Exploring the relationship between middle-class schooling anxiety and motherhood in Shanghai, China

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Abstract

In Shanghai, middle-class mothers are under intense pressures for their children to succeed within the fiercely competitive education system. My thesis seeks to explore how schooling anxiety amongst middle classes shapes motherhood in Shanghai and what role online communities play. Employing a multidisciplinary approach and drawing from both academic and everyday discourses, I use the concepts of "community of practice" and "social capital" to examine how these mothers perceive, experience, and respond to schooling anxiety and dominant motherhood narratives.

During a 13-month ethnographic study, I immersed myself in three WeChat online communities, observing mothers' interactions, and conducting online and in-person interviews. Using participatory research methods, I facilitated face-to-face group discussions with seven mothers from Shanghai, providing a reflective space for their personal experiences.

My study illuminates middle-class mothers' roles and practices within an increasingly commercialised education system. Drawing on culturally-specific terms like '*jixue*' (meaning 'chicken blood') and '*foxi*' (meaning 'Buddhist'), my data reveals the diversity of parenting styles. These mothers aspire to obtain a 'balanced' life yet face considerable challenges. Some mothers receive family support, but it often leads to complex changes in household power dynamics. These tensions between mothers and other family members are further influenced by the changing family structure. My research uncovers the pivotal role of online platforms, notably WeChat, in the day-to-day experiences of these mothers. These digital communities offer an alternative way for mothers to build social networks, seek support, and revitalise for their 'offline' mothering responsibilities, though this may require them to learn and negotiate the unwritten rules in online communities.

By exploring the complex relationships between education, motherhood and online communities, I challenge prevailing gendered discourses on child education and maternal practice. This research urges academics, policy makers, and education practitioners to acknowledge and value mothers' significance contributions, while recognising the practical challenges they encounter in their daily lives.

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Glossary of Chinese terms

Liu Dong Ren Kou n. Floating population, i.e. migrants.

Gaokao n. National University Entrance Examination

Hukou n. Household register showing individual’s place of birth/or current status in terms of permanent residence.

Xuequfang n. The property in school’s ‘attendance zone’.

Jixue adj. Chicken blood, which means enthusiasm for improving children’s (academic) performance.

Foxi adj. Buddhist. When someone uses the term 'foxi' to describe mothers, they typically mean that these mothers prefer a peaceful and relaxed approach to their children's education.

Jima n. Chicken mother, which means a mother who works hard helping her children’s academic performance.

Jiwa v. Tutoring/helping children on multiple levels to ensure they achieve better academic results.

Hunji adj./n. Subject-focused tutoring.

Suji adj./n. Non-academic/non-subject tutoring such as sports, arts, music, drama, dance, handwriting, public speaking, reading aloud etc.

Yuesao n. A nanny who is hired after childbirth.

Ayi n. A term used to refer to paid domestic helpers and is also a way to say 'aunt' in English. It is typically used to address middle-aged women and can also refer to a household employee.

Hongbao n. Red envelope. It is a gift of money packed in a red envelope. Now people can also do it digitally through digital media.

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Use of names, quotations and emphasis

NAMES

Names of participants have been changes in this thesis, unless they requested otherwise.

QUOTATIONS AND EMPHASIS

In this thesis, I use:

Italics for words in Chinese and book titles and for emphasis

“double quotation marks” for short direct quotes from literature and my participants

‘single quotation marks’ for the term I borrowed from literature and quotation within another

> indenting for long quotations from the literature and my fieldnotes

[ ] for my comments as editor of my fieldnotes

( ) my comments as observer of my fieldnotes

All conversations in fieldnotes were in Chinese unless otherwise noted as English.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

> This discussion about divorce revealed the hidden hardships of mothers as individuals and their vulnerability as a group. However, they also showed great courage and confidence, working hard to find new solutions. They are also enthusiastic and empathetic, truly offering advice and urging the group to move forward. This unity moved me (Fieldnote, 28/10/2021).

As a single woman in China who is going to be 30 years old soon, I often find myself at the receiving end of questions about my intentions regarding marriage and urged to have children before it is too late, by my family, former colleagues and even some “nice people” I just met. It seems like, I, as a female, must use my reproductive system to ensure personal happiness and contribution to the great world. By contrast, none of my research participants have encouraged me to become a mother; instead, they urged me to “enjoy individual time as long as possible”, or “find a husband who cannot father children, then they won’t blame you”. Only one mother thought that “the joy of rearing a baby is more than the exhaustion”. Even so, she did not encourage me to have one myself. I came to realise that while these mothers were well aware of the difficulties and unpleasant parts of motherhood, not all of them had the power to act against becoming a mother. Therefore, they advised me to enjoy my current non-motherhood status, as, they argued, being a mother is more like an obligation that is hard for us women to escape. In this patriarchal society, many people still believe that “It is in maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny; it is her natural ‘calling’, since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species” (Beauvoir et al., 2000, p. 509). As written in the fieldnotes, I was often moved by mothers’ genuine interactions and their collective awareness when facing the difficulties of motherhood, although many of them were doing so unconsciously.

This thesis research focuses on mothers as individuals and as a community of practice that revolves around their children’s education, who share values and contexts; it explores their perceptions and experiences of mothering practices in online and “offline” settings. Specifically, my participants are middle-class mothers and I explore their pressures, worries and anxieties about their children’s education and how this reshapes their motherhood in return. In this introductory chapter, I will explain how I came to this topic. I review relevant literature on education and parenting to explain the research gap I identified and how this shaped my research questions. I then provide an outline of the thesis structure.

1.2 My personal journey into the topic

Shanghai as "the Oriental Pearl" of China has always attracted me but I never have had the opportunity to live there and get to know the city until 2018. It was an adventure for me, after working in a private high school as a Chinese teacher and a publishing company as book editor in Zhengzhou. I was hoping to bring about some changes in my career trajectory, since at that point, I felt quite lost in China's education industry. At that time, I found an early year educational company in Shanghai that was hiring a social media editor and online curriculum developer; I thought that sounded interesting. So I went to Shanghai and started my new position in February 2018, right after the Lunar New Year holiday. It was an Early Childhood Education (ECE) company providing three main products: "offline" classes for 3-6 years old children including language, sports, numeracy, music, etc.; short videos of children's songs and dances for early year education teachers and parents via Douyin[1]; and online school choice guidance for parents through WeChat[2] groups and articles. My job centred on the third product and involved analysing primary school admission policies, comparing different schools' qualities and giving advice about school choice. During the one year I spent in Shanghai, I worked closely with young parents, especially mothers and officers from the local Education Bureau, which brought me many insightful reflections on the schooling system and educational dilemmas in current Shanghai.

In fact, my experience in the media department also gave me an insight into the wider and changing context. I became aware that the society around me was changing not only in terms of educational policy, family structure and commercialisation, but also fields that had a significant though indirect impact on education, such as the expansion of digital infrastructure and the relaxation of the one-child policy. The latter change can explain parents' changing attitudes to child rearing and children's development in China. All these changes can influence children's education as well as parents' everyday practices. To help the reader better understand my research context, some of the key changes are discussed in Chapter 2.

In the first few months of my new job, I experienced a few 'emergencies' due to the changing admission policies regarding primary schools. It was the first of "*gong min tong zhao*"[3] in Shanghai where the state sought to encourage parents to choose state schools rather than private schools, to reduce "the fever of school choice"[4] (see 2.2.3). Meanwhile, many parents did not feel able to make decisions based on what they saw as limited information; some felt that they did not know much about the schools their children were supposed to go to nor did they know what they should look for.

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[1] Short video social media, like TikTok.

[2] Popular messaging app in China, see Chapter 2.

[3] 公民同招, state school and private school recruit students at the same time.

[4] 择校热, the 'fever' to choose a better school for children started in 1980s and 1990s, people used to pay 'choice fee' to the selected school (see Dong & Li, 2019). In 2018, Shanghai Education Bureau took actions to reduce the fever, see: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/s3165/201808/t20180824_346092.html.

As a result, these parents sought help from external agencies such as teachers from private tutoring institutions or other experienced parents. At this time, I worked at the headquarters of this ECE company where my responsibilities included analysing admission policies in each district, monitoring key conversations among parents in online chat groups and forums, and providing information to support the frontline teachers of the company. During my time there, I had already learned a lot about the business of selecting schools, communicating with parents (most were mothers) and training children in different skills to pass the 'interviews'[5] of private primary school. I can still remember how stressed we were as a whole department, as we waited for the detailed policies from each district (16 districts in total). To ensure that we understand each policy correctly, we even called up individual District Education Bureaus to seek explanations, clarifications and specific examples.

State schools and private schools have entirely different preparation pathways**.** The application procedure for state schools is purely based on school-district property ownership and *hukou*[6] (see 2.2.1), while applying to private school is mainly based on children's performance during interview (see 5.3.1). Usually, for me and my team member, parents who were choosing to send their child to state school had more issues to consider. For example, Parents A wanted to know whether their children could go to school B. To answer this, we needed to know this family's circumstances, such as which district they were living in, whether they were house owners, whether the child's *hukou* was registered at this property etc. All these details were crucial if the target state school was a popular key school because all applicants would be listed by those qualifications. Once we knew this family's circumstances, we would have a basic idea about how likely their children were to get a place. Based on our analysis, parents could save time in applying to a particular school; more importantly, if according to our analysis, they were unlikely to get into their first choice state school, they could always give up this option at an early stage and prepare for the application to private school instead (or to another state school if they own more than one property). Sometimes, it was difficult to get a clear picture due to the limited information about the school's current development. We then would call the District Education Bureau for more information. For parents who had chosen a private school, my department could provide practice papers[7] from the interview of specific school/s - which requires a lot of work, such as searching on online forums and different chat groups, interviewing previous customers whose children successfully enrolled at the target school. We would assemble all the information, then write a report and share it with a broader audience. Based on this information, parents could do mock interviews at home with their children. I was impressed by this method, although I also wondered about the necessity of training the five years old pre-schoolers to perform well in interview.

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[5] Including Q&A, silent reading, playing on digital devices (with numeracy and literacy test), sports activity etc.

[6] Household register, a pamphlet to record family members' information.

The whole school application process for me looked more like a competition for information - it was about parents' ability to collect the relevant information, analyse a large quantity of information and then make decisions and adjustments based on this information. This kind of information management was closely entwined with their networking ability, learning ability and crucially, their time management. In my limited time working in this setting, most parents I contacted for school information were mothers; they seemed willing to share and communicate to "strangers" (me and my colleagues who never met them in person). Some of them were existing customers of my company who paid for tuition for their children; some of them were social media followers that we randomly approached through WeChat. It seemed to me that these mothers shared a similar lifestyle as well as educational background and as such, could be seen to be suffering a common malaise that has been named 'middle-class anxiety' in contemporary China. I noticed that some mothers would suddenly panic when their children finished kindergarten as they had not sorted out where to send them to primary school. This is why the ECE-focused company I worked for had created the media department. As I was told in the training, we are helping parents. However, I asked myself why and whether they needed 'help' from private agencies? This experience inspired me to investigate how much help parents require from external agencies in their children's education and why they need the extra support?

Later, I realised that we were not only offering educational information to parents, but also exacerbating their stress by providing an open place to parents in which to display and compare their children's achievements, thereby stimulating severe peer pressure. There were also ethical issues in terms of anonymity and exposure. For example, some parents shared their children's CV, photos, schools, and family relations on the online chat groups without disguising their children's names. Sometimes, those CVs were leaked and circulated widely on the internet; one of them was even reported by BBC News. It was a five-year-old boy's 15-page CV, which included "a variety of sections" claiming his "unique personality" and "colourful experience" (BBC News, 2018). The CV was reposted and shared over ten thousand times on Sina Weibo and WeChat. While most people showed respect to the boy's parents – both graduated from elite universities and working as senior executives, some people argued that compared to a real *Niuwa* (牛娃, talented kid), this boy did not seem so gifted (DaKe, 2018). This was not a single instance but a number of times in our company-managed online groups as well. I could see those parents' reactions and criticise each other's children with huge peer pressure; they did not seem to be able to resist the pressure of comparing their children's achievements with others, which brought more anxiety into the online group.

The more I worked with parents, the less confidence I had in my job: when I learned more about those parents' anxieties and their children's daily activities, I could not help to think, are we (as private sectors) genuinely helping them? Or are we in fact exacerbating and contributing to their anxieties? What role do online platforms play in feeding parental anxiety or in shaping parenting practices? Where are the fathers in the conversation? How can policies better intervene in educational issues? With all these ideas and my existing knowledge on education and learning, gleaned mainly from MA Adult Literacy course, I decided that my overarching research question would be: how does middle-class schooling anxiety (re)shape motherhood and what role do online communities play in it? To do so, I chose to employ the ethnographic approach, conducting 10 months fieldwork in online communities via WeChat located in Shanghai, China. I selected three WeChat groups as research sites; within the groups I conducted online participant observation, one-to-one interviews (online and in person) and group discussions using participatory methods (see Chapter 4). With those methods, I explored middle-class mothers' perceptions, understandings and practices with regards to education and motherhood; I also explored mothers' online and "offline" practices, investigating their mothering performance in different communities.

The next step in my journey was to review the relevant literature in order to construct a research context and to familiarise myself with previous research on children's education and online parenting practices in the wider literature. This then helped me to carve out a research gap.

1.3 Identifying my 'research niche'

Since my research is about middle-class schooling anxiety, I felt it is essential to review literature on school choice and tutoring, as those two terms were the first thing I had in mind when mentioning 'schooling anxiety'. Then I noticed the concept of 'shadow education' and its popularity in the Asian context, so I decided to review its development and identify the different terminology I would use (or focus on) in my own research. Meanwhile, I intended to identify the gap/s in online motherhood research. To do this, I reviewed different digital platforms that researchers have worked with and the key themes they identified in relation to motherhood and online communities, then sought to identify what is different/new in my research. In this section, I will not only review literature from China but from other contexts too, so it will provide the reader with a richer overview of this research field.

1.3.1 School choice and shadow education

The impact of school choice or educational choice on students' achievements and its implications for policy making in China and other countries, has been the focus of much discussion (Fuller and Elmore, 1996). However, when I reviewed relevant literature, I found that most of the literature in China are policy analysis or review which focuses on policy development with regards to school choice, how it produces social disparity, and how central government is essentially against such disparity (Qin, 2008; Dong & Li, 2019). A few academic articles relate the competitive school admission process to parents' cultural capital and point out the advantages enjoyed by middle-class families in relation to understanding, acquiring and utilising cultural capital in school choice (Wu, 2012). There is a limited number of empirical research studies on this topic in China, I have therefore searched for relevant empirical research in a broader context to explain how I situated my research.

I have noticed that the notion of school choice is often linked with middle-class parenting in the general literature. For example, school choice is connected to "concerted cultivation" in Davies & Aurini (2008), which is an intensive form of parenting involving middle-class parents shaping their children's study and life in a certain way and treating them as "projects-in-the-making" (Forsey et al., 2008, p. 17). Associated terms such as parental choice or parental anxiety are also discussed in the research. For instance, a study by Cucchiara (2013) involved American urban middle-class parents who were considering sending their children to the neighbourhood state school as part of a "countermovement" to parental anxiety and a rejection of contemporary "helicopter parenting" (see 3.2.2). The participants in Cucchiara's research suggested that state school is unsafe for children's future; in other words, private school is a safer choice. Thus, their 'countermovement' is a brave choice. This echoes a similar study conducted in Liberia (Longfield & Tooley, 2021) which showed that whatever school participants' children attended, in the decision making process, private schools were perceived "more favourably" than the state alternative (p. 117). However, as I mentioned earlier in 1.2, parents in Shanghai were in favour of certain prestigious state schools (*key schools*) too (also see 2.2.3), but their choice-making was shaped by their financial status and their children's performance, as well as by contextual differences such as school status, class vacancies etc. In fact, most of my participants sent their children to state school in the end (see 4.3.2, Table 1) which does not mean that they preferred state schools, but similar to participants in Cucchiara's research, some of them just chose to be 'brave' to minimise the anxiety of school choice (see Chapter 5).

In what has been referred to as "shadow education", the education market has stepped into the void of 'school choice' ostensibly to reassure parents in their anxiety to make the 'right' choice. As the 'shadow' of formal schooling, academic private tutoring or after-school training which also been called "shadow education" has played important part in the school choice (Bray, 1999). For example, in Japan, "shadow education" is described as an implementation of the educational market, a consequence of school choice (Dierkes, 2008). Many research carried out in China investigated the pressure and impact of National University Entrance Examination - *Gaokao* and discussed how it influences private tutoring development (Y. Zhang, 2011). However, most studies on "shadow education" emphasise the demand of private tutoring and its impact on curriculum, pedagogy and the influence on policy or teachers' experience, specifically, how school teachers' power impacted students' tutoring experience (W. Zhang, 2014; W. Zhang &

Bray, 2015), and what difficulty schoolteachers are facing in relation to private tutoring (Yan, 2014). Liu and Bray (2020) also researched the patterns and implications of private supplementary tutoring at primary and lower secondary schools in China. Instead of macro-level quantitative research data, they conducted micro-level interviews with individual parents about different demands on private tutoring and they investigated the patterns that parents expand or reduce tutoring lessons. They believed parental choice was influenced by cost, availability of time, and children's academic performance (Liu et al., 2015; Liu & Bray, 2020). During the exploration of this literature, I found that very few studies that explored how this educational system generally and educational decisions in particular, are reflected in parents' everyday practices.

Building on school choice and the notion of shadow education, I decided that rather than using the term school choice or parental anxiety, my focus in this thesis would be more on the parents (mothers particularly) as individual agents within education - their schooling anxieties and their everyday practices. The term 'schooling anxiety' to describe middle-class parents' practices in relation to their children's education seemed to me to be more contextualised, less abstract. Similarly, I found that compared to shadow education, private tutoring (Bray, 1999, 2006; Dawson, 2010) is a more appropriate and accurate term in this thesis, since it broadens the subject-focused courses to all supplementary courses.

1.3.2 Parenting and digital platforms

As my overarching research question indicates, I was also curious about what role online communities play in shaping motherhood. Thus, it was important for me to look at relevant research in this area. I found that some studies have investigated mothers' motivations for using digital platforms (Pettigrew et al., 2016), their usage of online spaces (O'Connor & Madge, 2004) and experience of presenting themselves in online communities (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Yother, 2012). Therefore, I set out here to see how I could build on previous research on digital parenting in relation to my interest in mothering practices in online platforms.

