (Lareau and Goyette 2014). This shared experience – of educational strategies – among the urban middle-class across the world led to few international comparisons from scholars. Parents in Paris, Montreal or New York do not expect to experience the same conundrums as parents in Shanghai, Beijing, or Shenzhen because they are constantly reminded that the Chinese context is radically different from their own environment. I illustrate how middle-class families around the world advocate for the preservation of social hierarchies to maintain their social status. I argue that this common experience is reinforced by two phenomena emerging in many developed countries around the world: first, the flourishing parenting markets promoting consumerist behaviors; second, the state-led nationalist and natalist discourses giving a political dimension to parenting practices.

### **The local characteristics of the Chinese case**

In this study, I highlight the specificities unique to the Chinese context. First, the Chinese urban middle-class households start devising educational resources much earlier than parents from other countries. Many Chinese parents plan their child's educational trajectory before their child even enrolls in kindergarten. I introduced the main actors in the private education market, but further research should be conducted on the growing parenting market, especially on parent practices as consumers. Some

scholars have noted the role of online mother groups in shaping consumerist behavior (Song 2016).<sup>193</sup> Further research can be conducted in connection with environmental issues regarding food safety or pollution.

Also, Chinese middle-class households have a peculiar resource at their disposal: the household registration or *hukou*, which officially anchors a family to a district. This resource divides the Chinese population and giving a competitive advantage to urban households. Only households who hold the household registration from the city and the district where they reside can enroll their children to the nearest public school. Scholars have focused on the exclusion and discrimination experienced by rural households, especially when they migrate to urban areas (Zhou 2014a; Salgues 2012). Some scholars argue that the household registration system assigns the rural-to-urban migrants to a sub-citizens status with lesser rights (Froissart 2008). I showed that families who move from an urban area to another urban area, for instance from Beijing to Nanjing, also experience forms of exclusion, as they cannot enroll their children in the nearest public schools. To complement the scholarship on mobility in China, I call for more attention on how the household registration also hinders the mobility between urban areas.

Second, I highlight the specificities of the Chinese nationalist discourse which relies on a distinct conception on the quality of the population. Filial nationalism is embedded in long-standing discourses encouraging the improvement of the quality of the population. The project to change the nature and the quality of the population is anchored in the Republican and Maoist revolutionary project. I contribute to the literature on Chinese politics by looking at how the government govern from a distance to control the behavior of the population even in the private and intimate sphere (Sigley 2006; Xie 2021b; Kuan 2015). Regulating the family relationship is a central tool to governing the population (Foucault 2006). I show that the state configures parenting practices directly with the Family Education Promotion Law and indirectly by organizing the educational competition. The state encourages this competition with a nationalist discourse highlighting the parents' responsibility in making the right educational choices for their children. The state organizes a parentocratic education system, in which the children educational trajectory depends on parents' investments and wishes. Parents are given a sense of power over their child's education. This study

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<sup>193</sup> In Chinese 妈妈团 [māmā tuán]

illuminates the processes by which the Chinese state governs the intimate relationships within urban middle-class families. Further research should be conducted on the state's influence on parenting. Historical studies documenting the Five Virtues families and its successive version are most welcomed, particularly on how government and party officials implemented the campaigns in rural and urban areas.

### **Parents as political actors**

I call for the recognition of parents as autonomous political actors, and as targets of public policies. My approach to parents in the study of politics not only brings the “parent” as political actors into view for the first time, but also offers a framework for understanding the complex ways in which they are shaped by and are shaping state-society relations. In this dissertation, I show how the process of becoming a parent, in societies where so much emphasis is put on the parental role in reproducing the ethnic, cultural and economic cohesion of the country, reactivate the political socialization for majority of people. I argue that the parent-identity leads to an increased awareness over one's socio-economic and political environment and thus can lead to engaging in some forms of social activism. I argue that parents engage in politics to defend the interests of their child, but also as a new way of performing the good citizen. In contrast with other social movements in which individuals mobilize to better their own living or working conditions, parent mobilizations are performed as altruistic inspired by their emotional attachment to their child. Being a parent and having the responsibility for the lives of one's children become a motive for individuals to hold the state accountable for its actions, discourses and policies. Some parents become active political actors, whose emotional attachment to their child drives them to get involved in politics, which sometimes align with their own personal interests. I call for further research on parenting as a politicizing experience, not only connected education policies but also regarding policy brutality, and environmental issues.

As I shed light on the shared experiences of urban middle-class households in developed countries in their educational project shaped by state discourses and private companies, I argue that the Chinese case should be studied in dialogue with Western countries. This research offers a new perspective on the analysis of parents in China and opens many venues for further comparative research.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Chronology of the Five-Virtue Families campaigns

Years	Campaigns and Events	Political Periods
1953	Second Chinese Women's Congress : recognition of the role of domestic work in the socialist construction	Mao Zedong (1949 – 1978)
1954	Wuhan City launched the “ <b>Five-virtue Activities</b> ” : good-day planning, encouraging workers to produce well, good community solidarity, good hygiene, good teaching and education of children	
1956	ACWF issued an call for a mass-mobilization campaign around the “five virtues”: Good family and neighborhood solidarity, good family living arrangements, good education of children, encouraging relatives to produce, work and study well, and good study themselves.	
1957	In more than a hundred cities, activities were organized to promote the Five Virtues	
1982	The ACWF initiated the campaign “ <b>Strive to create the Five-virtue Families</b> ” which first led to an activity in Shanghai in 1984, and events all over China in 1985	Deng Xiaoping (1978 – 1993)
1996	Publication of the “Joint Circular on In-depth and Lasting Development of the Five-Virtue Civilized Families” signed by more than 15 governmental agencies and ministries	Jiang Zemin (1993 – 2003)
2009	The campaign changed name for “The Five-Virtue Civilized Families”	Hu Jintao (2003 – 2013)
2012	The campaign changed name for “ <b>The Harmonious Families</b> ”	
2014	The ACWF initiated a new campaign titled “ <b>Looking for the Most Beautiful Family</b> ” to achieve the Chinese dream	Xi Jinping (2013 - )
2019	The ACWF launched the “ <b>Family Happiness and Well-Being</b> ” program	
2021	Promulgation of the Family Education Promotion Law on October 23 <sup>rd</sup>	

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# Appendix 4. Ethics Approval



## CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

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Name of Applicant: Manon Laurent  
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science \ Political Science  
Agency: N/A  
Title of Project: Responsibilized Parents Negotiating Authoritarianism:  
Governmentality in Education Policies in the People's  
Republic of China  
Certification Number: 30009469

Valid From: May 04, 2018 To: May 03, 2019

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Pfaus".

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Dr. James Pfaus, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee



# Appendix 5. Recruitment flyer

## 关于南京的教育情况

亲爱的家长，您好！



我叫罗玛侬 Manon Laurent。

目前在加拿大康考迪亚大学（Concordia University）和巴黎第七大学（Paris VII Diderot）攻读社会学和教育政策学博士。

我的研究课题是关于南京的父母如何选择学校。

我想了解你如何评估一个小学的好坏，为什么选择或者不选择这个学校，如何让你的孩子进入小学等等。如果你住在南京、你的孩子在两岁到十六岁之间，你也愿意跟我谈谈你的择校战略，欢迎与我联系。我会跟你汇报我的研究结果。访谈会用中文或英文，

我们可以随时面谈。我可以跟你谈谈教育政策和择校战略。

与我联系：

微信 ManonL-TPP

电话 18621376613



### 参与的条件

- 我明白我参与这项研究是保密的（虽然这个项目的研究者会知道，但是不会暴露我的个人身份）。
- 我明白我会被访一两次，每次约 60 分钟，所有访谈都将被录音并被誉写成文字。
- 我明白我可以在访谈发生后的一个月内取消我的协议并中断参与。我明白一个月后由于数据会被用于传播与出版因而我不能退出参与。
- 我明白录音将被存放在罗玛侬的电脑里，只有通过密码才能打开。这些誉写的文字保留十五年。
- 我明白这项研究的数据可能会被发表。

有关这项研究的研究伦理的问题，你可联系康科迪亚大学研究伦理负责人，电话：514.848.2424 分机 7481 或电邮：oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

# Appendix 6. Interview Guidelines in English

Each interview lasted from 50min to 1h30 and was conducted and recorded entirely in Chinese by myself to ensure an equivalent treatment for all interviewees, with the exception of one interview with an American father married to a Chinese woman and residing in Nanjing whom I interviewed in English.

I hired a Chinese undergraduate student to transcribe in Chinese all the interviews. Finally, I coded the Chinese transcription of each interview and translated in English the sections used in the dissertation.

After introducing myself, briefly presenting my research and obtaining my interviewee's consent to record how conversation. My interviews were structured in six sections. These steps were not followed in a specific order, as I wanted for the parent to share their own perspective and for the conversation to flow naturally.

