



# Education, Inequality, and Intensive Parenting in China

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Education, Inequality, and Intensive Parenting in China

A dissertation presented by

Fangsheng Zhu

to

Department of Sociology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses why education has remained intensive, unequal, and exam-oriented in China despite extensive government efforts at reform. Existing studies on these issues focus either on the top-down public policies or bottom-up family strategies, and therefore do not explain why one of them appears to have lost to the other. To fill this gap, I introduce an institutional framework that bridges the research on policies and family strategies. This framework focuses on the rules in the critical situations where education providers and families match, and traces how policymakers, educational providers, and families shape these rules of matching. By analyzing these rules and their origins, this framework explains why education providers and families match in ways that sustain intensive, unequal, and exam-oriented education.

Through fieldwork in Chinese cities with a particular focus on Beijing, I find that families and education providers match in three institutions within education: access, selection, and exit. None of the three institutions was solely designed by top-down policy. First, after the government introduced residency-based school assignments in the early 2010s, families employed formal and informal strategies to gain new local citizenship for school access, thus rendering school access effectively based on a family's capacity to gain local citizenship. Second, the government's ban on selective middle school admissions that induced early intensive education was compromised by fragmented local education governance that allowed local actors to circumvent the top-down bans. Third, even without government policies, alternative education schools emerged and adopted pedagogies consistent with the state's reform goal of reducing exam-oriented education, but a lack of state recognition constrained their development.

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Dedicated to the loving memory of my grandma, S. C.

## INTRODUCTION

### Puzzles of educational change and persistence

In 2012, Shanghai topped the Program for International Student Assessments (PISA) in all three tested subjects for the second time in a row (OECD 2010; 2014). The domestic reception, however, was primarily reflexive and self-critical. The public deemed the results unsurprising. Experts argued the scores symptomized an over-emphasis on exams (Tan 2017a; 2019). In support of this argument, they pointed out that Shanghai students spent an average of 13.8 hours per week on homework, the highest among all 64 PISA participants and almost triple the OECD average (OECD 2013).

While students put in long hours to achieve these high scores, their families spent money. Chinese families spent 2.5% of GDP on elementary and secondary education in 2016 (Wei 2019), nearly an order of magnitude higher than the OECD average of 0.3% (OECD 2022). Such high family spending was a remarkable development, considering that education provision was predominantly public by the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 (Pepper 2000). Four decades later, in 2016, Chinese families spent 30% *more than* the government on elementary and secondary education (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2017; Wei 2019).

All families were not equal in this education arms race. Urban, high-income, and highly educated parents spent more, creating unequal family investments that predicted later academic performance (Y. Zhang and Xie 2016; Young and Hannum 2018). In addition to education spending, families differ in their capacities to access schools. After China started enforcing catchment areas in school admissions in the early 2010s, public school access became

determined by a family's capacity to gain residency credentials in specific school catchment areas, often through the housing market (Zheng, Hu, and Wang 2016; Dong and Li 2019).

For a long time, the Chinese state has tried to deescalate these trends. Since the founding of the People's Republic, the national government has enacted at least 20 policies specifically to reduce academic burdens (*jianfu*) (Yin and Hao 2019) and many more national policies included this issue as a consideration. In 2010, the central government made a plan for education reform and development during 2010-2020. The plan's section on compulsory education – nine years of elementary and middle school – set only two goals besides consolidating the progress in universalizing compulsory education: to promote equity and to lessen academic burdens (The Central People's Government of the PRC 2010).

The government's efforts to lessen homework burdens were related to another policy goal: to broaden education's narrow focus on exams to a broader, more holistic paradigm. This policy goal was known as “quality education” (*suzhi jiaoyu*), a term usually used as the antonym for exam-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu*). Since the 1990s, the national and local governments have made numerous efforts toward quality education, often in conjunction with policies to lessen academic burdens on students and families (Dello-Iacovo 2009; B. Zhang and Cheng 2019).

Despite decades of government efforts at reform, education in China has remained intensive, unequal, and exam-oriented. In May 2021, President Xi Jinping chaired a national reform conference that passed yet another policy to lessen academic stress. According to the conference readout, “one of the most prominent problems of compulsory education is that the burden on primary and secondary school students is too heavy, and the problems of short-sightedness and utilitarianism have not been fundamentally solved” (Xinhua 2021). At the time of writing, the

Chinese government continues on its quest to make education less intensive, less exam-oriented, and more equal. The stories that emerge from this journey belong to the broader stories of education, inequality, and China in our time.

### **The problem and its significance**

This dissertation aims to account for three inter-related puzzles in Chinese education: why so intense, why so unequal, and why still exam-oriented?

Each of these issues has generated a separate line of academic inquiry. The growing intensity in education has been examined as several global trends, including the increasing importance of schooling (Baker 2014), increasingly intensive parenting styles (Doepke and Zilibotti 2019), and increasing saturation of tutoring (Bray 2020). Educational inequality has been a central topic in the broader inequality literature, a notable example being the widening class gaps in American families' investments in their children's education (Putnam 2016; Schneider, Hastings, and LaBriola 2018). Reforming schools and their pedagogies has been an important topic in the education literature (e.g., Mehta and Fine 2019) and part of the debate on school choice (M. Friedman 1982; Berends 2015).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the comprehensive books on Chinese education take the forms of historical narratives (Cleverley 1984; Thøgersen 2002; Vickers and Zeng 2018) or edited volumes (Yang 2006; Hannum and Park 2012; Guo and Guo 2016). If we look beyond China, the closest effort to synthesize these issues is the work of David Labaree, a sociologically oriented historian of education. In his influential essay, "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals," Labaree (1997) identified three goals in American education: democratic quality, social efficiency, and social mobility. These three goals conflict with each other due to "a fundamental source of strain at the core of any liberal democratic

society, the tension between democratic politics (public rights) and capitalist markets (private rights), between majority control and individual liberty, between political equality and social equality” (Ibid: p.41).

This American tension between public and private goods can be applied to analyze Chinese education, albeit the pressures are different in a socialist regime. In the American case, Labaree identified two advocates for public goods: citizens for democratic quality and taxpayers for social efficiency (Ibid). In the Chinese case, the state has been the leading advocate for public goods in education. For example, the May 2021 national reform conference, chaired by Xi Jinping, prescribed specific measures to reduce the intensity of education: “Deepen the reform of education and teaching, improve the quality of classroom teaching, optimize teaching methods, comprehensively reduce the total amount of homework, and reduce the pressure of examinations” (Xinhua 2021). In China, the overarching tension in education has been between the national government pushing for equitable and holistic education with less intense pressures versus mysterious forces that thwarted this push for decades.

It is puzzling that the Chinese state has not succeeded in reforming education according to its vision. After all, the state has many advantages. It enrolls most students in public schools, precisely 89% of elementary and middle school students as of 2020 (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2021). It has maintained tight control over the curriculum (Vickers and Zeng 2018). It has immense power to mobilize and an increasingly strong capability to enforce formal rules (Perry and Heilmann 2011; Wang 2014). Yet after decades of education reforms leveraging many policy tools, the education arms race persists (Wei 2019). Why has intense, unequal, and exam-oriented education been so difficult to reform, even in a socialist regime with a strong government?

This question is significant because it helps us better understand education and inequality in China, including the decline of intergenerational mobility (Xie et al. 2022). It also provides a case study of more general questions on the governance of inequality. As education has become the central mechanism in intergenerational reproduction (Bloome, Dyer, and Zhou 2018), policymakers face a historic opportunity to achieve equality of opportunity. When parents had various direct and indirect powers to influence their offspring's occupation and income, the potential for policy interventions seemed limited. Now that intergenerational reproduction mostly happens through getting children a good education, policymakers can – at least theoretically – equalize opportunities simply by ensuring educational equity. Among all countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China, with its strong socialist government, appears uniquely positioned to improve education equity and provide equal opportunities to all its students. Its attempts and setbacks can provide experiences potentially valuable for China and other countries, and it is this dissertation's goal to document and explain some of these experiences.

### **Theoretical framework**

This dissertation develops a theoretical framework that contributes to the existing research on education. Education is a highly fragmented field, with various perspectives and scholarly communities inhabiting parallel intellectual universes (see reviews by Mehta and Davies 2018; Vickers and Zeng 2018). Most education research focuses on either the supply or demand side. Supply-side studies investigate issues concerning education providers, including teachers, schools, and school districts (e.g., Meyer et al. 1987). Demand-side studies examine education consumers, including the roles of families, communities, and societies in education (e.g., Coleman 1988).

This dissertation's theoretical framework is built on how education's supply and demand sides match. This topic has seen two approaches. In the first, researchers study the formal rules that education providers set in allocating their quotas, such as lottery mechanisms, admissions rules, or school choice policies (e.g., Pathak 2011). This approach tends to neglect the fact that the rules on paper are often not the same as those implemented (Lipsky 2010).

In the second existing approach, researchers focus on how families gain access to these education providers, including learning, interpreting, and strategizing against the education providers' procedures (e.g., Lareau et al. 2016; Fong and Faude 2018). This approach can be summarized in a recent concept coined by David Grusky, Peter Hall, and Hazel Markus, the "opportunity market," which allows well-off parents to "buy opportunity indirectly through advantaged access to the schools, neighborhoods, and information that create merit" (2019: 19). This approach shows how families' stratified access to education providers reproduces inequality. However, it often leaves out the issue of the origins of the rules and the role of families in shaping them.

I propose bridging these two approaches and developing an institutional framework to study the matching between education providers and families. Institutions refer to the rules of the game, both formal and informal (Douglas 1986; North 1990). By matching, I refer to the processes through which families and education providers find and choose each other. I use the word "matching" to allow for agency on both parties, especially because both parties can be selective and exclusive. Specifically, I study the critical situations in which families access education resources and the rules that govern these situations. I use pilot fieldwork to identify these critical situations, including choosing home residences, kindergarten admissions,

elementary and secondary school admissions, starting and quitting after-school programs, and choosing an international or alternative education.

From this institutional framework, I ask what the rules are in these critical situations of matching, how these rules shape the thinking and actions of families and education providers, and why these rules vary across time and space. This framework puts formal policies into context, with an emphasis on how they are interpreted and acted upon by local actors. It sees families' strategies as capable of creating informal rules that change the calculations of other families and organizations. This framework generates a picture of how education inequalities happen and an account of why they happen, by examining how the rules in these situations emerge from the interactions among government, education providers, and families.

## **Methods**

This project primarily draws upon 125 interviews and three stages of fieldwork. First, in the summer of 2017, I traveled to six large cities to learn about their education landscapes through 35 interviews and three focus groups with parents and practitioners. Second, I inserted myself into Beijing's parenting and education field by participating in various parent events during for twelve months of fieldwork and embedded working at a leading tutoring firm in a strategic investment position. Third, a research assistant and I conducted 90 interviews with elementary and middle school parents in the Beijing metropolitan area during 2018-2019. All this dissertation fieldwork benefited from my previous fieldwork on elementary school access during 2015-2016, when I interviewed 70 parents and 20 education officials and administrators in another three Chinese cities.

As pilot fieldwork, between June-September 2017, I conducted 35 interviews and three focus groups of parents in six cities: Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and

Harbin. My goal was to learn about the local educational landscape, so I prioritized sampling educational practitioners including schoolteachers, education entrepreneurs, and education journalists (27 out of the 35). Because many practitioners also have children, I also asked many of these interviewees (31 of the 35) about their educational decisions for their own children. This research led me to identify three types of local rules differentiated by when parents become invested in intense academic preparations:

1. Places where parents were competitive about their children's education *beginning in kindergarten*: The typical example was the central districts of Shanghai, where international education was popular and the best elementary schools were selective private international/bilingual schools which required parents to start preparing their children from kindergarten onward.
2. Places where parents became competitive with their children's education *in elementary school*: The typical example was Chongqing and Guangzhou, where the best elementary schools were public, but the best middle schools were private and had selective admissions. Accordingly, academic preparations started in elementary school.
3. Places where parents were not notably anxious in elementary school: The typical example was Shenzhen, where the top elementary and middle schools were public, and the first merit-based selection was the entrance exam for high school. Therefore, competitive tutoring started relatively late and was less intensive.

I selected Beijing as the main site of fieldwork because the city had an outsized influence on national education policies, and also because it provided significant within-city variations. Among the six metropolitan districts of Beijing, Xicheng and Dongcheng – two small but populated districts in the heart of the city – were like Shenzhen in that the elementary and middle

schools were primarily public schools with less power to select their students. Haidian district – a highly developed district to the northwest of Xicheng – was rather like Chongqing and Guangzhou, where the top middle schools determined their admission decisions through academic merit.

During the main fieldwork phase from 2017-2019, a research assistant and I conducted 90 interviews with elementary and middle school parents in the Beijing metropolitan area. The research assistant was highly skilled with in-depth interviews and received additional training specific to this project. She conducted 17 of the 90 interviews, and I did the rest. With only a couple of exceptions where the interviewee declined recording, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. On average, these interviews produced recordings lasting between one-and-half and two hours. The total time with the interviewee would be usually half an hour longer and sometimes more, including time for introducing the study and time after the interviewer to answer questions from the interviewee, typically about their children's education.

I sampled for diverse situations of accessing education resources, a sampling strategy aimed at maximizing theoretical gains (Small 2009). The interviews focused on how parents obtained education resources for children during elementary and secondary school. In previous fieldwork, I had identified the transition from elementary to middle school as the critical tracking event for parents in Beijing, so I focused on parents with children in middle school. Among the interviewees, most were middle-class or upper-middle-class, with a college education and working as professionals, managers, government officials, or entrepreneurs. During the Beijing interviews, I added Langfang and Wuqing as field sites after learning about families moving between these cities and Beijing for purposes related to their children's education. I interviewed six parents in Langfang and three in Wuqing, most of whom had once worked and lived in

Beijing. Both Langfang and Wuqing were connected to Beijing by under 30 minutes of high-speed trains, and thus these interviews were treated as a part of the sample from the Beijing metropolitan area.

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of two main segments. I first asked parents to recall a series of crucial situations they had encountered in getting their children's education, including choosing homes, navigating school admissions, and finding after-school programs. These questions allowed me to capture the rules of education resource matching as experienced by families, which was more realistic and comprehensive than analyzing formal policies alone. The second main segment used a set of vignette stories to probe parents' cultural understanding. These vignettes presented stereotyped parental ideas and practices derived from previous fieldwork. In addition to these two main segments, the interviews included questions on the family's migration history, work, income, wealth, and the education trajectories of both parents.

Besides the interviews, I used three avenues of information gathering that parents themselves used regarding education. First, I joined parent conversations, including through acquaintances, colleagues, and parent Wechat groups. Second, I browsed and saved online information, including official sources such as the Education Bureau and school websites and unofficial sources such as parent forums and blog posts. Third, I attended offline events, including those hosted by parent organizations, school choice counselors, and schools. Moreover, my year of work at a tutoring firm exposed me to the goings-on inside the education industry. I also attempted to establish contacts with public school administrators and teachers in Beijing, which was not entirely successful but still yielded valuable knowledge. Lastly, I supplemented these fieldwork data with relevant policy documents and survey statistics during analysis.

### **Central argument and chapter outline**

The central argument of this dissertation is that the institutions of matching between education providers and families are primarily driven by bottom-up interactions rather than top-down policy design. This explains why, despite many government efforts, education remains intensive, unequal, and exam-oriented in China. Specifically, I identify three such institutions and explain why they have developed their own informal rules outside of top-down policy guidance. Each empirical chapter examines one institution of education resource matching.

In Chapter 1, I investigate how parents gain access to public elementary and middle schools for their children, after the government enforced residency-based school assignments in the early 2010s. Instead of educating children where they live, residency-based assignments induced families to move around and live separately in efforts to gain new local citizenships. I demonstrate a variety of formal and informal strategies that parents used to acquire local citizenships for school access. Middle-class and upper-middle-class parents were better equipped to expand or switch local citizenships via formal strategies, while working-class parents were constrained by their economic resources and could only use informal strategies that required strong social ties. Failing to gain new local citizenship resulted in accepting local school assignments, which limited local families to default options and forced domestic migrant parents to send their children back home. Therefore, acquiring local citizenships emerged as an unintended mechanism of transferring family resources to children's education opportunities.

In Chapter 2, I ask why the government had not successfully curtailed intensive parenting practices. I propose that parents are bounded rationality actors strategizing against near-term rules, and that these rules emerge from the local fields of public schools and tutoring. Primarily drawing on interviews and fieldwork in Beijing, I show that (1) parents strategize against near-term rules that vary across urban districts; (2) the tutoring field emerged as an offshoot of the

public school field; and (3) the tutoring field demanded and cultivated new intensive parenting practices. Among Beijing's urban districts, Haidian had the most fragmented local education governance, which facilitated the rise of the tutoring field and the development of new parenting practices. Over time, changes in the public school and tutoring fields reshaped parenting practices, and government efforts to control tutoring and parenting practices were compromised by fragmentations in local education governance.