I soon noticed several research studies based in the Global North. As Lupton et al (2016) explain, digital platforms for parenting purposes have developed from websites, online forums, blogs, messaging and call services to social media and functional apps. Parents are using various online platforms "as a part of their parenting practices" (Lupton et al, 2016, p. 730), from individual practices such as journal writing, to group activities like posting and responding questions on discussion board (Jang et al., 2012). They are not only uploading and sharing their experiences online or passively receiving advice, but also constructing their own online parenting spaces and building their own routines and communities. The online platforms usually work in different ways with diverse functions, but they also have overlapping features. For example, parenting and pregnancy websites always provide user-interested/oriented information, and they can communicate with peers on the online forum/discussion board. Currently, many parenting websites also have their own customised apps to ensure the flexible access through multiple digital devices, while some of them already have a social media account to develop their online presence (Lupton et al, 2016).

Previous research on parenting websites and online forums has focused on the UK-based *Mumsnet* and the US-based *Babycentre*, with only a few research studies based in the Global South, involving platforms such as *Babytree* (see later this section). In the UK context, Das (2017) investigated the visible and silenced narratives around giving birth in online discussions on Mumsnet; Mackenzie (2016, 2017) and Pedersen (2016) have discussed the definition of "bad mother" and the ideology of being a good mother, looking at how they constructed, negotiated, or subverted the narratives of good motherhood/parenthood in Mumsnet Talk. Like Jaworska (2018) titled, "bad mothers tell untellable stories", Pedersen & Lupton (2018) found that there is limited tolerance for negative emotions/stories in online communities: when people cross a certain narrative boundary, professional support might be suggested. Similarly, Matley (2020) focused on the expressions of maternal regret on Mumsnet to examine how mothers deal with the negative feelings and create the sense of self between the binaries of good/bad mother discourse. While the UK based Mumsnet tends to be focused on mothers' experiences, Babycentre (US-based website) ostensibly includes fathers' experiences too. Based on their review of profile pictures and communications on Babycentre, however, Jang, Dworkin & Connell (2012) found that in their collected data, there was only one father out of seventy-five users. The researchers therefore described the online forum is a "female dominated online environment" (p. 4), where fathers may feel "unsupported" leading to further lack of engagement.

A few similar research studies have been carried out in China. For example, researchers used *babytree.com*, one of the largest online parenting forums in China, to study topics relate to mothers, especially single mothers (X. Zhao & Basnyat, 2018; X. Zhao & Lim, 2021). As Zhao & Basnyat (2018) stated, information, emotion, and tangible support were presented and exchanged among users in online discussion boards. This social support not only enhanced mothers' self-esteem and promoted individual empowerment, but also raised group awareness and created a bond and a sense of belonging in the online community. Apart from Babytree, Chan (2008) conducted research in a parenting forum called *Happy Land*. She examined how a group of Hong Kong working mothers used this online space to perform and identify their professional and domestic roles. The boundaries of my research are somewhat different. My data encompassed not only 'public-private' discussions on online platforms (like an open discussion board) but also 'private' discussions on online spaces (like chat groups), although the distinction between public and private spaces is somewhat blurred (see Chapter 4). Also, my focus was not just single mothers or working mothers but included all kinds of middle-class mothers and their different experiences of mothering.

During my review of research, I noticed that blogging is another form of online communication that has been the focus of a number of studies that explore parenting. Sharing parental experiences through blogging is seen as beneficial in terms of improving communication and mental health (Archer, 2019; McDaniel et al., 2011; Orton-Johnson, 2017). Yother (2012) discussed how “mummy bloggers” build their own community and voice by writing up their experiences. Similarly, McDaniel, Coyne & Holmes (2011) argued that for new mothers, blogging lessens parental pressure and supports their well-being by maintaining the connections with extended families and friends. Indeed, Pettigrew, Archer & Harrigan (2016) found that a key motivation for mothers is to develop connections with others; blogging also helps them to feel “heard and accepted” (p. 1028).

Research on the focus on parenting through digital media such as email, text messaging and video calls through Skype and FaceTime etc., also mentioned the importance of communication, the emotional dimension and the benefits to wellbeing (King-O’Riain, 2015; Longhurst, 2013, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Rudi et al., 2015). However, the communication in these studies was more about how parents connect/bond with their children though digital media, rather than conversations between peers or friends. In addition, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest and Instagram have been studied for the extent to which they provide parents with “the opportunity to upload their own material and respond to, curate, tag or share other people’s content” (Lupton et al., 2016, p. 6). As mentioned before, many parenting websites use social media to promote their account and increase the interaction with users. Some parental forums/websites even have their own customised apps: the pregnancy-related ones are particularly popular, as some women use it to track the pregnancy or their baby’s physical development and health data (Lupton & Pedersen, 2016; Virani et al., 2019). In addition, most digital platforms involve advertisement in that parents combine sharing/posting to promote certain products in order to generate an income.

The studies that I have reviewed above mostly focus on a single platform, such as a parenting website, a social media platform, a chat room or a support group. However, none of them discuss parents’ online practices and performances on multiple affordances in terms of different audience formats, such as individual posts or group chats. One explanation for the lack of studies in China that focus on social media activities is that most of them have been banned in mainland China. More recently, there has been some context-based research (see 2.4.3) on platforms such as WeChat and Douyin. For example, G. Wang, Zhang & Zeng (2019) conducted a survey with 432 student respondents at 10 universities to study the relationship of WeChat use intensity and social support. They found out that participants’ WeChat use intensity was positively associated with online and offline support, while the online behaviour facilitated offline supportive relationships, and the interpersonal communication motive could increase enthusiasm for using Beyond a university context, WeChat. Y. Wang & Sandner (2019) investigated Chinese rural women’s social media practice in their everyday lives and emphasised those women’s usage of public account articles, such as emotional self-expression and learning self-care. Yet this study highlighted those women’s individual practices without mentioning group support or communication with peers like Xin (2022) and Xue et al. (2021). While Xin (2022) researched first-time mothers’ construction of social support network of online secondary groups, Xue, Hu, Chi & Zhang (2021) investigated teachers’ professional learning through building online community of practice. The studies I reviewed either focus on online support (see more examples in 1.3.3) or focus on women’s online practice, with only a few (eg. Wang & Sandner 2019) mentioning the business function of social media in mother’s everyday lives (He et al., 2022; S. Yang et al., 2016). Even fewer talk about mothers’ parenting anxiety in online communities (Meng, 2020; Y. Zheng, 2019). Some studies focus on parenting anxieties but conducted large scale quantitative research rather than exploring women’s individual experience and practices in depth (Sun et al., 2022). Furthermore, most of these studies collect data through online observation only or interview only; few combine different research methods and look at women’s both online and “offline” practices (G. Wang et al., 2019). Given this, I decided to fill the substantive as well as the methodological gap by using the multifunction of WeChat to investigate middle-class mothers’ practices and performances with different audiences in relation to various topics. Additionally, I decided to explore their diverse activities online and how those activities as well as experience influenced their offline lives. Specifically, I decided to use their schooling anxiety as a way into investigating their mothering practices.

1.3.3 Motherhood and online support

After introducing research on parenting and digital platforms and the specifics of each platform, in this section, I will focus on studies on motherhood, particularly digital motherhood which is highly relevant to my research area.

When drafting my research questions, I wondered what kind of digital platforms would appeal to mothers and what features they value. I then learned from Lupton (2016) that mothers tend to value multi-functional digital platforms which include advice from experts, easily accessible information and support from healthcare professionals (and that is why I decided to use the multifunctional platform WeChat instead of focusing on a single functions such as messaging or reading articles). For these mothers, especially new mothers, building social connections online and receiving support from other mothers, is hugely important. Focusing on the role of the internet in new mothers’ lives, Madge & O'Connor (2006) concluded that it “played a central role in providing virtual social support increasing the women’s ability to cope with their new experiences” (Madge & O’Connor, 2006, p. 213). Similarly, Johnson (2015) found that digital platforms provide first-time mothers with alternative forms of expertise on healthcare as well as social support. The internet allows new mothers to easily access resources provided by other mothers who have been through similar problems, namely, shared information and experience. Accessing these information sources increased “women’s real sense of empowerment” during the transition to motherhood (Madge & O'Connor, 2006, p. 213).

Pedersen & Lupton (2018) highlighted the importance of emotional support as well as information, for new mothers. Online forums like Mumsnet can offer an anonymous/pseudonymous space for mothers to share emotions and negative feelings like "ambivalence, resentment, anxiety and anger" that can be tolerated and responded to with "empathy and friendly support" (Pedersen & Lupton, 2018, p. 59). This semi-anonymous online space is seen as a safe and supportive place (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Madge & O'Connor, 2006) to parents where they can create new communities which then also transfer to offline.

However, online platforms, especially social media, also raised concerns. They can propagate "disturbing, violent or racist content" that require users to be to critically alert and are not necessarily supportive (Archer & Kao, 2018, p. 133). When parents seek medical or healthcare informational support on digital platforms, critical thinking/literacy is even more important. Lyons (2020) argued that digital platforms like WhatsApp can be seen as facilitating "fruitful" interactions involving not just the share of knowledge, experiences and medical advice but evaluation as well . Peer support is valuable in providing emotional and instrumental support but users also need to be educated in how to evaluate information and resources gained through online interactions (Gleeson et al., 2019).

During the transition to motherhood, most women hope to build and maintain connections with other mothers. According to a study by Pettigrew et al. (2016), the most common motivation for mothers to share their life through blogging is making connections with others. They want to record and share experiences to extended family and friends but also to develop connections with other parents, since "a similar life-stage would share common experiences, thereby facilitating a deeper level of interaction" (Pettigrew et al., 2016, p. 1027). Using blogging to express themselves and build communities (Yother, 2012) helps mothers feel more connected with the outside world at a time when they may feel isolated (McDaniel et al., 2011), which helps to improve maternal wellbeing. Blogging is not the only way in which new mothers connect with others outside the home. Longhurst (2013) researched on how Skyping as an alternative way to maintain mother-children emotional link and improve mothers' wellbeing, as it provides people a more direct and vivid way of communication. She suggests that "bodies, devices, screens, sounds and images commingle to mediate emotions over time and space" (Longhurst, 2016, p. 136).

According to the above studies, mothers appear to seek social support from online platforms and attempt to build connections with others through online communication. However, in my research, I decided to explore in more depth how mothers support each other and investigate the role that online communities play on shaping motherhood, instead of simply repeating research into mothers' needs for social support.

1.4 Shaping research questions

Based on my experience as an educational practitioner in the industry and my preliminary review of the relevant literature, I am aware that when I talk about "parents", I somehow usually mean "mothers". As mentioned in 1.3.2, research has showed that the online environment is "female-dominated"(Jang et al., 2012). Thus, my target group in this research is specifically middle-class *mothers* rather than parents and their online practices and performance.

As I discuss in Chapter 3, motherhood as a key theme in this research, has led me to explore several issues; under the overarching research question, how does middle-class schooling anxiety (re)shape motherhood? I am interested in mothers' practices in relation to their children's education. Therefore, my first sub-research question is: how do mothers support their children's education?

Following the first sub-question, I decided to explore mothers' perceptions and practices on motherhood while they help their children's education. Thus, my second sub-question is: How do middle-class mothers learn about, experience and practise motherhood? I discussed earlier my observation that some mothers seem to are struggle with the quantity of educational information that they are exposed to and maybe that is why they join online communities. In 1.4, I introduced digital platforms and their multiple functions in relation to parenthood, child development and education. Then, my third sub-question asked: what role do online communities play in shaping schooling anxiety as well as motherhood?

Finally, to return to the starting point of this research, as an educational practitioner, I wanted to find out whether research can help mothers who are under pressure from all sides and particularly, vulnerable to heightened schooling anxiety. Therefore, my fourth research question was: how can mothers' schooling anxiety be lessened?

1.5 Thesis structure

In this chapter I first introduced how I came to research schooling anxiety and motherhood and why I chose Shanghai as a research site by describing my personal journey in the education industry. I explained the importance of including online communities in this research to lead my research direction to mothering practices in everyday online and "offline" life. Then, to identify my research gap, I reviewed relevant literature on school choice and digital parenting in a broader context rather than China only. I clarified why my focus has been on mothers and how my research questions were formed.

In Chapter 2, I provide the geographical, cultural and social context to my research. This background to the study will help to understand some of the interpretations and discussions in this thesis. In Chapter 3, I discuss how I developed my theoretical framework based on three main elements: conceptualising motherhood; different types of learning in communities of practice;

and social capital in education, and how I used them in the later analysis. In Chapter 4, I explain why and how I adopted ethnographic approach as my methodology. I not only talk about what I did, but also the process of making decisions and why, reflecting on some of the issues and challenges I encountered.

In Chapter 5 to 7, I present the empirical findings based on the data I collected and analysed. Three main themes: education, motherhood, online communities, connect with my initial research question, how does middle-class schooling anxiety reshape motherhood and what role do online communities play in it? Each of these themes comprises sub-themes which I present, through stories from participants. I chose not to add literature and theories in this chapter, because I wanted primarily the mothers' voices to be heard.

Then, in Chapter 8, I adopt theories and literature from previous chapters to analysed my data more deeply and discuss some of the key issues that emerged. In Chapter 9, I conclude this thesis by outlining the contributions this thesis makes – methodological, theoretical and empirical, before setting out the implications for future policy making and suggesting future research directions.

1.6 Conclusion

This thesis investigates middle-class mothers' various activities in online and "offline" communities, to explore their perceptions, understandings and practices with regards to motherhood, their children's education and digital communication. Based on my research, I hope to provide a strong example for future researchers who study relevant topics in China as well as in the broader context.

Chapter 2 Background and context

2.1 Introduction

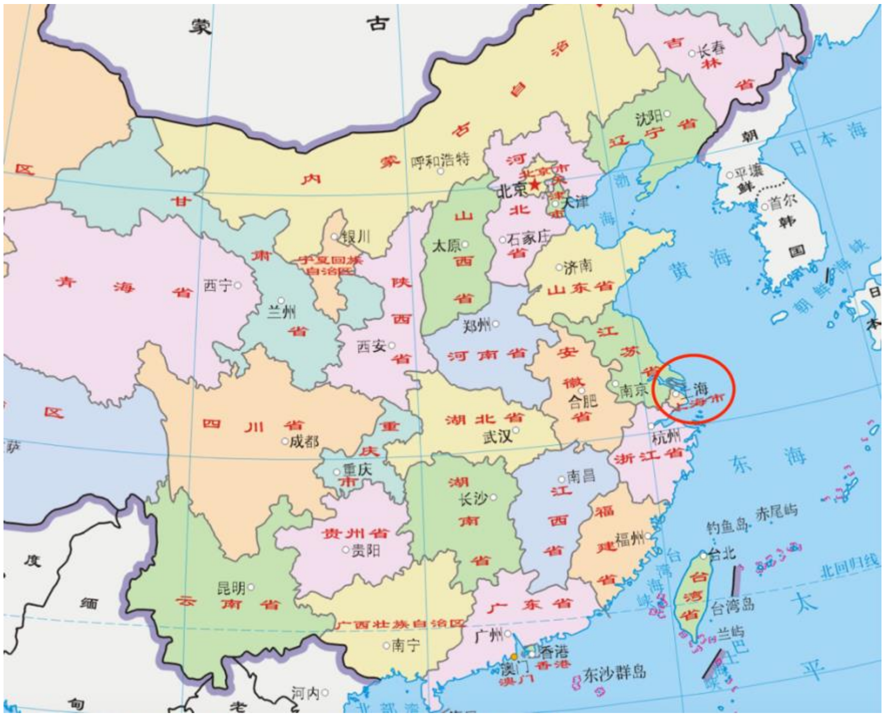
My research question – *how does middle-class schooling anxiety reshape motherhood in Shanghai?* was formulated based on working in the education industry in Shanghai (see 1.2). Therefore, I begin this chapter by explaining why and how Shanghai is different from other cities in China. I then explain the key terms in this thesis. I provide a historical perspective of middle-class development in China, especially the changing definitions of this social group and what 'middle-class' means in my research. To better understand 'schooling anxiety', I describe the competitive educational environment of Shanghai and the resulting pressures on its middle-class parents. More broadly, I discuss the changing family structure and parenting styles in China, which includes a historical view of gender roles, changing government policy on the family, as well as changing attitudes towards women and single mothers in mass media. Finally, this chapter will provide an overview of the development of social media in China, how it is used and what it is used for.

2.2 Middle-class educational anxiety in Shanghai

2.2.1 The Old and New Shanghainese: migration and hukou system

In this section, I introduce Shanghai and explore what is distinctive about the Shanghainese in relation to education and social position. I also aim to explain the 'making' of 'New Shanghainese' which usually refers to a newly emerging middle-class, although I leave the more in-depth exploration of the middle-class in China for the next section.

Shanghai is a coastal modern city located in east China (see Figure 1), covering an area of 6340.5 square kilometres and having 24.28 million residents (Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2020b). It is one of the municipalities directly under the Central Government of China, and "an international economic, financial, trade, shipping, and scientific and technological innovation centre" (State Council, 2017). The income level of residents in Shanghai also leads the country, with 3815.5 billion Chinese Yuan of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2019, the per capita disposable income of Shanghai residents was 69442 Yuan, which is 2.3 times the national average and even 1686 Yuan more than Beijing residents (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). As the country's richest and most modern city, Shanghai attracts all levels of migration from the whole country. As mentioned above, Shanghai has 24.28 million residents in 16 administrative regions, there are 9.78 million 'floating people' among them, also known as migrant workers (Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2020a).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内蒙古自治区
呼和浩特
吉林省
长春
沈阳
辽宁省
朝鲜
平壤
首尔
韩国
日本海
北京
北京市
天津
天津市
河北省
石家庄
银川
宁夏回族自治区
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南京
上海市
安徽省
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台湾省
台湾岛
兰屿
北回归线
广东省
广州
广西壮族自治区
南宁
香港
澳门
东沙群岛
河内
太平洋

Figure 1 Shanghai in map[8]

Large-scale migration to Shanghai is by no means a new phenomenon. Rural-urban migration began in the 1950s and exploded in the 1980s after the reform and opening up policy (Jia, 2017). With the progress of industrialisation, “there would be continuous needs for migrant workers to fill the labour gap”(Jia, 2017, p. 15). The migration process starts with moving from “less economically developed areas to more economically developed ones”, which also refers to from rural to urban (ibid.). However, migration is not all about economic changes, but also involves social, cultural and political factors in the process (Haas et al., 2022). The national population survey shows that the national ‘floating population’ (*liu dong ren kou*, 流动人口) has increased from 121 million in 2000 to 253 million in 2014 and down to 241 million in 2018 (National Bureau of Statistic of China, 2019). The changing numbers of migrants are highly relevant to governmental policies on migration.