## 1. Your child school trajectory

Prompt Questions:

- Could you tell me about your child school trajectory until now?
- Is he/she currently attending a kindergarten? If yes, which one? Is this kindergarten public or private?
- Why did you choose this kindergarten?
- Is this kindergarten far from your home? How much cost the tuition fees in this kindergarten?
- In your child kindergarten, have you ever met with your child's teachers? Are there teachers-parents meetings organized by the school? Have you ever been? What do you think about these meetings?

### If the child was not yet enrolled in primary school

- Which primary school do you wish your child to attend? Why do you want your child to enroll in this specific school? Is this school public or private? Is it far from your home? What are the requirements to enroll your child in this school? How will you enroll your child in this primary school?

### Extra-curricular activities

- Is your child attending any extra-curricular classes or activities (such as tutoring, hobbies)? If yes, which one? In which institutions? How much does it cost? Did your child participate in the choice of those activities? Do you meet with your child's teachers sometimes? If yes, what is the purpose of these meetings?

## 2. Family Residential trajectory

Prompt Questions:

- Where do you live? Who is living with you (relatives)? Since when do you live there?
- How did you choose your current home?
- Do you think residential choice and school choice are related?
- Are your neighbors' children going to the same kindergartens?

## 3. Family interactions

Prompt Questions:

- According to you, who is the main care-giver for your child in the family? What are your relations with your parents? with your parent-in-laws?
- Who choose the school?
- Have there been discussions in the family about which primary school to choose for your child?

#### **4. Education Conceptions**

Prompt Questions:

- What do you think about school ranking?
- What do you think about family education? Do you think family education and school education are related?
- What kind of interactions should parents have with schools? What do you think is a good school?
- How do you know the quality of a school? Which schools are good in Nanjing according to you?
- What books/media sources/academic literature have been most useful in your parenting process? Have you asked advice to relatives?
- What do you think about ‘reducing the burden’ policies? How do you define ‘quality education’?

#### **5. Reading a newspaper article**

Qiu, Haihong. 2018. "More than 800 ‘market-pupils’ are being resettled ; Suzhou’s century-old school plant to set up a ‘separation gate’ in the building." *The Paper* [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_2376586](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2376586)

- What do you think about this piece of news?

#### **6. Personal information**

Prompt Questions:

- What is your current profession? And your partner?
- Do you consider your family as wealthy, average or poor?
- Where do you come from? Where does your partner come from?
- What is your highest academic degree? What about your partner?
- How did you feel your education about your own education experience? Were you pressured to succeed during your childhood?

# Appendix 7. Interview Guidelines in Chinese

这项研究是将用博士论文关于怎么家长选择孩子的小学

## 1° 您孩子学校历程

- 您可以告诉我您孩子的学校历程吗？他现在上幼儿园吗？是哪一个幼儿园？这个幼儿园是公办的还是民办的？
- 您为什么选择孩子进入这个幼儿园？
- 离您的房子远不远？学费差不多多少钱？
- 在幼儿园有没有老师和父母的会议吗？您去不去这些会议？您觉得这些会议有没有意思？为什么去？
  
- 您希望孩子上哪一个小学？为什么？哪一样小学（民办、公办、离家远不远）
- 进入这个小学有什么要求？
  
- 您的孩子上课外辅导吗（补习班、复习班、兴趣班）？哪一个班？在哪儿？学费差不多多少钱？孩子选择一些班？

## 2° 您们的居民历程

- 您现在住在哪里？家里跟谁一起住？几个成人在家？
- 您怎么选择您的房子？您从什么时候住在哪儿？
  
- 您觉得择校和选择房子有没有关系？
- 您的邻居的孩子上一样的幼儿园？

## 3° 在家里的关系

- 请介绍在一起生活的家庭成员
- 您觉得在家谁照顾孩子？
- 关于选择学校谁主导？关于教孩子？

## 4° 您的教育理念

- 什么书籍，媒体资源，学术文献对你想要了解有关于教育孩子和选择学校的问题目前看来最有用？

- 是否有某个人让你觉得是你个人的榜样或特别地受启发？他们是谁？为什么？
- 您觉得学校排名有没有意思？
- 您觉得家庭教育和上学校的教育有什么关系？您觉得父母和学校有什么关系？
- 您觉得一个好学校是什么样的学校？好学校有什么特点？您觉得怎么知道一个学校是好还是不好？
- 您觉得“家庭教育”有什么意思？
- 您怎么了解“减负政策”？或“快乐教育”？您感受“教育焦虑”吗？
- 您觉得“素质教育”有什么意思？
- 您听说过“拼妈”或“教育妈妈”吗？您觉得有什么意思？

## 5° 阅读报刊文章

邱海鸿. 2018. 八百余名“菜小”生被安置，苏州百年名校拟校内设“隔离门”. 澎湃新闻

[https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_2376586](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2376586)

- 看这条新闻以后，您有什么想法？

## 6° 个人背景资料

- 您做什么工作？您的老公/妻子？
- 您觉得您富有，中点还是穷吗？
- 您从哪儿来得？省？城市？您的老公 /妻子？
- 您的最高的教育程度是什么？您的老公/妻子？
- 小的时候您经历成功学校里的压力吗？

## Appendix 8. List of interviews

Interview	Statut	Sex (child)	Age (child)	Connection
1	Mother	Girl	11 years old	La Source Learning Center
2	Mother	Boy	3 years old	Acquaintance
3	Father	Girl	5 years old	Acquaintance
4	Mother	Boy	3 years old	La Source Learning Center
5	Grand-Mother	Boy	6 years old	La Source Learning Center
6	Mother	Boy	6 years old	La Source Learning Center
7	Grand-Mother	Girl	4 years old and half	La Source Learning Center
8	Mother	Two Girls	8years old and 3 years old	La Source Learning Center
9	Mother	Girl	6 years old	Interviewee
10	Mother	Girl	6 years old	Interviewee
11	Parents	Boy	4 years old	La Source Learning Center
12	Mother	Girl	5 years old and half	Interviewee
13	Mother	Boy	12 years old	La Source Learning Center
14	Father	Girl and Boy	2 years old and 16 years old	La Source Learning Center
15	Mother	Boy	4 years old and half	La Source Learning Center
16	Mother	Two Girls	4 years old and 17 years old	La Source Learning Center
17	Father	Boy	7 years old	Network NFLS
18	Mother	Girl	6 years old	Interviewee
19	Mother	Girl	5 years old	La Source Learning Center
20	Father	Boy	12 years old	La Source Learning Center
21	Mother	Girl	14 years old	Network NFLS
22	Mother	Girl	13 years old	Network NFLS
23	Mother	Girl	14 years old	Network NFLS
24	Father	Girl	2 years old	Network NFLS
25	Mother	Boy	6 years old	Network NFLS
26	Father	Boy	7 years old	Interviewee
27	Mother	Girl	6 years old	Network NFLS
28	Mother	Girl	14 years old	Network NFLS
29	Mother	Boy	7 years old	Network NFLS
30	Mother	Girl	6 years old	Network NFLS
31	Father	Two Boys	3 years old and 7 years old	Acquaintance
32	Mother	Boy	11 years old	Network NFLS
33	Mother	Boy	12 years old	Network NFLS
34	Mother	Two Girls	7 years old and 8 years old	Network NFLS
35	Mother	Boy	5 years old	Network NFLS
36	Employee of the network NFLS			NJB Employee
37	Employee of the network NFLS			NJB Employee

## Appendix 9. Résumé en français

En août 2018, une école publique d'élite de Suzhou (province du Jiangsu) a pris une décision controversée.<sup>194</sup> Elle a choisi de construire un mur temporaire pour diviser les locaux, séparant ainsi les élèves du quartier aisé des enfants de travailleurs migrants qui venaient d'être affectés à l'école par le bureau d'éducation.<sup>195</sup> Ces derniers étaient auparavant inscrits à l'école primaire de *Lixin*, une école communautaire gérée par des travailleurs migrants. Or, le bail de l'école a expiré à l'été 2017, ce qui a forcé l'établissement scolaire communautaire à quitter les lieux, après plus d'un an de procédures judiciaires engagées par le propriétaire du terrain, une société privée d'éducation.

En Chine, la loi exige la scolarisation obligatoire pour tous les enfants de 6 à 15 ans. Il était donc de la responsabilité de la commune de réaffecter les 800 enfants migrants dans une autre école pour leur permettre de poursuivre leur scolarité. Les autorités locales ont choisi l'école primaire expérimentale de *Qinxi*, réputée depuis près d'un siècle pour la réussite scolaire de ses élèves. En 2016, l'établissement avait inauguré un tout nouveau campus. La nouvelle de l'affectation des enfants de travailleurs migrants n'est pas passée inaperçue. Les parents du quartier ont vivement exprimé leur mécontentement et leurs inquiétudes sur les réseaux sociaux face à l'arrivée de ces nouveaux élèves. Certains ont même manifesté devant l'école. En effet, il a été difficile pour ces parents d'obtenir une place dans cette école primaire d'élite, certains parents ont investi des sommes importantes pour acheter des appartements dans le quartier. Or, la réputation d'excellence de l'école expérimentale de *Qinxi* impacte les prix de l'immobilier du quartier. Finalement, pour rassurer les parents, l'école publique d'élite a construit à la hâte une séparation physique qui a divisé les locaux en deux.