In Chapter 3, I examine why mainstream education and parenting styles remained exam-oriented despite cultural changes and policy efforts. I approach this institutional stability by analyzing the limited success of the institutional emergence of alternative parenting and schools. I find that alternative schools, also called new education schools by local communities, have emerged in recently developed urban spaces. These new education schools emphasized natural growth as their defining characteristic, attracting urban middle-class parents seeking to deliberately create a natural growth environment for their children. Despite the lack of government recognition, these schools attracted families from new urban communities and from many kindergartens offering similarly alternative pedagogies. Nevertheless, these new education schools lacked pedagogical and institutional linkages with secondary or tertiary schools, which made it difficult for them to retain students beyond elementary school. Therefore, alternative education schools created bottom-up change in education and parenting culture, but they were limited to enclaves lacking ties to the mainstream education system and with limited potential to facilitate broader changes.

Finally, this dissertation concludes by summarizing its contributions. Empirically, this dissertation provides an institutional explanation for why education has remained intensive, unequal, and exam-oriented in China. Theoretically, this dissertation contributes a contextual

explanation for why specific family characteristics and strategies matter for intergenerational mobility. Extrapolating from the Chinese case, I argue that top-down policy designs for equality of opportunity face a common challenge: the institutions of education matching tend to emerge bottom-up in ways unintended by policymakers.

## **CHAPTER 1. ACCESS: CHOOSING SCHOOLS BY GAINING LOCAL CITIZENSHIPS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Choosing schools has been studied in two different contexts. First, where school choice programs are available, a literature examines how families navigate options made available to them by such programs (e.g., Fong and Faude 2018). Second, where school assignment is strictly based on residence, choosing schools is studied in relation to choosing homes. In this latter context, parents are generally found to focus on choosing homes, and after that school assignment follows effortlessly (Lareau 2014; Cuddy, Krysan, and Lewis 2020).

However, even without formal school choice programs, families manage to create and access non-assigned school options. For example, low-income parents in an American city use relatives' addresses to access schools beyond their zoned options (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014). Quantitative research has found families with children and money moving to better school districts, in diverse contexts such as the US, Germany, and Finland (Owens 2016; Noreisch 2007; Bernelius and Vilkkama 2019).

We lack a theoretical framework to qualitatively understand how families create and access non-assigned school options, even when such options are not explicitly provided by policies. In this paper, I develop such a framework in three steps. First, I borrow from the territoriality literature to argue that public schools are territorial institutions. Second, I borrow from the citizenship literature to describe the type of local citizenship specific to public school access. Third, I draw from the immigration literature to describe how families create public school options even without choice programs by strategically arranging their local citizenships.

I derive and demonstrate the utility of this framework by studying parents in the Beijing metropolitan area, a region without formal school choice policies. I primarily draw upon 90 parent interviews in three cities in the Beijing metropolitan area conducted during 2018-2019, supplemented by fieldwork on school admissions in eight other cities in China spanning from 2010-2019.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Territorial public schools**

Public schools have rarely, if ever, been theorized as territorial. Classic definitions of territories involve monopoly of physical force, sovereignty, and identity, none of which public schools have. Despite this, I propose to consider a type of historically formed territoriality in the institution of public schools. This conceptual development will prove useful later in analyzing how parents strategize when choosing schools.

When modern public schools emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the US, they were initially designed to “enroll all children in an area” for purposes of a republican government (Kaestle 1983). To do so, school districts were developed as a parallel yet independent system of local government. School boards had their own power to tax and held elections on separate days from regular government. For the multiple purposes of enrollment, taxation, and election, school districts in the US necessitated clearly marked boundaries. Since local residents pay taxes towards the local schools, they had the incentive to police their boundaries and prevent non-local residents from enrolling.

While public schools have historically been territorial in this manner, the importance of territorial boundaries have varied across time and place. Since the 1980s, a variety of “school

choice” reforms in England, the US, and parts of continental Europe and Latin America have loosened the link between residence and school assignment. In the extreme case of Westphalia, Germany, school catchment areas have been abolished altogether (Ramos Lobato and Groos 2019). In India, private schools are so preferred to the poorly performing public schools that public schools’ territorial boundaries do not matter for the richer half of society. Nevertheless, the territorial principle – especially in terms of school admissions, if not in terms of taxation and school governance – has largely survived and remained at the center of school admissions in most countries and regions across the world.

In China, this territorial quality of public schools is relatively new. When China imported the concept public schools, it did not import the communitarian tradition that necessitated territoriality. School districts were first introduced only in the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 as a tool to achieve a national policy goal of universalizing nine-year compulsory education. County-level local governments have been responsible for drawing the school district boundaries, but for decades there have been few regulations to enforce these boundaries as a rule of admissions. Under this arrangement, school admissions have unsurprisingly been riddled with the use of connections (*guanxi*). School boundary-crossing was so prevalent that it had become semi-institutionalized in the 1990s and 2000s, and government levies on school boundary-crossing (*jiedu fei*) constituted a major income to finance local education budgets (Wu 2012).

Public schools in China only gained real territoriality in the 2010s, after school boundary-crossing was officially recognized as “chaotic” (*luanxiang*) and policies were enacted to eliminate it. Briefly, a flurry of central and local government policies from 2011-2014 removed the discretionary power that school administrators had enjoyed in admissions and established new regulations and administrative infrastructure to formalize school admissions. At the center

of these new regulations are rigid procedures that compare and rank families' claims to membership within these catchment areas. Detailed descriptions of school choice regulations in China can be found in the Appendix.

The strength of school territoriality in a given jurisdiction largely depends on how boundaries are policed. In the US, using a residential address other than one's own for school enrollment is called "boundary hopping," "residency fraud," or "enrollment fraud," punishable by jail time and heavy fines. An African American mother, Kelley Williams-Bolar, was a widely publicized example of a parent who received jail time for sending her children to school using her father's address. Her case is not an exception. School districts' enrollment offices are responsible for catching boundary hoppers, and anecdotal reports show they can remove 1% or more students per year.<sup>1</sup> In addition, school districts in the US may maintain or strengthen their boundaries by secession from existing districts or objecting to district consolidation proposals.

In a time when the problem is not gaining access to any school but achieving placement in desirable schools, public schools are less an institution working to achieve the national goal of universal education (for republican ideals of citizenship or for developmental or economic purposes), and more a local territorial institution that families navigate to achieve social mobility. In other words, public schools are not just places of education; they are also territorial institutions that police their boundaries and determine who has the right to access specific schools.

### **Local citizenship in school access (LCSA)**

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<sup>1</sup> The School Superintendent's Association: <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=15742>. In such school districts, the average student would witness 12% or more of their classmates removed for boundary hopping from the first to the twelfth grade.

As territorial institutions, public schools create a type of local citizenship in the form of school assignment. Citizenship can be conceived of as the right to get rights (Somers 1993; 2008), “an exclusionary status identifying individuals as belonging to a specific polity that establishes a relationship between the individual and the state, defined by rights and responsibilities” (Vortherms 2017, 5). While most often used at national level, the term “citizenship” itself has its historical origin in city membership (Brubaker 1992). Subnational citizenships continue to exist in a variety of contexts. In China, household registration (*hukou*) has been considered as a type of local citizenship, since it determines political and social rights in terms of rural versus urban residency (Solinger 1999) as well that of localities (Vortherms 2015).

One consequence of household registration for Chinese families is access to public schools. Particularly, lack of household registration creates educational barriers for tens of millions of migrant workers’ children, some of whom are left behind by migrating parents as a result (UNICEF 2013; Lan 2014; Xiong 2015). This literature, however, tends to perceive migrant families as one category with their rights deprived in a wholesale manner. As fruitful as it is to see household registration as local citizenship, it cannot alone account for huge variations in school access between migrant families (Z. Liu and Zhu 2013) or between local families.

To explain the variations in school access outcomes, I argue it is useful to additionally theorize citizenship practice and institution in school access. In T.H. Marshall’s classic trichotomy of civic, political, and social citizenship (Marshall 1949), access to school is part of social citizenship, a claim to welfare provided by state. In contemporary times, school access is arguably the most important element of social citizenship, as education has become the largest item of public expenditure in China as in many other countries. However, this type of citizenship

is also highly unequal on subnational levels, as public schools within a country vary significantly in per pupil funding and resources.

Existing literature on education as citizenship focuses on its national element. Through compulsory schooling, civic virtues and capabilities are nurtured for the perpetuation of the ruling regime. However, since schools are local territorial entities, education as citizenship also has a local element. While the national policy requires the family to send their children to school regardless of the school chosen, the local element enables a family to access specific schools. Just as national citizenship is conferred by customs and immigration procedures, local citizenship, and thus school access, is determined in admissions offices and enrollment procedures.

### **Choosing schools by gaining local citizenship**

In light of this, I argue that families across social classes choose schools by expanding or switching their local citizenship. Existing quantitative studies document rising non-local school choice, especially in urban and gentrifying contexts (Schachner 2019; Candipan 2020), and consider the process of choosing schools a driving force behind residential income segregation (Owens 2016; 2017). Qualitative studies on how families do so, however, find that school choice follows rather than drives home choice (Lareau 2014; Cuddy, Krysan, and Lewis 2020).

Drawing from the literature on strategic citizenship that finds that people instrumentally gain a second citizenship for welfare benefits and other purposes (Harpaz and Mateos 2019), I argue that families are able to strategically gain Local Citizenship in School Access (LCSA), especially because citizenship in this case can be dual or multiple. The design of school admissions procedures makes multiple LCSA possible due to two aspects: 1) multiple categories of credentials could be used for school admissions, and some categories – such as homeownership –

make it possible for a family to hold credentials at multiple locales; and 2) the child can expand school access by living with other adults, which often generates more than one possibility when the parents, grandparents, or other potential guardians hold different local citizenships.

Therefore, parents may strategically expand or switch their LCSA via formal credentials and/or via their social networks.

The practice of seeking additional citizenship via formal credentials can be evidenced by the additional financial value parents assign to these credentials. Existing literatures on real estate markets in China and the US have extensively documented the housing price premium brought by providing access to high-quality local schools (e.g., Zheng, Hu, and Wang 2016). Similarly, a range of other credentials acknowledged by the local admissions rules also experience these monetary value increases. For example, in Beijing, a formal lease accompanied with landlord endorsement – serviceable for school admissions purposes – could cost the tenants a handsome fee; a job that grants school access via work unit connections, residence card, or *hukou* may command the same skills and job duties with lower wage pay than other jobs without such school ties; and a black market exists for forged social security payments and household registration in desirable cities. As with international immigration (Kim 2018), various brokers in China and the US make a living off helping parents navigate the complex and often expensive process of gaining LCSA via formal credentials.

Gaining citizenship via social network is relatively under-investigated. Based on anecdotal evidence, I find families engaging in boundary-hopping in the US often try to “pass” as if they have not done so, similar to undocumented immigrants (García 2019). This tendency perhaps makes it difficult for qualitative researchers to uncover this phenomenon when researching school choice. In the China literature, the existing research emphasizes the institutional barriers

in school access (particularly *hukou*), with relatively few researchers paying attention to how families work around them, even though much research exists on everyday subversive strategies in other realms (Scott 2008; Szonyi 2017).

I argue that choosing schools via gaining local citizenship is a cross-class phenomenon because working-class families can and often do adopt the social network route, even as their lack of economic or credential resources may prohibit them from using formal credentials to do so. This enables us to bring the literature on migrant children's education in China into conversation with middle-class parenting.

Note that not all aspects of choosing schools require gaining local citizenship. For example, where a school choice program is set up, many parents will make school choices within the range of choice provided to them without gaining additional local citizenship. In this case, the territorial boundary enlarges to grant local citizenship for school access to all families in the school choice zone. In the case of magnet schools in the US and their counterparts in China, children are able to attend schools outside their default assignment via selective admissions. And private schools are usually not territorial – with notable exceptions in China that have made some private schools territorial – and thus choosing private schools would usually not involve gaining local citizenship.

At its heart, framing choosing schools as gaining local citizenship follows a Weberian view of inequality, that is, inequality is created through social closures. Parents attempt to increase the chances of upward mobility of their children by transcending these social closures, in this case the territorial boundaries of schools. To do that, these parents need to gain a new local citizenship. Those who do not engage in such expansion are limited by their existing standing by

social closures. In a way, this paper advocates for using local citizenship as a vehicle to study inequality.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Gaining local citizenships by formal credentials**

Gaining local citizenship via formal channels requires formal credentials such as *hukou* and homeownership. To achieve these changes, parents often need to make the most of their resources, including material wealth and employment relations. Moreover, these changes might also tap into other intangible resources families might or might not be able to afford: long planning processes that can be emotionally exhausting, and in some cases separated families that can strain marital relationships.

#### *Gaining local citizenship in Beijing*

Formally changing a family's *hukou* to Beijing represents an important and relatively well-understood strategy of gaining local citizenship. Except through family reunions and special talent programs, gaining Beijing *hukou* is typically achieved via quotas from employers. A number of parents in the sample had gained Beijing *hukou* through their employers in the 1990s or 2000s. The exclusivity of this process had evolved with time, and in general had increased in the recent two decades. As a result, Beijing *hukou* came to be seen as a major perk that was sometimes advertised with jobs. Being able to give Beijing *hukou* quotas also reflected the employer's relationship with government.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> During my fieldwork, gaining Beijing *hukou* was a widely felt and discussed issue among young professionals in Beijing. Generally, government and state-owned enterprises had more *hukou quotas* to offer than private companies, but there also appeared to be significant variations within the latter group. Anecdotally, I sat across the human resource department while working at Beijing's largest tutoring company – also the world's highest evaluated education company – and learned that they have only four Beijing *hukou* quotas each year company-wide. One of my colleagues in strategic investment, a Harvard alum, felt very lucky to take one of the four quotas. However, a

I interviewed C28<sup>3</sup> in Tongzhou District, an eastern district that had been mostly rural until recent attempts to urbanize it and shape it into a municipal administration center for Beijing. Having grown up and worked in Langfang, Hebei Province all her life, C28 shifted her and her husband's assignments to Beijing in 2016 to provide better educational opportunities for their son. At the time, her son was in fifth grade and in one of Langfang's best elementary schools owing to C28's extensive family ties in Langfang. C28 recounted her reasoning behind the move:

At that time [before 2016], the impression in my mind was that I should live in Langfang. Coming to Beijing had never entered my thoughts. I was quite naive at the time, and in retrospect that was perhaps not right. By the time our child was in the 4th grade [2015-2016 academic year], my colleagues with children at similar ages with my kid – two or three of them started to take action. For their children's future, they had all started the paperwork to enter Beijing. People around me all took action. I was thinking whether I made the wrong choice... Later, I consulted others when chatting together, and then learned that Beijing might actually be better for the child, and I started considering it. At the time, my child was in the 4th grade, and I handled the transfer [to Beijing], because I had to move first. And then in the 5th grade, our child moved as a [public employee] dependent and got *hukou* [in Beijing] at the end of the 5th grade.

Notably, while C28 was able to access Beijing *hukou* through her employer, she could not freely choose her *hukou* registration in an arbitrary district. Her [public employer] branch had a base in Tongzhou District, so she transferred her family to this district. She completed the transfer without ever having been to Tongzhou.

While C28 was able to gain Tongzhou *hukou* without having been to Tongzhou, a number of parents in the sample had not been able to obtain *hukou* in Beijing despite having lived in Beijing much longer. For example, Sonia, an office worker, had lived in Beijing for over a decade with

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human resource official who joined recently told us that her previous employer, Lenovo, had many more Beijing *hukou* quotas.

<sup>3</sup> The "C" here signifies the interview comes from the third stage of dissertation fieldwork, conducted in Beijing and its surrounding cities.

her family without gaining Beijing *hukou*. Her husband had worked as a mid-level manager for a state-owned company for years, but had only been able to obtain a resident permit (similar to green card, conferring temporary local citizenship). He was passed over recently due to being over 45 years old. Fortunately, his employer relations and resident permit gave their child a slot in public elementary and middle schools in Beijing, but their child may be forced to return to their hometown for high school without *hukou*. In comparison, C28's success might be attributed to her status within public employer and its branch's presumably strong relations with Beijing's local governments. Later sections will describe in more detail the situation of those failing to obtain local citizenship.

#### *Satellite cities as alternative destinations of local citizenship*

Parents living in Beijing but not able to obtain Beijing *hukou* may seek out satellite cities as secondary choices for local citizenship. In this regard, Tianjin stood out as a preferred location. As another major city with perceived high education quality and high proportions of college admissions, Tianjin had also become a member of the Jing-Jin-Ji metropolitan area and in recent years had become conveniently connected to Beijing by high-speed railway and highways. For example, as of 2019, Wuqing District in Tianjin was connected to Beijing by a highspeed railway train that ran 20+ times a day with a travel time of only 21 minutes each way.