Not all migrants will be called ‘Shanghainese’, or ’New Shanghainese’, unless they have obtained a Shanghai *hukou*, which is a key element of school application, working opportunities, and many other social welfares. As a household registration system, *hukou* had its prototype 4000 years ago. With the foundation of P.R.China, a new *hukou* system was established in the early 1950s to monitor the population in urban and rural areas. Then in 1958, the government updated this system. For the first time, a clear distinction was made between agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou*; the system also restricted people’s movement between urban and rural area. The *hukou* booklet (also known as household register) records details of a person, including the household leader, household members, relationships, date of birth and place of birth etc., which represents the person's social status (L. Zhao et al., 2018).

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[8] Original map from: https://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2017-07/28/content_5043915.htm (accessed: 14 May 2024).

After the economic reform of 1978, restrictions on rural-urban migration were relaxed. Then in 2000s, a reform of the *hukou* system was announced. In 2001, "for those who apply for permanent residence registration in small towns, the management of planning indicators will no longer be implemented" (State Council, 2001). In 2014, the government "completely loosen the restrictions on the registration of towns and small cities, relaxed the restrictions on the registration of medium-sized cities, reasonably determine the conditions for registration in large cities, and strictly control the population size of megacities". At the same time, the distinction between agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* was removed so as to establish "a unified household registration system for urban and rural areas" (State Council, 2014).

The changing number of 'floating people' from 2000 to 2018 could be seen as a reflection of the migration policy: between 2014 to 2018, the floating population decreased year on year. Perhaps because some people chose not to move to another town/city, or some migrants successfully transferred their *hukou* from their hometown to their new residence. This transition is a big step as it transforms temporary migration to permanent migration and their new *hukou* provides the evidence. Some of my participants followed this very trend, moving to Shanghai at a young age, settling there and obtaining Shanghai *hukou* after many years, thereby becoming New Shanghainese.

Permanent migrants with new *hukou* enjoy many benefits, such as apply a local school place for their children. Therefore, *hukou* not only provides "the principal basis for establishing identity, citizenship and proof of official status", it is essential for individuals' everyday life, such as education, employment, housing and other social welfare provision (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 644). Usually, residents with rural (agricultural) *hukou* are less privileged compared to the benefits and opportunities enjoyed by urban (non-agricultural) *hukou* holders because of the unequal distribution of social resources (L. Zhao et al., 2018). Among urban centres, there is also a hierarchy: the big city and megacity *hukou* are at the top, which means it has access to better resources and conversely, it is more difficult to obtain permanent residency.

Migration in Shanghai is not simply rural to urban but urban to urban. For example, my hometown (where my parents are living in) is a big provincial capital city but my *hukou* is in another smaller city where I finished primary and secondary school. I moved to Shanghai for employment, which is temporary migration (see 1.2 my employment experience) so as a migrant without Shanghai *hukou,* I was not able to work in state schools, government departments or other official workplaces, hence my decision to seek work in the private sector. Thus, the *hukou* system "largely prevents" migrants' children from enjoying public education and health care in the cities their parents working in. As a result, "most migrants leave their children behind with grandparents or other relatives" (L. Zhao et al., 2018, p. 22).

For those who want to become permanent migrants, the process of obtaining Shanghai *hukou* comprises a 'points system' (State Council, 2014). Migrants must register for a Shanghai residence card and achieve 120 points[9] to enjoy certain residential rights, such as children's education and medical insurance. Once they have held a residence card for seven years and paid the relevant amount of tax and social fund/insurance, migrants can officially apply for a Shanghai *hukou,* thereby becoming 'New Shanghainese' (Shanghai Huangpu District Government, 2021b). PhD graduates, double first-class masters or graduates of Tsinghua University, Peking University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, East China Normal University, and Tongji University can directly settle in and apply for Shanghai *hukou*. People with high level skills or who have studied abroad can also obtain new citizenship directly in this way (Shanghai Huangpu District Government, 2021a). Such policies aim to encourage educated young adults to stay in Shanghai and seek employment. Some of my participants fall into this category (see Chapter 5).

One common problem New Shanghainese face is communication. To protect the local dialect, Shanghainese, many schools are promoting its use especially in kindergartens (J. Zhang, 2022). In fact, some private primary schools even have Shanghainese listening and speaking tests as part of the application interview. The division of local and non-local residents is made very visible through language, therefore, can result in children from migrant families being "dis-citizened" or marginalised; in other words, they may lack the sense of belonging in this city (Keung Wong et al., 2007; Shao & Gao, 2019).

Alongside this 'dialect hierarchy'–- Shanghainese seeming to be more valued than other dialects – the Shanghai government also welcomes educated and skilled migrants. Making it easier for those social groups to obtain citizenship (directly or within a year), the *hukou* system as it is currently implemented clearly functions as a tool of social stratification (Lu, 2008), with 'New Shanghainese' more likely to come from the middle-classes rather than the working classes or rural poor. My pool of participants includes both old and new Shanghainese and I was interested to find out if they have different understandings and practices with regards to their children's education based on their own experience. In the next section, I discuss this social group and investigate the changing definition of middle-class in China.

2.2.2 The middle-class in China: definition and development

This study focuses on middle-class mothers in Shanghai. As such, my sample is not limited to the New Shanghainese, since the different ways of obtaining citizenship is not particularly relevant to my research question. However, the different types of migration are having an impact on class stratification. For example, some rural-urban migrations are based on education or skills. Applying for a new kind of job in this urban environment leads to participating in different social groups and gaining a new identity. In this section, I want to explore the definition of middle-class, as it is an unstable and developing concept in this context. It also has different connotations to those that are associated with the term in Western society.

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[9] The points system is related to the applicant's age, educational background, occupation, professional abilities, and whether their spouse is from Shanghai. See https://jzzjf.rsj.sh.gov.cn/jzzjf/pingfen/zc2.jsp (Accessed: 30 May 2023).

In China, the term *zhongchan jieji* (middle-class) or *zhongjian jieceng* (middle stratum) is a direct translation from Marx's work (Li, 2001). However, before the term was introduced via Marxism, a group of people could be identified as the middle part of the social hierarchy. Historically, China's social structure has resembled a pyramid: the top class, limited in numbers, included imperial officials, while the bottom class, the peasants, comprised over 90% of the population. Between the two was the village gentry, some kind of middle stratum, whose influence was restricted (Q. Li, 2001). According to the sociologist Li (2001), the middle-class in China really began to emerge after 1978, following the Reform and Opening Up policy. Comparing the development of the middle-class before and after 1978, she states "the old middle-class consisted of cadres, intellectuals (professional and technical personnel), and employees of state-owned enterprises, while the new middle-class after 1978 are mainly independent operators" (Q. Li, 2001, p. 19). There was also a distinctive age difference between old and new middle-class: while the old middle-class were in their 40s and 50s, the new middle-class tended to be in their 30s. Then, in the late 1990s, a group of 'old middle-class' who worked in state-owned enterprises as manual workers, lost their jobs because of enterprise reform. In 2000s, there was an increase in white-collar employees, leading to an expansion of a new middle-class.

Because it is "newly emerging" with unclear "boundaries and attributes", it is not easy to define the current middle-class in the Chinese context (C. Li & Campbell, 2012). According to sociologist Chunling Li, the rapid expansion in Chinese cities of this newly emerging middle-class can be dated to the beginning of the 21st century (Li, 2011), fuelled by economic and income growth, urbanisation, higher education expansion and the increase of white-collar workers. Four criteria are used to define the middle-class in China. First is income: middle-class people have "relatively high and stable income"; the second is occupation: middle-class people work in "professional or managerial jobs"; the third is education: middle-class people tend to have attended higher education; the fourth is consumption and lifestyle: middle-class people can afford levels of consumption and enjoy a comfortable lifestyle (C. Li & Campbell, 2012, p. 91). However, there are at least three major approaches to defining the middle-class in China (Li,2011). In general public discourse, as described above, having a high and stable income, engaging in professional or managerial occupations, attending higher education, affording, and maintaining a high-standard consumption and being able to live in a comfortable way are the key characteristics of the middle-class. In the government's definition, middle-class is mainly determined by economics, in that they are simply middle-income earners. Chinese sociologists argue that both the public and governmental definitions of middle-class are too crude : only a small upper stratum of the middle-class match the public view and the government's middle income group includes diverse people from different backgrounds, for whom "it is impossible" to "develop a shared class identity, class consciousness or class culture" (C. Li & Campbell, 2012, p. 93).

Sociologists define the middle-class based on occupational development and employment status, distinguishing between employers and employees, physical and mental workers. They also see a distinction between white-collar and blue-collar worker as the dividing line between the middle and working classes, while property ownership is a vital criterion that divides "the middle-class from the upper capitalist class" (ibid.). Within this definition, large property owners are upper class, middle sized to small property owners and self-employed people are middle-class. However, Li has also suggested that this division is not entirely appropriate, since according to this criterion, the middle-class in China would be a large group encompassing "up to 30% of the total national population", and "nobody believes" this (C. Li & Campbell, 2012, p. 94). Other criteria used to define this social group, such as education, income and consumption/lifestyle, generate hugely disparate estimates, from 4% to 25% of the population. Nonetheless, most sociologists agree that there are subclasses of middle-class, which have "differing economic conditions, living standards, and socio-political attitudes" (ibid.).

Li adopted the social mobility and class structure developed by the British sociologist, John H. Goldthorpe. The division is largely based on occupation, which is not ideal but is acceptable and workable for the purposes of my research. Historically, the Chinese divide people according to their position (e.g. officials, farmers, workers, businessmen) (*shi, nong, gong, shang*) and this division is generationally inherited and more resistant to change. Furthermore, occupation links to people's property ownership, educational level, lifestyle and political attitudes etc., so it is a relatively easy way to divide social groups in this context.

Li (2011) has posited six classes in China. 1. At the top is the capitalist class, employers with 20 or more employees; 2. next is the new middle-class, professional technicians and management personnel; 3. then comes the old middle-class, employers with 20 or less employees or without employees; 4. This class includes marginal middle-classes (general office workers and non-physical commercial service workers); 5. The working class consists of technicians, overseers, skilled workers, semi-technical and unskilled workers; 6. The last group are the agricultural labourers. Based on this classification, China's middle-class could be defined in two ways: broadly speaking, the middle-class includes capitalists, new middle-class, old middle-class and marginal middle-class; more narrowly, the middle-class could simply refer to the new middle-class. According to Li, as a rapidly developing country, the narrow definition of middle-class is more appropriate for China since it is the new middle-class that is seeing a dramatic expansion.

One reason driving this expansion is the aspirations of the younger generation. Young people aspire to work hard to achieve their desire for a better life, e.g., buy a house and a car, have a decent job and a relatively high salary. At the same time, many new middle-class people feel unsafe and anxious about their current situation, because of the difficulties of achieving these goals. Property prices, the pressure of paying debts, the competition of work, the requirements of children's high-quality education all generate anxiety (C. Li, 2016). Furthermore, the middle-class in China lack a coherent identity, since they do not think they have obtained a high-quality lifestyle nor the welfare system they have been led to expect.

One of the most obvious areas of aspiration and competition – and therefore pressure–- in China is education. Educational aspiration is a strong cultural and historical feature since ancient China. An old saying from Confucius "学而优则仕"[10] encourages men to study hard and successfully pass in the examination[11] that will enable them to enter into government service. In other words, it encourages men (especially men from poor families) to effectively change their social status which they can achieve by passing the requisite examination enabling them to become a government officer. Thus, education has acted not only as a way to maintain identity and certain social benefits but has also been a way to break out of one's inherited class. In ancient China, education enabled a certain amount of social mobility: men could become empire officials through study and examination, which is the top class. While in contemporary China, government officials are a part of the middle-class with certain salaries and welfares, education is still seen as crucial to maintaining or improving social status.

Turning to my study, I think the definition of middle-class can be more flexible and inclusive, especially in the online domain. Given the fluidity of online environments, it would be difficult to investigate someone's occupation, salary, consumption and lifestyle. Besides, it was not appropriate for me to directly ask potential participants if they are middle-class, since everyone's understanding is different. Therefore, based on the literature, I use the term middle-class in a broader but also context-based way, which includes the new middle-class, old middle-class, and marginal middle-class, as people's occupations can also be fluid between these three sections. In addition, more and more young people in China are self-employed (as Qi's story in 6.3.1) so they do not match the definition of the new middle-class, yet they still represent a strong middle-class force. Thus, in my study, I used the concept of middle-class as a shared and recognised social identity and lifestyle (see 4.3.2 for sampling details), to help me select a certain group of mothers who might share certain values and experiences in relation to education and parenting.

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[10] From The Analects of Confucius,《论语》.

[11] The examination here means "科举考试" (*keju kaoshi*) which only open for men, started from Sui and Tang dynasty.

Since the definition of the middle-class is changing, and educational purposes are changing, I set out to explore the relationships between education and middle-class. I hoped to gain insights into the role of social identity in the pressure parents feel in relation to their children's education. In next section I provide an overview of education in China before highlighting educational pressures that dominate family life in Shanghai specifically.

2.2.3 Educational anxiety in Shanghai: understanding the educational system and policy

'Middle-class anxiety' is a popular phrase in contemporary China, and the focus of much discussion online. In general, this 'anxiety' includes two aspects: first, there is a sense of crisis regarding career and status. The middle-class mainly composed of managers and professional and technical personnel, may have a relatively high income but they do not own power in their organisations. When the business of enterprise faces difficulties or traverses on economic crisis, middle-level managers are more likely to be made unemployed than frontline employees. Second, there is a sense of crisis in families' socioeconomic status, a fear that one's own children will not be able to move further upwards or even inherit their parents' socioeconomic status (Xiong, 2020). To mitigate this anxiety, many "have a particular interest in investing in the children's (even grandchildren's) education which is thought to help retain social capital" (L. Yang et al., 2018, p. 46). Since my study explores schooling anxiety among middle-class mothers, in this section, I describe the structure of the Chinese educational system and significant recent changes in educational policy.

2.2.3.1 The school system, key schools and admission process

I provided a glimpse into the Chinese primary school admission process in 1.2, which mainly focused on the "gong min tong zhao" policy in 2018. To better understand the educational system and competition in China, in this section, I will introduce more details on school years, admission process, and the concept of key schools.

In urban China, most students start school life as 3-year-olds in kindergarten, then, after three years' learning, they can go to primary school when they are 6 years old (see Figure 2). They have six years in primary school and another three years in junior middle school (although in Shanghai it is 5 years primary school and 4 years junior school). This nine years' study (from Grade 1 to 9) is also called Compulsory Education in China, which means every student should attend and complete this period of study. Students who aim to experience higher education can attend senior middle school (3 years) and prepare for *gaokao* (the National Entrance Exam of University), then go to university as planned. Students who do not go to senior middle school may choose to go to a vocational school as an alternative. The decision of going to general senior middle school or vocational school mainly depends on students' academic performance in exams. In fact, during the study process, students need to take exams on every step to move to next level. From primary school to university, three important examinations are mandatory for moving to the next level:

xiaoshengchu, zhongkao and *gaokao*. For students in Year 6, Year 9 and Year 12, those three examinations mainly decide which school they can go to for the next few years.

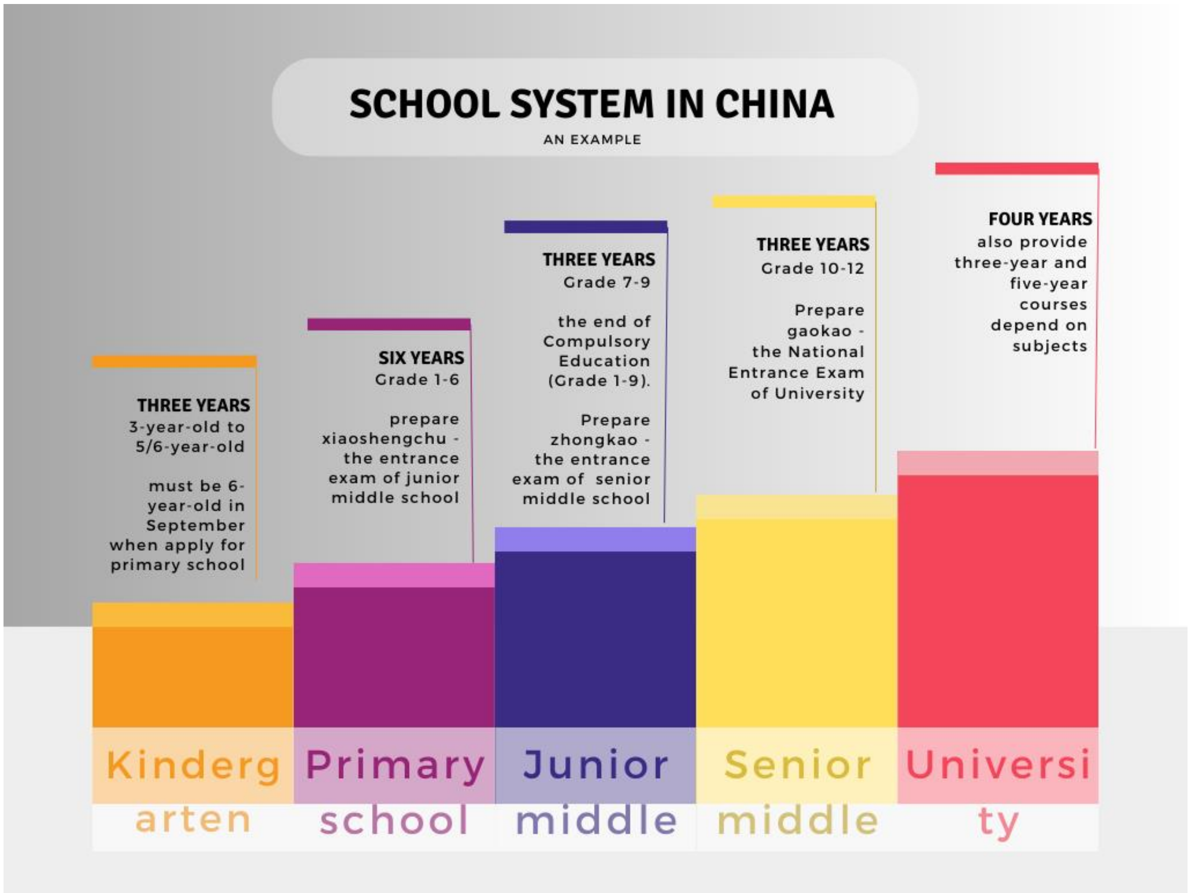
SCHOOL SYSTEM IN CHINA
AN EXAMPLE
THREE YEARS
3-year-old to 5/6-year-old
must be 6-year-old in September when apply for primary school
SIX YEARS
Grade 1-6
prepare xiaoshengchu - the entrance exam of junior middle school
THREE YEARS
Grade 7-9
the end of Compulsory Education (Grade 1-9).
Prepare zhongkao - the entrance exam of senior middle school
THREE YEARS
Grade 10-12
Prepare gaokao - the National Entrance Exam of University
FOUR YEARS
also provide three-year and five-year courses depend on subjects
Kindergarten
Primary school
Junior middle
Senior middle
University

Figure 2 The school system in China

Within this system, *gaokao* is even more important since it decides one's future. *Gaokao,* the university entrance exam, is the most competitive and vital, perceived as the only way to "escape from the countryside" for rural area students; only "top-performing students in high-stake tests may enrol in prestigious universities, get recruited for satisfactory jobs and enjoy opportunities that are off-limits to lower scoring students" (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). Most Chinese students are taught that "hard work, study, and high educational achievement are important" and parents are under pressure to keep them away from social activities so as to better concentrate on learning (Dong et al., 1994, p. 352). This brings "heightened level" pressure, "anxiety and fear" to the whole family, which in turn impacts everyone's daily life (ibid., p. 353). The anxiety over *gaokao* is "passed down from generation to generation" (Xu, 2019, page 4). Parents even pass down anxiety from high school to pre-school level (Guan & Ploner, 2020; Hong & Zhao, 2015; Wu, 2012). Some parents believe that the only way to success is to get ahead, which means attending a top university, is to enrol in a good senior/junior middle school, a good primary school, a good kindergarten–- and to study extremely hard to pass the different entrance exams. However, the definition of a ‘good school’ is unclear, who decide the standards of ‘good’? In this context, good school usually means a key state school or famous private school.