Cette actualité illustre comment les politiques éducatives de l'État produisent des espaces de protestation dans lesquels différents acteurs sociaux à lutter pour protéger leurs intérêts particuliers. Dans cette étude, je m'intéresse à la façon dont les parents des classes moyennes urbaines s'impliquent dans des espaces conflictuels pour défendre leurs intérêts et ceux de leur enfant. Ce faisant, ils performant et réinterprètent leur classe sociale et leur citoyenneté.

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<sup>194</sup>Suzhou est la deuxième grande ville du Jiangsu après Nanjing où j'ai mené mon travail de terrain.

<sup>195</sup>En Chine, les travailleurs migrants sont des citoyens chinois des zones rurales qui migrent vers les zones urbaines dans l'espoir d'améliorer leurs conditions de vie.

Dans cette histoire du mur des écoles de Suzhou, trois types d'acteurs défendent leurs intérêts : les parents, les acteurs éducatifs du secteur public (écoles publiques et bureaux de l'éducation) et les acteurs éducatifs du secteur privé (entreprises privées d'éducation), révélant la relation complexe entre les politiques éducatives et la hiérarchie sociale.

D'une part, en ce qui concerne les parents, les hiérarchies sociale et géographique organisent l'accès à l'éducation. Les ménages ruraux sont enregistrés dans leur localité d'origine ce qui leur donne un accès limité aux ressources éducatives des zones urbaines. Pour faire face à ces discriminations dans l'accès aux services publics, ils ouvrent des écoles communautaires en marge de la légalité (Froissart 2003a). Dans l'histoire de l'école de Suzhou, les familles migrantes apparaissent d'abord comme victimes de la marchandisation des ressources éducatives. En effet, l'histoire débute avec la fermeture de leur école suite aux poursuites judiciaires d'une entreprise privée d'éducation. Par ailleurs, ils sont également les cibles passives de la mise en œuvre des politiques éducatives lorsque le bureau local d'éducation affecte leurs enfants dans une autre école. Enfin, les familles aisées discriminent et rejettent publiquement les enfants des travailleurs migrants. Ces représentations sont souvent exactes, bien que des chercheurs aient également montré comment certaines familles de migrants ruraux résistent aux discriminations qu'ils subissent dans les zones urbaines (Froissart 2003a). À l'autre extrémité de la hiérarchie sociale, les parents de la classe moyenne urbaine agissent comme des consommateurs proactifs. Ils estiment que leurs enfants méritent une certaine qualité d'éducation, par conséquent ils investissent dans des appartements coûteux pour faire admettre leurs enfants dans des établissements scolaires d'élite. Enfin, parfois ils expriment publiquement leurs inquiétudes et leur mécontentement lorsqu'ils désapprouvent les décisions prises par les autorités locales.

D'autre part, les acteurs éducatifs publics sont tiraillés entre leur rôle d'exécutants locaux des politiques publiques et la pression liée aux plaintes et aux protestations de la population. A ce dilemme s'ajoute des objectifs politiques concurrents: fournir une éducation à tous les enfants d'âge scolaire, tout en maintenant la qualité des ressources éducatives dans un contexte financier contraint.

Dernier détail à noter, les acteurs éducatifs du secteur privé fleurissent depuis les années 1990, sous la forme d'écoles privées et de centres privés d'apprentissage extrascolaire. Soumises aux lois du marché, elles cherchent à augmenter leurs revenus et



à attirer de nouveaux clients solvables. Initialement, le marché éducatif était très peu réglementé. Cependant, au cours des dernières décennies, les entreprises privées d'éducation ont été de plus en plus soumises au contrôle de l'État.

L'histoire des écoles de Suzhou est l'un des nombreux exemples où l'on assiste à diverses luttes autour de la répartition des ressources éducatives. Elle illustre la façon dont les parents deviennent des acteurs avec lesquels il faut compter sur le plan politique, en forçant la main des gouvernements locaux et des écoles publiques. Cette thèse examine ces dynamiques dans le contexte de la ville de Nanjing et montre l'importance croissante des mobilisations parentales et de leurs origines dans le discours nationaliste chinois.

Pour réaliser le *Rêve chinois* et restaurer la grandeur de la nation chinoise, Xi Jinping met l'accent sur le rôle de l'éducation, non seulement comme outil de propagande mais aussi comme moyen de former des citoyens innovants et compétitifs redevables à leur nation.<sup>196</sup> Les politiques d'éducation présentent les projets économiques, sociaux et nationalistes du président chinois. Pour résoudre le dilemme intrinsèque à tout pays : garantir une répartition équitable des ressources éducatives tout en conservant un avantage concurrentiel sur le marché international du travail, le gouvernement chinois recourt à la marchandisation et la régulation des ressources éducatives. L'État transfère concrètement la responsabilité de la réussite scolaire des enfants aux parents. Ils sont aujourd'hui clairement tenus responsables des décisions concernant l'accès de leur enfant aux diverses ressources éducatives. Je soutiens que la diversification du choix de l'école et le marché florissant de l'enseignement privé en Chine renforcent l'autonomie des parents de la classe moyenne et placent simultanément des responsabilités démesurées sur leurs épaules. À partir d'un travail de terrain immersif à Nanjing auprès de parents et d'établissements éducatifs, je montre que la responsabilisation croissante des parents vis-à-vis de la réussite scolaire de leur enfant a conduit à une professionnalisation des pratiques parentales ainsi qu'à une réactivation du processus de socialisation politique des parents. L'autonomisation des parents renouvelle la façon dont ils configurent et sont configurés par les relations État-société.

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<sup>196</sup>Le « rêve chinois », en chinois 中国梦 [zhōngguó mèng] est un slogan attribué à Xi Jinping, depuis qu'il est devenu le chef du PCC. Il a utilisé ce slogan pour la première fois en novembre 2012 lors de l'ouverture d'une exposition au Musée national de Chine. L'exposition s'appelait "La route du rajeunissement national".

Dans ce résumé, je pose les jalons de mon argumentation. Dans un premier temps, je propose une définition des parents et de la parentalité afin de distinguer ces constructions sociales de la famille et de la parenté. Je définis la parentalité comme une performance sociale et politique façonnée au-delà des caractéristiques biologiques et juridiques. Dans un deuxième temps, je m'appuie sur le concept foucaldien de gouvernementalité pour expliquer le rôle central des parents dans les relations entre l'État et la société dans la Chine contemporaine. Dans un troisième temps, je montre comment les parents se sont impliqués dans la mise en œuvre des politiques d'éducation. Ensuite, je présente la méthodologie hybride que j'ai utilisée pour mener cette recherche combinant un travail de terrain immersif à Nanjing et une collecte de données en ligne pendant la pandémie mondiale de COVID-19. Enfin, je présenterai le plan de ma thèse.

### **Famille, parenté, parents et parentalité**

Dans cette étude, je me concentre sur les pratiques parentales définies comme des pratiques intentionnelles et un travail émotionnel qui contribuent à l'incarnation de la relation parent-enfant et comme un rôle social dans lequel un individu incarne et exécute la représentation sociale et politique d'un parent. Je commence par distinguer trois termes : famille, parenté et parentalité. Traditionnellement, la famille était présentée comme la plus petite unité collective « naturelle » de la population (Neyrand 2011). Or, les chercheurs définissaient généralement la famille à partir de trois liens principaux : la relation contractuelle d'un couple hétérosexuel, les relations biologiques des individus partageant le même ADN et les relations sociales entre individus vivant dans la même maison. Toutes sont organisées par des hiérarchies, des relations d'autorité, d'obéissance et de soin (Neyrand 2011 ; Bourdieu 1993 ; Ariès 1996). Selon Bourdieu (1993), la famille est une construction sociale. Bourdieu soutient que la famille « en tant que catégorie sociale objective (structure structurante) est la base de la famille en tant que catégorie sociale subjective (structure structurée) qui détermine des milliers de représentations et d'actions (telles que les mariages) qui participent à la reproduction de la catégorie sociale objective » (Bourdieu 1993 : 34). En effet, les rôles et les relations quotidiennes des individus au sein de la famille sont déterminés par des représentations sociales subjectives. Parmi ces rôles, je me concentre sur la relation entre parents et enfants.