C22 and her husband were both from rural areas in Northeast China. She graduated from vocational high school, and her husband from community college. They came to Beijing shortly after graduation. Her husband is a serial entrepreneur in IT, and C22 worked at her husband's small firms before her and her daughter's move to Tianjin. C22 and her husband purchased a home in Tianjin in 2012 when their daughter was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

Note that C22 had been able to gain access to elementary school in Beijing in 2011, the year before public school admissions became formalized. While she and her husband lived in Daxing District, they sent their daughter to the nearby Fengtai District for elementary school using *guanxi* through a neighbor. However, her daughter would not be able to attend high schools or sit the college entrance exam in Beijing due to their lack of Beijing *hukou*. In contrast, Tianjin at the time had the policy of awarding *hukou* with home purchase, and with *hukou*, her daughter could attend high school and take college entrance exam in the future. C22 became aware of the unique Tianjin opportunity offered after her neighbor acted on it:

I started to consider this (middle school access) when she started elementary school. The neighbor next door was also a non-local [in Beijing]. She was from Henan Province and had two kids... My neighbor did not want to go back to Henan Province. She started to think about it early, because she has been here for even longer than us, and her husband also runs a business. I don't know if she heard it from someone else or what – she went to Wuqing District, Tianjin. I heard about this from her. Buy a home in Wuqing District, and you can move your household registration to Tianjin. At the time, Tianjin happened to have that policy, buying a home and landing a household registration. She was relatively early (in using the policy).

Following their neighbor's footsteps, C22 and her husband bought an apartment in Tianjin 2012, when their daughter was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. In 2015, C22 sent her daughter to Tianjin in 5<sup>th</sup> grade in order to make time for her daughter to adjust to the Tianjin curriculum and prepare for middle school selection in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. For a year, C22 travelled every workday between Beijing and Tianjin to take care of the child and her job at the same time. When her daughter rose to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade in 2016, C22 left her job and moved to Tianjin to prepare her daughter for selection exams to private middle schools in Tianjin. At the time of my interview with C22 in 2019, her husband had maintained his job in Beijing while C22 and her daughter lived in Tianjin, so the family had been living separately on weekdays.

C22 and her neighbor were not the only Beijing families that chose Tianjin as a secondary destination for local citizenship. C22 later introduced me to other moms living in the same property development in Wuqing District, Tianjin, who shared similar trajectories from Beijing to Tianjin. C22 even started a broker business to aid other parents in handling the process of obtaining *hukou* in Tianjin.

Moreover, parents across the Jing-Jin-Ji metropolitan area or even more broadly in northern China have chosen Tianjin as a *hukou* destination for school purposes. Another parent I interviewed in Hebei Province told me, at the end of interview, that she and her husband were planning to move to a developing college town in Tianjin for the planned elementary and middle schools there. C22 and other interviewees in Wuqing told me that about half of the parents in the Wuqing District were migrants for education purposes, coming from various provinces in northern China.

Tianjin is not the only secondary local citizenship destination for parents who could not obtain *hukou* in Beijing. Beijing is also conveniently connected to multiple cities in Hebei Province, a populous province considered to be less prestigious in education and much more competitive in college entrance exams. However, these cities had homes available at much lower prices than Beijing and Tianjin, and usually allowed *hukou* change with the purchase of a home. For working-class parents hoping to settle in the Beijing metropolitan area, these cities provided the best opportunity to maintain their livelihood in Beijing and also a home nearby where their children could go to school. At least a few parents in the sample had chosen or considered this option.

*Gaining local citizenship in specific districts*

Gaining local citizenship in a city like Beijing, however, does not automatically mean access to the schools in the best districts of Beijing. C28's assignment was in Tongzhou District, Beijing – a developing peripheral district of Beijing whose educational resources are still inferior. Having previously lived all her life in Langfang, C28 did not have any pre-existing notions of school variations across districts in Beijing. However, that changed when C28 was browsing online after she completed the *hukou* transfer to Beijing. At that point, C28's *hukou* would stay with her employer in Tongzhou until she bought a residential property in Beijing and transferred her *hukou* there.

One day, I suddenly saw an online article about education in Tongzhou District. It was 2016, and the article was about 2015, discussing the high school entrance exam results of 2015. The article described how horrible Tongzhou's 2015 high school entrance exam results were, and how horrible its 2015 college entrance exam results were, and how bad Tongzhou's education was. The article says these suburban districts were at the bottom, even worse than Shunyi, worse than Huairou (two other suburban/rural districts). Oh my god. I thought it was this bad, then what is the purpose and meaning of me coming here? I felt lost.

As she learned about the education geography in Beijing, C28 tried hard to buy an apartment in the better-reputed districts (Haidian, Xicheng, or Dongcheng), but found her half a million dollars of funds were insufficient to buy a home in these districts during a housing price surge. The process was emotionally trying and exhausting. C28 recounted how she finally gave up on moving districts and settled for a home in Tongzhou District:

I was really bringing money with me to Dongcheng to buy an apartment and could not get one, and I did not know what I was doing. I had a driver with me at the time. The driver told me: Sister, why don't I take you to a fortune teller. I was a mess then, and he took me to the fortune teller. I asked the fortune teller's opinion on this, and he told me I could not buy an apartment in Dongcheng in my life. Don't think about it, he said. You think about other directions, think about the south.

C28 bought an apartment in Tongzhou the second day, and her son was studying in the school district of the apartment at the time of my interview. Part of C28's failure to purchase local citizenship in a desired district was her late arrival in Beijing. If she had arrived in Beijing just a few months earlier, her funds might have been sufficient before the rise of real estate prices in 2016.

Indeed, parents who had lived in Beijing for a long time would have had more opportunities to buy a home in a preferred district. C12, for example, bought a 100-square-foot apartment in Dongcheng District when she got pregnant, so that her child, once born, could have *hukou* in Dongcheng, a high qualification that would ensure school access. At such a small size, the apartment was impractical for a family, so they never lived there and rented it out. C12 and her husband later bought another apartment in a suburban district to live in. When the child came of age for school, they rented an apartment in Dongcheng District to stay close to the school as a family. The apartment they rented was right across the street from the 100-square-foot apartment they owned that had provided the school access.

### *Hoarding multiple local citizenships*

Since the school admissions process offers a variety of ways to prove local citizenship, it is possible for parents to own multiple local citizenships. Owning multiple local citizenships may provide a larger set of options for children, with some options offering certain advantages in some stage along the child's education trajectory. Therefore, owning two or more local citizenships presents an attractive strategy for parents with resources to do so.

The most straightforward strategy is to buy multiple homes, in locations where home ownership serves as a valid local citizenship for school purposes. C84, an executive in a state-owned company, recounted his preparations of multiple local citizenships for his child:

I actually prepared a few school district apartments. If we don't go to [the schools in] this district, it is okay to move the child to that apartment [and its attached school district]. But if he has the ability to get to better [schools], better than what I have prepared, then these apartments are useless. We had an apartment in the school district of [one of the top elementary schools in Haidian District]. Later, he went to [another high-quality school] because it was relatively close to home. To be honest, elementary schools are more or less similar, so it was not worth the trouble. I also bought an apartment in Fangshan District [for a branch of a reputed middle school]. But before he went to middle school, he went overseas [to a prep school in new England]. This is preparation (*pupai*).

Even if the prepared local citizenships were not used, parents felt they provided safety and certainty for the child's access to desired resources along their educational trajectory. Moreover, the resources that enabled C84 to make these preparations eventually made them useless. For upper-middle-class parents like C84, it is common for their children to go overseas at some point for high school or middle school. When asking why his child started planning to go overseas in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, C84 plainly said, "because our colleagues' children are basically all overseas."

My interview sampling intentionally avoided parents who sent their children abroad, due to an already rich literature on this topic. However, my sample included upper-middle-class parents who pursued "new education" in Beijing, which can be roughly understood as locally adapted international education. These parents often preserved back-up options for their children by investing in local citizenships in good school districts. When these new education schools no longer provided adequate opportunities for their children's education, parents were often able to draw upon these options to pull their children back into a desirable location on the mainstream education trajectory.

### **Gaining local citizenship by informal strategies**

Besides formally gaining local citizenships, parents may also gain their local citizenship via informal channels, notably social ties of various types. Such informal usage of social ties can be

very effective and is widely used as a way to have one's children attend desired schools in the Beijing metropolitan area. The informal usage of social ties may result in formally expanding local citizenships and then school access, and they may also directly result in school access without formal expansion of local citizenship. The informal usage of ties I observed sometimes took advantage of informalities in school admissions, and could also take place despite apparently formal procedures that forbade the use of ties.

### *Family and local ties*

Parents born and raised in Beijing often leverage family ties to arrange *hukou* in desired districts, even if their own socioeconomic resources are otherwise not high. C10, a Beijing local, illustrates this local advantage. C10 graduated from a vocational high school and now works at an office job. She and her husband have a combined monthly salary of \$1,500~\$3,000. They own two homes in the relatively suburban Fengtai District, but they were able to send their child to the desired Dongcheng District for school.

She explained that her parents had household registration in Dongcheng District, and she had household registration in Fengtai because the family was living there when she was born. When C10 was expecting her own child, she moved her child's household registration back to Dongcheng, presumably via Dongcheng *hukou* retained by the child's grandparents. C10 explained that this local knowledge of the importance of putting *hukou* in a desirable district was natural to her:

If you could have household registration in Dong-Xi-Hai (Dongcheng, Xicheng, and Haidian Districts), everyone would put their household registration there.... if you can. Basically everyone does that.

Compared to a new migrant like C28, C10 enjoyed the local knowledge and multiple local citizenships within the family. Even if C10 and her husband were less educated and had less powerful employers than C28 and her spouse, C10 was able to gain Dongcheng *hukou* while C28 could not.

Even if the parent was not actually born and raised in Beijing, having grandparental ties in Beijing can prove crucial in children's school access. C6 and her husband were both born and raised in other provinces, and only came to Beijing after completing their education and several years of work. However, C6's child was able to access public middle school in the desired Dongcheng District, owing to a family history that C6's father was sent-down as a youth during the Cultural Revolution from a Beijing family. Although C6's father was unable to recover Beijing *hukou* even after the Cultural Revolution, the grandparental ties, combined with use of personal connections, eventually allowed C6's family to obtain Dongcheng *hukou*.

#### *Social and community ties*

Migrant parents in Beijing can also build strong social and community ties in Beijing, if they have lived in Beijing for a long time. These ties could help their children to obtain what could be described as *informal local citizenship* that is enough to send them to the desired schools, even when they do not enjoy formal local citizenship.

C38, an electrician in Beijing, was working-class by all measures. He finished his education when he graduated from middle school, then did construction work and military service before migrating to Beijing to work in security. While on the security job, C38 learned to be an electrician. His wife did not work, and his monthly income was around \$1,000. Besides a house built in his rural hometown, C38's family assets were around \$12,000 in all. However, C38

managed to send all of his four children to public school in Beijing, and in the much desired Haidian District.

C38's children's school access was remarkable, particularly as C38 did not have the credentials required to prove their local citizenships, and as Beijing started to formalize the school admissions procedures after 2012. These formal procedures, which affected C38's third and fourth children, required parents to show formal proof of residence, among other things. Due to their tight family budget, C38 had always lived in informal housing in Beijing that did not qualify as formal proof of residence. However, as C38 described it:

Many people helped me, because I've been here for a long time, and especially brethren from church. We all believe in Jesus, like one family. They know I have many children and a bad job, so those who have property ownership certificate just lent us their certificate.

By borrowing the certificate and presumably making up a lease, C38 was able to "prove" his family's formal residence in Beijing. This borrowing isn't easy at all, and some landlords charge hundreds of thousands of dollars for their lessees to borrow them for children's school purpose. Moreover, C38 and his family needed to collaborate with the actual property owners to pass in-person inspections by the local education bureau. C38 was able to achieve this only because of his church community ties. He was a devout churchgoer, and even tried to recruit me before and after the interview.

This type of local ties could certainly develop in other ways, but strong ties like a tightknit church community were uncommon among the migrant parents interviewed. Another working-class parent in the sample was able to send his child to school in Beijing after admitting to traffic crime committed by a local official. Most working- and lower-middle-class migrant parents in

my sample did not have ties strong enough to send children to schools in Beijing after formalized school admissions in 2012.

### **Local school choice as failing to gain new local citizenships**

Not everyone is proactive about hoarding or acquiring new local citizenships. Within my interview sample, there were parents who were entirely passive about it. These parents tended to be either satisfied with the schools provided by their local citizenship accumulated earlier in life, and/or constrained by their existing local citizenship as they did not have the means to change it. These parents come from various locations on the socioeconomic spectrum, yet they share one thing in common: their current local citizenship was already the best available within the range of local citizenships they could obtain based on their capability and willingness. Therefore, accepting one's default local school choice shall not be seen as "natural," but rather a special case in choosing schools.

#### *Local choice by families with local citizenship*

Parents might be satisfied with their local citizenship, because it may "naturally" provide access to the schools they prefer. This tends to happen with parents with quite desirable local citizenships. C9 and her husband came to Beijing through college and post-graduate education. C9 holds a PhD from a prestigious university and works for a national organization, and her husband holds a master's degree and works for a central government ministry. Their combined annual income is about 300,000 RMB (~\$43,000). In her account, gaining spatial membership was never an explicit concern. Due to her husband's job with a powerful employer, their housing options corresponded to good school districts only.

C9: Our benefit housing was initially at [a place at the very center of Beijing]. Then because that housing was small, so the work unit has a rotation system. If there are some

new housing units, everyone queues again, and then [you know whether] you have a choice to change your benefit housing or not. We did change. And it was the housing we live in now, the housing we use to go to school.

Interviewer: Did you factor in school district when you were making this decision?

C9: Probably not at all. Because with the other option we had, the elementary school for that residential quarter was good too.

For C9, local choice and a good school were her natural choices. However, they were only natural because her husband has a powerful employer that provides for spatial membership in highly desired places. C9's case appears fundamentally different from C28's, in that C9 and her husband did not plan their careers around their child's school district. Instead, their pursuit of careers in central government seems to have naturally resulted in access to excellent school districts. Similarly, pursuit of careers in China's top universities, like Peking and Tsinghua, could also have similar effects as these universities have excellent affiliated schools that admit their employees' children. Nevertheless, for parents who are not at the top of their career hierarchy, they are often more like C28 than C9, in that they tended to factor in their child's school district in their pursuit of careers.

However, even C9 had a shade of frustration with her school choice. One of her children was unhappy at the public school and wanted to go to the US for the rest of middle/high school, and had researched these schools on the internet. Recounting this, C9 said she told the children,

Your parents just make so much money now. We really don't have much left after spending on your education. If you want to go abroad, get a scholarship on your own.

In the hierarchical system of education, only very few (like C84) have the resources to choose freely across the territorial boundaries of school districts, districts, cities, and nations. For the rest, even including arguably upper-middle-class parents like C9, their capability to gain local citizenship is constrained in some way. Their local choice, then, is not characterized as one

of complete satisfaction. In a way, C9's compromise is not dissimilar to that of migrant families, described below.

#### *Local choice by families without local citizenship*

Large numbers of migrant workers in Beijing were not able to send their children to school in Beijing, as they could not afford the associated expenses or prepare the required documents. C8, an IT consultant, has never gained household registration in Beijing. After graduating from community college, he and his wife moved to Beijing in the late 1990s. Now he earns a monthly salary of \$3,000-\$4,000, and his wife, after long years of being a full-time stay-at-home mom, earns around \$1,000 per month. They have not purchased homes in Beijing, and have an estimated household wealth of about \$150,000. At the time of interview, C8 had just decided to send his child back to middle school in his hometown village for the ninth grade.

Even though C8 had the ability to send his child to a private school in Beijing, due to his lack of Beijing household registration, their child cannot go to high school in Beijing. C8 plans to send his son back to rural hometown in the last year of middle school, so that his son can prepare for the high school entrance exam there:

But I still think it is a great pity. From my heart, first, I'm unwilling to separate my child from me, and I hope he can stay with me as much as possible. We are on very good terms with each other. Second, there are a lot of factors you can't control.

C8 represents a classic example of child being forced into return migration as a result of failed school access. C8 accepted his default assignment based on his local citizenship, only due to a lack of capacity to gain appropriate local citizenship for further school access at destination city.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

## Summary of findings

This paper describes how parents with varied resources responded to a spatial hierarchy of school destinations, which restricted their access via local citizenship institutions. Parents used their formal resources – such as employer clout and family wealth – as well as informal resources – such as social connections – to gain local citizenship in their desired district, so that their children could attend schools there. In the metropolitan context, the disparity among districts was salient, and the strategies parents adopted were often deliberate and resource-intensive.

It is important to note that these parents' efforts to manipulate their local citizenships corresponds to the resources they have. Towards one end of socioeconomic spectrum, upper-middle-class parents achieved multiple places of local citizenship via purchasing multiple homes. These parents sent their children to elite elementary and middle schools in Beijing, often preparing for eventual overseas education. Towards the other end of spectrum, large numbers of working-class parents were preoccupied with their livelihoods and unable to expand their local citizenship beyond their hometown origins, despite having lived and worked in cities for many years. These parents sent their children back home, sometimes with one parent (typically the mother) and sometimes not, and with hometown schools usually being of inferior quality and offering fewer opportunities than the average schools in Beijing and Tianjin.