Compared to regular schools, key schools generally have a higher rate of “successfully transitioning their students to the good schools at the next level of schooling” (Wu, 2012, p. 276). The key school system was initiated in the 1950s, following the release of the document *Suggestions on Running some Key Middle Schools and Regular Schools* by the Ministry of Education (MOE 1953, cited in (J. Zhang & Zhou, 1984). Those key schools are famous for their title in certain districts. This could be a ‘Provincial key school’ or ‘Municipal key school’, which refers to schools that have “fully qualified teachers, good facilities, sufficient funds and, most importantly of all, a high rate of matriculation of top performing students on standardised exams” (Wu, 2012, p. 276). To clarify, the key schools which I discuss here are *state schools only* since they are officially selected as a *key school* by the government, instead of informally selected by parents (e.g. Some private primary schools were complimented as key private schools by parents themselves).

As the vacancies at ‘key schools’ are limited and the volume of applicants is too high to be easily examined, most schools follow the rule of ‘picking up the best one’, making the entrance examinations quite competitive. All key schools used to have the right to select their students before the mid-1990s, but now key primary schools (Grade 1-6) and key junior middle schools (Grade 7-9) have to take all the students in their *catchment area* before they can accept students from other areas. Key senior middle schools (Grade 10-12) retain the right to select their students (Wu, 2012). Therefore, to acquire the entrance ticket of key primary and key junior middle school, living in their catchment area is essential. Since the free nine-year compulsory education was made statutory, most school-age children can attend primary and middle state school based on the ‘attendance zone’. In other words, the admission to state schools is “territorial-based” and restricted by *hukou* (see 2.2.1) (L. Yang et al., 2018, p. 46). In Shanghai, some migrant children are not able to go to key state schools because of lacking the local *hukou* (Y. Chen & Feng, 2013, p. 75). Even for people who have Shanghai *hukou*, the key state schools require that the candidates’ parents (or grandparents) should own a property in the ‘attendance zone’ – also known as *xuequfang*. The price of the property directly links to the school’s ranking and therefore, property availability is strongly affected by the location of top-tier schools: “*xuequfang* exhibit values that are between 9.3% and 12.1% higher than non-*xuequfang*” (L. Yang et al., 2018, p. 59). This statistical evidence also illustrates the popularity of *xuequfang*: as discussed in 1.3.1, parents seem to value the state school more than the private school because of the ‘key school’ title. However, the government now intends to blur the distinction of key schools and regular schools.

Not every family could afford to buy property in a key school area. Therefore most families have to decide either to go to a good quality private school or go to a neighbourhood state school where the quality is not guaranteed but they do not need to worry about the vacancy and competition for admission. This is a big decision for parents, especially for middle-class parents in this study, who could not easily give up their children's future nor easily purchase another property for school admission. Under this circumstance, parents usually attempt to send children to a good private primary school for a better learning experience. However, application for a good quality private school is as difficult and competitive as key school admission.

While *xiaoshengchu* (junior middle school entrance exam), *zhongkao* (senior middle school entrance exam) and *gaokao* (university entrance exam) is mainly based on students' performance on final exam papers, *youshengxiao* (primary school entrance exam) is less formal and more flexible on examination. Since state schools are not allowed to select students by their performance now, mainly private schools are the ones that organise entrance examinations. In fact, it is not called an 'examination' but an 'interview'. This interview includes a test on literacy, numeracy, communication, sports etc. In addition, not all primary schools have this kind of 'interview' in their admission process, but popular schools with good quality usually would like to meet students in advance and observe their performance on the admission day then select 'the best ones'. As explained earlier, if the family does not own a key state school property and students failed to pass the examination for a private school, then their school choice will be very limited. As introduced before, the student can still go to a nearby state school arranged by the government, but the quality of the school could not be guaranteed. Therefore, some parents who aim to apply for a well-known private school for their children, usually start the preparation years early and book tutoring courses for children to improve their literacy, numeracy and English, sports etc. at a very early age.

The whole process of school application is not so different to the examination system in ancient China (see 2.2.2), high stakes, highly competitive and generating much anxiety. In this context, it might be easier to understand the school enrolment situation in Shanghai and the burden for parents to secure the best education for their children.

The educational pressure that I am exploring in this study is closely related to economic pressure, which echoes the inequality of the division of social resources and social stratification. As explained in 2.2.1, Shanghainese citizenship alongside social welfare/benefits (including education, medical, pension, property purchase etc.), requires a local *hukou*. Thus, for children without *hukou* or *xuequfang*, a key state school (which is always popular) will not be a wise choice as they are likely not to be shortlisted and to be transferred to other schools (nearby state school). In this case, it makes more sense to apply to a private school with a similar reputation since they enrol students by academic achievements and have less district limitations. It is hard to establish which kind of school parents prefer, as the application number of private and state school tended to be balanced.

According to Xinhua (2019), 35% of China's schools were private in 2018. While state schools have low fees and fewer expenses, private schools are much more expensive. As private schools are "dependent on user fees to cover all or part of their operational and development costs", they "have to follow the market to attract and retain students in order to be financially viable" (Ashley et al., 2014, p. 4). So, private schools are more expensive than state schools on tuition fees as well as "hidden costs" such as books and uniforms. However, school fees are not the only investment in education that parents make. They invariably also pay for private tutoring. To achieve better academic performance, students need extra practice outside of school (known as after-school training or private tutoring), which requires strong financial support from the family (Bray & Lykins, 2012; X. Zheng et al., 2020).

In contrast to the common definition of private tutoring within shadow education (Bray & Lykins, 2012), students in Shanghai are not only tutored in academic subjects but also have to take music, sports and arts classes in order to be well-rounded in their development. My study will explore both academic subject tutoring (Chinese, Math, English etc.) and non-academic subject tutoring (instruments, dance, arts, sports etc.) as a way of investigating how the choice of private tutoring reflects middle-class families' educational preferences as well as parenting styles (see Chapter 5).

Private tutoring comes in many forms, including one-to-one, in pairs, in small/medium/large learning groups and via online tools – especially for English and Mathematics (Bray, 1999, 2006). Sometimes, students attend over 10 after-school classes per week. In a TV programme entitled *Teacher, please answer*, a primary school student, Daqi, complained that she had 13 different tutoring classes per week. When the host asked "Isn't it too much for a child? Are you just unable to bear the thought that your daughter isn't good enough?", her mother answered, "I could not bear the thought that I did nothing when all mothers in the group were planning tutoring classes for their children" (BRTV Youth Channel, 2019). This exchange vividly illustrates the peer pressure on parents and its impact on children's everyday life.

2.2.3.2 Educational policy in relation to schooling pressure

An important historical development has been the attempts of government to reduce the burden of study for students. In 2000, the Ministry of Education (2000) declared that reducing the burden on primary and secondary school students was a major task of the education administrative departments during that year and managing students' book would be a breakthrough. In 2005, the policy was to "deeply promote" a new round of basic education curriculum reform, focusing on improving teaching quality and reducing the academic burden on students (Ministry of Education, 2005). Then in 2011, a detailed document was released emphasising the need to alleviate the academic burden on students and the importance of protecting students' sleep time (Ministry of Education, 2011). Implicit in all the policies was the assumption that the burden on students came solely from school; out-of-school tutoring was not mentioned. Then in 2013, Shanghai issued a ban on compulsory educational institutions using competition results and examination certificates as the basis for admission. Schools were no longer permitted to be venues for competition and examinations, which were prohibited throughout primary and secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 2013).

In 2018, there was an overhaul of the entire examination enrolment system which gradually alleviated the ‘school choice fever’ in compulsory education. The policy, implemented simultaneously in Shanghai’s state and private primary schools, meant that parents could only select one or the other. Furthermore, the state school would out the second round of enrolment after private schools had completed their enrolment (Ministry of Education, 2018). Compared with 2017, the ratio of applicants to and admissions in Shanghai's private primary schools in 2018 dropped from 3:1 to 1.4:1. It seems that this policy was successful in calming the ‘school choice fever’. However, it did not significantly reduce the popularity of private tutoring.

Since 2019, out-of-school tutoring class has been strictly monitored. The government declared its intention to “effectively reduce the excessive extracurricular burden on primary and secondary school students” and “standardise off-campus training institutions” (Ministry of Education, 2019a). The policy also mentioned that online trainings would be monitored (Ministry of Education, 2019b). Following this, to further reduce the burden of schooling and tutoring on students, the government announced its ‘double reduction’ (双减, *shuangjian*) policy in 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2021a). Detailed instructions included no online training for preschool children; offline subject courses (including foreign language) for preschool children in the name of preschool classes, kindergarten transition classes were banned as this trend had deeply influenced the development (even existence) of private tutoring institutions. The policy aimed to “strengthen the role of school education as the main front, deepen the governance of off-campus training institutions, effectively alleviate parent’' anxiety, and promote the all-round development and healthy growth of students” (Ministry of Education, 2021b).

Within the competitive education environment, middle-class parents in Shanghai, however, continue to use different methods to ensure their children’s success. The methods include but are not limited to choosing prestigious schools, paying for private tutoring and ensuring *xuequfan*. It is with this background that I set out to explore more in-depth reflections from mothers and their perceptions regarding their children’s education, particularly private tutoring. I also wanted to understand mothers’ coping practices with regards to schooling anxiety (see Chapter 5).

2.3 Changing understandings of parenting and motherhood in China

In the previous section, I explained that parents’ schooling anxiety does not simply pertain to their children’s academic performance but is also relevant to family investment and expectations. Also, in the section about Shanghainese and *hukou* system (see 2.2.1), I mentioned that some migrants have to leave their children with grandparents or other relatives and work in the city alone. Thus, family responsibility for childcare in China, as elsewhere, is not limited to the parents.

However, the meaning and understanding of 'family' is changing in contemporary China, since the family structure itself is changing (Shen, 2013). In this section, I will give an insight into the changing family structure and parenting styles. Specifically, I look at women's changing role within and outside the family. I also look at changing attitudes to the family as reflected in government policy.

Historically, in Chinese culture, family (家, *Jia* in Chinese) does not carry the same meaning as the English word 'family', which usually refers to a unit of a couple and their unmarried children. The Chinese word correlates with the notion of the 'expanded family' which included married children, other relatives and even servants (Shen, 2013). In this context, family identity only refers to the identification with the patriarchal family (ibid.). However, the understanding of family is changing in contemporary China. Family members have different perceptions about and who belongs to their family:[12] it may exclude each other's parents and the line between who is included and who is excluded has become less defined (Shen, 2013). For instance, most husbands have a "more inclusive view of the family" and they tend to see 'family' as their extended family, while the young wife may have a more critical view on 'family' which is often related to their living patterns, the influence of blood and intimacy, where the small family unit is "more prominent" (Shen, 2013, p. 68). Interestingly, in Shen's research, young mothers had two main understandings of the small family: one only included their spouse and children while the other included their own parents but not their parents-in-law). In some cases, where the parents-in-law participate in family activities such as help with family care/childcare, the wife may include them in the 'family' since they "cannot live without" parent-in-laws' help, particularly the mothers-in-law (Shen, 2013, p. 68).

Along with the changing family structure, parenting styles and women's role are changing as well. Before the twentieth century, women were strictly raised under "Confucian discipline" to ensure that they behaved "properly" (Croll, 1995, p. 11). One of the key disciplines is the three forms of obedience: "Unmarried obey father, married obey husband, husband die obey son"[13]. This clearly shows women's subordinate social status and how they have been raised (and educated) in the past to defer to the male members of the family. Raising children seems to be a private matter of the family, but is "closely related to social productivity" (Y. Zheng, 2019, p. 88). In the 1910s to 1920s, there were intellectuals who supported the women's movement and the fight for women's rights. For example, they criticised the family and marriage patterns as the root cause of gender inequality and "advocated equality between women and men, free love and marriage, educational opportunities for women, labour force participation of women" (Y. Li, 2000, p. 31).

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[12] In this thesis, when I use the term 'family', I mean heteronormative family.

[13] From an ancient Chinese literature, 《仪礼·丧服》, the original quote is: "妇人有三从之义，无专用之道，故未嫁从父，既嫁从夫，夫死从子。"

However, they only influenced a few "urban and elite women" during that period; the majority who lived in the countryside were immune to these ideas until after the 1949 revolution (ibid.). The famous quotation of that time reflects the aim of changing women's status: "women hold up half the sky" (妇女能顶半边天)[14]. In the 1950s, the government of P.R.China had only been established a few years, with much of the focus on "restructuring economy" and "rebuilding the cities" (Y. Li, 2000, p. 32). Within this, there was an emphasis on gender equality within employment policy and women were encouraged to work rather than stay at home (Y. Zheng, 2019).

One of the symbolic actions that was seen to improve gender equality and female emancipation was that "women like men were to be addressed by an individual name, thus ending the practice of whereby, without a personal name, they had been addressed as daughter, wife or the mother of…", in addition, a less gendered name was proposed: both male and female nationwide were to be referred to henceforth as "comrade" (Croll, 1995, p. 70). During this period, women's working rights were emphasised and they began to expand their economic and political roles in society (Croll, 1995). However, although women were being "persuaded" to join the labour market, especially agricultural work since the men were doing industrial work, they continued to be expected to complete domestic responsibilities (Y. Li, 2000). To address this, childcare was framed as not the responsibility of the family but of society and the state "vigorously set up kindergarten institutions to support women to go out of their homes and enter the society"(Y. Zheng, 2019, p. 89).

By the end of the 1970s, the economic reform had brought significant changes and success to China's economy, but the impact on women was not entirely positive. Employment opportunities and income distribution between men and women were still unequal (Y. Li, 2000). In the 1980s and 1990s, influenced by economic development and China's one-child policy, a new parenting style emerged with three distinctive features: first, because of the limitation of the *hukou* system, people usually lived in a certain area surrounded by relatives; co-parenting each other's children within an extended family household was common and children were often brought up with cousins; second, since people rarely moved to another place, children lived in a safe 'acquaintance society' , parenting was relatively 'free-range' (without much control); third, in urban families, the main parenting style was that children were taken care of by grandparents before school age, returning to parents at the age of seven (Y. Zheng, 2019).

Then in the 2000s, because of economic and political reforms as well as reforms to the *hukou* system, this relatively stable, safe, 'acquaintance' society rapidly became 'stranger society', which means there is no familiar relatives and neighbours living in the same community (ibid.).

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[14] It was a slogan to promote gender equality, famously announced in Chairman MAO Zedong's speech in early 1950s.

Intensive parenting became the new style during this period; a professional and scientific approach to parenting was promoted on mass media, while women still had responsibilities in the workplace (Y. Zheng, 2019). Government policy on the family also underwent changes at this time. Most significant was the relaxation around the 'one-child' policy of 1978. Already in 1982, 'one & a half' policy was announced, which meant that in rural areas, couples were allowed to have a second child if the first one was a girl. Then in 2000, couples who themselves were both only children, were allowed to have a second child. In 2013, in a further relaxation of the policy, couples where one spouse was an only child, were allowed to have a second child, although the fertility rate did not increase significantly (State Council, 2013). Then, at the end of 2015, the government announced that all families could have a second child (State Council, 2015). Finally, in 2021, the government announced the implementation of a policy that allows couples to have three children (State Council, 2021).

When I designed this thesis research, the main argument around women and motherhood seemed not to have changed significantly. Concerns remained about their domestic responsibilities and multiples roles in the workplace and the family, despite changes in family policy. The historical and current definition of 'family' forms the cultural background for this research. When participants referred to different parenting styles, it encompassed ideas about who can and should be involved in childcare. When the parents talked about whether their 'family' includes grandparents, they also talked about the role grandparents play in the nuclear family. Some aspects have not changed significantly over time, such as the relatively minor involvement of men in child-rearing, and the tensions between working and mothering for women. Meanwhile, attitudes towards mothers have changed or softened. For example, attitudes towards single mothers seem to have become more tolerant in the big cities (McDonell, 2023). Although my research did not include single mothers, it is still an important feature of the changing cultural background. As mentioned in this section, this cultural background forms the basis of my study, leading me to investigate parenting and motherhood in more depth and to look at grandparents' contributions to the small family unit (see Chapter 6).

2.4 Social media and digital communication in China

As I explained in 1.2, my work in Shanghai was social media management, mainly involving the collection and analysis of educational information from online platforms and communicating with parents through digital methods (WeChat, phone call etc.). In this research, I used WeChat as the major platform to collect data because it has been developed with multipurpose functions, making it not only a major social media platform but a crucial tool of everyday life. It is important to understand how online communication works in this context and why social media is essential for parents and central to their educational practices. Therefore, in this section, I provide an overview of popular social media in China. I then outline the main features of WeChat which will be mentioned again later in empirical chapters, as many participants used those functions.