Les phénomènes de modernisation, mondialisation et d'urbanisation des sociétés à travers le monde ont eu un grand impact sur les attentes sociales concernant la relation parent-enfant au cours des derniers siècles. Certains chercheurs occidentaux ont montré que la parentalité est passée d'une fonction de simple reproduction à une mission éducative. La parentalité a évolué de pratiques sociales communautaires à des pratiques privées et intimes (Gauchet 2004). Selon le célèbre historien de l'enfance, Philippe Ariès, au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, le modèle familial occidental est passé d'une société ouverte tournée vers le monde des adultes à un modèle familial fermé et nucléaire tourné vers la protection des enfants (Ariès 1996). Dans le modèle de la famille ouverte, les enfants dès leur plus jeune âge étaient considérés comme des adultes. Ils étaient intégrés dans la société adulte en tant qu'apprentis, ouvriers agricoles ou jeunes princes, selon l'origine sociale de leur famille et leur sexe.<sup>197</sup> Dans le modèle de la famille fermée, les enfants sont élevés en dehors de la société adulte. Au cours des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles, la baisse du taux de fécondité et du taux de mortalité infantile qui a accompagné le processus d'industrialisation et l'entrée des femmes sur le marché du travail rend les enfants de plus en plus précieux dans les pays industrialisés. La natalité n'a cessé de baisser depuis la Seconde Guerre mondiale, passant de 3,6 naissances par femme en 1,60 à 1,6 en 2019 dans les pays de l'OCDE (Banque mondiale 2021). Dans le même temps, la mission de l'État s'élargit afin d'assurer l'accès à l'éducation pour tous. La généralisation de la scolarisation ouvre de nouvelles opportunités de mobilité sociale. Certaines études montrent comment les changements sociaux beaucoup plus rapides dans la Chine contemporaine ont influencé la relation parent-enfant (Naftali 2016).<sup>198</sup>

Les innovations juridiques et médicales telles que le divorce, l'adoption, la gestation pour autrui, la FIV ont permis de nouvelles formes de familles biologiques et juridiques. Les changements sociaux, tels que l'urbanisation, le renforcement des droits des femmes et la participation des femmes au marché du travail ont également remis en question la construction sociale des familles. Ces changements ont amené les chercheurs à déplacer leur analyse de la famille en tant qu'unité holistique vers la famille nucléaire, puis vers les enfants et les parents en tant que catégories distinctes d'acteurs. Le

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<sup>197</sup>Le mot enfant n'avait pas le sens restreint actuel. Au Moyen Age, les gens utilisaient le mot enfant comme le mot "gars" de nos jours. (Ariès 2014, 177)

<sup>198</sup>Fait intéressant, Philippe Ariès est souvent cité par les universitaires chinois et enseigné dans les cours de sociologie. Au cours de mon travail de terrain, j'ai participé à des cours de sociologie à l'Université de Nanjing et à l'East Normal University de Shanghai au cours desquels les professeurs ont cité Philippe Ariès comme référence pour analyser l'impact de la modernisation sur les relations familiales.

« parent » est désormais devenu une catégorie sociale à part entière (Neyrand 2011). Une littérature florissante sur les droits reproductifs met en lumière les processus qui permettent de devenir parent et d'acquérir le statut de parent pour différentes communautés et par différents moyens (Ginsburg et Reiter 1995 ; Hoghughi et Long 2004). En outre, les chercheurs ont souligné la nécessité de différencier la filiation génétique de la parentalité légale ou de la responsabilité parentale, car celles-ci peuvent être partagées entre différentes personnes ou institutions en relation avec un enfant spécifique (Bainham 1999).

La parentalité est un statut qui correspond également à un agir : soigner, élever et éduquer un enfant. De nombreux individus présents autour d'un enfant sont impliqués dans la parentalité. Hoghughi et Long définissent la parentalité « comme des activités intentionnelles visant à assurer la survie et le développement des enfants » (2004, 5) Cette définition ne contient aucun élément juridique ou biologique et met plutôt l'accent sur les actions. Cependant, elle néglige le rôle des émotions dans la parentalité (Kuan 2015). Darling et Steinberg (1993) distinguent le style parental des pratiques parentales. Ils définissent le premier comme le « climat émotionnel dans lequel la socialisation se produit » (1993, 488) tandis que le second décrit « les comportements orientés vers un but par lesquels les parents s'acquittent de leurs devoirs parentaux » (Darling et Steinberg 1993, 488) . En m'appuyant sur ces auteurs, je propose ma propre définition des pratiques parentales en tant que pratiques intentionnelles et travail émotionnel contribuant à l'incarnation de la relation parent-enfant.

### **La gouvernementalité dans le contexte chinois**

Le sens aigu des responsabilités des parents quant au succès ou à l'échec futur de leur enfant, illustre comment les pratiques de gouvernance ont discipliné la population et configuré les parents comme sujets des politiques éducatives. Dans les années 1990, Foucault soulignait que le passage à la gouvernementalité a fait de la famille un « instrument privilégié du gouvernement de la population » (2006 : 140) . Dans son ouvrage, Foucault (2006) décrit l'évolution historique des États occidentaux depuis la personnalisation du pouvoir au profit du règne princier ; à « l'art de gouverner », une répartition diffuse et omniprésente du pouvoir qui discipline et contrôle la population dans un contexte d'expansion démographique, financière et agricole. Foucault théorise le concept de gouvernementalité comme un « ensemble formé par les institutions, les procédures, les analyses et les réflexions, le calcul et la tactique » (Foucault 2006 : 142)

qui discipline la population pour maintenir l'ordre et la sécurité. La gouvernementalité désigne également une tendance à s'appuyer sur le savoir et l'expertise pour gouverner. S'appuyant sur Foucault, Rose (1996) développe le concept de gouvernementalité appliqué aux « démocraties libérales avancées » signifiant qu'« il est possible de gouverner sans gouverner la *société*, c'est-à-dire de gouverner par les choix régulés et responsables d'agents autonomes - citoyens, consommateurs, parents, employés, gestionnaires, investisseurs - et de gouverner en intensifiant et en agissant sur leur allégeance à des « communautés » particulières » (Rose 1996, 61) . Ainsi, il est important de comprendre les processus, les mécanismes et les pratiques qui permettent aux individus d'imaginer l'État, alors que ce dernier gouverne à distance en organisant « la 'responsabilisation' des sujets qui sont de plus en plus 'habilités' à se discipliner eux-mêmes » (Ferguson et Gupta 2002, 989).

Bien que la conceptualisation de la gouvernementalité ait été largement appliquée aux analyses d'un programme gouvernemental libéral avancé, elle offre également des informations importantes sur les pratiques du gouvernement dans des contextes non démocratiques. Des recherches récentes appliquent le concept de gouvernementalité au contexte chinois pour remettre en question la compréhension d'un État fort face à une société faible (Sigley 1996, 2006 ; Jeffreys et Sigley 2009 ; Bray et Jeffreys 2016). D'après Sigley (2006), la gouvernementalité chinoise diffère de ses variantes occidentales non pas par le manque de liberté des citoyens mais plutôt par sa plus grande dépendance aux connaissances technoscientifiques et son discours déterministe sur les conséquences des choix des individus. Hoffman (2006) illustre comment le passage d'un système d'affectation des tâches organisé par l'État à un marché du travail individualisé dans les années 1990 a non seulement rendu les individus responsables de leur avenir, mais aussi de l'avenir de la nation. Elle décrit comment « le choix et l'autonomie des individus font partie des processus de gouvernance et de formation des sujets » (Hoffman 2006, 553). Hoffman soutient en outre que la gouvernementalité chinoise diffère de la version néolibérale occidentale en raison de sa forte dimension nationaliste. Elle montre par exemple comment la version chinoise de la gouvernementalité encourage les jeunes diplômés à réaliser leur potentiel professionnel par des choix responsables en suggérant que cela fait partie de leur devoir de citoyen, puisqu'elle leur permettra de construire une nation chinoise plus forte (Hoffman 2006) . Greenhalgh et Winckler (2005) décrivent deux étapes du processus chinois de gouvernementalisation

dans le domaine de la politique démographique. Tout d'abord, sous l'ère Deng dans les années 1980, la construction de la capacité bureaucratique de l'État a permis l'application stricte des politiques de planification familiale. La deuxième étape, durant les ères Jiang et Hu des années 1990 aux années 2000, a conduit à l'apparition d'une « discipline professionnelle et d'une autonomie individuelle » (Greenhalgh et Winckler 2005 : 23). Je soutiens que ce processus a évolué vers une troisième étape dans les années 2000, en raison de l'émergence d'espaces concurrentiels organisés par l'État dans lesquels les citoyens se sentent responsables de leurs choix et de leur réussite dans la vie. Cette concurrence est renforcée par des discours nationalistes produits par l'État qui soulignent que les citoyens doivent user de leur autonomie pour se gouverner et participer à faire grandir leur nation. Ce processus configure la façon dont les parents élèvent leurs enfants.