In the middle of the spectrum, middle-class parents varied in their capability to obtain local citizenships among districts in Beijing and the greater surrounding Jing-Jin-Ji. The more successful of them were able to get into desirable Beijing districts such as Dongcheng, Xicheng, or Haidian, often by far-sighted planning that started before the child was born. Other parents settled for second-tier districts in Beijing due to limits in their formal or informal resources.

Among parents who were unable to obtain *hukou* in Beijing, some were able to implement a secondary and partial migration to Tianjin, a city that was quite attractive in terms of schools and offered preferential quotas in college entrance exams. Some other parents purchased homes and gained local citizenships in cities like Langfang in Hebei Province, which did not boast superior schools but at least provided spatial proximity that kept the family together.

Therefore, choosing schools in metropolitan areas reproduces inequality intergenerationally. Families with more resources are more capable of expanding their local citizenship to places with better schools. In this process, parents transmit their advantages in employment, wealth, and social ties into their children's educational opportunities.

### **Linking educational inequality and spatial inequality**

In addition to intergenerational reproduction of inequality, school choice also reproduces the existing spatial hierarchy in terms of education. As the places with better schools attract more resourceful families, these places become even more capable of generating better academic performance due to the resources families bring with them. For example, over the past two decades in Beijing, areas near good schools witnessed a dramatic growth of tutoring agencies, with the most advanced curricula usually offered near elite elementary and middle schools. Through families trying to migrate to districts with better educational resources, the spatial hierarchy of education reinforces itself.

The spatial hierarchy in terms of education closely mirrors a more general hierarchy of locales in metropolitan areas. The development of the prestigious elementary and middle schools in Beijing was historically based on powerful institutions such as government branches, strong state-owned enterprises, elite universities, and more recently high-end real estate developments and high-tech zones. These institutions provide resources that create a tier of prestigious schools

that dominate high school and college entrance exams in Beijing. The hierarchical nature of school provision in metropolitan areas is, by institutional origin, not unlike the dual labor market in global cities (Sassen 2018).

In sum, space acts as a sift to create inequalities among children's educational resources in three inter-connected ways. First, space itself is hierarchical in its ability to house high-quality education providers, particularly schools. Second, the territoriality principle of school admissions links children's chances of accessing quality education to parents' local citizenships. Third, parents differ in their capability to live, work, own, or make ties at given locales, and this means they have differentiated resources to gain local citizenship for school purposes.

### **Micro-climates and the emergence of new education practices**

The reinforced spatial segregation for families with different resources may have profound repercussions for the emergence of shared intensive parenting practices. In the existing literature, scholars have found that parents are deeply influenced by “micro-climates” (Lareau 2003; Lareau and Goyette 2014), namely spatially clustered cultural knowledge of parenting. The existing literature, however, does not yet provide an explanation for the formation of these micro-climates. By documenting extensive family relocations for school purposes, this paper provides one plausible mechanism that explains the formation of micro-climates in which similar families cluster.

At least one of these clusters has proved capable of effecting education changes on the national scale. Huangzhuang, a subway station in Haidian District, represents a hotbed of intensive education practices. Located among elite public schools and universities, Huangzhuang was cradle to the then-nascent tutoring industry in early 2000s. Aspiring parents sought out tutors who were often students at elite universities, and hired them to tutor their children

preparing for selective exams to enter elite middle-schools. Huangzhuang happened to be at the spatial crossroads of the most aspiring families, the top schools, and the best tutor supply in the nation. Nowadays, Huangzhuang is home to China's two largest tutoring companies that have replicated their Huangzhuang success in hundreds of cities across the country, and is home to many dozens of other education companies that aspire to follow their steps.

Places like Huangzhuang bred the rise of the intensive parenting documented across countries (Doepke and Zilibotti 2019). In addition to being incubators for education startups, these hotbeds create isomorphic pressure on families and schools in other locales in the metropolitan area to join the competition (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Indeed, when enrichment tutoring companies start branches in a new city, they focus on these hotbed locales, where families are most aspirational and school selection is most competitive. For example, when a Huangzhuang-originated company expanded to the US, it chose elite San Jose, CA as its first US location. After all, what children and parents do in these locales define what is competitive, prestigious, and desirable for middle-class families in other locales in these metropolitan areas and even beyond.

## **CHAPTER 2. SELECTION: FIELD ENVIRONMENT AND PARENTING**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The intensification of parenting has become an intractable social issue widening the education opportunity gap in many countries (Doepke and Zilibotti 2019). In China, the salience of this issue is reflected in President Xi Jinping's ongoing campaign to reduce academic burdens on elementary and middle school students.

Intensive parenting constitutes a social and political issue in China due to three reasons. First, the burdens of intensive parenting are most felt in large urban areas, which have the highest potential threat to regime stability and an outsized influence on the country's policy agenda (Wallace 2014). Second, the location of elementary and secondary education has shifted towards the private domain, despite China being a socialist country and the continued dominance of public schools. According to a national survey by Peking University (CIEFR-HS 2017), Chinese families outspent the government during their children's elementary and secondary education. Third, intensive parenting practices have mainly focused on test preparation and defied repeated government reforms toward "happy" and more well-rounded child development (Naftali 2014).

It is a puzzle why the Chinese government has failed to curb the rise of intensive parenting, given its many tools of governance. The existing literature on parenting lacks theoretical leverage to explain persistence and change in parenting practices. In this paper, I develop a field theory of parenting to explain the emergence and persistence of intensive parenting practices in urban China.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Human capital and the utility maximizing parent**

Current literature on parenting follows two paradigms. The first one sees parenting as an investment in the children's human capital, eventually rewarding the children economically. Pioneering this line of research are American economist Gary Becker and French sociologist Raymond Boudon. Becker argues that parents invest time and money in their children in anticipation of a future reward – their children's success and well-being. Injecting economic modeling into social analysis, Becker formulates a utility function where the parent's utility is influenced by the child's welfare (Becker 1962). Parenting is utility maximization, logically similar to an investment in a business.

While Becker thinks positively of human capital investment, Boudon describes it as a doomed venture based on an illusion. According to Boudon, parents invest in their children because they observe a cross-sectional correlation between education and socioeconomic success. However, as more parents invest in their children's education, education credentials inflate, and their returns decline. Therefore, parental investment in education will be intense but will, on average, fail to reap the expected rewards (Boudon 1974). Writing in the 1970s, Boudon was arguably the first prominent social scientist to study the intensification of parenting.

Boudon's argument of declining returns to education is consistent with the theory of maximally maintained inequality (Raftery and Hout 1993), which argues that educational expansion did not reduce inequality, but only push it to later stages of education. However, this observation turns out to be irrelevant if we calculate the returns to education within the same cohort. Returns to schooling have generally kept rising during the past decades, and college

education has become the primary pathway by which parents transfer their advantages to children (Bloome, Dyer, and Zhou 2018; Piketty 2014).

Nevertheless, Boudon is correct in that parenting tends to intensify. Examining dozens of developed countries, contemporary economists have documented a widespread trend towards more intensive parenting (Doepke and Zilibotti 2019). When parents live in economically unequal societies and observe high returns to education, they have more incentives to invest in their children's education. This link between societal inequality and parenting behavior fits with data in most major countries during the past few decades (Doepke and Zilibotti 2014). In other words, an unequal world tends to produce tiger parents.

This human capital approach assumes that parents are rational individuals, a model of action that has been proved unrealistic by behavioral research. Real actors like parents do not usually calculate returns to their investment but instead use intuitive heuristics and respond to nudges from the environment (e.g., Kahneman 2013). Moreover, research in the human capital model tends to use highly abstract operationalizations of parenting such as "parenting styles," often ignoring substantive aspects of parenting practices such as the activities, space, time, and finances of parenting. These parenting practices are essential for family life and the education system, and therefore should be objects of parenting research.

### **Cultural capital and the social reproduction parent**

A lineage of sociologists has studied parenting practices from the cultural capital paradigm started by Pierre Bourdieu. In a series of studies published from the 1970s to the 1990s, Bourdieu developed the concept of cultural capital to explain the reproduction of social class (Bourdieu 1973; 1984; 1998). Cultural capital includes three forms: embodied capital, as related to habitus;

institutionalized capital, e.g., education credentials; and objectified capital, such as a physical art collection. Cultural capital helps some children succeed in schools and later in society.

Bourdieu's idea has been expanded by the contemporary sociologist Annette Lareau. In "Unequal Childhoods," a classic in parenting research, Lareau describes two sets of parenting practices by two social classes (Lareau 2003). Middle-class parents arrange a variety of activities for their children, while working-class parents do not. Middle-class parenting is "concerted cultivation," and working-class parents leave their children to "natural growth." Middle-class parents foster their children's abilities to articulate their needs and interact with authorities, and working-class parents emphasize autonomy and discipline. These differences matter because the cultural skills and habits middle-class children receive will help them succeed in school and access future middle-class jobs. Lareau further speculates that parenting practices originate from parents' own life and work routines that differ by class. Consistent with Bourdieu's original argument, parenting is a cultural process of social class reproduction.

Cultural capital is a decidedly different view from human capital. The cultural capital paradigm highlights the constraints of parents' socioeconomic conditions on parenting practices. In this cultural capital paradigm, parents are agents of social reproduction. This paradigm has framed the sociological inquiry into parenting.

However, the cultural capital paradigm is poorly equipped to explain over-time or cross-context variations in parenting. The cultural capital view cannot explain the significant changes in parenting over the past decades in China or OECD countries (Doepke and Zilibotti 2019). Across contexts, recent studies have found an inconsistent influence of social class on parenting. While some studies document class-based differences in strategies to obtain school access (Ramos Lobato and Groos 2019), others find none (Lareau 2014). While some describe middle-

class parents adeptly manipulating rules to secure advantages (Calarco 2014), others find that even middle-class parents fail to understand the rules of the game (Lareau, Adia Evans, and Yee 2016). After all, parenting appears not determined by social class alone.

### **Institutions and the bounded rationality parent**

To explain varying patterns in parenting practices, we need an updated theoretical model that provides a more empirically accurate model of parent's agency. I propose an institutional model that parents are rationally bounded decision-makers who adapt to the rules of the game. This model incorporates the central insights from the human capital and cultural capital models: that the parent is trying to make reasonable decisions and is bound by rules of the social world.

*Bounded Rationality.* Parents' decision-making is bounded by their cognitive processes (Simon 1997). Parents face three constraints on the cognitive process. (1) *Limited information* regarding child and education resources: it is challenging to evaluate the child's abilities and potentials. Parents often need to rely on limited signals to understand the child's strengths and potential matches with specific education resources. (2) *Uncertain futures* regarding the child's and the society's future developments: even the most sophisticated parent cannot predict where the child's interests will develop or which skills will be valued in the future job market.

Therefore, parents usually cannot choose educational activities according to expected returns from the child's future job. (3) *Limited cognitive bandwidth* prevents parents from sufficiently considering all the options available: for example, demanding work or a sick grandparent can turn parents' attention away from their children.

*Rules of the Game (Institutions).* Parenting practices and value orientations are strongly shaped by rules of the game, also known as institutions (Douglas 1986; North 1990). Institutions of parenting include a set of cultural frames that determine what matters and material practices

that enable specific parenting activities. These institutions vary across contexts, therefore yielding variations in parenting practices. For example, as college hierarchy is viewed as less prominent in Canada than in the U.S., Canadian parents emphasize activities related to entry to selective colleges less than their American counterparts do (Aurini, Missaghian, and Milian 2020).

### **Fields: explaining the variations of rules**

The institutional model brings us closer to the empirically realistic parent, but it says little about why rules vary. I borrow from the field theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011; 2012) to explain these rules' cross-sectional and over-time variations. A field is a meso-level social order where actors interact with knowledge of one another and with shared understandings. I propose that these rules emerge from two fields: public schools and tutoring. The contemporary tutoring field in urban China emerged as an offshoot of the public school field.

*Field of public schools.* Public elementary and middle schools in China have been part of compulsory nine-year education since 1986. Since the 2000s, it had gradually become the norm that they are not selective and admit all students from catchment zones designated by the local government. However, China's public schools have a history of hierarchical differentiation. In 1978, one of Deng Xiaoping's first reform policies was to designate "key" schools across all levels of education (Tsang 2000). During elementary and middle school stages, key schools were abolished through repeated policy efforts in the 1990s, but many ex-key schools managed to maintain their prestige (J. Liu 2018). Keeping and competing for prestige was often crucial for school principals' careers, and perhaps the most salient indicator of prestige was the destinations of graduates. For middle schools, this meant sending students to good high schools, usually through the competitive high school entrance exams. The best way to achieve this was to admit

academically promising students selectively. Therefore, many public schools principals were motivated to selectively admit their students.

*Field of tutoring.* After-school tutoring is a type of shadow education, which includes all education offered by non-school providers. First coined in studies of Japan (Stevenson and Baker 1992), shadow education was soon found across Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America in substantial volumes (Bray 1999). Subsequent studies identify even more extensive geographical penetration, such as in Germany, France, Australia, and even Nordic countries (W. Zhang and Bray 2019; 2020). Research across all contexts appears to find shadow education to be growing in recent decades, even after various government attempts to restrict it (Baker 2020). Currently, we have relatively little research on the origins of contemporary forms of tutoring, or how it affects parenting.

## **FINDINGS**

### **The bounded rationality parent and the rules of the game**

Contrary to the rational choice assumption that parents rationalize their choices with their children's future incomes in mind, I find that parents focus on the next steps. Middle-school parents tended not to plan their children's college or job intensively, but instead made parenting decisions based on near-term pressures such as high school admissions. Likewise, when their children were still in elementary school, their parenting decisions were shaped by the near-term pressure of middle school admissions. For example, in districts where middle school admissions were selective on academic performance, parents felt pressure to start tutoring in elementary school. Therefore, the concrete next steps – not long-term expectations relatively vague in parents' minds – are the most powerful in shaping parenting practices.

### *The bounded rationality parent*

When asked about college and job plans for their middle-school children, parent interviewees conveyed vague ideas. They sometimes outright rejected the question, saying these concerns were not on their mind. C4, a mom with an advanced degree from an elite university, said,

Now I haven't considered the college step. I think about high school first. I still want him to go to – the middle school is a branch of this school, whose main school is a high school. Just hope to go on to the high school division from the middle school. The high school is probably among the best in the entire district. ... To go onto the high school, it may need to get ranked top 100 or 120 [of the middle school].

Even when these middle-school parents were pushed to express ideas about their children's college and job prospects, they tended to be general and vague in their answers. For example, C4 only said their child should get a bachelor's degree, a much more general idea than her rather specific plans for high school.

Interviewer: Do you have any requirement for your child's job or college? What about the [elite university C4 held an advanced degree from]?

C4: I feel that [these elite universities] are too difficult to test into. I don't have special expectations, but I think it should be at least a bachelor's degree. I think it should not be lower than this line. I think we may still have such expectations for our child.

For future jobs, parents had even less of an idea. Some said as long as the children are happy, that is enough. Even parents who had given some thought to their children's careers acknowledged that it depends on a lot of things. In recounting everyday parenting experiences, parents seldom reported feeling or doing anything due to concern for the distant future.

In contrast, parents could be pushed to consider near-term goals by events they experienced. For example, C4's middle school had a fast-track program that selected top students at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade and offered them admissions to the high school division. C4's rising 8<sup>th</sup> grade child

wasn't nearly good enough for the program, but she nevertheless felt anxieties after observing other parents vying for it at a recent parent-teacher meeting.

After the PTA meeting, many parents asked the homeroom teacher about how to get into the fast-track program. I was thinking about how I could get into the high school, so everyone's needs were different, but I was thinking about how difficult it is for me to get into the high school.

Furthermore, C4's anxieties were amplified when she recognized the gap between her child's current performance and the high-school admissions exam in less than two years. As C4 recounted, "[at the PTA meeting,] the teacher also made a special statistics. There had been four big exams in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade... My child may be ranked [close] or outside of 200. So you will feel particularly anxious when you compare."

Driven by these anxieties about high school admissions, C4 had sent her child to multiple academic tutoring programs, something she had not done when the child was in elementary school. In retrospect, C4 regretted her late induction of her child to intensive tutoring, saying she should have done that "at least in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades." C4's not having done that, however, was consistent with the lack of middle school admissions pressure in her district. In other districts where middle school selected students based on merit, parents felt the pressure to take such actions in elementary school.

### *The varied rules of the game*

Parenting in elementary school was heavily influenced by the type of middle school admissions families faced. In C4's Dongcheng District, the government had successfully banned selective admissions in middle schools. As a result, C4 did not feel the selective pressure when her child was in elementary school. According to C4, she "would probably have sent for tutoring

if in [another district].” Not feeling the immediate selective pressures, C4 followed the rather popular notion of parenting for a happy childhood:

Perhaps yet another reason was I was influenced by some ideas of education. Although I now figure out that some of those ideas are probably a hoax... When the kids were in elementary school, a lot of people told you about happy education. ... And they use some American examples, such as American elementary schools let students go at three, and they don't have much homework.