In contrast to other countries where the use of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, or YouTube is relatively unrestricted, China banned these social media platforms and promoted local software applications instead. In China, people are more familiar with WeChat, Sina Weibo, Red (also known as Xiaohongshu) and Douyin. The past two decades have seen the dramatic development of technology. When researching the development of social media in China, an online article attracted my attention. The article, entitled 'Twenty years of Chinese socialisation' (Hiro), summarised the milestones of China's digital social platforms. The first digital social platform to be set up in China was a BBS (Bulletin Board System) called Shuguang ('dawn' in English) in 1994. It launched the popular era of BBS, represented by Maopu and Tianya (Hiro, 2018). With the rise of the Internet, three major portal websites, Sina, Sohu and Netease were developed. In 1998, Tecent was incorporated by Ma Huateng; then in February 1999, an instant messenger named OICQ was officially released. In just nine months, it surpassed one million registered users.

Because of the copyright problem, this instant messenger changed its name to QQ in November 2000. So far, Tencent "has laid the foundation for the domination of the social empire" (Hiro, 2018; Negro et al., 2020). Then in 2002, Blog officially appeared in China and the four major websites joined in succession. With the introduction of broadband, the Internet has gradually entered the life of ordinary people. In the following year, Baidu, Douban, Xiaonei were launched and rapidly developed, in August 2009, Xiaonei, with nearly 70 million registered users, officially changed its name to the well-known Renren, marking the peak of Chin''s SNS network. In September 2009, Sina Weibo quietly went online, becoming the first portal website to open Weibo services, and once again copied the celebrity strategy of the blog era, attracting the attention of the entire network at an astonishing speed. Meanwhile, with the popularity of smartphones, Weibo, with its natural mobile attributes, quickly became a national phenomenon-level product (Hiro, 2018; Negro et al., 2020).

The official launch of Weibo marked 10 years of the development of China's mobile social media. As Huang (2021) pointed out, the past 10 years has been a 'critical period' for those platforms, "growing from its infancy, developing to maturity, and bringing an all-round impact to our era and social life". Referring to the beginning of the WeChat era, Hiro (2018) commented, "there will never be another Weibo that beats Weibo". In January 2011, WeChat (*Wexin* in Chinese) officially launched. By the following year, 433 days after its launch, in March 2012, WeChat users had exceeded 100 million. Soon, WeChat launched moments, public accounts, red envelope (and WeChat pay) functions and applets, which means it completed "a closed-loop social and business ecological chain" (Hiro, 2018). As a "free messaging and calling app" (written on WeChat official website), WeChat has more than 1 billion monthly active users and has become one of the most important applications in China (Montag et al., 2018). It integrates a variety of services for urban life such as booking travel tickets, ordering food delivery, paying for living expenses, even renting a flat. As such, it is not just a social media but “an integral part of everyday life” for many users (Harwit, 2017; Montag et al., 2018).

The main features of WeChat that make it most popular to young and entrepreneurial users, are WeChat moments and individual/group chat. The moments feature allows users to share text, photos (limited to nine), short videos, links to web-based news/articles, and music to a selected group of people who are contacts of the user; in other words, only those who are accepted by the sender can see the posts/links. This kind of communication could be seen as one to a group of acquaintances (Harwit, 2017). WeChat users can also create a chat group to send “simultaneous, targeted messages” but the group number is limited (Harwit, 2017, p. 317). Initially, the maximum group size was 40 people. It gradually increased to 100 people; then in 2016, the maximum group size increased to 500 members but once a group reached 100 people, only users registered with mobile phone number could be invited to join. Although the group size is restricted to 500 people, WeChat is still a relatively fast way to spread information to a large number of users, since members can pass messages on to other groups that they are members of (Harwit, 2017). Another feature of a chat group is that when the group is created, any member of the group can invite new members but only the group founder has ability to “expel unilaterally members” after they have been added into the group (ibid., p. 318). The group chat, moments and mobile payment features are not only convenient for individuals, as well as entrepreneurs, but the micro-business (*weishang* in Chinese) mode has now been introduced on the WeChat platform (S. Yang et al., 2016).

As mentioned in 1.3.2, researchers started to use WeChat as a study tool as well as a research target in recent years. As a “dominant messaging app” (Harwit, 2017. P. 312), WeChat is changing China’s social connections because it “enhances trusted, personal contacts while transforming opportunities for larger online group formation” (ibid.). The evidence shows that WeChat is not merely a messaging app but can influence a person’s everyday lifestyle, just like Jay’s experience in Shanghai: “leaving WeChat means leaving [social] life” (J. Y. Chen, 2018, p. 5) because of its “super-sticky” design (ibid. p. 10). In an analysis of WeChat’s phenomenal success, Hariharan (2017) believes that WeChat is most valued for the number of tasks users can use it for on a daily base.

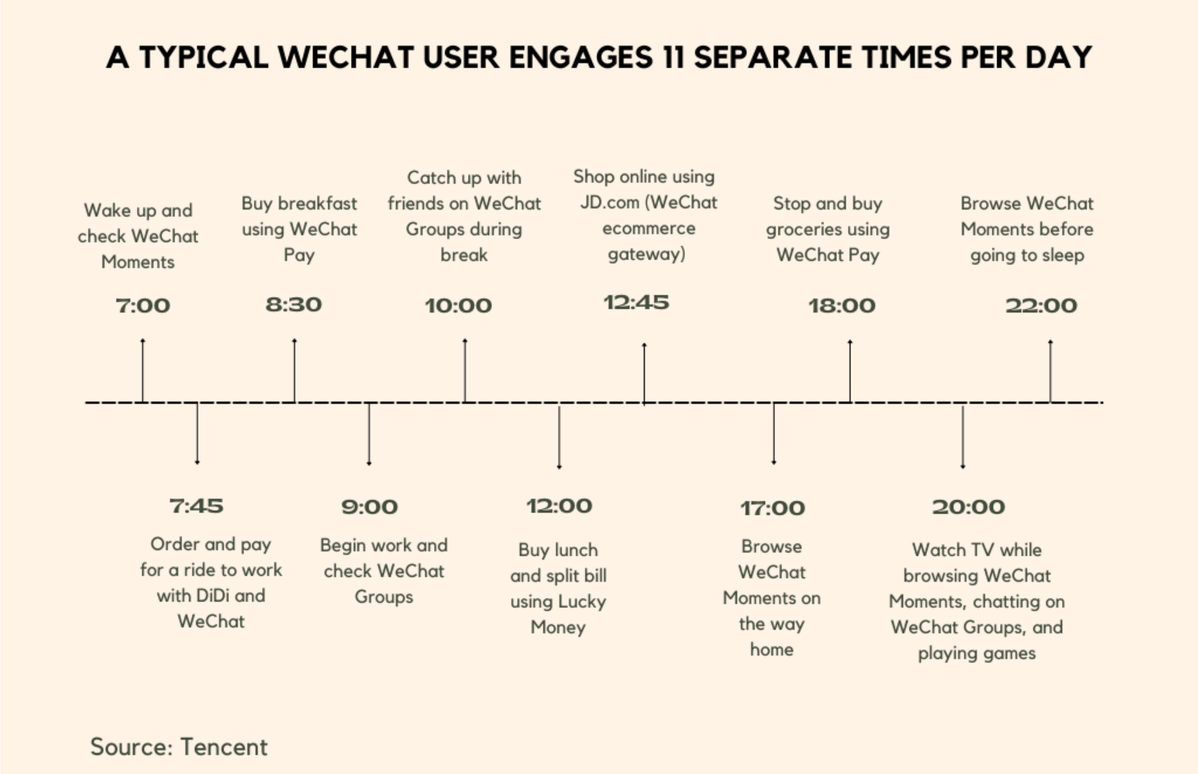
A TYPICAL WECHAT USER ENGAGES 11 SEPARATE TIMES PER DAY
Wake up and check WeChat Moments
7:00
Buy breakfast using WeChat Pay
8:30
Catch up with friends on WeChat Groups during break
10:00
Shop online using JD.com (WeChat ecommerce gateway)
12:45
Stop and buy groceries using WeChat Pay
18:00
Browse WeChat Moments before going to sleep
22:00
7:45
Order and pay for a ride to work with DiDi and WeChat
9:00
Begin work and check WeChat Groups
12:00
Buy lunch and split bill using Lucky Money
17:00
Browse WeChat Moments on the way home
20:00
Watch TV while browsing WeChat Moments, chatting on WeChat Groups, and playing games
Source: Tencent

Figure 3 How a typical WeChat user lives the day (J. Y. Chen, 2018; Hariharan, 2017)

As illustrated in Figure 3, the typical usage of WeChat encompasses a whole day's activities. I took this into account when designing my research: I chose to focus on WeChat as the main platform of our communication and was able to follow the way participants used it, looking at their practices in groups and in Moments as well (see Chapter 4).

Digital communication in China has been through several stages: from online forum to immediate messengers, then to networking-focused websites, to information exchange platforms (like Weibo) and finally, to the integrated platform – WeChat. The latter includes all the features mentioned before and has developed more advanced and daily life-based functions. The development of social media in China both reflects and shapes how people communicate with each other and what needs people have while they connect with the broader world through online platforms. Granted, this 'broader world' is mainly limited to China and written in Chinese, while communications online are not free from monitoring and censorship by the government. In Chapter 7, I talk more about the role social media/online platforms play in shaping motherhood in contemporary China.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the geographical, cultural, and social context to my study. In describing my research site Shanghai and the distinctions between Shanghainese, I introduced the important *hukou* system and how it impacts citizen rights and indirectly, access to education. The New Shanghainese, previously migrants who have gained *hukou* through being highly education and skilled, are creating a new social identity, a new middle-class in Shanghai. I showed how education has been an important way of maintaining or gaining social status since ancient times. However, current pressures on middle-class parents and the expectations and educational aspirations they have for their children, is also specific to this new middle-class who are pursuing dreams of a better life in challenging economic times and a highly competitive environment. In addition, I discussed changing attitudes to parenting and changing policies that impact the family, particularly with regards to reproduction. I have mentioned the role that grandparents play in different family settings and the changes in women's emancipation. I also offered a brief history of social media in China, including core features of WeChat and how it is used in everyday life.

This chapter set out to contextualise key concepts in my research: the current meaning/s of middle-class in China generally and in Shanghai specifically; how 'family' has been understood and parenting is perceived; how and why people use specific social media platforms. These are aspects that have changed significantly in China in the past decades. From the relaxation of the one-child policy to the 'double reduction' policy in education; from the *hukou* system to women's changing role, the family structure is changing, people's understandings of motherhood are changing, the whole society is changing. My study sits in this changing context and looks at the implications of those social changes on mothers' everyday activities.

Chapter 3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the main concepts that shaped and underpin my research questions, my research design and analysis, and which provide the theoretical basis for the empirical chapters. The overarching research question of my thesis - *how does middle-class schooling anxiety reshape motherhood?* - aims to explore mothers' different parental experiences and how those experiences are shaped by education, digital communities and the dominant discourse of motherhood. Guided by this aim, my starting point in this chapter is to define motherhood before situating mothers in the digital communities of practice through the lens of learning. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, education has played an important role in discussions about middle-class parenting, so I will look at how education has been conceptualised in relation to motherhood and social capital. Thus, this chapter is divided into three sections: firstly, I look at how different disciplines look at and conceptualise motherhood; I then draw on the communities of practice theory from Wenger to look at how mothers' learning and identity happen/change within a community; finally, I explore ways of theorising the dynamics of social capital and education.

3.2 Conceptualising motherhood

In Chapters 1 and 2, I explained why I have chosen to focus on mothers rather than on parents in this research (see 1.2 & 2.3). Before exploring how schooling anxiety might be reshaping motherhood among middle class mothers in Shanghai, it is important to establish how motherhood as a concept has been understood, discussed, developed, challenged and adopted in the past and in contemporary society; and then how this conceptualisation has shaped and expanded my research questions. In this section, I look at how different academic disciplines talk about motherhood, and how this might impact on the public discourse around motherhood. After briefly reviewing different conceptualisations of motherhood, I present the ideologies of motherhood with more detailed themes that inform my research and later data analysis. The reader should be aware that the discussion around motherhood in this thesis is more about mothers in the nuclear family, including within the single-parent family and extended family (see the concepts of 'small family' and 'big family' in Chapter 2) rather than same gender family or any other kinds of families[15].

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[15] Same gender marriage is currently not legally accepted in China, so all family I mentioned in this thesis means heteronormative family. All my participants were married during my fieldwork (one got divorce after), so there is no unmarried family or other kinds of family in my data. Because of *hukou* system, most family units in China are rather stable and simple.

3.2.1 Multidisciplinary discussions

Defining motherhood seemed an easy task at the beginning of this research, since it could be simply explained as “the state of being a mother” or “the qualities or spirit of a mother” in a dictionary[16]. However, after a few readings, I realised that motherhood is a very different and personal experience which needs careful consideration rather than being reduced to a simplified semantic definition.

3.2.1.1 Psychological perspectives

Motherhood as a concept has been discussed in medical and psychological discourse from the early twentieth century in the Global North. Medical experts first emphasised the importance of mothers for children’s physical health and good habits (Wall, 2004). Then, after the Second World War, with the development of psychology, the discourse shifted to an emphasis on a mothers’ responsibility for their child’s mental health (Wall, 2010). Theories in developmental psychology have played a large part in this ideological shift. For instance, John Bowlby’s work on maternal privation and attachment in the UK has proved to be particularly significant (Wall, 2004). In the 1950s, Bowlby’s attachment theory emphasised the innate connection between mother and child, and mothers were expected to fulfil all the child’s needs and desires. This innate attachment and bond between mother and child brings to the fore a mother’s impact on the child’s mental health: ‘ good’ mothers provide a “warm, intimate, and continuous relationship” with the infant and young child (Bowlby, 1952, p. 11). Implicit to this theory is the idea of the mother devoting her time to the infant and her responsibility for preventing the anxiety and depression that may result from separation (ibid.). Motherhood is framed in terms of “anticipating and adapting” children’s needs and ensuring that these needs are fulfilled, while their own needs and wants are ‘buried’ beneath the child’s (Wall, 2010, p. 254). In the 1970s, the debate moved to communicational analysis of mothering, which emphasises that the mother-child relationship is a two-way interaction. For example, Piaget emphasised the mother’s interactions with her child as central to their intellectual development (Rose, 1999). Thus, in the psychology of the post- war era, mothers were conceptualised as having multiple responsibilities for childrearing, placing a strong premium on spending time with children. As Arnup (1994) stated, ideas and advice on child development made the mother “a virtual prisoner in her own home, unable to go out even to shop, lest the baby need to nurse or the two-year old suffer ‘separation anxiety’” (p. 149).

This theory has since been challenged by both historians and sociologists. Rather than there being a ‘natural’ bond between mother and child, the family unit based emotional ties are dominant instead (i.e., extended family), as husband and wife, parent and child, does not exist in traditional societies for many social and demographic reasons Feminists have criticised Bowlby’s theory as more about “enforcing and legitimating women’s socially inferior position and their exile from public life" (Rose, 1999, p. 180). Overall, psychological research on motherhood focuses on the relationship between mother and child and the ways that mothers influence the development of their children. Only in recent decades, scientists and psychologists have begun to consider 'the subjective experience of motherhood' – the thoughts, feelings, wishes, desires, and inner conflicts experienced through mothering; and the dynamic ways in which children change and affect women's lives as mothers (O'Reilly, 2010).

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[16] See: https://www.dictionary.com/browse/motherhood.

When using a feminist lens to look at the debate over mothering and childcare in psychology, I can see how the influence of psychology and the childcare manuals that have emerged could be seen to have increased the burden of rearing children and constrained women's lives. The work of Western psychologists has not only influenced Western parenting practices but practices around the world, including China. For example, when I searched 'parenting/early year education' in Amazon-China books, the bestseller was *The Gardener and The Carpenter*, by Alison Gopnik[17], an American psychologist. Alfred Adler and Jane Nelsen were on the list as well, since their work such as *Child Educational Psychology* (by Adler)[18] and *Positive Discipline (by Nelsen)*[19] is more famous among parents and teachers. While I was working in the early years education company in Shanghai, I noticed that some mothers used psychological terms such as 'the terrible twos'[20]. This inspired me to explore their knowledge and understanding around parenting. They treated parenting like a self-learning course and all these psychology books were the 'textbooks'.

3.2.1.2 An economic perspective

When searching the literature about motherhood, I found that economists too have a perspective on motherhood, one which comes out of a more structured and measurable approach. According to Piachaud (1984), in the past, most economists ignored the influence of childcare on women's everyday life. It was when labour economists recognised that the presence of childcare affects labour force participation, that they added a special variable to their equations for women (not men), to take into account the child's presence. In other words, women's hard work in rearing children had even not been recognised, let alone valued, by the labour market in previous decades.

In 1979, Piachaud published a study called *The Cost of a Child*. It contributed to a growing awareness about the living standards which a society should provide children in the UK. Piachaud divided the cost of a child into two categories: money costs and time costs. He listed the actual cost of "shoes and socks, eggs and sausages, going to school and having the occasional family treat", and pointed out that all these things requires parents to earn a certain amount of money week by week (Piachaud, 1984, p. iii). Although the cost of a child in terms of earnings has been measured, the actual cost to the childcare giver/mother in terms of her time has been "virtually ignored" (ibid.). To develop the argument of 'cost of a child', Piachaud then conducted a survey and interviews to measure the time costs of caring for a child in 1984. First, he categorised tasks people needed to do during childcare time, which are basic tasks including feeding, washing, toileting, and cooking, food shopping, cleaning etc.; educational and entertainment tasks such as reading to, playing with, and talking to children; and the hardest and most invisible task - indirect supervisory tasks, providing on-call service 24 hours per day. Piachaud was able to measure the anticipated hours to finish basic tasks. On average, he calculated that those tasks would take up at least fifty hours per week, and mothers were responsible for nine out of every ten hours, while fathers only took one in every ten. The study demonstrated what was already known, that the workload of rearing children fell primarily to women, However, this research was limited in that there were only 55 respondents. Moreover, the measurement of fathers' time was "inevitably less reliable", since fathers were not interviewed and all data came from mothers (Piachaud, 1984, p. 18).

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[17] 《园丁与木匠》

[18] 《儿童教育心理学》

[19] 《正面管教》

[20] 'The terrible twos' are often described as a time of 'gaining control', usually thought of as adults asserting control over children, who learn to control themselves. See Gallacher, 2005.

Piachaud's work was ground breaking in that it sought to measure mothers' time investment in childcare, though it only selected daily tasks that were relatively easy to measure. As Piachaud explained at the beginning of that book, mothering cannot be solely measured by the numbers of tasks or costed time alone. Thus, in my research, I look at economic aspects of childrearing and activities, particularly those that relate to education. I will also mention other economists' work such as Folbre (2001) and Razavi (2008), when discussing feminist perspective of motherhood later in this chapter. Having considered psychological and economical approaches to motherhood, in the next section I consider how sociologists conceptualise mothering and motherhood.