Depuis les années 1980, les réformes de l'éducation dans de nombreux pays ont conduit à l'émergence d'un marché de l'éducation compétitif reposant sur le sens du devoir des parents à investir dans l'éducation de leur enfant. Ce phénomène est mieux décrit par le concept de parentocratie de Philip Brown, selon lequel l'État introduit des réformes pour encourager les parents à croire que "l'éducation qu'un enfant reçoit doit être conforme à la *richesse* et aux *souhaits* des parents plutôt qu'aux *capacités* et aux *efforts* des élèves" (Brown 1990, 65, italique dans le texte original). L'émergence de la parentocratie bouleverse l'idée de méritocratie. Le mérite de l'enfant n'est plus un critère d'accès aux ressources éducatives. Le capital social, culturel et économique d'un ménage surdétermine la richesse et les souhaits des parents et donc la capacité d'un enfant à accéder à l'éducation et à se construire son avenir. Choisir et obtenir l'accès aux ressources éducatives adaptées à son enfant sont des moyens pour les parents de performer et de reproduire leur position sociale. Jin et Di (2015) soutiennent que la parentocratie est un phénomène répandu dans la Chine urbaine portant atteinte à l'équité et à la justice dans la distribution des ressources éducatives publiques. Un système éducatif parentocratique minimise la responsabilité du gouvernement dans la lutte contre la reproduction sociale et les inégalités sociales.

Je soutiens que l'émergence d'un marché de l'éducation menant à un système éducatif parentocratique est un outil pour gouverner la population chinoise. Le gouvernement encadre les parents comme des sujets autonomes dont les choix ont un

impact déterminant sur la mobilité sociale et donnent l'illusion aux parents qu'ils sont responsables de la réussite sociale de leur enfant.

### **Parents et réformes de l'éducation**

Le fort investissement des parents dans l'éducation de leurs enfants les sensibilise aux politiques éducatives et aux réglementations locales. Je soutiens que cette prise de conscience des politiques éducatives réactive le processus de socialisation politique défini par Galsberg et Deri comme le « processus par lequel les individus apprennent et intériorisent une certaine approche du politique qui encadre ensuite leurs perceptions de la façon dont le pouvoir est organisé et comment le monde qui les entoure est (et devrait être) organisé. Ces perceptions, à leur tour, façonnent la définition des individus de qui ils sont et comment ils devraient se comporter dans les institutions politiques et économiques dans lesquelles ils vivent » (Glasberg et Deric 2011, 47). En ce qui concerne les parents, cette socialisation politique réactivée peut conduire à des formes d'activisme civique, telles que des manifestations en ligne et dans la rue ou des poursuites judiciaires contre les autorités locales.

Pour analyser la politisation des pratiques parentales, j'utilise le concept de champ de cause développé par Laure Bereni pour analyser les mouvements des femmes en France dans les années 1990. S'appuyant sur le concept de champ de Bourdieu, Bereni définit un champ de cause comme un ensemble de structures mobilisatrices principalement consacrées à l'avancement d'une cause spécifique, « dépassant la frontière entre la société civile et les institutions politiques » (Bereni 2021, 208). Ces structures peuvent avoir des revendications diverses, parfois contradictoires. La caractéristique importante pour Bereni et pour mes propres recherches est de dépasser la division claire entre la société civile et les institutions politiques. Un champ de cause englobe des acteurs intra et extra-institutionnels. Dans le champ de cause parental, cet aspect est crucial car l'État est fortement impliqué dans la définition juridique et pratique de la parentalité et des pratiques parentales. Les gouvernements brouillent souvent les frontières entre les institutions formelles et les organisations informelles en mobilisant les parents en tant que bénévoles pour soutenir d'autres familles. Dans son examen des programmes de soutien à la parentalité, l'UNICEF montre que les parents sont souvent mobilisés par les programmes de soutien pour aider d'autres familles. Par exemple, en Chine, des mères volontaires sont recrutées pour aider les enfants dans les

zones rurales; en Biélorussie, les pères sont recrutés comme formateurs bénévoles dans les *Father Schools* et des mères-mentors sont recrutées en Afrique du Sud pour « aider à améliorer les compétences maternelles » chez les ménages à faible revenu (UNICEF et al. 2015, 28). Par ailleurs, les organisations de parents établissent souvent des relations institutionnelles avec les écoles. Par exemple, en France, les représentants des parents font désormais partie intégrante de la communauté éducative (Gombert 2008 ; Barthélémy 1995).

Le concept de champ de cause saisit la relation de pouvoir déséquilibrée au sein d'un groupe qui est censé défendre la même cause. Premièrement, l'hypothèse principale qui façonne le champ de cause parental est que la plupart des parents défendent les intérêts de leur enfant en investissant des ressources et en s'impliquant parfois dans l'activisme civique. Cependant, l'émergence d'un marché de l'éducation concurrentiel a opposé les parents les uns aux autres dans la course aux meilleures écoles. Je soutiens que les parents des classes moyennes défendent les intérêts de leur enfant, en contournant les politiques visant à redistribuer les ressources éducatives.

Deuxièmement, je soutiens que les parents de la classe moyenne participent activement à la reproduction des inégalités sociales en concevant des stratégies éducatives qui mobilisent leur capital social, culturel et économique. En m'inspirant du concept de capital de Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1986), je définis le capital social comme les relations interpersonnelles de la famille, également appelées *guanxi* en chinois. Le capital culturel se divise en deux formes de capital : les savoirs transmis au sein de la famille et la familiarité avec les codes et les procédures sociales. Les revenus et les biens immobiliers du ménage constituent le capital économique. Enfin, il existe une forme supplémentaire de capital propre au contexte chinois : le registre des ménages ou *hukou*, qui rattache officiellement une famille à une ville et un quartier. La mobilisation des ressources montre le déséquilibre des pouvoirs dans le champ de cause parental.

## **Méthodologie**

Cette étude s'appuie sur la littérature de l'anthropologie de l'État (Sharma et Gupta 2006 ; Abélès 2005) et explore comment les techniques de gouvernance façonnent l'identité parentale et les pratiques parentales. Hagman et Péclard (2010) fournissent un cadre heuristique convaincant pour étudier les configurations de pouvoir et les représentations locales de l'État, qu'ils appellent *l'État négocié* tel qu'il est produit « par



des processus de négociation, de contestation et de bricolage » (Hagmann et Péclard 2010 : 544).

Leur cadre d'analyse propose d'étudier trois éléments : les acteurs, les arènes et les répertoires d'actions. Dans mes recherches, j'ai observé les discours et les pratiques de trois ensembles d'acteurs : les familles composées d'enfants, de parents et de grands-parents ; les représentants de l'État, c'est-à-dire les autorités centrales et les représentants locaux de l'Etat tels que les enseignants et les directeurs d'école ; et les entreprises privées dans les secteurs de l'éducation et de l'immobilier.

Hagman et Péclard (2010) utilisent le terme « arènes de négociation » comme un outil permettant au chercheur « d'identifier les limites de l'espace politique dans lequel les groupes d'acteurs négocient les dimensions matérielles et symboliques de l'État. [...] Au sein de ces arènes, l'État se négocie de manière plus ou moins formalisée et routinière » (Hagmann et Péclard 2010, 543). De plus, Hagman et Péclard montrent que « les arènes de négociation sont difficiles à localiser géographiquement car elles sont ancrées dans les relations sociales entre groupes en présence et se caractérisent par des dynamiques spatio-temporelles et une certaine informalité » (Hagmann et Péclard 2010 : 551). Dans cette étude, j'ai analysé le rôle joué par les acteurs étatiques et non étatiques qui interagissent pour négocier la mise en œuvre des politiques éducatives. En Chine, entre 1949 et les années 1980, lorsqu'il s'agissait d'éducation, les principaux espaces de négociation se limitaient aux relations entre les familles, le Parti communiste et les unités de travail qui assuraient la garde des enfants et organisaient l'offre éducative.<sup>199</sup> Cependant, dans les années 1990, la libéralisation progressive du système éducatif et l'émergence d'un marché de l'enseignement privé ont ouvert de nouvelles arènes aux familles pour négocier le rôle de l'État dans l'éducation de leurs enfants. Dans ces arènes relationnelles et dynamiques, j'ai observé les discours performatifs de chaque acteur (État, entreprises privées et familles) qui, selon moi, sont diverses manières par lesquelles chaque acteur négocie le rôle de l'État. Ces négociations utilisent différents répertoires d'actions, notamment : la coercition, la consultation, les protestations, les poursuites judiciaires, la corruption et le lobbying. L'utilisation de ces répertoires d'actions dépend des ressources dont dispose chaque ensemble d'acteurs à

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<sup>199</sup> L'unité de travail, en chinois 单位[dānwèi], est officiellement le lieu de travail de tous les individus en République populaire de Chine (RPC). Ces unités servaient également d'institutions collectives multifonctionnelles dans les zones urbaines, distribuant l'aide sociale, fournissant des services de garde d'enfants, des cantines, etc. Ils sont souvent définis comme un outil de gouvernement permettant au régime chinois de contrôler la population, en particulier à l'époque maoïste (D. Bray 2005).

des moments précis. Dans cette étude, je soutiens que les arènes de négociation transforment la perception qu'ont les parents de l'État et de la politique.