In contrast, parents in Haidian District faced a different middle school admissions system. The varied rules can be attributed to varied field environment, specifically the fragmentation of local education governance. Different with Dongcheng District, Haidian District was larger and had a number of prestigious middle schools affiliated with higher-ranking government units. Therefore, the Haidian district education bureau had no administrative command over these middle schools.

Such fragmented education governance of Haidian District made it difficult to enforce rules on the schools, notably the Ministry of Education ban on selective admissions into public middle schools. For example, the Beijing National Day School in Haidian was formerly attached to the all-powerful Central Military Commission and still enjoyed a special experimental status, which allowed it to select its students. As another example, the High School Affiliated to Tsinghua University was affiliated with the Tsinghua University, a public entity at the vice-ministerial rank. The school's middle school division used a private subsidiary school to select students who in reality sat in the public school classrooms.

Therefore, while Dongcheng District had rather successfully stopped middle schools from selecting their students, Haidian District had failed to do so despite apparent attempts by its education bureau. Thus, elementary school parents in Haidian faced near-term selective pressures. C11, a senior administrator at a local public employer in Haidian District, shared a

similar experience with C4 in the early years of elementary school – no academic tutoring – but started to feel intense pressure to do otherwise when her child was in the fifth grade.

C11: Everyone else was enrolled in tutoring, and everyone said it was useful for middle school admissions... When I was taking a stroll in the neighborhood, parents were exchanging [about children's academics]. All kinds of opportunities for talking. At my work unit, colleagues with children in the same grade or similar age – all kinds of exchange [among parents]. Everyone else was tutoring like that, and I felt horrified.

Interviewer: Did you feel this kind of pressure earlier, such as in the fourth grade?

C11: I didn't even think about it at all. Several of them in our neighborhood had already started tutoring. We only started when we couldn't help it in the end.

Interviewer: Why did you suddenly feel pressure in the fifth grade?

C11: Because you started to feel the pressure of middle school admission at that time.

The contrast between C4 and C11 illustrated a broader pattern of different parenting experiences across Beijing Districts. Where middle schools had been banned from selective admissions, such as in Dongcheng and Xicheng Districts, parents did not face immediate pressure to send their children for tutoring in elementary school. Where middle schools selectively admitted students, such as in Haidian District, parents were pressured to start tutoring in elementary school. According to one popular local idiom, “Dongcheng and Xicheng make dads compete; Haidian make children compete.” As middle schools in Dongcheng and Xicheng did not select on academic merits, it was most important for parents to obtain local citizenship in the right school catchment areas, as analyzed in the earlier chapter “Choosing Schools by Gaining Local Citizenship.” In Haidian, access to desirable middle schools depended more on elementary school children's academic performance.

### **Emergence of a new field: tutoring agencies as sponsors for middle school selections**

How did selective middle school admissions translate to pressure for tutoring? Tutoring agencies played the role of sponsors in the contest for selective middle schools. Some tutoring

agencies were direct sponsors, as they vetted students for specific middle schools, sending names to the latter that could directly lead to admission offers. More often, tutoring agencies were indirect sponsors, as they helped build students' resumes with the signals valued by middle schools, prepared students for the eccentric admissions tests set by targeted middle schools, and informed parents about behind-the-door selection events hosted by middle schools. Because tutoring agencies directly or indirectly sponsored contests for middle school, parents were motivated to send their children to tutoring.

*Direct sponsors: vetting students for middle schools*

Feeder agencies served as direct sponsors for particular middle schools. These agencies tutored students for a fee, but for students, it was not just the tutoring that mattered. More importantly, these agencies tested students and fed information about high-performing students to collaborating middle schools. They are locally known as placeholder or “pit” agencies (*keng ban*), as parents sent children there to improve their chances of getting into specific middle schools.

Some feeder agencies were developed as extensions of the elite public middle schools, and therefore had been backed by, if not outright owned and operated by, public entities. The earliest feeder agency in Beijing was an extension of a gifted and talented program hosted by the High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China (Renmin Daxue Fushu Zhongxue, hereafter RDFZ). In 1989, a RDFZ student won a silver medal at the International Math Olympiad. Building on this momentum, RDFZ expanded its in-house gifted and talented math program to a tutoring school training and identifying talents among elementary school students, the best of which would be recruited into the middle school. This feeder agency – Hualuogeng School of Math, later renamed as Renhua School in 2004 – was a public enterprise. The operation was a

testimony to RDFZ's political clout: this feeder agency was endorsed by luminary mathematicians, and its coordinator (a RDFZ teacher) was a nephew of China's first Premier Zhou Enlai.

Table 1. Example feeder agencies (keng ban) and their collaborating middle schools in Beijing

| Feeder Agency                                  | Related Middle school                                              | District | Status as of 2019                  |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|
| Hualuogeng School of Math, later Renhua School | High School Affiliated to Renmin University (RDFZ)                 | Haidian  | Privatized in 2012, closed in 2013 |
| Ziyou School, Boya School                      | High School Affiliated to Beijing University                       | Haidian  | Open                               |
| Long School                                    | High School Affiliated to Tsinghua University                      | Haidian  | Closed in 2019                     |
| Shicheng School                                | Beijing National Day School                                        | Haidian  | Open                               |
| Jinfan School                                  | Beijing 101 Middle School                                          | Haidian  | Closed in 2018                     |
| Beihang Suzhi School                           | High School Affiliated to Beihang University                       | Haidian  | Open                               |
| Sicun School                                   | Beijing No.8 High School                                           | Xicheng  | Closed                             |
| Lao Jiaoxie School                             | The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University | Xicheng  | Privatized in 2013                 |

A barrage of national and municipal policies passed between 2012-2019 banned public middle schools from selecting students, forcing some feeder agencies to shut down and others to metamorphosize, often by privatization and changing of names. This created an ideal environment for a more grassroots type of feeder agency, set up by entrepreneurial individuals to create a convenient venue for middle schools to test prospective students. For example, in Guangzhou, an experienced parent set up a tutoring agency and signaled its feeder status by inviting a principal from a prestigious middle school to speak. The agency held one test that helped the middle school to vet the students, but families were required to engage in months of tutoring to gain entrance to the test.

Under hostile government policies, feeder agencies continued to operate in this grey area, and these uncertainties were shared by families engaging them. C28, a parent in Beijing, sent her child to multiple agencies during the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, one of them a well-known feeder agency.

I had spent over 10,000 yuan then [at the feeder agency]. Later, the [feeder agency] teacher said that there were last-push classes, one-on-one, and if you buy his class, they will recommend you. Then, moreover, they told me that according to our kid's grades, it was very promising to go to [collaborating middle school]. They let us make the last push, and it would also prepare for the placement test [in middle school]. Worst case scenario, we could also go to [a subsidiary campus of the collaborating middle school]. They made the promise. I believed them. I seemed to have spent nearly 20,000 yuan for the one-on-one classes. But then there was no result.

Students at tutoring agencies may also get recommended for admissions to desirable middle schools, if they are personally endorsed by reputed coaches at the agencies. Note that this does not have to happen at feeder agencies. Like with American football coaches, reputed academic coaches were sought after and respected figures. For tutoring agencies, these coaches are able to attract the brightest students to their fastest tracks, and these students in turn brought prestige as they won awards and attended elite schools afterwards. For middle schools, these coaches already knew some high-performing students and could help identify the worthwhile students to admit. C14's child was tutored by such a reputed coach:

Let me give a simple example. If it is recommended by teacher [name], because he is very well-known, others will trust him more, and the students he has recommended will be given some consideration.

#### *Indirect sponsors: preparing students for selection*

More often than vetting students for middle schools, tutoring agencies served as indirect sponsors as they prepare students for middle school selection. Indirect sponsorship did not rely on direct institutional or personal ties to middle schools. Instead, it prepared students for the selection mechanisms used by various middle schools.

One prominent selection mechanism was resume screening, and tutoring agencies helped students to add academic signals to their resumes. Despite being banned from selecting students, middle schools in Beijing collected resumes of prospective students with their application forms, at campus events, or by providing an email address. When no official channels were available, parents reportedly left their children's resumes at the school janitor's offices. Typical resumes were thick with photocopies of various award certificates and photo proofs of activities, but the gist was the signals indicating the child's academic potential. For example, in an experience-sharing post in a parent forum, a child profile was summarized below<sup>4</sup>:

Boy, Early Development<sup>5</sup> finalist as rising sixth grader, three first prizes in math Olympiads (2 Firsts at Hua Cup, 1 First at Ying Cup), district honor roll for one year, high-end tracks at Xueersi, Gaosi math; piano eighth level, principal at Jinfan orchestra.

The post further went on to advise future parents, "Certificates are necessary. Early Development finalist and math Olympiad certificates are the main thing, English and school honors are the icing on the cake." Since elementary schools had long been banned from coaching students in competitive math, after-school tutoring was necessary to achieve these first prizes in math Olympiads. The "high-end tracks" at Xueersi and Gaosi math provided exactly the right training on competitive math, helping the child to obtain the valued academic signals.

Another selection mechanism, usually following resume screening, was selective admissions exams. Although officially banned from doing so, some public middle schools had found ways to hold admissions exams. As discussed in the last section, one such way was to issue tests at a collaborating agency. Other workarounds included testing prospective students at open campus

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.jzb.com/bbs/thread-7722616-1-1.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Early Development" (zaopei) is a RDFZ gifted and talented program that enrolled fifth and sixth graders into the middle school.

events or invited camps. Since each middle school carried out their tests separately, each test was different. The variations in tests generated the need for customized preparation. C14 recounted her child's experience of targeted tutoring after the fifth grade started:

C14: That agency was very good. It knew very clearly about exams for different schools... In the fifth grade, there will be all kinds of coaches, telling you to get prepared. For example, if you are going to prepare for Tsinghua [referring to the middle school affiliated], Tsinghua has the Long school. If you prepare for Tsinghua's exams, you got to go to the Long school. If the child targeted RDFZ, then they had to learn... a very abstract form of exams...

Interviewer: The test for extraordinary IQ?

C14: Yes, RDFZ had that test. So if you wanted to go to RDFZ or [name of another school], you got to learn this.... Also middle school math and physics, all available back then specifically for RDFZ, you got to learn this too.

Moreover, tutoring agencies played the important role of informing parents about the various stealthy selection events. Middle schools understood this and involved tutoring agencies to ensure turnout at their selective events, which were in theory banned and thus not openly advertised. C14, whose child was tutored at a major agency in Beijing, shared her experiences:

Coaches at these agencies might communicate some information with these key-point middle schools, and the coaches will tell you – send you Wechat messages – when to apply to which school, hurry up. We then went to take the test.

To summarize, tutoring agencies served as direct and indirect sponsors in selective admissions to middle schools. These roles were especially salient in the fifth and sixth grades, when most selection events were taking place and when parents were most concerned with middle school admissions. Importantly, these roles allows tutoring agencies to gradually establish a separate field. Less regulated than the field of public schools, this new field of tutoring evolved its own rules and offered another set of incentives for parents.

### **New field, new rules, and new parenting practices**

After parents send their children to tutoring, they soon find a set of rules different from those in schools. While tracking is banned during elementary school, tutoring agencies freely use tracking – to cater to different student groups but also to create a new set of desirables. Tracking in elementary school tutoring provide salient progress markers that are otherwise obscure for this age group of children. To get into these tracks is itself yet another, even earlier round of contest. Importantly, children during early elementary school are usually too young to manage the intensive learning process, which necessitates extensive parent participation.

### *The higher tracks in elementary school tutoring*

The rewards of tutoring were concentrated at the top. Like professional sports and drug gangs, tutoring agencies organized their students in pyramid structures, with relatively few students enrolled at the highest tracks (Table 2: tracks within math tutoring). Students at these higher tracks received first prizes, coach recommendations, and eventually admissions offers from the best middle schools. C14's child was tutored at a high-end track, and she recounted the stellar middle school offers these children received:

In our track [at the tutoring agency], I think about two-thirds of the kids was going to Early Training [a gifted and talented program at RDFZ], some went to Tsinghua [affiliated school], some to Bashao Basu [two gifted and talented programs at Beijing No.8 High School], and a small proportion went to RDFZ main or subsidiary. Basically that was it.

Even better, these higher tracks yielded other significant amenities. Not only did these students receive sought-after admissions offers, most of the offers were given as early as the fifth grade, as middle schools competed to recruit the best students. They formed an exclusive club of families. These similarly advanced children were put together in the same classrooms with more experienced coaches. The parents, who usually sat in the back rows of the same classrooms, formed tightly-knit social networks and shared information. Tutoring agencies poached these

students and offered them scholarships, as these students brought prestige and thus marketing value.

In contrast, students in the lower tracks of tutoring were generally not as competitive in middle school admissions. C11, also a parent in Haidian District, shared similar socioeconomic resources with C14. But different from C14, C11 enrolled her child in math tutoring as late as the fifth grade, in a lower and then a middling track. While C14's child won first prizes, C11's received only a third prize in math Olympiad. While C14 could relax during the sixth grade, C11 spent months busy and anxious about her child's middle school admissions. Eventually, C11's child enrolled in a less prestigious middle school.

Table 2. Tracks within math tutoring, major agencies in Beijing, 2019

| Tutoring agency | Tracks, from lower to higher                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Xueersi         | Set-sail; Agile learning; Diligent thinking; Innovation prep; Innovation; Innovation 3; Innovation 2; Innovation 1; Innovation goal; Interest group |
| Gaosi           | Enrichment; Advancement; Top A; Top A+; Innovation prep 2; Innovation prep 1; Innovation; Training team                                             |
| Youcai          | Top; Innovation; Innovation A+; Mini Excellence; Training team                                                                                      |
| Mobi            | Comprehensive; Innovation; Innovation A; Innovation S; Experimental group                                                                           |
| Puxin           | Elite; Top; Quality B; Quality A; Training team                                                                                                     |
| Jierui          | Advancement; Top; Top A; Prep; Prep 2; Prep 1; Training team                                                                                        |

*Note: Availabilities and names of the tracks vary by the branches of the same tutoring agency. Usually, lower tracks are offered at all branches, higher-end tracks at some branches, and the highest typically only at one branch per agency per city.*

The higher tracks in tutoring were so in demand, that the seats were typically occupied by children who had spent years in the same agency. C28 moved her family from Hebei Province to Beijing when their child was in the fifth grade, in large part to pursue brighter academic futures for their child. Despite the fact that the child ranked at the top of their hometown school, C28 found that they were unable to enroll the child into the desired tracks due to lack of a previous

relationship with the tutoring agency. Partly as a result of this, C28 failed to obtain the valued academic signals for their child and eventually settled for a less prestigious middle school.

At Xueersi [a major tutoring agency], you have to be a long-term student and also pass the tests. At my child's level, we couldn't get into the tracks. They require you to be a long-term student, and we could not join in. Same thing with Gaosi [another major tutoring agency]. You couldn't apply, couldn't transfer into the tracks, and so they won't recommend you [to middle schools].

To test into the higher tracks, students typically had to have received prior training. One route was to start from the lower tracks and gradually get promoted. After tutoring with an at-home tutor in the first grade, C14 enrolled her child with a major tutoring agency in the second grade. At first, the child was placed in track D.

C14: We tested into a track D at the time [second grade], and the child was not quite happy, feeling just not so good. On the Children's Day that year, I remember this very clearly, he wrote down a wish: I'm going to Track A. ... He wanted to go to Track A. So we studied in Track D for a semester, and they also had the exams. If you tested well at the end-of-semester exam, the coach would recommend you to higher tracks. We went from Track D straight to Track A.

Interviewer: Were these tracks A, B, C, etc., all for the second grade?

C14: Yes. They put students in different tracks. The more advanced kids in higher tracks, and less advanced in lower tracks. ... Not long after in Track A, there was another exam. Coach Zhang [a prestigious coach] was teaching Track S. He took the exam and was eligible for Track S. At that time, I was hesitating whether to go or not. Tracks too high would be too exhausting. I consulted other coaches, and they said you might not get into Coach Zhang's class even if you wanted. Even after you were eligible, you needed to apply very early.

On the application day, C14 arrived at 7am and found a long queue. Fortunately, a stranger shared an extra reservation number with her, and C14 was able to enroll her child into Track S with Coach Zhang. Coach Zhang later proved so good that C14 stressed in the interview that she was "very grateful" for him, and that he "taught especially well and very patient with children." C14's child remained in Coach Zhang's track until receiving a middle school admission offer in the fifth grade.

Unlike C14's child, most children were unable to test into the higher tracks simply by following the curriculum with one tutoring agency. To facilitate track promotion within tutoring, several parent interviewees reported enrolling their children in preparatory tutoring or parallel tutoring in the same subject. This was so common that it created a niche space in the tutoring industry. For example, Yuboyuan, a Beijing tutoring agency, made its business by preparing students to test into the Long School, another tutoring agency.

### *New space, new practices*

Tutoring therefore created a new space that induced new parenting practices. First, children needed more parental help when they were learning difficult after-school content. In my interviewee samples, parents with children enrolled in higher tracks generally reported more helping at home. For example, when C14's child first entered Track S, he was initially falling behind and relied on C14's at-home help to keep up.