3.2.1.3 Sociological perspective

While from a psychological and economist perspective, it is parents who have primary responsibility for providing food and care to children, childcare provision can come from outside the home. Piachaud (1984) proposed four categories: parents (mother, father); other relatives or friends; private agencies (e.g., child-minder, playgroup); public provisions (e.g., school, day nursery). Sociologists have considered the less measurable aspects of childcare and its impact on women, given that they remain the primary childcare providers. Richardson (1993), for example, described rearing children as a "tiring", "demanding", "unending" job, with endless daily tasks, such as "bathing, dressing, feeding, putting children to bed at night, tidying up after them, responding to their demands for attention", and a lot of responsibilities which are "rarely shared" (p. 2). At the same time, Richardson argued that for many women, being a mother is also a vital aspect of establishing the sense of "security and belonging": having children is meant to prove that they are a “real woman” with maturity. Motherhood is something that a “good girl” embraces willingly, the reward being society’s approval and acceptance (Richardson, 1993, p. 2).

As the primary childcare giver, women spend enormous un-calculated time looking after children (Richardson, 1993): even where fathers do the same amount of work in the home, the results will be different because of their attitudes and the lack of responsibility they have towards childcare. Since men tend to perceive their participation or contribution in the home as “helping”, they rarely have the sense of responsibility to the work they have done/are doing (p. 14). Additionally, allocating work to a partner and then supervising them are all unseen tasks for the woman. Sometimes, even thinking about the need-to-be-done work is a mental burden for women (Emma & Dimitrijevic, 2018), one that is “invisible” and therefore “unpaid”, “boundaryless” and “never complete” physical labour (Dean et al., 2022). More importantly, the mental and emotional labour are highly likely been neglected.

These sociologists’ ideas may seem a little generalised towards the female perspective, in this paragraph I will discuss power dynamics and social expectations. Aitken (2000), as a father himself, researched fatherhood, concluding that, “even the most active fathers tend to see their role as ‘helping out’ their partners rather than taking the main responsibility for childcare themselves” (Aitken, 2000, p. 581). In non-western contexts, the expectation that mothers take primary responsibility for childcare as well as maintaining the household, poses a real dilemma for women. A study in India (Rao, 2016, p. 257) found that men and women also have different reasons when doing the same thing. For example, as parents, they may all care about their children’s wellbeing, but men put more emphasis on its relevance to educational success, academic performance, and the ability to find a job, while women care more about their children generally “doing well” in education, their child’s wellbeing, their success in marriage, their job satisfaction and happy family life (Rao, 2016, p. 262). Elsewhere, researchers focusing on the fathers’ perspective have found that fathers may encounter difficulties in childcare as well, but that it is even harder for them to speak out and seek support. Hodkinson & Das (2021) pointed out that some fathers may not be prepared to have a baby and their positioning as “peripheral yet stoic supporters” of their partners make it more difficult for them to understand their feelings as “legitimate or deserving support” (Hodkinson & Das, 2021, p. 41).

Thus, sociologists have an interest in the gender division of domestic labour and childcare. These sociologists suggest that one reason why fathers do not play a key role in parenting is because of the tendency to see themselves as “helpers” and “supporters” in the family rather than the one with the main responsibility. This insight inspired me to look at *how mothers perceive parenting/parenthood*, rather than only focusing on their perceptions of motherhood. Also, based on the debates of men and women with regards to domestic chores, from Piachaud’s time measurement to Hodkinson and Das’s fatherhood study, I found myself wondering whether when references are made to gender equality, it includes gender relations within the family? If not, then how can one talk about empowering women to fight for their rights while they are not allowed to share equal rights in the home? How can equality within the household be measured? When I asked myself these questions, there was no answer for me. It all seemed very complicated once we add the context – 'home' or 'family'.

3.2.1.4 Feminist perspectives

When reviewing sociologists' ideas on women and motherhood, I also engaged with feminist debates relating to gender roles, the gender division of labour, and care in other disciplines. Some debates from a feminist perspective are helpful for exploring gendered understandings of motherhood. Thus, in this section, I will introduce feminist perspectives on motherhood.

In *Feminism and Anthropology,* Henrietta Moore (1988) explored gender roles and the division of labour through an anthropological lens. She critically addressed the cultural specificity of gender roles and their influence on labour division across different societies. She argued against the traditional anthropological notion of universal gender norms, emphasising that "gender may be seen either as a symbolic construction or as a social relationship" which significantly influences societal structures and labour roles (Moore, 1988, p. 18). Moore critiqued the historical and cultural constructs that associate women with nature and men with culture, noting how these associations have traditionally confined women to domestic roles and men to public and political arenas. By highlighting cross-cultural differences, Moore challenged these established norms and emphasised the vast cultural variability in the roles and statuses assigned to women and men (Moore, 1988). Moore's statement shares parallels with Beauvoir's (2000) critique on maternity as a women's "physiological destiny" and "natural calling" (see 1.1), and Butler's (1999) writings on gender being a 'doing' rather than a 'being' (see 3.3.3). Such approaches demonstrate how feminist perspectives aim to challenge the traditional 'culture' of labour division. These perspectives provide a useful sociological framing of the culture of motherhood. Moore's ideas in particular help me to analyse and better understand to the cultural expectations on my participants. Moore's arguments call for a nuanced understanding that embraces feminist anthropological critiques. These critiques emphasise the constructed nature of these roles and advocate for re-evaluating the rigid frameworks that have historically defined the division of gender and labour.

Moore was not the first to discuss women's unpaid, invisible, domestic roles. Different from her anthropology background, Edholm, Harris and Young (1978) with a development studies background explored the complex dynamics of the division of labour and reproduction, critically examining how these concepts are often oversimplified in theoretical discourse. They challenged the prevailing notions that narrowly confine women to roles defined by biological reproduction. They argued, "the core of the problem, as we see it, lies in the unhistorical, atemporal nature of the category 'women'. If what defines women as women is the eternal fact of biology, this definition will intrude into any attempt at historical and theoretical specificity" (Edholm et al., 1978, p. 101). Additionally, they critiqued how the concept of reproduction is frequently mixed with social reproduction. This conflation leads to a simplification that reduces women's contributions to just biological functions. As they noted, "It is assumed that biological reproduction is merely one, unproblematic, aspect of reproduction as a whole" (ibid., p. 103). By advocating for this perspective, they called for a nuanced understanding that differentiates women's roles across "a wide territory of discussion" (ibid., p. 101). They emphasised the need for empirical and theoretical reviews to fully acknowledge the complex and variable nature of women's contributions in both productive and reproductive spheres.

Caroline Moser (1993), also from anthropology, expanded the understanding of women's reproductive role. She discussed the reproductive role of women in her work on gender planning which focused on women's 'triple roles'. She discussed how women's reproductive work intersects with their productive and community managing roles, shaping their experiences of subordination and inequality. She stated that:

> "women's work" includes not only *reproductive* work (the childbearing and rearing responsibilities) required to guarantee the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force but also *productive* work, often as secondary income earners. In rural areas this usually takes the form of agricultural work, while in urban areas women frequently work in informal sector enterprises located either in the home (in subcontracting or piece-rate work) or at the neighbourhood level." In addition, women are involved in *community managing* work undertaken at a local community settlement level in both urban and rural contexts *(Moser, 1989, p. 1801)*.

In Caroline Moser's exploration of gender roles and labour division, she addressed the nuanced and often unrecognised labour that women contribute both within and outside the household. She highlighted women's reproductive work including "childbearing responsibilities and domestic tasks", which are crucial yet often unpaid and undervalued by society (Moser, 1993, p. 28). This idea echoes Dean et al.'s (2012) opinion on childcare (see 3.2.1.3), which is an invisible, unpaid and boundaryless labour. This lack of recognition and compensation contributes to women's economic dependence and reinforces their subordinate positions within both the household and society. Moser critiqued societal norms that prioritise women's roles as mothers and caregivers, often overshadowing other pursuits. This societal expectation not only limits women's agency but also reinforces traditional gender roles, further embedding their subordination within society (Moser, 1993).

While care work is often linked with women's responsibilities, Nancy Folbre, an economist, addressed the economic implications of care work, particularly how it is undervalued and often performed by women within both the household and the broader economy. Folbre (2001) explored the economic dimensions of care labour, including its various dimensions such as emotional labour, physical care, and nurturing. She emphasised the importance of recognising and valuing care labour because of its impact on individual's well-being and social reproduction, and economic productivity. On a policy level, Folbre pointed out the needs for governmental intervention, "governmental programs of support for care are necessary, and should be improved rather than abolished" (J. Nelson, 2002, p. 189). She indicated that some personal care is provided through the market, but much has always been provided within the home without pay by family members informed by "family values", which Folbre (2001) understands as love, obligation, and reciprocity:

> "The first word implies feelings; the second morality; the third, rational calculation. I think my parents understood it this way: loving and being loved are essential to a meaningful and happy life. Each of us has some obligation for the care of other people, whether we like it or not. Moreover, if we take care of other people, they are more likely to take care of us" (p. xii).

Folbre also highlighted the necessity to support caregivers, such as through paid family leave, affordable childcare, and recognition of caregiving in economic indicators to better support caregivers and promote gender equality (Folbre, 2001).

Shahra Razavi also worked on care labour from an economic perspective, explaining that care work involves "direct care of persons", and can be paid or unpaid (Razavi, 2008, p. 3). However, she suggests that parents caring for their children while on paid "parental leave" are not "doing unpaid care work nor can they be classified as paid carers" (ibid., p. 4). Gender advocates have proposed various strategies to "overcome the many disadvantages endured by most women" due to their caregiving responsibilities and to "entice men to contribute more time to caregiving" (Razavi, 2008, p. 3). However, she notes that there are tensions within these proposals about how to both "support and value care" and "liberate women from the confines of caregiving", which would allow them greater involvement in public life (ibid.). Similar to Folbre's opinion on undervalued care labour, Razavi (2008) stated that society should recognise and value the importance of different forms of care, "but without reinforcing care work as something that only women can or should do", a belief that contributes to women's economic insecurity and limits their participation in public life (p. 3).

The UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development) research project conceptualised the institutions involved in the provision of care as a "care diamond". The care diamond includes:

> The *family/household* (where a lot of care is provided on an unpaid basis), *markets* (which may be formal or informal and which provide care in return for a fee or wage), the *public sector* (which may provide different forms of care directly through a government hospital or crèche employing public sector workers, or indirectly by subsidizing others to do so) and the *not-for-profit*

> *sector* (this category could include different type of care provision, by charities, NGOs, or through voluntary and "community" provision) *(Razavi, 2008, p. 4)*.

Razavi (2008) emphasised that typologies are always problematic and certain types of provisions might not be adequately captured, as exemplified by compensated "voluntary" care work. Furthermore, market provisions are seldom entirely independent, as the state "often subsidizes and regulates market providers" (p. 4). In addition, feminist scholars analysed the reproductive sector and its linkages with the market. This sector includes unpaid household or voluntary domestic and care work, (re)productive labour, with varying degrees of support from the state and from capitalist enterprises (which may contribute through social wage) (Cook & Razavi, 2012). While the reproductive work is "essential for both human well-being and economic growth" (ibid., p. 3), the cost of its provision are "unequally borne" (ibid., p. 4). Cook and Razavi (2012) also suggested that labour markets and social policies are gendered institutions, which differentially affect men and women. Social norms and family roles have been shown to significantly impact women's ability to earn a fair wage and control their income. Social acceptance of paid work, particularly outside the home, along with the reasons women choose to work, the nature of their jobs, and their life stages and household status, all influence their work experiences. Moreover, these researchers suggest that women's obligations to provide unpaid care often restrict the types of jobs they can pursue, leading to lower wages and reduced access to social security benefits (Cook & Razavi, 2012). Cook & Razavi's work also could be seen as an example of 'child penalty', which I will discuss in 8.3.3.

Similarly to Razavi's concept of a 'care diamond', Piachaud (1984) explored four categories of childcare provision through a feminist lens. The four categories focused specific on childcare rather than Razavi's broader conception of care (including illness, elderly care etc) and included parents, other relatives, public sectors and private agencies. Both authors explored in particular the ways in which governmental intervention were important and highlighted that caregivers' contributions needed to be valued. Piachaud's categories are particularly helpful for this study as they place emphasis on the real situation of childcare and expand an understandings of childcare from home-based to a wider society. Moreover, these discussions of care labour provide a useful broader framing to consider mothers' practice on children's education and their arrangements of family members.

Beyond a discussion of women's paid and unpaid work, feminist research has also explored debates on the "harsh choices" of Chinese women. For example, Cook & Dong (2011) found that the main obstacle influencing the participation of women with young children in paid work is the lack of "affordable, decent childcare services" (p. 955). Meanwhile, women were expected to take responsibilities to look after the elderly as well. Cook & Dong (2011) explored how these increased responsibilities affected women's choices between paid work and unpaid care. They pointed out that women often face conflicts between these roles, impacting their well-being and that of their families. The need for unpaid care work, such as childcare and eldercare, often limited women's participation in the workforce and affected their income potential. This debate on women's limited participation and income in the workforce echoes Claudia Goldin's gendered perspective on labour economics.

According to Goldin (2014), over the past century, there has been significant convergence between men and women in terms of labour force participation, hours worked, occupations, and education levels. From the economic perspective, Goldin (2014) suggested that women have begun to outpace men in educational attainment and are increasingly represented in professional and graduate education. Despite these advancements, a significant gender pay gap persists. This gap is influenced not only by direct discrimination but also by the fact that the labour market disproportionately rewards individuals who can work long and particular hours—practices that often disadvantage women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities. A substantial part of the gender pay gap, she suggests, can be attributed to the "mother penalty" which also has been discussed in Cook & Razavi (2012). Mothers often face significant disadvantages in earnings and career progression compared to non-mothers and compared to fathers. This is largely due to taking time off for child-rearing, working fewer hours, or needing more flexible schedules—all of which can lead to fewer opportunities for raises and promotions (Goldin, 2014).

However, Goldin (2014) argued that achieving gender equality in the labour market does not necessarily require government intervention nor solely pushing men to take more responsibility at home. Rather, it primarily necessitates changes in how jobs are structured and compensated. A major factor is increasing temporal flexibility—allowing employees to have more control over their work hours without a penalty in pay or career advancement.

The above discussions on women's identities and roles from a feminist perspective provide a useful lens through which to consider the structures of motherhood. Drawing from anthropology, sociology, development studies, and economics, I am able to consider motherhood through the lens of gender inequality in care labour, and women's 'harsh' choices on childcare, family care, and workforce participation. The concept of 'paid and unpaid' work also reflects women's different roles in home, workplace, community and wider society. The debates around unpaid labour are particularly helpful to investigate how mothers in Shanghai perceive their 'unpaid' job in home and in relation to children's education. In addition, the concept of 'harsh choice' provides a way to consider how women are 'forced' to make choices between work and home (Orgad, 2019) and how those middle-class mothers balance their lives while they are learning to be a 'good' mother (see 3.2.2).

Furthermore, a feminist economic framing provides a different lens for me to look at motherhood, such as the categories of childcare tasks and the cost a child needs - both financial and emotional (Piachaud, 1984), the 'mother penalty' women face (which is invisible and hardly recognised) (Goldin, 2014) and the 'care diamond' (Razavi, 2008), which will be explored in chapter 5 of this thesis. In particular, these feminist debates imply that the current gendered division of labour should be intervened and changed. This implication will be discussed in relation to my data in more detail in chapter 6.

Although I deliberately did not position myself as a feminist as I felt it may put off some participants in my specific context, I have nonetheless drawn on certain ideas in the literature I reviewed especially from feminist economists, as noted above. Based on my research context and my understandings of motherhood in China, I have mainly adopted a sociological perspective in this thesis, however, I feel that debates around paid/unpaid labour and women's different roles are particularly helpful to analyse mothers' everyday practices as well. In addition, a gendered lens helps me to better understand the division of labour in family and how it reflects the power dynamics. More importantly, it provides a clearer conceptualisation of motherhood in relation to women's roles, care labour and paid/unpaid work.

In next section, I will focus on the everyday discourse on motherhood including popular terms and debates around contemporary mothers.

3.2.2 Everyday discourses on motherhood

In the previous section, I noted how motherhood has been conceptualised by experts in different disciplines. In this section, I focus on the popular debates around motherhood in everyday life and how they are influenced by economic, psychological and sociological discourses. These everyday conversations around motherhood framed my research with more specific themes, such as 'good mother', 'tiger mother', 'intensive mothering' and 'online mothering'. These themes were then useful in analysing the research data.

3.2.2.1 Being a 'good' mother

Although psychologists' opinions on mothering (see 3.2.1) are mainly rooted in the research and ideas of the last century, it seems those ideas are still around in everyday discourse. For example, women are still educated, instructed and trained to be a 'good mother' at some point during womanhood. Recalling how psychologists define motherhood, good mothers always place their children's needs first: they tend to bury their own needs and wants, so as to spend good quality time with their children, care about children's mental health and future development and take responsibility for any separation anxiety (Bowlby, 1951; Wall, 2004, 2010). Children in these circumstances, have been posited as vulnerable, passive, and lacking in agency, while mothers have been appointed the role of developing their child's potential (Caputo, 2007). As discussed in the previous section, mothers are charged with responsibilities for the child's cognitive development, emotional health and future happiness (Weiss,1978). In other words, mothers are accountable for children's health, school performance and other outcomes; if such outcomes fall below expectations, they may be blamed as providing "inadequate parenting" (Weiss, 1978, p. 186). The requirements for being a good mother look overwhelming if not superhuman but also somehow vague. It still remains unclear what kind of mother is a ‘good mother’ and it makes me wonder, why is that? If someone is not doing the required things, does that make her a ‘bad’ mother? And in any case, is the polarisation between the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mother useful at all?

3.2.2.2 Intensive mothering and the forced choice

Within regards to the notion of good mothering, Hays (1996) has argued that contemporary society has disseminated an ideology on intensive mothering that urges mothers “to give unselfishly of their time, money, and love on behalf of sacred children” (Hays, 1996, p. 97). She questions why our culture encourages women to dedicate so much of themselves while over half of them with young children are also working outside home? Why does a logic of unselfish nurturing guide mother’s behaviour in many aspects of life? Hays suggests that the “socially constructed cultural images” of being a good mother remain the mother who is at home doing all the “cleaning, sewing, cooking, shopping, doing the laundry, or comforting her mate” or focusing on children’s needs and ensuring their appropriate development. The alternative image is that of a ‘supermom’ always juggling between work and family (Hays, 1996, p. 132). Both options in Hays’ view are socially accepted but their coexistence represents a cultural ambivalence with regards to how mothers should behave. For example, both groups of mothers encounter criticism: stay-at-home mothers are described as lazy and boring, while working mothers are accused of neglecting their children. To summarise, in Hays’ view, a good mother has to be intensively focused on her children; the only problem is whether she can also play her part as a paid working woman at the same time (Hays, 1996, p. 131).