Pour observer les interactions entre l'État gouvernant à distance et les parents en tant qu'acteurs politiques, j'ai combiné plusieurs méthodes de recherche qualitative à la fois sur place et en ligne. J'ai mené un travail de terrain immersif à Nanjing, ville d'environ 8 millions d'habitants et capitale de l'une des provinces les plus riches de Chine : le Jiangsu. Nanjing fait partie de la catégorie administrative « nouvelle ville de niveau 1 » avec Chengdu, Chongqing, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Tianjin, Suzhou, Xi'an, Changsha, Shenyang, Qingdao, Zhengzhou, Dalian, Dongguan et Ningbo<sup>200</sup>. En raison de son statut administratif, Nanjing a été l'une des villes sélectionnées pour tester les réformes éducatives telles que le renforcement des politiques de zonage scolaire en 2014.

En tant que première capitale de la dynastie Ming (1368-1421), Nanjing a une longue histoire culturelle et des établissements scolaires publics bien établis. Les écoles les plus anciennes sont publiques et jouissent d'une solide réputation d'excellence. Cette situation distingue la ville de Nanjing de celle de Shanghai, où la plupart des établissements d'élite, hormis les universités, sont privés en raison du développement économique relativement récent de la ville et de l'expansion tardive des établissements scolaires concomitamment avec les concessions étrangères au cours du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. A Nanjing, les classes moyennes se livrent une concurrence acharnée pour inscrire leurs enfants dans les meilleures écoles publiques. Seules quelques écoles privées (par exemple, l'école *Sujie*) attirent les enfants des classes moyennes et supérieures. Officiellement, le système éducatif public et privé laisse peu de place aux parents pour jouer un rôle dans le processus d'admission. L'inscription dans les écoles publiques est déterminée par une carte scolaire basée sur le lieu de résidence du ménage. Cependant, de nombreuses stratégies sont utilisées par les parents de la classe moyenne pour contourner ce système. Par exemple, certains parents font des dons financiers à l'école, certains valorisent les compétences spécifiques de leur enfant, enfin certains utilisent leur réseau social pour rencontrer le directeur de l'école souhaitée et négocient l'admission de leur enfant directement avec le directeur. Les établissements privés ont

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<sup>200</sup>Le système de niveaux de villes chinoises est une classification hiérarchique non officielle des villes chinoises basée sur la population, la richesse et l'attractivité commerciale. Le niveau 1 comprend : Pékin, Shanghai, Guangzhou et Shenzhen. En 2017, le magazine financier *Yicai Global* a classé 338 villes en 6 niveaux : le Tier-1, le New Tier-1, le Tier-2, le Tier-3 etc.

plus de liberté dans leurs processus de sélection. Dès l'école maternelle, les établissements privés sélectionnent les enfants en fonction non seulement de leurs compétences mais aussi de la situation économique et du statut social des parents.

### ***Un terrain immersif à Nanjing***

En 2018, j'ai suivi pendant huit mois des parents de la classe moyenne dans leurs activités éducatives et j'ai observé la construction de leurs stratégies scolaire.<sup>201</sup> J'ai commencé le travail de terrain en août 2018 en rencontrant Amy Wang, directrice de La Source, un centre d'apprentissage local.<sup>202</sup> La Source propose des services de garde d'enfants de 2 à 3 ans et des cours extrascolaires d'écriture et de peinture pour les enfants de 3 à 6 ans. Tout en aidant la directrice à mettre en place des cours d'anglais pour les 3 à 6 ans, j'ai observé les interactions entre les parents, la directrice et les enseignants. À la fin du mois d'août, j'ai assisté à la journée de remise des diplômes de la *Summer Preschool*. Amy Wang, la directrice, m'a présentée comme une chercheuse travaillant sur la parentalité et les questions de stratégies scolaires à Nanjing. J'ai rencontré les enfants et les parents et j'ai rejoint la discussion en ligne WeChat, sur laquelle les parents ont rapidement commencé à échanger des informations sur l'année scolaire à venir et sur la meilleure façon de préparer les enfants à entrer en maternelle. La plupart des enfants fréquentant La Source sont inscrits dans la même école maternelle publique voisine. A partir de septembre, lors des cours du soir, j'assistais aux discussions entre parents dans la salle d'attente et je réalisais des entretiens approfondis avec les parents volontaires. Lors d'occasions spéciales, j'ai accompagné certains parents à des activités avec leurs enfants et à des rencontres avec des enseignants dans des centres d'apprentissage scolaires et parascolaires.

Au cours des discussions, j'ai collecté un grand nombre de ressources en ligne (sites Web, podcasts et articles) que les parents utilisent pour se renseigner sur les écoles, les activités parascolaires et l'éducation des enfants en général. Après quelques semaines, une connaissance m'a présenté un réseau de parents appelé *Support for*

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<sup>201</sup>Pour mener cette recherche, j'ai obtenu le soutien du comité d'éthique de la recherche humaine de Concordia le 4 mai 2018. Le certificat n°30009469 est reproduit en annexe 4.

<sup>202</sup> J'appelle cela un centre d'apprentissage « local » car il n'est affilié à aucune grande entreprise et la plupart des enfants vivent dans le quartier. C'est une société à but lucratif enregistrée. Le nom « La Source » a été choisi par Amy Wang, la directrice du centre après son séjour de quatre ans en France. Au cours de notre rencontre, elle a rejeté toute forme d'anonymat, très probablement parce qu'elle supposait qu'être citée dans une recherche par un universitaire étranger pourrait être une bonne publicité pour son entreprise.

*Parents of Nanjing Foreign Languages School*.<sup>203</sup> Ce réseau, créé en 2015 par Mme Sang, se définit comme un « média indépendant » publiant des articles sur l'école, les activités parascolaires et l'éducation des enfants.<sup>204</sup> Depuis sa création, le réseau s'est agrandi, employant désormais deux personnes qui organisent des événements hebdomadaires intitulés *Good Parents Classroom*, au cours desquels un parent modèle, généralement une mère, est invité à partager ses expériences.<sup>205</sup> Plus d'une centaine de sessions ont eu lieu en 2019. Selon les employés, le réseau se fait connaître dans toute la Chine et les parents viennent d'autres villes pour assister aux événements *Good Parents Classroom*. Les parents modèles sont recrutés en fonction du parcours et des résultats scolaires de leurs enfants. La réussite scolaire de l'enfant est la preuve que les parents ont fait les bons choix scolaires et sont donc de « bons parents ».

Les parents que j'ai rencontrés via le réseau *Support for Parents of Nanjing Foreign Languages School* étaient généralement d'un statut social plus élevé que ceux rencontrés à La Source. Le premier groupe était composé de cadres d'entreprises privées et de cadres supérieurs du secteur public, tandis que les seconds étaient des cadres subalternes, des employés et des commerçants. La plupart des parents des deux groupes ont des emplois stables et la capacité de consacrer une part importante du budget du ménage à l'éducation de leurs enfants. Tous les parents ont les moyens d'inscrire leur enfant à des cours parascolaires mais presque tous mentionnent que les dépenses d'éducation constituent un poids non négligeable dans leur budget.

Au cours des huit mois d'observation, j'ai réalisé trente-sept entrevues formelles, dont la moitié avec des parents rencontrés à La Source et l'autre moitié avec des parents du réseau de soutien. Chaque entretien a duré entre 50min et 1h30 et a été réalisé et enregistré entièrement en chinois afin d'assurer un traitement équivalent pour tous les interviewés, à l'exception d'un entretien avec un père américain marié à une femme chinoise et résidant à Nanjing que j'ai interviewé en anglais.<sup>206</sup> Près des deux tiers des entretiens ont été réalisées avec des mères, un tiers avec des pères, deux entretiens ont

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<sup>203</sup> En chinois 南外家长帮 [nán wài jiāzhǎng bang].

<sup>204</sup> Littéralement, un 自媒体 [zì méiti] désigne un self média, similaire aux sites internet spécialisés dans l'information, mais ouvert uniquement sur la plateforme WeChat. Tout utilisateur peut suivre n'importe quel self-média et recevoir les informations, articles ou invitations publiés par ce self-média. En général, ces auto-médias ou comptes publics officiels sont financés par la publicité qu'ils hébergent.

<sup>205</sup> En chinois 好家长课堂 [hǎojiāzhǎng kètáng].

<sup>206</sup> J'ai alors embauché un étudiant chinois de premier cycle pour transcrire en chinois toutes les interviews. Enfin, j'ai codé la transcription chinoise de chaque entretien et traduit en anglais les sections utilisées dans le mémoire.

été réalisés avec des grand-mères. Enfin, j'ai également réalisé un entretien avec les deux salariées du réseau de soutien. Dans le tableau ci-dessous, je présente une description quantitative des personnes interrogées.