At the beginning with the ordinary tracks, be it Track D or Track A, I thought [observed] that the child was able to understand 70% to 80% right in class by himself. At Track S, I thought [observed] the child was understanding at most half. When he didn't understand, the child would cry, he couldn't figure out the problem sets. ... During that time, I probably spent more time teaching the child after class. If the child couldn't figure out, I taught him.

The practical necessity of parental help became more apparent when the children were starting math tutoring in the lower grades of elementary school. With younger children, parent interviewees generally reported that they considered the children incapable of managing their learning, such as taking notes. When C14 recalled her experience sending her child to Track S in the third grade,

Interviewer: Were parents also learning at the back of the classroom?

C14: Yes, all of them. The kids were too young and could not keep the notes. The teacher was writing all over the blackboard, one blackboard after the other, and the kids could not keep notes.

In other words, parental labor was an essential part of early enrichment tutoring. Without parental help to manage learning and provide extra help, it would be impossible for a sizeable number of children to participate in early enrichment tutoring, and would be therefore impossible for early enrichment tutoring agencies to be viable. Such parental help was in addition to the logistical support required of parents such as transportation.

Second, tutoring agencies encouraged consistent parental investment. Some tutoring agencies ritualized parental engagement, by designing room for parents in the tutoring venue. For example, one prominent agency using a blue belt on the floors to designate the “parent audit area.” Like parents watching children playing baseball, watching children in tutoring sessions became part of the event. During breaks – the competitive math sessions typically lasted three hours per evening – some parents replenish their children with snacks and offer observations of their classroom behavior. Not having a guardian in the back was the exception. As C14’s earlier quote implied, such direct engagement helped parents to observe what the child failed to understand in the classroom, so that they might help them back home accordingly.

Tutoring agencies usually communicated much more regularly with parents than schools. In these communications, parents learned about their children’s performance as well as many reasons to continue tutoring. The pedagogical content built on itself, and students must keep taking spring, summer, fall, and winter classes to keep up. If one wished to retain their position in a high track, then they must keep learning to prevent demotion. For in-demand tracks, if students took a break for one semester, the spot may no longer be available should they wish to resume later. From agencies’ point of view, prolonging customer life cycle was key to profits.

Tutoring offered many near-term incentives that ambitious parents found difficult to resist. The next placement exam might be just the one to advance to the higher track. The tutoring content might prepare the child for the next competition, which might serve as a useful experience for the child, who might eventually win prizes that lead to future school admissions. C14 reflected on why she kept her child enrolled in tutoring during elementary school, despite strong objections from her husband:

He [her husband] was against tutoring very much. But actually we were trapped. You learn and learn and you don't have a choice. You learned this, and there is another small goal, another next goal. You're already here, don't you test for the next? Don't you? If you are going to test, you need a bit more, you need to learn more. That's how it happened.

To summarize, parenting practices are shaped by the content and timing of tutoring, as well as the rituals and incentives designed by the agencies. To bring about success in early intensive tutoring, parents have to transform themselves into diligent personal coaches. In this process, the parent that serves this role – usually the mother – sacrifices most of their leisure time. Parents were self-aware that their parenting changed their own life. As one parent idiom described it, “to pump the child, you must pump yourself first” (*jiwa bi xian ziji*).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **Summary of findings**

This study offers a three-part explanation of parenting practices. First, parents are bounded rationality actors strategizing against varied rules. Instead of planning decades ahead for their children's success, most middle-class parents in Beijing planned only a couple of years ahead; accordingly, they put their children into intense training only when short-term pressure exists within a timeline of a couple of years. For example, parents tended to start intensive tutoring in

elementary school in places where middle schools selectively admitted students, but tended not to in the districts where middle schools in general did not select students.

Second, these rules evolve by the fields of education. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a tutoring field emerged as an offshoot of the public school field in Beijing, and tutoring agencies played the roles of direct and indirect sponsors in selective middle school admissions.

Third, new intensive parenting practices emerge in the new tutoring field. In Beijing and other Chinese metropolises, tutoring agencies created a scarcity of higher-end tracks, which pressured parents to start tutoring in earlier years of elementary school. To help their young children succeed in such tutoring, parenting practices adapted to the new constraints and incentives created by tutoring agencies. In other words, tutoring field demanded intensive parenting practices that would be useless in the public school field, such as note-taking.

This field theory of parenting explains variations of parenting practices across urban places and across time. In urban districts where middle schools were able to select students, the tutoring field was more developed, and parenting practices were more intensive. Over time, parenting practices varied as the fields of public school and tutoring evolved.

### **How tutoring changed parenting**

The tutoring field developed as an offshoot of the public school field. Intending to diminish contests for entry to desired middle schools, central and municipal governments banned public middle schools from selectively admitting students and required them to take students from designated school catchment areas. In response, middle schools relied on shadow education providers directly and indirectly to identify higher-performing students. Where shadow

education providers facilitated the contest for entry to middle school, they became essential for aspirational families.

After-school tutoring agencies shifted the domain of education expenditures. They also shifted the content of parenting towards test preparation during the early years of elementary school, an age group otherwise conceived to be about “happy childhood” by contemporary Chinese middle-class parents (Naftali 2014). While previous research sees tutoring as an extension of parenting (W. Zhang 2020), I argue that the tutoring field had its own logic and could manufacture new parenting practices.

## CHAPTER 3. EXIT: THE EMERGENCE AND LIMITATIONS OF NEW EDUCATION SCHOOLS

### INTRODUCTION

To cultivate human capital for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Chinese state has carried out multiple waves of curriculum reform (Law 2014). These reforms advocate for “quality education” (*suzhi jiaoyu*), referring to holistic education in contrast with exam-centered education (Dello-Iacovo 2009). These reforms have fallen short of their goals, such that in 2021 President Xi Jinping initiated yet another vigorous campaign to reduce the academic burdens on elementary and middle school students.

Why has the state failed to shift the focus of education away from exams, especially during students’ elementary school and middle school years? It is not surprising that high school education centers on academics, as families work hard to prepare their children for the competitive national college exams (Howlett 2021). However, in the earlier years of childhood, middle parents in China have come to value child autonomy and happiness (Naftali 2014). Middle-class parents therefore converge with the state on their preference for a holistic education, at least for elementary school students.

This chapter revisits the difficulty of reforming education values by examining the unlikely and limited success of educational innovation outside mainstream schools. I focus on the group of parents who gave up mainstream schools for new education schools. Using parent interviews and participant observation, I find that (1) these parents left mainstream schools due to cultural clashes; (2) they joined new education schools because of cultural matches and the presence of

conducive upstream institutions; and (3) they returned to mainstream education at the beginning of middle school or before, due to selection pressures from downstream institutions.

From this extreme case, I propose a new explanation of why compulsory education in China continues to center on exams. Upstream factors favor a cultural change, including progressive kindergartens and parents' cultural shifts, both facilitated by new large-scale residential projects inhabited by new cohorts of parents. However, downstream factors limit this change, as middle schools and related institutions still require students to focus on test preparation. Therefore, alternative education styles and organizations have emerged informally, but with limited success as parents and students start to recognize selection pressures in late elementary school.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Deliberate natural growth as exit**

Studying contemporary American families, Annette Lareau discovered differences in parenting styles along class lines: middle-class parents tend to raise their children using “concerted cultivation,” (define here briefly), while working-class parents more typically subscribe to “natural growth,” in which parents believe children can grow on their own, and accordingly plan fewer activities for children (Lareau 2002).

Natural growth, however, can become a middle-class ideal when transposed into Asian or post-socialist contexts. Studying Taiwanese families, Pei-Chia Lan finds that some middle-class parents deliberately choose and construct natural growth for their children (Lan 2018). Natural growth is deliberate in this context, because it takes effort for parents to insulate their children from school, home, and community influences that are deemed harmful—exam pressures, for

example. Similar dynamics have been found in post-socialist societies such as Poland (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021).

Across these studies, middle-class parents share a tendency to make deliberate decisions in parenting. However, the outcomes of these decisions differ by context. In a relatively permissive education context like the United States, middle-class parents deliberately arrange more activities. In contrast, in Asian and post-socialist contexts, middle-class parents may deliberately choose the opposite direction of fewer structured activities, moving against a more authoritarian context and sometimes against the parents' own upbringing (Lan 2018; Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021). With both Asian and post-socialist legacies, it is perhaps not surprising that many Chinese middle-class parents have come to adopt a liberal view of parenting, one that respects the child's "natural" need for freedom, autonomy, and happiness (Naftali 2014).

Chinese policymakers share a similar stance with that of middle-class parents: instead of celebrating high PISA scores, Chinese policymakers today emphasize the costs of this achievement, such as homework hours almost three times as long as the OECD average (Tan 2017b; 2019). Curriculum reforms have shortened school hours and attempted to reduce academic burdens inside and outside schools (Dello-Iacovo 2009). However, as schools continue to rely on exam results to compete for resources, mainstream education has remained stubbornly focused on exams (Y. Liu and Dunne 2009). As shown in my previous chapter, exam-based pressures can flow from the future college admissions process, through multiple layers of selection operated by a variety of education organizations reaching all the way back into early years of elementary school.

Like their counterparts in Taiwan and Poland, some Chinese parents choose to leave mainstream schools to pursue natural growth (Lan 2018; Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021). Exiting

schools is one of the original examples in the classic voice-loyalty-exit study by Hirschman (1970). Social scientists like Hirschman and Milton Friedman (1982) have long asked the questions of how school exits—often framed positively as school choice—influence the schools being exited from, as well as how public policies should encourage or discourage such exits. In this case, the deliberate exit of Chinese middle-class families from mainstream schools raises similar questions: how do these exits happen in the existing policy context, and do they change mainstream schools?

### **Emergence through upstream linkages**

The emergence of new education schools in China is in itself a puzzle. Unlike in America, Taiwan, or Poland, the Chinese government does not have a school choice policy (Wu 2012; Ladd and Fiske 2020). Therefore, the new education schools in China are not subsidized by the government, and oftentimes cannot even register with the government. How did new education schools emerge in an apparently hostile institutional environment?

The legal status of new education schools in China is comparable to the early experience of private migrant children's schools. Private migrant children's schools cater to migrant children who are not able to access public schools. They emerged in 1990s, and many of them were still not formally registered with the government in the 2000s. Nevertheless, they emerged and persisted due to demand from families, partial support from the fragmented state, and collective mobilization among local social actors (Kwong 2004; Yu 2018; 2021). Although some schools were forcefully shut down, more formal arrangements emerged between the surviving migrant children's schools and the government. To date, however, new education schools have generally been unable to achieve formal recognition. For example, a relatively well-known new education

school in Beijing is registered as a corporate entity, and its students are registered with a private migrant children's school (Ren 2017).

A further puzzle is how these unregistered schools manage to attract middle-class parents. Based on fieldwork data, I find that institutional linkages (Baum and Oliver 1991) matter. These institutional linkages are upstream, meaning they are temporally located before the time parents choose elementary schools. First, the popularity of alternative pedagogies among kindergartens in China (Cherry 2014; Chen and Guo 2021) exposes families to alternative education. Second, as Chinese cities rapidly expand, new residential projects accommodating new cohorts of families often lack established schools or parenting norms, providing a spatial opening for new education schools as well as new parenting practices. These organizational and spatial upstream linkages create an enrollment funnel for new education schools, despite the absence of school choice policies or government recognition.

### **Downstream blockage**

With the emergence of new education schools, the question arises: can they change mainstream schools? It is perhaps too early to tell, but there is an important sign. New education schools are heavily focused on the early years of education, particularly the elementary years (Yang, Yang, and Huang 2018). Few new education schools in China have been successful in developing middle school or high school sections. This stands in contrast with alternative schools in America, which have flourished during the secondary education stage and have received policy and scholarly attention (Aron 2006; Sims 2017). Absent such development in secondary education, families in new education schools have to return and re-adjust to mainstream education by the end of elementary school, therefore limiting the implications of the new education movement.

The stunted development of alternative schools in China raises a theoretical question of institutional growth. Bottom-up institutional developments have catalyzed the emergence of the market economy in China (Nee and Oppen 2012), but have fallen short of bringing about a liberal turn in education. As discussed in the earlier section, upstream linkages have facilitated the emergence of new education schools. To consider the potential of these schools, however, we need to examine downstream rules in education. Notably, the secondary education stage in China is dominated by exam preparation, specifically preparation for the high school entrance exam and the college entrance exam (Tan 2019). Opposite to the logic of natural growth, secondary schools discipline students to focus on academics and develop their personhood through this process (M. Zhang 2014; Xiang 2018). As long as a family still plans to pursue an education trajectory within China, the logic of deliberate natural growth necessarily ends by the start of secondary education. Therefore, new education schools are blocked by the downstream institutional logic of exam selection.

This issue of downstream blockage has been neglected by the existing literature on alternative schools, due to a methodological bias. Existing research on alternative schools is usually school-based, sampling and interviewing families whose children currently attend alternative schools. From this school-based approach, these studies find parents are generally happy with alternative schools and do not plan to return to mainstream schools (Ren 2017; Yang, Yang, and Huang 2018). In contrast, this study selects parents based on snowball sampling, allowing me to include parents who have left alternative schools. The sample's focus on middle-school parents also allows for retrospective evaluation of the experiences of alternative education and data collection on the circumstances under which these parents left alternative schools.

## **FINDINGS**

## **Deliberate natural growth as exit**

The pursuit of natural growth was the primary reason for parents in my sample to exit mainstream schools. Among parents valuing natural growth, some found that mainstream schools—public or private—unapologetically violated this ideal. In comparison, new education schools promised to create a haven for natural growth and in many ways delivered on this. Therefore, the natural growth ideal generated both push and pull for families considering exit.

### *Unfulfilled desires for natural growth at mainstream schools*

Most parents who exited from mainstream schools recounted a similar push factor: the schools failed to give their children freedom, autonomy, and happiness. The schools might be otherwise desirable, but inconsistent with the parents' liberal view of childhood (Naftali 2014). One such example was limited physical freedom in schools. C80, a middle-class father in Beijing, started to think about transferring when he found the public elementary school did not allow his children to use the playground during recess.

C80: One of the first things I was most dissatisfied with was that the children were not allowed to go out to play during recess. The playground is quite big, why can't you go to play between classes? ...I discovered it in the first grade, and I discovered this problem soon after I started school.

Interviewer: Did you have the idea of transferring schools at that time?

C80: At that time, I had this idea. I didn't figure out where to go yet.

The restrictions on physical freedom appear not limited to the school C80 eventually left. C46, an upper-middle-class mother who enrolled her child at one of the most prestigious public elementary schools in Beijing, observed, "The public schools are basically similar. Usually, first-grade children are not allowed to go to the playground between classes, nor can they run in the corridors." Due to this deprivation of physical freedom, she decided to transfer her child out after

just one month. In her words, “I especially can't accept this. I think it's too violating, for such a young child.”

Other than physical freedom, parents were also concerned about autonomy. C83, a middle-class stay-at-home mother, was at first befuddled as to why their her was unhappy in his private school. “He cried as soon as Sunday came, saying ‘I didn’t want to go to school tomorrow’... When he arrived at the school gate, he cried. If you asked him why, he said he didn’t like it. I asked him what he didn’t like, he couldn’t articulate it. He just felt it was meaningless, meaningless.” It took time and interactions with teachers for C83 to arrive at an analysis of why the child didn’t feel school was meaningful—the deprivation of autonomy.

C83: The teachers didn't care about the process, so the experience made him feel bad. Everything he did, he felt no meaning. It didn't motivate him to finish his homework, he wasn't motivated to study, and it was only results oriented. Children who behaved well would get small red flower, the child's photo would be pasted on the board newspaper, and the child with the best red flowers would be rewarded. I don't think they really saw the children, instead they made the children obey. If the child did the teacher's bidding, he was considered a good boy, otherwise he was not a good boy.

Even though it was a private school, C83 concluded it was “run just like a public institution.” This analysis made her determined to leave. “To sum up, I felt I didn't accept this school, and neither did my kid. Then I thought I was going to choose another school.”

Parents also exited mainstream schools because they made their children unhappy. C47, an upper-middle-class parent, showed a remarkable ability to take the child’s perspective. “When she got to elementary school, she couldn't even see the basketball court unless she raised her head. It was too big and too high. For a first-year child, she didn't feel anything. She didn't feel anything about those classrooms that looked like office buildings.” After describing more details she observed from the perspective the child, the parent concluded, “she [the child] didn’t like the

atmosphere.” Even though they were in one of the most prestigious elementary schools in Beijing, C47 decided to let the child try out a new education school instead.

Bearing liberal views of childhood, these parents found mainstream schools to be antithetical to the ideals of natural growth, including freedom, autonomy, and happiness. The parents’ desires for natural growth are evidenced by their efforts to collect data on the child’s experience and by the perspectives they use to interpret the data. In an extreme example, C48 placed a voice recorder in her child’s schoolbag, in order to understand a school day from the child’s perspective. Listening to the recording, she was “terrified” to hear teachers shouting and yelling in first-grade classrooms. Parents like C48 thus found mainstream schools violated the ideal of natural, happy childhood. Upset by this finding, they sought out alternatives.