A study involving educated middle-class women’s experiences who had left successful paid work to become full-time mothers, Shani Orgad (2019) argued that these mothers had been “forced” to quit their career and return home by cultural conditioning (also see Cook & Dong, 2011). In some ways, middle-class privileged mothers can be seen as having power in society: they are framed as role models by mass media and the advertising industry, even if they find it hard to juggle work and home particularly in relation to childcare (see Razavi ,2008; Cook & Razavi, 2012). However, Orgad points out that even these middle-class privileged mothers who seem to be making “a completely free, personal, autonomous choice” are in fact shaped by policy and popular discourse, highly influenced by gender inequality in the workplace and the home. The balanced woman is seen as more like an “ideal consumer”, a product of social, political and economic transformations, reflecting a changing division of labour (Orgad, 2019, p. 50).

3.2.2.3 Tiger mother, helicopter mother, and hands-off mother

I have already discussed the ‘intensive’ mother, which appears to be associated in popular discourse with the ‘good’ mother. One type of mother that seems to be specific to the Asian context, is the ‘tiger mother’. The image of ‘tiger mother’ came from and has become popularised in Amy Chua’s book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Chua, 2011). Tiger mothering is described as a strict, achievement-focused childrearing style, which includes “high parental monitoring, moderate level of hostility and punishment, and low emotional warmth” (Lui, 2020, para. 1). Lui & Rollock (2013) suggest ‘tiger parenting’ as an Asian parenting style is aimed at “intellectual and academic achievement and competency, with an emphasis on parental control and offspring training” (Lui & Rollock, 2013, p. 453). Some researchers have argued that ‘tiger parenting’ is not as efficient as Chua stated and is not the most popular parenting style within Chinese American families (Kim, 2013). However, Chua argue that the response to this new term reflected how “we parents, including me, are all so anxious about whether we're doing the right thing. You can never know the results. It's this latent anxiety” (Noorain & Amy, 2011, para. 14). However, Lui & Rollock (2013) suggest that the Asian-American parenting style described by Chua may come from Asian culture, which values “obedience, respect for elders and authority, harmonious group dynamics and collectivism, and the importance of education” (Lui & Rollock, 2013, p. 453). Compared with mainstream parenting of European Americans where the emphasis is on self-esteem, independence, sensitivity, responsiveness with optimal parental control (ibid.). In Chua’s case, the ’obedience’ of children clearly showed her power and control on children’s education and everyday life. This idea of ‘culture’ interests me and leads me to think about how cultural backgrounds impact parenting styles, specifically, I want to explore, what does it mean of being a ‘good’ mother in Confucius culture.

When I review ‘tiger parenting’ literature, which apparently is a kind of ‘intensive parenting’ but with Chinese feature, I encountered another Western term – ‘helicopter parenting’. Like tiger mothers, with their focus on children’s academic achievement and success, the term ‘helicopter parenting’ (Weber, 2016) also contains an element of criticism. Helicopter mothers focus on every aspect of children’s life – always “hovering over”, being overprotective and overinvolved. ‘Helicopter parent’ has been compared with ‘tiger parent’, both criticised as ‘overparenting’ which can have a negative influence on children’s future development (Weber, 2016). However, I wonder what is the distinction between ‘overparenting’ and ‘intensive parenting’? Are ‘tiger mother’ and ‘helicopter mother’ ‘good’ mothers?

For some mothers, those kind of ‘intensive parenting’ is not the best way to nurture children. In contrast to ‘helicopter parenting’, a parenting style that gives children plenty of freedom is known as ‘hands-off parenting’ (Lloyd, 2019). This approach is underpinned by the belief that children need to be given plenty of space to face challenges and difficulties, to learn that they are capable of solving those problems and become more independent, confident and responsible as a result (CBS New York, 2018; Wagner, 2022; Winston, 2019). The main message of this parenting style is that “the best support is less support” (CBS New York, 2018). After experimenting with hands-off parenting, Winston (2019) strongly recommends being a hands-off mother, because “it is glorious” – no more nagging, worrying and fighting. Basically, her practice was to withdraw “mum service” when the child is old enough (her son was a teenager) and spend that time on her own to ensure her own happiness. However, as Richardson (1993) and Hays (1996) have pointed out in their work, the daily “unending”, “tiring” “basic tasks” (Piachaud, 1984) of childcare relate more to younger children who need feeding, cleaning, dressing, bathing etc. As they get older, they progressively need less of the basic tasks but more supervision, talking with and playing with, which could be a big challenge for someone adopting the ‘hands-off parenting’ approach.

3.2.2.4 Positive mother: the product of social expectation

Among the discussions of mothering and motherhood in this section, one question that kept coming to me is, do women have to be mothers? Richardson (1993) shared that when she was young, the married women around her whether or not they had children, advised her “don’t do it!”. Just like my participants (see Chapter 1) these women urged her to live her own life for a little bit longer. As a researcher, Richardson reflected on whether this might be because of a “sense of loss” (Richardson, 1993, p. 5). For those women, having children meant giving up a certain way of life which one might “regret” later. Motherhood, she argues, is accompanied by a series of important social and psychological losses (Richardson, 1993, p. 5). Richardson (1993) goes on to say that when a woman stops working due to motherhood, this may involve a “loss of status, loss of independence, loss of privacy, loss of social network, and loss of an idealised and romanticised vision of motherhood”. Among all the losses, the most significant is “the loss of personal identity and individuality” (p. 6).

Mothers do not have to shoulder motherhood alone. They can receive help and support from partner, family and friends, or having money to hire someone to look after the children and share the responsibility (Richardson, 1993; Razavi, 2008; Cook & Razavi, 2012). As Brown & Harris suggested, a close supportive friendship, an emotionally intimate partner and paid work outside the home are all factors to make a woman less vulnerable to depression (Brown & Harris, 1978). Regarding this, Lupton & Schmied (2002) also find that for a group of Australia middle-class women, paid work is seen as a vital part of selfhood. Those first-time mothers agree that being a stay-at-home mother is seen as the “ideal” model of a ‘good mother’ although they also acknowledge that it is hard to achieve in practice. Because they feel paid work provide opportunities to obtain “self-fulfilment and self-actualisation”, while being a stay at home mother can feel like a “distorted” or “constrained” self (Lupton & Schmied, 2002, p. 106) whereas balancing this with engagement in the world of work can help to stay in touch with the “real me”.

Stay-at-home mothers, according to Orgad (2019), do not seem to be encouraged to acknowledge or express feelings of loss or regret. The popular strategy to cope with negative feelings is “going for a run”. Indeed, physical exercise is always recommended by contemporary ‘self-help’ experts and the mass media. The general message seems to be that “the painful and uncomfortable feeling”, “the disappointments and anxieties” are too difficult to face and that women should simply avoid them and go for a run instead (Orgad, 2019, p. 201). Additionally, the current “happy industry” and “confidence culture” do not approve negative and difficult feelings, particularly “anger and complaints”. Instead, they advocate a focus on “happiness” and “positive energy” (Orgad, 2019, p. 201). In addition, women’s dissatisfaction with motherhood tends to be ignored because of the women’s own sense of guilt: traditional beliefs have taught them that they should not have these feelings. Therefore, they attempt to “contain and conceal” their real feelings and keep up the pretence of being a ‘good’ mother, blaming themselves for these feelings (Richardson, 1993, p. 4).

3.2.2.5 'Sharenting’ and motherhood

Another key element of this thesis is the notion of online mothering practices. In this section, I introduce key discussions around mothers’ online practices, with a particular focus on ‘sharenting’.

Alongside the development of social media, the term ‘sharenting’ has been used to refer to the parental practices that have developed on digital platforms. It is a shorthand term to describe parents who “share information about themselves and children online, concern both parents and the wider public” (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 110). In general, sharenting can be used to ‘show off’ good parenting and children’s success. However, it can also be described as the oversharing of children-centred images and contents in online parental practices (Lazard et al., 2019). Another way to understand sharenting is as “a complex affective and intersectional accomplishment that produces motherhood and family as communicative activities within digital social practices” (Lazard et al., 2019, p. 7).

Questions have been raised about sharenting, the most urgent concerning children’s privacy (Ranzini et al., 2020). When parents share their parenting experiences and children’s daily activities on digital platforms, they are the gatekeepers of children as well as the narrator of children’s stories (Steinberg, 2016). They therefore have a certain duty to be concerned about the “what, where and how much to share”; in other words, they have responsibility to themselves but also to their children (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 122; Marasli et al., 2016). Blum-Ross & Livingstone (2017, p.122) argue that “the boundaries of their digital personhood”, “what are their stories to tell” and more importantly, the question of “who is been presented” urgently need to be addressed. Interestingly, a parent’s identity has “an inescapable implied connection” to their children. Although some parents try not be tied to their children online and prefer to be an individual, many choose to “embrace the notion that being a parent encompasses a relational identity where the child and parent mutually exist in an imbricated visual, social media narrative” (Holiday et al., 2022, p. 1). Parents’ presentations on social media that involve their children are “complex narratives” of their own “aspiration, abilities, quest for control, and recognition of inadequacies” (Holiday et al., 2022, p. 10).

Although there is evidence of fathers’ participation and engagement on digital parenting platforms (Ammari et al., 2018; Campana et al., 2020), mothers still are the main childcare giver and sharer in most cases. Nonetheless, because the focus in this research is on mothers, fathers' participations and contributions to family life from the mother's perspective are relevant. These discussions and terms of online mothering have been a useful tool to help me highlight key themes during data analysis and expand my research question from schooling anxiety-focused to a broader women-focused topic. The term of 'sharenting' brings me a lens to look at mothers' online performance, which includes the boundary of sharing, what to share, share to whom, on what platform etc.

In this section, I have discussed the conceptual lenses offered by different disciplines as a means for understanding motherhood and mothering practices in everyday life. I have identified key academic discourses (3.2.1) and everyday discourses (3.2.2) around motherhood. This has provided several key themes for my analytic framework (such as "good mother", "work-life balance", "sharenting" etc.) while designing the research and collecting data. I will return to these themes later in the analysis and discussion. In addition, the multidisciplinary discussion of motherhood offers a broader view of and social context for motherhood and childrearing. I will discuss how the economic, psychological and sociological debates influence and are linked to mothers' everyday practices on education, family division of labour and digital communities in Chapter 8.

3.3 Learning in communities of practice

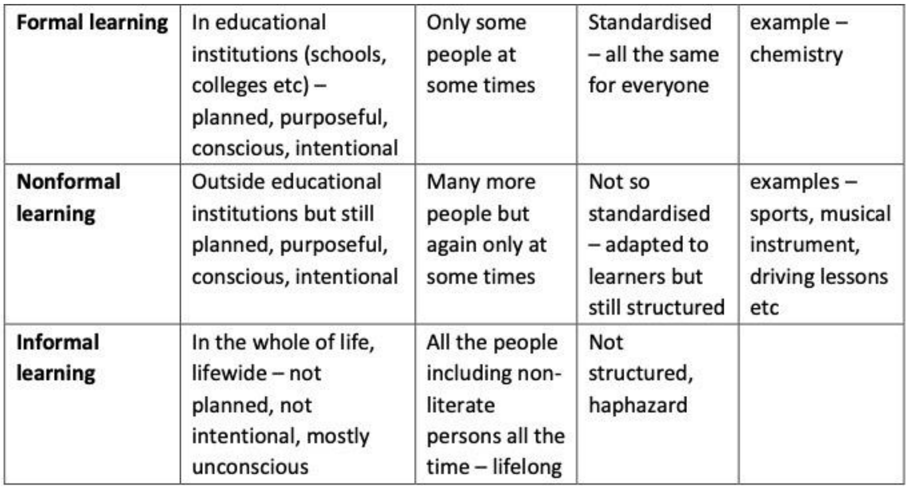
When looking at motherhood and mothering practices online and "offline", I was inspired by the ideas of Rogers' informal learning theory and Wenger's communities of practices. I hope to look at mothers' informal/non-formal learning in different communities of practice. Moving from Rogers to Wenger, the theory of 'communities of practice' was useful as an approach to 'knowing and learning' (Wenger, 2009) in the context of online platforms. Specifically, the 'communities of practice' led me to look not only at the role online communities play in shaping motherhood but also to investigate what kind of learning mothers engage with in online communities.

3.3.1 Learning theory

3.3.1.1 Different types of learning

Many researchers have defined the concept of learning and learning methods (Brookfield, 1984; Kolb, 1984). I adopted Rogers' (2014) approach which distinguishes three forms of learning: formal, non-formal, informal. Rogers (2002) conceptualises learning as consisting of changes in knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes which lead to "those more or less permanent changes and reinforcements brought about …in one's patterns of acting, thinking and/or feeling" (p. 86). Following this idea, I found that the formal, non-formal, informal learning continuum was particularly useful to my research design and later analysis, since I could use it as key a tool to look at mothers' different practices in the family as well as in online communities.

UNESCO's (2009, p. 27) definition of formal learning relates to schooling or institutional tutoring, as it occurs as "a result of experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support which leads to certification". Originally, I did not think that formal or nonformal learning would form part of my research: since my participants would be middle-class mothers, I assumed that they would have already completed higher education. However, when I came across Rogers (2020) (see Figure 4), my understanding about learning deepened.



Formal learning	In educational institutions (schools, colleges etc) – planned, purposeful, conscious, intentional	Only some people at some times	Standardised – all the same for everyone	example – chemistry
Nonformal learning	Outside educational institutions but still planned, purposeful, conscious, intentional	Many more people but again only at some times	Not so standardised – adapted to learners but still structured	examples – sports, musical instrument, driving lessons etc
Informal learning	In the whole of life, lifewide – not planned, not intentional, mostly unconscious	All the people including non-literate persons all the time – lifelong	Not structured, haphazard	

Figure 4 Three forms of learning, from Rogers (2020) PowerPoint on MA Adult literacy seminar

Rogers (2020) defines formal learning as "planned, purposeful, conscious, and intentional", structured, such as learning chemistry in school. While non-formal learning is also "planned, purposeful, conscious, and intentional" and still structured, the focus is more on the learner, for example, learning a sport, musical instrument or a skill such as driving. In contrast, informal learning is "not planned, not intentional, mostly unconscious", unstructured, 'haphazard'; all people are involved, and it happens throughout life (Rogers, 2014, 2020). At the same time, Rogers did not limit learning to specific environments such as a classroom, training centre or workplace, nor did he perceive learning as discrete categories of formal, nonformal, informal. Rather, he suggested that there is a continuum of learning based on a mix of formal and informal learning, which occurs throughout life (Rogers, 2003). Rogers also argued that separating these different types of learning was a mistake since "the boundaries between them are often blurred as they merge into each other" (Rogers 2014, p. 10). As Colley, Hodkinson & Malcom (2003) have stated "it is not possible to separate out informal, non-formal learning from formal learning settings" (p. iii).

Rogers' learning continuum generated a range of questions in my mind. For example, I wondered what kind of learning mothers engage with in everyday life? And how does their learning differ in different contexts (such as in online communities and in family life)? With these thoughts, I decided to not merely look at mothers' information learning in online communities (as introduced in Chapters 1 and 2), but to investigate a broader view, by looking at their learning practices on a daily base, especially informal learning.

The European Commission (2001, cited in UNESCO 2009) defines informal learning as "resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured and typically does not lead to certification…in most cases, informal learning is non-intentional" (p. 32). This definition of informal learning is widely quoted. Expanding on this definition, Rogers argued that informal learning includes "all the unconscious influences through the family and groups within the wider society, through religion and sport, through shared music and peer pressures in such things as dress and computer games, and through the many accidents which occur during the course of our lives" (Rogers, 2014, p. 17). The reason I focus on mothers' informal learning in everyday life is because it covers more kind of learning practices in daily life. For example, Rogers explained, there are multiple types of informal learning, such as self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1984; Tough, 1989), incidental learning, and unintentional learning etc. I think these definitions will be helpful to analysis my later data and locate mothers' learning practices in a certain term which might be useful to understand motherhood in different aspect.

In further categorising different kinds of informal learning, Rogers (2014) suggested that one should look not only at learners' intentions but also learning providers' (sponsors) intentions: for example, some learning might not be intended by the learner but may be intended by the learning-provider. Since learning in my research occurs in an online context, online content providers might have intentions that the content receivers (learners) may not be aware of so that their learning is unintentional and unconscious. For instance, 'incidental learning' happens when the person may not be aware that they are learning: they may think they are simply carrying out a task. This kind of learning is also referred to as 'task-conscious learning' (Rogers, 2014). It is also helpful to distinguish between incidental and 'accidental learning'. For example, advertisements against smoking, unhealthy eating or HIV/AIDS lead to incidental learning while "the unintended learning through media, unexpected interactions with others or experiences, cancelled journeys, sudden challenges, new friendships, accidents, becoming lost and so on" are accidental learning, since neither learner nor learning sponsor intends learning to take place (Rogers, 2014, p. 19). All this informal learning is largely "invisible" because it lies below the visibility line (Rogers, 2014, p. 29). As shown in Figure 5 in "the iceberg of learning" (Tough, 1979), the unseen part is "not only larger but also more influential than what can be seen for it supports and indeed determines what can be seen above the water line" (Livingstone, 2001, 2002; Rogers, 2014, p. 22).

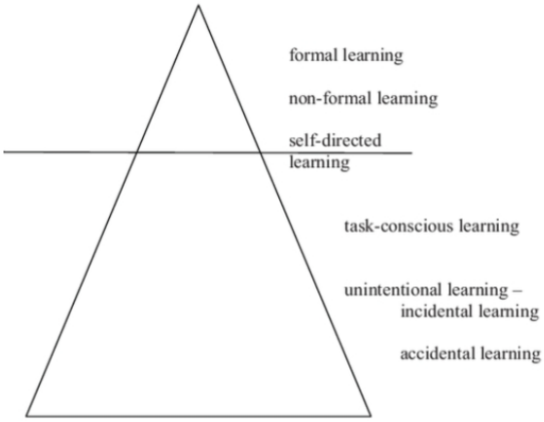


Figure 5 The iceberg of learning (Rogers, 2014 based on Tough, 1979)

When reading through Rogers' work on adult learning, I was interested in his discussion about power relationships in learning. Rogers (2003) argues that the main difference between adult learning and children's learning lies in the different power relationships between learners and teachers. He goes on to argue that child student learners and adult learners have a different acceptance of their student identities while they are constructing childhood/adulthood; thus, the teaching-learning relations are different in learning programmes aimed at adults compared to those aimed at children. This was a reminder to consider the power relationships in learning, in my case, in online communities as well as in the home.