<b>Ménages</b>	<b>Personnes</b>	<b>Pères</b>	<b>Mères</b>	<b>Grands-parents (femmes)</b>	<b>Ménages de deux enfants</b>
32	34	8	24	2	5

La plupart de mes interlocuteurs étaient dans la trentaine ou au début de la quarantaine. Ils sont la première génération d'enfants uniques, nés dans les années 1980 à l'époque de Deng Xiaoping. Pour la plupart, ils ont grandi dans des centres urbains où ils ont connu le développement économique rapide, la massification de l'enseignement supérieur, la libéralisation du marché du travail et l'ouverture de la Chine au marché mondial. Ces parents ont eu leurs enfants au milieu des années 2000, lorsque les politiques de planification familiale ont commencé à s'assouplir dans certaines régions. Au cours de mon travail de terrain, je n'ai rencontré que cinq ménages sur trente avec deux enfants. La plupart de mes interlocuteurs ont clairement exprimé qu'ils ne souhaitaient pas d'un deuxième enfant car élever le premier était déjà une source d'anxiété et d'épuisement.

Bien que je n'aie pas mené d'entretiens avec les enfants, l'âge de l'enfant était un critère de sélection des ménages. J'ai interviewé des parents d'enfants en âge d'aller à l'école primaire ou sur le point de s'inscrire à l'école, de préférence âgés de 3 à 13 ans.

<b>Enfants</b>	<b>Garçons</b>	<b>Les filles</b>	<b>Âge 0 - 6 (M-)</b>	<b>6 à 11 ans (PS)</b>	<b>11 à 15 ans (JHS)</b>	<b>Âge 15 - 18 (SHS)</b>
37	17	20	17	dix	8	2

K = Maternelle ; PS = école primaire ; JHS = École secondaire du premier cycle ; SHS = Lycée

Dans les ménages à deux enfants, le premier enfant était généralement beaucoup plus âgé que le second. Par exemple, dans un ménage, le fils aîné avait 17 ans et était sur le point de passer l'examen d'entrée à l'université, tandis que la fille avait 3 ans et était sur le point d'entrer à la maternelle.

Mes entretiens étaient structurés en six sections. Dans un premier temps, je demandais aux parents de décrire et d'expliquer le parcours scolaire de leur enfant (activités scolaires et parascolaires). Les parents étaient également invités à évaluer la qualité de l'école qu'ils ont choisie. Dans un deuxième temps, les parents décrivaient

leurs interactions avec les établissements scolaires, en particulier leur utilisation ou leur absence d'applications téléphoniques. Dans un troisième temps, nous discutons de l'implication des différents membres de la famille dans l'éducation de l'enfant. Ensuite, je retraçais l'histoire résidentielle de la famille en essayant de comprendre comment elle était influencée par la scolarité de l'enfant. Enfin, j'ouvrais la discussion sur les politiques d'éducation et le discours de l'État sur l'éducation. Plusieurs expressions utilisées par l'État telles que « éducation de qualité, éducation joyeuse, réduire le fardeau [des devoirs], suppression des classements des écoles » étaient généralement évoqués par les interviewés eux-mêmes. L'interview se terminait par une discussion sur un article de journal de l'époque relatant l'histoire de l'école publique d'élite de Suzhou construisant un mur pour séparer les enfants d'un quartier aisé des enfants de travailleurs migrants. J'utilisais cet article pour observer les discours critiquant ou justifiant la décision de l'autorité publique et la réaction des parents. Je ne suivais pas ces étapes dans un ordre précis, car je voulais que le parent partage son propre point de vue et que la conversation se déroule naturellement.

Au cours du travail de terrain à Nanjing, j'ai également collecté des documents en format papier, recommandé par les personnes interrogées pour documenter les expériences des parents. Dans cette thèse, je propose une analyse approfondie de deux de ces documents. Tout d'abord, pour comprendre le discours normatif intense autour de la maternité, j'ai analysé un ouvrage best-seller sur la maternité intensive, *Une bonne mère vaut mieux qu'une bonne enseignante* de Yin Jianli (Cheng 2014), qui s'est vendu à plus de 12 millions d'exemplaires entre 2009 et 2017.<sup>207</sup> Dans un second temps, j'ai examiné l'influence des sociétés immobilières sur les trajectoires scolaires des familles de la classe moyenne. J'ai récupéré un livret publié par l'une des principales agences immobilières chinoises, House365, qui vend un bien immobilier spécifique : l'appartement d'éducation.<sup>208</sup> L'analyse de cette brochure donne un aperçu du discours produit par les agences immobilières et complète le discours des autres acteurs du secteur privé.

Un deuxième voyage d'étude sur le terrain, prévu à l'été 2020 afin de rencontrer à nouveau les familles et d'approfondir mon analyse des parcours sociaux et scolaires des enfants et des parents, a été annulé en raison de la pandémie mondiale. Deux des

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<sup>207</sup>En chinois, le titre du livre est 好妈妈胜过好老师 [hǎo māmā shèngguò hǎo lǎoshī].

<sup>208</sup>En chinois l'agence immobilière s'appelle 365 淘房 [táo fāng].

principaux objectifs de cette seconde visite de terrain auraient été de mieux comprendre le marché de l'éducation et d'examiner les trajectoires des mères qui ont consacré leur vie et leur carrière professionnelle à la maternité (voir chapitre 5).

### ***Une analyse discursive hors site***

L'annulation de ce deuxième séjour de terrain m'a amené à réorienter mon travail de collecte de données vers les ressources en ligne. Heureusement, l'année 2021 a été très riche en termes de production discursive et réglementaire sur la famille et les parents en Chine. Au printemps, la publication des données du recensement a montré une baisse drastique du taux de natalité, suscitant des débats sur les mesures politiques visant à inciter les familles à avoir plus d'enfants. À l'été 2021, la répression gouvernementale du secteur de l'enseignement privé a produit une multitude de déclarations d'officiels, d'experts et d'entreprises sur l'impact des activités extrascolaires et plus largement sur la concurrence scolaire et la charge financière de l'éducation sur les familles. Enfin à l'automne 2021, le gouvernement a promulgué la loi de promotion de l'éducation familiale (FEPL) qui définit un cadre juridique détaillé des pratiques parentales.<sup>209</sup> Ainsi, l'année 2021 m'a offert un cadre particulièrement intéressant pour approfondir ma compréhension de la dimension politique des pratiques parentales et m'a conduit à examiner deux dynamiques clés.

Dans un premier temps, j'ai retracé la genèse de la FEPL et cherché à mieux comprendre le discours de l'État chinois sur l'institution familiale et la relation parents-enfants. À cette fin, j'ai collecté des archives en ligne principalement produites par l'État, le Parti et la Fédération des Femmes de toute la Chine (ACWF). Je me suis concentrée sur la documentation des campagnes politiques successives intitulée « Five-Virtue Family » en collectant des flyers promotionnels, des documents officiels et des articles de journaux.<sup>210</sup> Cette campagne est mentionnée par les représentants qui ont plaidé pour la promulgation de la récente loi et l'ACWF est mentionnée par le gouvernement comme l'un des principaux acteurs de l'exécution de la FEPL. J'ai mené une analyse discursive de ces documents pour comprendre les discours institutionnels et gouvernementaux sur les pratiques parentales. La version la plus récente de cette campagne, sur les familles aux cinq vertus, s'est transformée en un concours familial télévisé, dans lequel des familles sélectionnées racontent leur histoire devant la caméra (CCTV 2019). Sur la base de

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<sup>209</sup>Cet acronyme est construit à partir du titre de la loi en anglais : Family Education Promotion Law (FEPL)

<sup>210</sup>En chinois,五好家庭 [ wǔ hǎo jiātíng ]

discussions avec mes interlocuteurs, cette émission parrainée par l'État ne semble pas avoir une audience très importante, mais elle illustre le discours normatif de l'État sur la famille idéale. Dans le chapitre 3, j'analyse quelques histoires de famille présentées par les sections locales de l'ACWF et par le concours national.

Dans un deuxième temps, pour comprendre la relation entre les entreprises privées et les parents en tant qu'arène façonnant les normes parentales et comment l'État influence ces normes à travers la réglementation des entreprises privées, j'analyse un service en ligne mentionné par plusieurs personnes interrogées, appelé *Parents' Helper*.<sup>211</sup> Cette application mobile est le service parental le plus complet que j'ai rencontré lors de mon travail de terrain. Ce service a été développé par l'une des principales sociétés chinoises d'éducation, *Tomorrow Advancing Life* (TAL Education Group), d'abord sous la forme d'un site Web puis sous la forme d'un service multiplateforme avec une application mobile. Le groupe d'éducation TAL a été fondé en 2003 sous le nom de Xueersi par des étudiants diplômés d'une université d'élite à Pékin pour fournir des cours particuliers de mathématiques aux enfants, en particulier pour la formation aux Olympiades (Yan 2019 ; Zhang et Bray 2020). Sept ans après son implantation dans un quartier huppé de la capitale, la société est introduite en bourse à la Bourse de New York en 2010. En 2013, la société prend le nom de *Tomorrow Advancing Life (TAL) Education Group* (voir en haut de l'organigramme sur la Fig. 1) et regroupait huit marques (voir les deuxième et troisième lignes sur la Fig. 1). Sur la deuxième ligne, de gauche à droite, les marques sont : Xueersi Online School, Zhikang one-on-one, Xueersi Peiyou qui correspondent aux premiers centres d'apprentissage d'élite, le quatrième logo correspond à la marque Moby pour les tout-petits et tout à droite de l'organigramme la plateforme *Parents' Helpers*. Sur la troisième ligne, de gauche à droite, les marques sont : *Xueersi Science*, *Happy English*, *East School* pour les cours supplémentaires de chinois. Chaque marque offre des services spécialisés aux enfants et aux étudiants. Certaines de ces marques ont été acquises et d'autres ont été créées par TAL Education Group. Selon les documents de présentation de la société aux investisseurs, le groupe compte plus d'un millier de centres d'apprentissage dispersés dans plus de 90 villes en Chine (TAL Education Group 2021). Dans cette étude, je me concentre sur la plateforme *Parents' Helper*.