#### *New education schools as a haven for natural growth*

New education schools present themselves as a haven for natural growth, protecting children’s freedom, autonomy, and happiness. Therefore, their ideological positioning attracts middle-class parents who found mainstream schools lacking in these aspects.

My field entry to the new education schools came from a parent NGO in Beijing. Originally based on the parent group for a new education kindergarten, this NGO programmed a series of events that invited new education school representatives to meet parents. I volunteered to help with the events, which provided me with a window to observe the branding of new education schools. The event series included four elementary schools that were described as “new education.” For anonymity, I call them Schools A, B, C, and D.

All four new education schools emphasized natural growth, in that students had autonomy in their own growth. School A’s representative prepared a presentation titled “How to Develop a

Child's Full Character.” It began with a claim that summarized its founder’s philosophy: “The two most important words to learn in life, one is happiness and the other is love.” To help the audience understand this point, the representative played relaxing music and asked participants to dance in groups, hand in hand. After making this point, the speaker conveyed the school’s philosophy, with emotion and using a metaphor from nature.

Just like a small flower, a child has his own resources. A flower has petals, stamens, receptacles and stems, right? In fact, a child also brings a series of resources, which is the most precious wealth that the Creator has given to every life. As a flower has these resources, we have to give it sunshine, water, warmth, and air. Then the child is the same. He needs an external environment to constantly give him the nutrition that his spiritual embryo needs. In this way, this spiritual embryo will eventually bloom with the most beautiful light of life. We call that light the self.

Similarly, School B’s representative called their pedagogy natural: “We understand a lot of truth, but we can't live according to the truth. Today’s education extracts the essence and feeds it to children, as if it extracts the nutrients in the rice, but this will not work, it will destroy the children.” Natural education, according to School B, does not “pull the seedlings to encourage growth” (*ba miao zhu zhang*). Instead, natural education acknowledges that “growing up is fuzzy” and respects children’s private space and autonomy.

Naturalness and autonomy were repeated in School C’s representation. “We have three returns in our practice: return to life, return to living, return to ecology. Returning to life means that children will always be the subject of education and learning, not placements, exams, or curricula.” Facilitating such natural growth required a haven from the mainstream education world. School D’s representative put it clearly: new education schools were a haven for families identifying with liberal values of childhood, if they did not wish to send their children abroad at an early age.

There are many problems [about education], and in fact it is because the adult world is in trouble. But what do we do? We live in such an environment, we cannot change, and many people have voted with their feet. But we feel that this place is still the soil for us to grow up, and we hope that the child grows up in an environment where he understands his language and culture. What then? So those of us who identify with this value, let's create this garden together. The outside has been completely destroyed. All are using pesticides, pulling the seedling to encourage growth, faked. Let us create organic soil and let children return to a natural growth environment.

These natural growth ideals proved effective in attracting parents and children. First, parents and children were both impressed with the freedom. C46, unhappy about the restrictions on using playgrounds in public schools, was impressed with their children's newfound freedom at School B. When asked about the transfer decision, C46 said, "the environment over there allows him to run all around." The children gained other freedoms too. C80, who met a School B family on a train ride, went to see the school during the second grade's winter vacation.

At that time, we heard that there was no homework at this school, so we went to visit the school with the children. The children were very happy: it was great to have no homework. The boys liked it very much. We transferred the next semester.

Second, the children gained more autonomy. Unhappy with the results-oriented academic pressure at mainstream schools, C83 transferred to School C and was very happy. At School C, homework was individualized, and assessments were holistic. C83 commented, "I think the core of School C is education of the person. This is the real education in my opinion, because education is to make one into an independent person in the end." C36, who transferred her child to from a public school to School A, recounted the symbolic episode of her child regaining autonomy upon the transfer.

She went to the school for a last day. When I picked her up in the afternoon, she told me that the teacher forced her to eat chicken drumsticks at lunch. She was particularly reluctant to eat the marinated drumsticks at school, but there was a class monitor for lunch, watching every student and telling them you must eat. She told me that she had no choice and she ate the chicken drumstick. When I picked her up – this made a strong

impression on my memory – she kept vomiting from that classroom. She kept vomiting, and she vomited all the way to the school gate.

Third, the children reported feeling happier at new education schools, which parents considered an important rationale in making their school decisions. In all the cases discussed above, the child's self-reported feelings made a difference in the transfer decision. As another example, C47 found her child preferred School B over the prestigious elementary school. "At School B, there are swings in the sand pit for children, and there are single and parallel bars. She said she would go there, and then we decided to go there. Just because she likes it, there is not much else."

### **Upstream linkages**

Given the lack of institutional support for alternative education in China, it is worth asking how these new education schools managed to attract families. My fieldwork identified two upstream linkages: kindergartens that also used alternative pedagogies and new urban spaces housing emergent communities and cultures.

#### *A continuation from kindergarten*

Among fifteen families in my sample that chose new education elementary schools, nine had already experienced alternative pedagogies during kindergarten. Such kindergarten experiences oriented families toward further alternative education in three ways: 1) they provided an educational experience that families used as a benchmark for later school experiences; 2) served as an institutional funnel to elementary schools through institutional linkages; and 3) taught parents about natural growth ideas and parent networks with like-minded families.

Experiencing alternative pedagogies during kindergarten could inform parents' diagnosis of their children's experience at elementary school. For example, when C47 analyzed her child's experience at a prestigious public elementary school, she compared it to their previous experience at a Montessori-inspired kindergarten. Through this comparison, C47 explained why her child did not like the atmosphere of the prestigious public elementary school. This insight ultimately led her to send her child to another new education elementary school.

At [the Montessori-inspired kindergarten], the teacher would squat down to be equal to the child. The teacher would look into her eyes, chat with her on an equal footing, and take her to play for a while. You know the child's psyche, she felt an independent person, and she didn't feel [the gap between] you as an adult and me as a child. But when she got to that environment [referring to a prestigious public elementary school], she felt as if nobody cared about her, nobody came up to say hello or something. When they saw you, they just said that the child go to the second floor. There wasn't the friendly feel, and the child might want to refuse.

Some new education schools have both kindergarten and elementary school divisions. School B, for example, built upwards from a kindergarten. As the school built up, its kindergarten graduates naturally formed an enrollment funnel for its elementary school. C36, a graduate of school B's kindergarten division, initially went to public elementary school but came back after School B developed its elementary division. C55, a middle-class parent in Beijing, was very happy with the kindergarten division of School B. In his words, he had chosen "the best kindergarten." Following this experience, C55 also chose School B's elementary school.

Interviewer: When did you start thinking about your child's elementary school?

C55: I didn't hesitate at the time. I naturally wanted to go to this primary school, their primary school.

Interviewer: Didn't you even consider the public elementary school or any other options?

C55: I haven't considered it. I think the kind of nourishment this school gives to children is so good. Traditional schools cannot give that.

Even when not housed under the same organization, kindergartens could culturally and socially orient parents toward elementary schools adopting similar pedagogies. C43, for example, became converted to the liberal view after years in another Montessori-inspired kindergarten community. Her husband joined a reading group with other kindergarten parents to learn “positive discipline,” a liberal parenting strategy popular in this new education circle. Following his husband, C43 took a course in positive discipline later. Parents of students in this kindergarten went to open houses at elementary schools together, including quite a few trips to new education schools such as School B. C43 reported that in the graduating cohort of the kindergarten—just over a dozen kids—six interviewed at new education elementary schools and three or four eventually went.

How did the parents find these alternative kindergartens in the first place? Some parents discovered alternative kindergartens after bad experiences at traditional kindergartens. Just like those parents exiting mainstream elementary schools, some parents found their children deprived of freedom, autonomy, and happiness at traditional kindergartens. In one such case, C58 recounted her three-year-old trying to leave the kindergarten on her own and crying out to her, “mommy, you save me!” For these parents, finding alternatives was fortunately not too hard. China’s kindergartens had become mostly privatized since the late 2000s (Zhou 2011) and boasted the highest number of Montessori kindergartens in the world (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008). In certain urban spaces, these kindergartens could even be considered mainstream.

### *New urban spaces*

Changping District, northwest to downtown Beijing, was home to a disproportionate number of new education schools, including Schools A and B. Located just north of Haidian District—

China's higher education and technology center—Changping is home to university affiliates, tech workers, and their families arriving in Beijing since the 2000s. The district's population more than doubled in eight years, from less than one million in 2008 to over two million in 2016. Two of Changping's residential quarters, Huilongguan and Tiantongyuan, were forests of residential high-rises and housed half a million residents each.

With the inflow of one million people during 2008-2016, Changping's school system struggled to keep up. The public schools were not obliged to take all of them in, as a bit over half of Changping's two million population did not have Beijing household registration as of 2015. Moreover, the district's public schools were not comparable in prestige with their counterparts in central Beijing. Changping's public schools could not meet the ambitions of the district's newly arrived middle-class families, and they certainly did not create selection pressures like Haidian's schools as described in the previous chapter.

With a shortage of high-quality schools, new education schools emerged as a reasonable compromise for Changping's new families. While some still managed access to excellent public schools, others chose new education schools after discovering their lack of access to desired alternatives. C81, an aspirational businesswoman, told me that she chose School C for her child only after two unsatisfactory school access attempts: first an allocation to a village public school, and another private school whose poor quality disappointed her. C88, an IT worker with a prestigious pedigree, similarly viewed their choice of School B as a matter of practicality.

C88: Actually, there were relatively few choices. If there were a school like Peking University Affiliated or Renmin University Affiliated School in front of my home, I would also consider this kind of school at that time. But no, basically it was a school like [an ordinary public school], and I didn't really want to go to this kind of school at that time. We were inclined towards [School B]. We hadn't decided yet, so we let him try preschool first. The preschool worked out fine, so let's just go to elementary school here.

These new urban communities also developed online presence. Huilongguan, for example, had a lively BBS (Bulletin Board System) in the late 2000s and early 2010s. This BBS helped disperse new education ideas, as a virtual space where enthusiasts met, built up schools, and attracted families. C85, a parent who moved to Huilongguan in 2006, witnessed the origination of School B's kindergarten division on community BBS.

C85: The founder started calls in the forum from the very beginning of the founding process. He described what kind of kindergarten he wanted to start, and he wanted to find some partners, such as mutual aid teaching. He said if you have school age kids at home, then we can organize and work together to run a kindergarten.

At first they only had six or seven kids, but they kept posting this on the forum and updating their progress. Later, more and more parents paid attention, because Huilongguan is a very dense residential area with many children of school age, probably wanting to find the right kindergarten.

Parents in this new urban space were receptive to these new education ideas, partly due to a lack of pre-existing parenting norms. The newly settled residential quarters of Changping housed young families. Back in the late 2000s, few of them had children reaching the middle school stage. As a result, there was “no reference point” as to which middle schools to aim for (C88). Without the daunting middle school admissions channels described in the previous chapter, elementary school parents in Changping were not pressured to prepare children's academic skills from an early age.

Enabled by the lack of pre-existing norms, some parents took the time to explore new education ideas. Several of my interviewees recounted years-long processes of learning about and warming up to new education. C85 summed up her conversion process poetically: “In the constant encounters and collisions, it seems that some of my inner expectations and desires for education were slowly revealed, just like I slowly began to emerge from water.”

The new education schools cannot be separated from the vibrancy of their local urban communities. The schools were in many senses extensions of local communities, as many started as a collaboration among families and still relied on community support. This community characteristic of these new education schools helped attract and retain families. C47 attributed her transfer to a new education school partly to her child being able to “drop by” her classmates’ homes, while this type of ties were absent in public schools. C80 described their belonging to the School B community with delight, recounting frequent birthday parties and informal parent gatherings where they discussed education ideas.

In sum, there was a mutually enhancing dynamic between new education schools and emergent local parent communities. New education schools inspired receptive parents, and local parent communities strengthened these schools and also extended their influence beyond schools. For example, my fieldwork entry was facilitated by a parent NGO, which stemmed from a parent community of a new education school and now organized events for a more general parent audience. While BBS had declined as a technology platform at the time of my fieldwork, Changping parents continued to organize regular offline events to discuss new education ideas using Wechat. The ecological and social conditions of new urban spaces therefore provided an upstream linkage for new education schools.

### **Downstream blockage**

Despite their successful emergence, new education schools face challenges in producing larger impacts. First, they have a severe retention problem. Because previous studies have focused on current families of these schools, few have reported on the retention issue. I find the retention problem to be severe. Struggling to retain students, new education schools have a hard time demonstrating their ability to prepare students for further education, and therefore cannot

prove themselves effective by pointing to students' successful downstream placements. These downstream blockages mean that new education schools are limited to small enclaves. In such educational enclaves, students spend a few years of their time exposed to new pedagogies but later need to return to mainstream trajectories and re-adjust. This limits the potential influence of these alternative education pedagogies.

### *Growing out of natural growth*

New education schools had a retention problem. At School B, parents recounted a gradual loss of students in the same class. C85 said she was confused about why “many children left gradually in the third, fourth, or fifth grades.” The outflow of students was so significant by the fourth grade so that, according to C46, the school had to reduce three homerooms to two in the fifth grade. According to C44, “half of students had transferred by the fourth grade,” and by fifth grade, “about 80-90% were gone.” The situation was not unique to School B. When C55 was trying to decide whether his child should stay at School A for middle school, School A operated a middle school division that employed fourteen teachers, but only seven students.

For parents planning for international education, the shift away from new education schools could be part of their intentional education trajectory. C43, whose child was currently at a new education school, said she hadn't considered the issue of further school access issues, because “once at this kind of school, then it is perhaps going the international route later.” C47, a wealthy parent, told me that in her social circle, “as long as your financial conditions allow it, your child usually go to an international school from junior high.” My interviews with other upper middle-class families showed that early international education was indeed a popular option. She sent her child abroad even earlier than this norm to preserve her child's happy childhood until middle school.

C47: At that time, I still wanted her to be happy in junior high school. Junior high isn't too stressful abroad, but high school will be. If she stays in China for junior high and is stressed, and she goes to high school abroad and is stressed again, then she'll be stressed all the time.

For parents planning to stay in the domestic education system, they left behind new education schools when they found the schools no longer satisfied them. As time went by, some parents or children felt unsatisfied by the natural growth approach. C59 was concerned with her child's math and took advantage of School B's open classroom to observe math instruction.

What she found made her decide to transfer to a public school in the fourth grade:

C59: I'd be going through the kids' homework right there. At that time in fourth grade, I found common problems. The answers to this math homework showed that these children did not have mathematical logic, they were all confused, and my child was not the only one. There were only two or three kids in the entire class who showed clarity. So at that time, I felt that it would not work, this would definitely not work.

The later years of elementary school appeared to be a time when parents started to feel unsatisfied with the natural growth environment that had attracted them in the first place. As another example, the fourth grade was when C55 decided to train her child systemically in sports. "Before the third grade, I let her try everything, such as swimming, painting, English, etc. In the fourth grade, I found that it was not good enough. In the future, I need to make my child very confident." C55 chose badminton for her child and even organized a badminton club for this purpose. Eventually, the sport helped her child gain access to a reputable public middle school.

Parallel to the parents' own emerging unsatisfaction, some parents found their children outgrew the freedom afforded by new education schools as they aged. C85 reported that his child became bored with the new education curriculum in the later years. "They didn't systematically teach the curriculum of traditional schools... The school requirements were not very high. There was very little homework. The child felt bored in class."

### *Increasing importance of mainstream status*

Unlike in Taiwan or Poland, new education schools in mainland China were not supported by any school choice policy. The cost of staying outside the system appeared to increase in secondary education, as new education schools lacked enrichment activities that older students more likely benefit from. C80 enrolled their children at public middle schools and found easier access to enrichment activities that they valued.

C80: Because [School B] is outside the system, it is actually different from public schools in terms of educational resources. ... For example, now we go to a public middle school, and it has social and science enrichment activities every year. These paid by the state. You wouldn't have these at School B. ... Some of these activities happen at school, and at other times they go to other institutions, such as institutes at the Chinese Academy of Sciences."

New education schools had few linkages with downstream education institutions, such as desirable high schools and colleges that are predominantly state-owned in China. As children grew older, parents started to consider the prospects of competing for high schools and colleges, but new education schools were not deemed a promising pipeline for this purpose. C85 had high hopes for his child in terms of college and felt it was "natural that you should choose traditional schools," because "practically speaking, as the child is getting older, you must choose a path like this in the future, either to study abroad, to choose an international school, or to go to a domestic university."

Falling outside the mainstream was increasingly deemed as a disadvantage as families progressed to secondary education. C44 planned to finish elementary school at School B but planned to enroll in public school for junior high, "because that is still the mainstream." C85, one of the few parents who had children attending an alternative middle school, felt a need to socialize the child into a larger world as the child grew:

C95: These so-called public schools may represent something of a mainstream society, a mainstream social environment. Then should we also consider letting the child go this way, and there is a larger part of the world that she also needs to contact and understand? If you don't accept it, then it seems like you don't want to connect with it. Our child herself said that she also wanted to get out of the [new education school] circle, she wanted to see other things. We asked her, suppose you go back to public school, how about it? She said it was acceptable, and she also wanted to try it.