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<sup>211</sup>En chinois, appelé 家长帮 [jiāzhǎng bang], l'URL est l'acronyme du *pinyin* qui est jzb.com



Figure 1. Organigramme du Groupe Éducation TAL



J'ai analysé l'arborescence et le contenu du site internet et de l'application mobile. Avant d'accéder au contenu, qu'il s'agisse du site Web ou de l'application mobile, les utilisateurs doivent fournir leur localisation et l'âge de leur enfant. Ces informations personnalisent le contenu en fonction des caractéristiques de l'utilisateur. Pour mes recherches, je me suis fait passer pour un parent de Nanjing avec un enfant de cinq ans sur le point de s'inscrire à l'école primaire.<sup>212</sup>

Le site est progressivement devenu obsolète alors que l'application mobile est régulièrement mise à jour. Les interactions sur l'application sont fréquentes et la communauté en ligne des parents se développe. Je me suis donc concentrée sur l'analyse de l'application mobile dans l'analyse et je fais parfois référence au contenu du site Web (voir chapitre 4). L'application mobile est structurée par quatre onglets accessibles par quatre icônes en bas de l'application : Recommandations, Université des parents, Local, Mon profil.<sup>213</sup> Le premier onglet regroupe du contenu multimédia sur la parentalité et l'admission à l'école. Cette page est divisée en deux catégories principales : les émissions en direct d'experts et les articles de presse. Les experts sont sélectionnés par la plateforme et leurs vidéos s'organise en deux parties, après 40-45 minutes de présentation en solo devant la caméra, il y a une période de questions-réponses, pendant laquelle les parents posent des questions sur le chat et l'expert répond oralement. Dans la deuxième section de l'onglet, « Recommandations aux parents », regroupe des articles de journaux initialement publiés sur d'autres plateformes. Ces articles couvrent l'actualité, comme des histoires d'enfants très performants, le débat gouvernemental au sujet de la loi sur l'éducation ou les dernières tendances de consommation (par exemple,

<sup>212</sup>Je n'ai pas interagi avec des utilisateurs humains réels de l'application mobile, car cela aurait nécessité la modification de mon protocole d'éthique et l'accès aux sections payantes de l'application mobile. Dans cette recherche, j'ai seulement observé et collecté des informations qui sont accessibles au public.

<sup>213</sup>En chinois c'est respectivement : 头条 [tóutiáo], 家长大学 [jiāzhǎng dàxué], 本地 [běndì], 我的 [wǒ de]

le meilleur lait néo-zélandais ou le dernier jeu éducatif). La page « Recommandation aux parents » est accessible gratuitement. En tant que première page qui apparaît quand les utilisateurs ouvrent l'application, elle attire l'attention des parents avec des questions fréquemment posées et des solutions prêtes à l'emploi. De là, les parents sont invités à accéder à des contenus plus élaborés, comme l'Université des Parents. Le cœur de l'application mobile est l'Université des parents, où apparaît la plupart des contenus commercialisés. Cet onglet regroupe une compilation de cours en ligne pour les parents, organisés en thèmes tels que la communication parent-enfant, les sciences cognitives, la puberté, la maternelle, l'école primaire, le lycée et la communication parents-école. Chaque cours coûte environ 400RMB.<sup>214</sup> Toutes les vidéos des experts accessibles depuis la page « Recommandations aux parents » sont également affichées gratuitement sur la page de l'Université des Parents. La plateforme *Parents' Helper* offre également la possibilité de créer des espaces virtuels d'interactions que je n'ai pas testées. Le service *Parents' Helper* s'est transformé progressivement en un outil interactif, connectée au réseau social chinois *WeChat*. Chaque page dispose d'un bouton *WeChat* permettant aux utilisateurs de partager sur leur profil de réseau social et de rejoindre un groupe d'utilisateurs *WeChat* intéressés par le même sujet. L'analyse du service multiplateforme *Parents' Helper* a combiné des méthodes d'analyse de contenu et de discours et d'expérience utilisateur numérique en s'intéressant aux fonctionnalités offertes par la plateforme (Rouquette 2009).

Ce travail de terrain en ligne et hors ligne permet de brosser un tableau de l'environnement dans lequel les parents chinois issus de la classe moyenne urbaine élaborent leurs stratégies éducatives, donnant un aperçu des interactions entre les trois types d'acteurs : familles, acteurs étatiques et entreprises privées. Je soutiens que cet environnement normatif et interactif conduit à un regain d'intérêt et d'interaction avec les politiques éducatives et réactive la socialisation politique des parents de la classe moyenne urbaine.

## **Plan de la thèse**

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<sup>214</sup>En juillet 2021, 400RMB c'est environ 52€ et 77\$CA.

Dans les chapitres 1 et 2, la revue de littérature présente les différents concepts tels que la socialisation politique, la politisation et introduit les discours clés (nataliste et nationaliste) encadrant les pratiques des parents en Chine et plus largement dans le monde développé. Dans le chapitre 1, je soutiens qu'une nouvelle ère mondiale de la parentalité politisée se caractérise par une définition contestée de la parentalité comme n'étant pas exclusive aux mères, une renaissance des discours nationalistes politisant l'identité parentale et enfin, une forme d'activisme fondé sur les droits axé sur le « futur » des enfants. Dans le chapitre 2, je soutiens que ces phénomènes jouent un rôle crucial dans le contexte chinois pour repenser les relations État-société. Le discours nationaliste au centre du *China Dream* promu par Xi Jinping est un discours de néo-familialiste. La Loi sur la Promotion de l'Education Familiale promulguée en octobre 2021, donne un poids politique supplémentaire aux pratiques parentales déjà soumises à une pression et une surveillance accrues. Cependant, le problème démographique actuel - taux de natalité en baisse et vieillissement rapide de la population - pousse simultanément l'État chinois à inciter les parents de la classe moyenne à faire plus de bébés pour « sauver la nation » du déclin démographique.

Dans le chapitre 3, j'examine comment l'État produit et diffuse un cadre normatif sur la parentalité. Le chapitre montre l'évolution des campagnes de mobilisation de masse sur la Famille aux Cinq Vertus lancées pour la première fois dans les années 1950, dont le cadre est passé de l'institution familiale en tant qu'unité de production économique à la famille en tant qu'unité de base de l'édification de la nation. Je soutiens que ce changement a conduit à la promulgation de la Loi sur la Promotion de l'Education Familiale (FEPL) en octobre 2021, qui stipule précisément comment les parents doivent élever leurs enfants et configurer les parents comme sujet de discours normatifs dirigés par l'État.

Dans le chapitre 4, je montre comment, à partir des années 2010, le secteur privé à but lucratif renforce le cadre normatif produit par l'État via un marché parental vendant des services et des produits. Au chapitre 5, j'examine comment les parents édictent et négocient ces normes. Je montre que certains parents, notamment les mères, se réapproprient la production de connaissances sur les pratiques parentales. Certaines mères de la classe moyenne supérieure utilisent leur agentivité pour devenir des « mères professionnelles », vendant leurs conseils en maternité pour gagner leur vie. Dans le chapitre 6, je soutiens que les parents de la classe moyenne urbaine conçoivent

des stratégies pour obtenir les meilleures ressources éducatives pour leurs enfants et protéger la position familiale privilégiée. Je mets en évidence les différentes ressources mobilisées par les parents des classes moyennes. Enfin, le chapitre 7 illustre comment les parents questionnent la formulation et la mise en œuvre des politiques éducatives. Les parents remettent en cause les principes d'équité et de justice, utilisés pour justifier les politiques éducatives, parfois ils participent à des manifestations en ligne ou dans la rue pour dénoncer ce qu'ils considèrent comme une répartition inéquitable des ressources éducatives. Je montre comment, dans le même temps, les parents soutiennent et renforcent également les pratiques institutionnelles, telles que la surveillance des enseignants et des professionnels de l'éducation. Pour conclure, je soutiens que l'activisme des parents de la classe moyenne urbaine ne remet pas en question ou ne menace pas le régime autoritaire actuel en Chine, mais rejette plutôt les politiques éducatives qui pourraient menacer leurs intérêts de classe.



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