In summary, new education schools struggled to retain families beyond elementary school, as they outgrew the benefits of natural growth and found it increasingly important to send their children to the mainstream. The small number of junior high students that new education schools retained made it even more difficult to reach scale and was unattractive to families. As C80 recounted, “At that time, our first choice was to continue to study at [School B], but there were too few junior high students.” In the current circumstances, it appeared that new education schools are blocked downstream, and new education presents not a trajectory, but an enclave.

## **CONCLUSION**

By examining new education schools, this chapter provides an answer to the puzzle of why mainstream education in China have been so resistant to reform. Despite the governments’ many attempts to pursue holistic education and despite many parents’ beliefs in the importance of a happy childhood, mainstream elementary schools have continued to focus on academics and exam preparation. I explain this puzzle by showing that bottom-up changes in education values have emerged by capitalizing on changes in parenting culture and building on upstream linkages, but have not been able to scale due to downstream blockages.

The paper offers findings in three parts. First, new education schools presented an exit option for parents who deliberately chose an environment for children’s natural growth. Parents with liberal views of childhood found their ideals were unfulfilled and even violated at mainstream

schools. Meanwhile, new education schools presented themselves as reflecting the ideals of child freedom, autonomy, and happiness. Therefore, families chose new education schools as an alternative that better fit their visions of childhood.

Second, despite the lack of institutional support, new education schools emerged by leveraging upstream linkages such as new urban spaces and kindergartens adopting alternative pedagogies. Kindergartens in China had become mostly privatized, and alternative pedagogies stressing natural growth proliferated in these kindergartens, putting families in cultural, social, and organizational contact with new education schools. New urban spaces housed large numbers of recently arrived families who were underserved by existing schools and unencumbered by preexisting local education norms. The ambitious and creative dynamics among these new urban communities were particularly conducive to the founding of new education organizations. Therefore, new urban spaces provided spatial opportunities for new education schools to emerge.

Third, new education schools struggled to retain students beyond elementary school, because they lacked linkages to downstream institutions. Pedagogically, their natural growth orientation was insufficient to meet the demands of older children and their families. As children advanced in age, middle-class parents and children alike grew out of natural growth and found it important to be competitive academically and in extracurriculars. Meanwhile, middle-class families also had increasing demands for downstream resources, such as access to reputable secondary and tertiary schools as well as broader socialization. Compared to public schools in Beijing, new education schools were less able to provide access to these downstream resources.

This chapter shows that with dynamic cities and societies, there were abundant opportunities for the emergence of bottom-up educational changes in China, in many ways mirroring shifts in the Chinese economy (Nee and Oppen 2012). However, new educational organizations faced

severe bottlenecks that limited their potential. Notably, the lack of their access to downstream resources appeared to restrict them to enclaves where a select number of families enjoyed a few years of happy childhood-focused education. If policymakers are interested in harnessing bottom-up dynamics facilitate educational change in the holistic direction, they might unleash potential of new education schools by allowing them greater access to downstream resources.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation is motivated by explaining why elementary and middle school education in China has remained intensive, unequal, and exam-oriented. The existing literature treats these puzzles separately. Most of this literature takes on either the supply side, such as unequal regulations (e.g., Friedman 2022) or stratified schools (e.g., Ye 2015), or the demand side, such as different family resources related to accessing education (e.g., Zhang and Xie 2016). These approaches, however, are not equipped to explain why these education phenomena persisted despite government efforts to reform them. This dissertation advances this literature by connecting these inter-related puzzles and developing an institutional framework on how education's supply and demand sides match.

Specifically, this dissertation analyzed three institutions on education matching: access, selection, and exit. The access chapter demonstrated that residency-based school assignments induced families to acquire new local citizenship for school access. The selection chapter found that government reform efforts were compromised by fragmentations in local education governance, which preserved the autonomy of some public schools to selectively enroll students and maintained the locally generated selection dynamics. In the exit chapter, I showed that while government efforts to create holistic education had largely been unsuccessful, new education schools adopting non-exam-oriented pedagogies emerged and attracted parents despite their lack of government recognition.

The findings of the dissertation share one theme: the matching processes between families and education providers revolved around rules that emerge from local interactions. These rules differed from formal policies, and they tended to produce patterns and outcomes that policymakers had not intended.

Theoretically, my dissertation sheds new light on the origins of the mechanisms in intergenerational reproduction. The existing literature has identified various middle-class advantages and strategies that put their children ahead in accessing education providers (e.g., Lareau 2003; Calarco 2014), but has said much less about why these advantages and strategies matter in the particular context. My dissertation fills this gap by developing the institutions of education matching as a framework. The institutions of education matching explain why some types of family resources are more relevant than others: they are context-dependent and emerge from interactions among governments, education providers, and families.

This dissertation also has implications for understanding China's social and political orders. Inequality is about who gets what, fundamentally an issue of political order. For a socialist regime, effective governance of inequality is core to fulfilling its political promise. However, as this dissertation shows, top-down government efforts are limited in their capacity to create equal education opportunities, as long as the institutions of education matching continue to be locally generated. As China successfully develops its economy and builds its middle class, ambitious parents, educational organizations, and local officials (Osnos 2014) have good reasons to keep education intensive, unequal, and exam-oriented. Therefore, the governance of educational opportunities will likely remain an essential tension for the foreseeable future.

Since my dissertation fieldwork ended in 2019, new questions have continued to arise from China's ongoing quest for education reform. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to address them, but the theoretical framework presented here may continue to be useful for tackling these new questions. In the 2021 education reforms, one of the policy interventions was a ban on the for-profit tutoring industry (Xinhua 2021). Will this new policy make China's education less

intensive, unequal, or exam-oriented? More empirical work needs to be done, particularly on how the new policy interventions changed the local institutions of education matching.

Future research may also explore how the institutions of education matching have been influenced by global capital and technology, two forces that appear increasingly difficult to avoid in contemporary life. For about two decades, the combination of education, technology, and global capital had enjoyed favorable policies in China. A few of China's large education companies were listed on America's stock exchanges, and many more had received funding from U.S.-based venture capital funds. The 2021 education reforms changed that. Responding to the reforms, the Wall Street Journal editorialized: "Wall Street Gets a Chinese Education" (2021). More research will be needed to understand how these types of transnational links and technological advances influence domestic educational opportunities and their governance.

## APPENDIXES

### Appendix 1. The Districts of Beijing

Beijing's geography bears witness to centuries of political and economic history. A local proverb summarizes it: "Rich eastside, high-born westside. Poor southside, low-born northside." The rich eastside, now Dongcheng and Chaoyang Districts, have historically benefited from flourishing markets on the Beijing-Hangzhou canal for a millennium, and now are home to foreign embassies and one of China's most prominent CBDs. The high-born westside, now Xicheng District, was home to royal courts during imperial dynasties and now hosts China's central government, central party organizations, and many of the more powerful ministries.

To the west of Xicheng is Haidian District. Historically royal gardens and farmlands, Haidian District has hosted many of China's top universities since planned economy under Mao, including household names such as Peking University, Tsinghua University, Renmin University, a few Chinese Academy of Sciences institutes, and numerous other top-tier specialty universities. In China's four-decade market transition after Mao, these universities generated a vibrant ecology of startups and made Haidian China's silicon valley.

Since late 1990s, Haidian District with its newly gained prestige and wealth has also witnessed a dramatic rise of reputation of elementary and middle schools. The Huangzhuang area in Haidian, located within these relatively new powerhouses of elementary and middle schools, has also bred China's initial after-school tutoring industry. The high-rise office buildings in Huangzhuang area are not for financiers like the CBDs in Beijing's east, but for swarms of children and parents in after-school hours coming for tutoring. Huangzhuang has generated and still headquarters the world's largest education firm, TAL, which specializes in teaching math and science subjects in elementary and middle schools kids across China and now also in US. In

addition, the Huangzhuang area in Haidian District also boasts hundreds of education startups and a venture capital ecosystem around them. It has been characterized as the mecca of Chinese education industry.

It is common knowledge among middle-class parents in Beijing that these four districts, Dongcheng, Xicheng, Haidian, and Chaoyang, are the four desirable districts among Beijing's sixteen. The other twelve districts, unfortunately, are not on the map for parents seeking top-tier education for their children. Among the top four, Chaoyang is a distant fourth, widely considered an inferior choice to the other three. Xicheng and Dongcheng, located at the very heart of Beijing, are very small districts compared to the rest, and they boast very high percentages of college entrance. Haidian is more competitive and boasts the largest quantity of elite students, but it also includes some weaker schools and overall lower percentages of college entrance.

Among the rest, several districts stood out as holding at least some promise among middle-class parents in Beijing. Shunyi District, despite it being mostly rural, holds a significant expatriate community and international schools. Changping District is home to many residential properties that cater to IT professionals who work in Haidian, and with this population, a cluster of alternative education schools that are called "new education schools" by local parents. Tongzhou District has been relatively undeveloped until recent relocation of Beijing municipal government to the district, designating it as "deputy center" of Beijing. Tongzhou is sometimes nicknamed "Tonglifornia" after California, perhaps because it resembles a new frontier in Beijing's metropolitan development like California in the gold rush. With its rising political and economic status, Tongzhou is expected to see a boost in school quality based on its lackluster education record.

Daxing, Shijingshan, and Fengtai Districts had relatively fewer schools considered desirable by middle-class parents, with notable exception of new branches set up by reputable schools from central Beijing, usually as amenities accompanying new industrial complex developments. Fangshan, Mentougou, Pinggu, Miyu, Huairou, and Yanqing are mostly rural and generally considered undesired districts for education by middle-class parents in urban Beijing, with exceptions of a small number of schools. Even though they are within the administrative boundary of Beijing, people from these districts do not tend to consider themselves to be from “Beijing”, a spatial concept that more often refers to urban, central Beijing that came with the political and economic privileges of the capital city.

## **Appendix 2. Jing-Jin-Ji and Two Research Sites outside Beijing**

The “Jing-Jin-Ji” metropolitan area was officially designated in 2015, as one of the three mega-size metropolitan areas under the country’s New Urbanization Plan. “Jing” refers to Beijing, capital of China with 20-30 million people, according to varying estimates and ways of counting<sup>6</sup>. “Jin” refers to Tianjin, another huge city adjacent to Beijing, with 15 million people. “Ji” is the classical Chinese name for Hebei Province, with 75 million people. Together, Jing-Jin-Ji covers about 1million sq miles, similar to Britain. It has a combined population of 110 million, comparable to the combined population of Britain and Spain.

In this Jing-Jin-Ji metro area, Beijing is the lead of the pack in terms of economic development and reputation of schools. Tianjin follows as one of China’s four cities directly administered by central government, without the intervening administrative layer of provinces.

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<sup>6</sup> How many people are there in Beijing? Official numbers put it at 22 million, but that only includes people who have been officially registered with government — migrants who have lived in Beijing for more than 1 year. There are many who are not registered. Perhaps it’s 30 million, perhaps 40, and during festivals maybe over 50.

Beijing and Tianjin have grown into important cities by attracting internal migrants. Indeed, most of parents in the sample were not born or raised in Beijing or Tianjin, but have migrated due to college, work, or opportunities of entrepreneurship. Hebei Province, in contrast, is a migrant-sending region.

In this Jing-Jin-Ji area, I visited and interviewed parents at two sites outside of Beijing: Wuqing District of Tianjin, and Langfang City of Hebei Province. Wuqing, a small town in Tianjin but tightly integrated to Beijing by high-speed train and a direct highway. Filled with outlet stores and apartment buildings, Wuqing is home to hundreds of parents who are not able to obtain household registration in Beijing but nevertheless resourceful enough to purchase a home and its *hukou* benefits in Tianjin.

Langfang city is situated in Hebei Province, and has also recently been linked to Beijing by high-speed train and direct high-way. Within a few years, an entirely new urban center had risen in Langfang surrounding the high-speed train station and highway entrance, providing homes to many families who have one member working in Beijing. Among Chinese cities, Langfang is considered to be “third-tier” (China Business Network, 2018). Its GDP per capita as of 2016 was around 8,700 USD, only 45% of Beijing. Langfang’s population is about half rural, while Beijing is less than 15% rural. Langfang is also much smaller than Beijing – its population is 4.6 million, about one fifth of Beijing’s 22 million.

### **Appendix 3. School Admissions Policies in China**

China does not yet have school choice programs, though education officials and scholars have proposed such policies under the influence of American education policies. Importantly, 97% of elementary and 90% percent of middle schools are public in China (Ministry of

Education). Many of these public schools have been set up during the Mao era, in a time where universalizing education and reducing inequalities were political priorities (Andreas 2004). After Deng took reign of China, one of his first policies were to restore hierarchy to the public schools, establishing key-point system from elementary school straight up to universities (Tsang 2000). These key-point schools were intended to establish a funnel to develop the country's talent in science and technology. Under the key-point systems, the government invested disproportionately into select schools, usually located at urban center and those serving the children of local government officials. Though the key-point system was abolished in 1990s/2000s (slowly across the nation), it left an important legacy of prestigious public schools in China, with expensive infrastructure and embedded prestige that made it difficult for private schools to compete at the same game. This is especially the case in economically advanced areas, where rich local governments have continued to invest heavily into these elite public schools.

Unlike in US, public schools in China have not been born territorial. Under Mao, schools were seen as attached to collective economies, which means work unit in urban areas and agricultural collectives in rural areas. School teachers were assigned, often not based on an evaluation of their teaching abilities. Only after the market reform and the disintegration of collective economy that schools became administered under local government, with elementary and middle schools mostly financed by county-level government.

Public schools slowly gained territoriality since 1980s, but they were never fully territorialized until early 2010s. The 1986 version of Compulsory Education Law mentioned "school district" for the first time in Chinese education law, but only for the purpose of rationalized school planning to universalize nine-year education, not for school admissions. Between 1986 and 2012, national regulations continued to see school districts as a tool for

education planning, not a rule for public school admissions. During this period, various school admissions practices developed locally across China, and school administrators had great discretion over admissions processes. This effectively facilitated school choice via money and connections on a mass scale (Wu 2012). For example, the formal “school choice fee” in Guangzhou amounted to half of the city’s education budget in 2010.

It took a series of policies between 2011-2014 for public elementary school admissions to become formally integrated into urban governance and gained the territoriality mimicking local state. The allocation of admissions quota shifted from schools to city governments. The city governments not only enforce the link between enrollment eligibility and household registration in enrollment area, but also create local regulations that link enrollment to special talents, home ownership, lease, employer, and social insurance payment. Consequently, school admissions become an urban policy to regulate space and internal migration. For example, official media reports that school admissions are among Beijing’s policy toolkit to control its population.

Since school enrollment influences family residence decisions, other stakeholders in urban space also take interest. Real estate developers build or finance schools nearby, to make their development projects sell at higher prices. Big employers negotiate school enrollment guarantee for their employees’ children, to gain recruitment advantage over competitors. After-school providers teach advanced curricula only in the top school districts, to recruit the top-performing students who help establish the providers’ reputation. Because of all these actions, the enrollment area of good schools also become home to premium real estate projects, offices of powerful companies, and sought-after tutoring providers.

As a result, school admissions in China has generated a local citizenship regime that is highly complicated and goes far beyond household registration. For example, if you look at a county-

level government's guidance of public school admissions, the document on how parents with different credentials are ranked are usually very long. Parents are usually categorized into a few broad hierarchical categories, under which more details hierarchical categories are given, and in each small category there is a ranking mechanism.

Perhaps a unique feature, school admissions in China are more based on ranking than on rights. Each school has quota that is not flexible. No category – including parents with local household registration in the catchment area – is “safe” for any school. However, certain priority categories are guaranteed public school access within a broader school district (usually at the township-level) even though they do not have guaranteed access to a school, while other categories can only access schools if there are left-over quotas from the priority categories.

The integration of schools into urban space has made the latter a critical nexus, where wealth, privilege, and education resources meet and reinforce each other. This nexus gives rise to an urban space regime that requires parent qualifications for children's education resources. Aspiring parents try to obtain membership in a high-power urban space, and those who fail are relegated to spaces with inferior educational resources. Below is a list of some commonly used space-based credentials that influence eligibility for school access, and an incomplete list of the options parents may pursue in responding to these rules.

1. Household registration (*hukou*)

- acquire through birth
- put the child's registration under a grandparent or a relative
- take certain jobs, acquire talent certifications, or other legal steps to

facilitate a change in household registration

- purchase household registration through black market

- return child to hometown (for internal migrants), as their child's education rights are denied at migration destination but guaranteed at hometown

2. Home ownership

- home purchase
- take a job with reduced-price housing benefits

3. Lease

- lease a home in the district of child's schools to acquire enrollment eligibility
- lease a home close to education providers to save child's time

4. Place of employer

- change employer, so that to acquire enrollment eligibility in a certain district via place of work and place of social insurance payment

5. History of social security payment

- pay social security through employer
- pay social security through an acquaintance's company, or through a broker that specializes in handling social security payment

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