Rogers' lens on informal learning also enables me to look at mothers' online practices in a different way. I could imagine that when mothers discuss their children's schoolings and/or share their anxieties, experiences or individual stories in online communities, they are unconsciously engaged in informal learning as well, without intention. Online communities as a part of mothers' everyday life, could be cautiously explored and analysed in my research from an informal and nonformal learning perspective.

3.3.1.2 Different domains of learning

Apart from the types of learning, I was also interested in different domains of learning in mothers' everyday lives. Specifically, I wanted to explore how do these different domains shape mothers' learning practices? As explained earlier, I employed the concept of 'literacy as social practice' as my basis for understanding learning in this thesis. In this section, I will introduce the concept of 'literacy domains', which helped me to look at mothers' learning practices in a different way.

In *Local Literacies*, Barton & Hamilton (1998) emphasised, "there are different literacies associated with different domains of life" (p. 7). Literacy domains refer to the broad areas within which literacy activities take place, and each domain has its own specific norms, values, and practices related to literacy. They suggested that domains are defined by social institutions and settings, which could include places like homes, workplaces, schools, and communities. Each domain has its unique set of literacy practices associated with the activities and goals specific to that domain. However, the distinction between home and other domains is less clear cut than they first imagined:

> There is a distinctiveness to many home literacy practices, but what is more striking is the range of different literacies which are carried out in the home, including work and school literacies which are brought home where they mingle together *(Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 188)*.

They found that individuals often navigate multiple domains, and that these domains can intersect and influence each other. For example, the literacy practices in which a person engages at work might differ from those at home, yet skills and habits from one domain can transfer to and affect practices in another (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Following this discussion, I want to extend this concept in relation to literacy to analyse the different domains of learning. As Barton & Hamilton (1998) suggested in relation to literacy, different learning takes place in different spaces (homes, workplaces, schools, religious institutions, community centres). In this research, analysing the spaces of learning was particularly important. For instance, I set out to investigate different types of learning in the household, the online community, the educational market, and wider societal spaces such as tourism (educational camp, museum visiting). I will talk more about this in Chapter 6 when I analyse mothers' learning practices.

3.3.2 Communities of practice

In Rogers' learning theory, learning is seen as "a set of on-going processes" (Rogers, 2014a, p. 26). These have been framed in various ways by educationalists: some pay attention to these processes as taking place in interaction with sociocultural contexts, such as in the 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger-Trayner, 2008). I found Wenger's work very helpful in forming my research sub questions and shifting the focus of my online exploration. It is a theory that became central to my later data analysis, including the key elements that I wanted to look at, namely, learning, community, practice and identity.

3.3.2.1 Defining communities of practice

Wenger (2009) defined communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (para. 2). In other words, the communities of practice are formed by people who "engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour", such as "a band of artists seeking new forms of expression", "a group of engineers working on similar problems", "a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope" (ibid.). This definition implicates that learning could be the reason the community gathers, or an incidental outcome of community members interactions. In relation to learning theory, Barton & Tusting (2005, p. 2) see a 'community of practice' (CoP) as predicated on the idea that "people typically come together in groupings to carry out activities in everyday life, in the workplace and in education".

Wenger highlighted that not every community is a community of practice, and conversely, not every practice necessarily involves a community. For example, a residential neighbourhood is often called "the community" but it is usually not a community of practice. Similarly, playing scales on the piano is often called practice, but it is not a community of practice either (Wenger-Trayner, 2008). A community of practice involves three crucial factors. First, the domain - a community should have an 'identity' by sharing an interest; second, the community - in the community, based on sharing an interest, there needs to be regular interactions and the building of relationships that enable them to learn from each other; third, the practice – a community of practice is not only a community of interest: people in that community are practitioners; they develop a shared practice which "may be more or less self-conscious" (Wenger, 2009). Community members develop their practices through diverse activities such as problem solving, requests for information, seeking experience, reusing assets, discussing developments, visits, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps etc. (ibid.). These practices provide community members the opportunity to learn from each other and this learning process in a specific situation is unintentional and situated, that is, so-called situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Mothering practice as a community of practice in this thesis draws on both Lave and Wenger's definition of community of practice and situated learning and Street's (1984) theory of 'literacy as social practice'. Thus, 'mothering practice' in this thesis is conceptualised as a 'social practice' situated in social contexts. In exploring learning in this community of practice, I also use the term 'learning as social practice'. According to Wenger (2009),

> Communities of practice have been around for as long as human beings have learned together. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies, we all belong to communities of practice, a number of them usually. In some we are core members. in many we are merely peripheral. And we travel through numerous communities over the course of our lives (para.8).

In Wenger's description, communities of practice are everywhere in our daily life. The task of defining communities of practice led me to rethink: online communities are viewed through a learning lens in this research. These ideas of different communities, practices and situated learning, helped me to explore how mothers' online communities differ from other communities; what kind of practices they engage in on digital platforms as well as in their every daily life; and what role the platform plays in their situated learning. In the following sections, I discuss in more depth the key characteristics of CoP, with a particular focus on mutual engagement. I also unpack the theoretical development of this concept which has underpinned my research.

3.3.2.2 Key characteristics of CoP

Wenger-Traynor (2008) describe a community of practice as having three characteristics: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Of the three, mutual engagement is the most relevant to my research, although joint enterprise and shared repertoire also helped me to analyse my data about mothers' learnings and practices in online communities.

According to Wenger-Traynor (2008), membership is a matter of mutual engagement in a community of practice: it is what defines the community. The term membership is "not a synonym for group, team or network…not just a matter of social category…not defined merely by who knows whom…neither is geographical proximity sufficient to develop a practice" (p. 74); mutual engagement requires interactions, of course, and geographical proximity can help, but as Wenger says, working in the same office is not the reason to form a community of practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2008). Transforming mutual engagement into a community of practice requires work: "community maintenance" work is "intrinsic" to any practice; however, compared to the instrumental aspect of that practice, it is "less visible" and "easily undervalued or even totally unrecognized" (p. 75). Also, within a community of practice, the way people deal with dilemma and aspiration are diverse but influenced by the relations they create through mutual engagement. For example, in the case of claim processors (in Wenger-Trayner 2008), they work together, see each other every day, talk with each other and exchange information and opinions, thereby directly affecting each other's understandings. Through this process, they create differences as well as similarities; they belong to a community of practice in which people help each other: knowing how to give and receive help is more important than trying to know everything oneself. Such mutual engagement creates relationships among people; it connects members in ways that are deeper than more abstract similarities. Thus a community of practice can become 'a very tight node of interpersonal relationships' (ibid., p. 76).

At the same time, Wenger-Trayner (2008) argues that 'community' in the CoP is not an idealised community. That is to say, "peace, happiness, and harmony are not necessary properties of a community of practice…there are plenty of disagreements, tensions, and conflicts…Disagreement, challenges, and competition can all be forms of participation" (p. 77). Indeed, in some communities of practice, conflict and misery can even constitute the core characteristic of a shared practice (ibid.). A shared practice connects participants to each other in diverse and complex ways, and the relations they build reflect the complexity of doing things together. The whole argument around mutual engagement draws my attention to more detailed communications and activities in women's everyday life, especially in their online practices. With this lens, I realised that my focus should not only be what mothers talk about in online communities, but also how they talk about it and how others react.

Joint enterprise as another characteristic of practice as a source of community coherence, has three key aspects that keep a community of practice together (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 77). First, it is the result of “a collective process of negotiation” that reflects the full complexity of mutual engagement. Second, it is defined by the participants in the process of pursuing it, and it is their “negotiated response to their situation”. Third, it is “not just a stated goal, but creates among participants relations of mutual accountability that become an integral part of practice” (ibid., p. 78). This characteristic explains the collective response/answer to a proposed situation in a group and helped me to look at mothers not only as individuals but also as a collective with negotiated responses to their situation.

The third characteristic of a CoP is the idea of a shared repertoire. The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions etc., it also includes the discourse with which members create meaningful statements about the world, and the ways they express “their forms of memberships and their identities as members” (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 83). This explanation inspired me to explore the details of mothers’ perceptions, rather than simply to look at their opinions on a topic. It also awakened a curiosity within me to look at whether they shared values, identities, habits, understandings, whether unconsciously or unintentionally.

Thus, the notion of CoP has provided an invaluable lens through which to explore mothers’ practice and participation in online and offline communities. It also helped me to analyse the different types of learning in those communities of practice. More importantly, the three key characteristics gave me a framework through which to explore mothers’ activities and investigate their response to certain situations both individually as well as collectively.

3.3.2.3 Theoretical development of the concept: from CoP to MCoP

Communities of practice was originally used in learning theory and remains its primary use. Lave & Wenger (1991) coined the term when studying apprenticeship as a learning model. The primary focus of this learning theory is ‘learning as social participation’ where participation is understood as “a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities” (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 4). Meanwhile, social participation as a process of learning and knowing, has been defined in two ways. First, it requires not only participating activities but being an active member of the community. All members in communities of practice are supposed to engage in various activities, such as developing resources, experiences, tools and sharing stories. Second, social participation involves “ both participation and non-participation”, and individuals’ identities are “shaped by combination of the two” (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 164). Wenger sees non-participation as “an inevitable part of life”; when participation and non-participation refer only to relations of insider and outsider, they simply reflect individuals’ membership in specific communities of practice and not in others (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 165). Therefore, adopting the idea of social participation in my research, I not only look at women’s active participation in online communities/social life but also their 'non-participation' in some social activities, which helped to generate richer discussions around the data.

Another key term to CoP in the context of learning is 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Building on the idea of 'learning as social participation', Lave & Wenger (1991) also posited that when newcomers join an established community, they spend time observing other members' activities to find out how this community works and how can they participate, which could also be seen as informal learning in the community (see 3.3.1 different types of learning). This socialisation process is described as 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Newcomers can learn their identity and role as they move from peripheral participation in the community towards core participation (Martin, 2005). This remind me of mothers' performance in the online communities (WeChat groups) that I managed before (see Chapter 1): newcomers were usually quiet while older members were maybe more active and powerful.

An interest in the dynamics within online communities has developed into a sub category of CoP, which is mobile communities of practice (MCOP) (Kietzmann et al., 2013): it looks at how members learn from each other through practice and participation in online communities. When group members "conduct work, communicate with one another and participate in community work on the go", a community of practice becomes a MCOP (ibid., p. 285).

The concepts of participation, nonparticipation and peripheral participation within a CoP deepened my understanding about learning and social participation. In addition, the move from communities of practice to mobile communities of practice in the research field strengthened my decision to focus more on online communities instead of "offline" only. It also provided me a useful term to deepen the analysis of mothers' social practices in online communities, particularly in terms of their participation and non-participation in discussing various topics.

3.3.3 Conceptualising identity

The idea of mothers' different types of participation in various communities of practice inspired me to also look at their multiple identities. Since my study aimed to explore how mothers engage socially both online and offline, it was essential to think about their personal and social identities, especially how they present themselves on digital platforms. In this section, I review relevant literature on the topic of identity and explain how I used these ideas in my analysis.

Essentialists perceive identity as "rigidly fixed and exist[ing] outside of action: product rather than process". This viewpoint ignores the ways in which people and societies are always changing and evolving (Omoniyi & White, 2006). Hall (2011) argued that identity "does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change" (p. 3), but rather as "never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions" (p. 4). In simpler terms, our identities do not stay the same as we go through life – they are shaped by different situations and times. I find Hall's idea helpful for studying my research data about how mothers approach education and online communities, as it allows me to understand how their identities shift and adapt.

When looking at mothers' performance in online and "offline" practice, I came across Butler's work. Butler (1999) suggested that gender is not something we have but something we perform or do. She explained that gender is continually produced and reproduced through our actions and interactions within society, in other words, gender is a series of repeated acts, behaviours, and gestures that create the illusion of a stable and natural identity. These performances of gender are influenced by social norms, cultural expectations and power relations. Butler challenged existing understandings of gender as being a fixed and essential aspect of individuals, arguing that gender is socially constructed and maintained through repeated performances.

I was inspired by Butler's work on gender and started to think about mother as a gendered identity that could be shaped or formed through social norms, cultural expectations and power relations as well.

3.3.3.1 Individual identity and social identity

During the exploration of the mothers' shared repertoire, I was interested in the idea that people in a community of practice may not only form and share their styles of membership but their identities as members as well, however unintentionally. Wenger-Trayner (2008) argued that using the concept of identity here does not mean only focusing on the person's "individual self" but on the person's social experience as well, to build on identity while negotiating the meaning of those experiences of membership in social communities. Therefore, identity is more like a "pivot" between the social and the individual (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 145).

Furthermore, for Wenger-Trayner (2008), the individual and collective are not opposite positions and the focus on identity as fluid does not mean the denial of the individual. There may be "tensions, conflicts or concessions" in some cases, but where there is conflict, there is the possibility that "individual and social development enhance each other" (ibid., p. 147). Acknowledging that there can be specific tensions between individuals and collectives is "very different from positing a dichotomy with a fundamental divergence between them" (ibid.). In fact, in everyday life, it is difficult to draw boundaries between the sphere of the individual and the sphere of the collective/social. For example, even our private thoughts which contain concepts, understandings, and perspectives, come from our participation in social communities. Wenger then also claimed that our membership in any community of practice is just a part of our identity; our identities are not something we can easily "turn on and off" and "our various forms of participation are not merely sequences in time" (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 159). For instance, in Wenger's example of claim processors, these individuals would come to the office without their children, but this does not mean that they are only officers; their conversation in the office will reflect their participation in other practices and performance of other identities. Similarly, when I look at mothers' performance in online groups, I do not only focus on their identity as a group member, but on their whole experience as individuals in a digital community of practice.

Since mothers in this study spend a lot of time in online communities, their performance in digital platforms might be another important factor shaping their identity. With this idea, I explored relevant literature on identity in online spaces.

3.3.3.2 Identity in an online context

As other scholars who have challenged the essentialist approach to identity , Jenkins (2004, p. 5) argues that identity should be understood as a process, as "being" or "becoming". In his definition, identity is our understanding of who we are and of who others are, and other people's understanding of themselves and others (including us); in other words, identity is "not fixed" but is a negotiation of the outcome of agreement and disagreement (Jenkins, 2004). However, identity on digital platforms or in social media can be seen as more complicated than "offline" life. According to Dyer & Abidin (2022), the design choices of social platforms constrain and shape our identities and social experiences online. Meanwhile, we, as users, bring socio-cultural resources to these platforms as well, which will guide our unique experience online.

Dyer & Abidin (2022) argue that the discussion of identity theory and research in sociology has shifted away from focusing on the relationships between the inner self and identity, towards a focus on the relationship between an individual and the social contexts/settings in which their identity is "(per)formed and enacted". Within this focus, there is still "much variation" regarding the conceptualisation of a social identity. In addition, the dynamics of online spaces bring some challenges for the established approaches for understanding identity (Dyer & Abidin, 2022). Drawing on Goffman, Dyer & Abidin (2022) explain how the notion of audience "informed and guided a socially responsive co-creation of identity"; notably, the reaction and feedback of an audience to the identity performance helps to "shape the direction of social interaction" (p. 4). It is therefore not hard to imagine how complicated the situation is in online spaces, since users have to negotiate the possible input from multiple audiences, such as friends, family, colleagues, partners, companies and politicians, who exist in and share the same space.

Discussions about and definitions of identity have helped me to broaden my understanding of the 'self'. Now I am more aware about how individual identities and collective identities are shaped by the social context, and how membership is formed and negotiated in online spaces. This understanding has informed my analysis of mothers' identities and performance digitally and in their everyday lives.

3.4 Defining social capital

When I was exploring the theory of learning and communities of practice, I also noticed the importance of networking in a community. This led me to wonder how their social networks might influence or shape my research participants' educational concepts and their social activities in online communities. Social capital theory seemed very relevant as a lens through which to investigate mothers' perceptions and practices of their children's education.

Before explaining how social capital relates to me research, I want to look at the original definition of capital as conceptualised by Bourdieu (1986). He posited that capital manifests in three guises: economic capital, which might be institutionalized in the form of "property rights"; social capital, which is related to social connections or networks and may be institutionalized in the form of "a title of nobility"; and cultural capital, which is institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications (p. 16). Among these three, economic capital is "immediately and directly convertible into money", while social and cultural capital are "convertible" into economic capital (ibid.). Cultural capital is more about inherited capital from family or investment by family and that is why it so connected to social class. With regards to a CoP, compared to cultural capital, social capital is more about the connections of group members, which means acquiring "actual or potential resources" from social networks (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). The relationships between group members are maintained by exchanging resources and may also be "guaranteed by the application of a common name" (the same class, school, family or party etc.) (ibid.). This reminds me of the concepts of 'community' and 'learning' in communities of practice theory where group members share a common interest, interact and help each other as well as build networks.

Dika & Singh (2002) argue that for Bourdieu, social capital was something that the dominant class invest in to maintain and reproduce group solidarity and dominant position. Naseri (2017) argues that the concept of social capital is used more flexibly and can refer simply to individual's family, friends and the networks they can benefit from when in crisis or take advantage of and use as a ladder of success and as a means to access material benefits. Wellman et al. (2001) propose three types of social capital: network capital, such as informal relations with friends, neighbours and colleagues; participatory capital, such as participation in politics and voluntary organisations; and community commitment, which means trust and engagement toward the community. These definitions of social capital led me to explore the social networking and community engagement of mothers and how social capital might play out in their decisions about their children's education as well as their own career.

Lin & Erickson (2008) posit that people with more social networks have broader access to professional, economic and political possibilities, while people with weaker social ties may have limited opportunities. Using the concept of social capital, Coleman (1988) links it with education and suggests that the greater amount of social capital parents have, the lower number of siblings, the higher parental educational expectations and the less likely their children are to drop out of school. These debates foreground my interest in children's education, their parents' capital as well as middle-class anxiety, which gave me a specific direction under my main research question – *how does middle-class schooling anxiety reshape motherhood?*

When talking about middle-class educational anxiety, it is not only about children's academic performance but the capital (economic, cultural, and social capital) that their parents own is highly relevant. As discussed in 3.2.1.2, economists suggest that parents must earn a certain amount of money to ensure they provide their children not only with food and shelter but costs associated with entertainment and education. However, childrearing does not only entail financial costs. This section summarised the key definitions of social capital that I will use in my analysis. It helped me to explore and understand the links between mothers' social practice and the efforts they intentionally/unintentionally made regarding their children's education. It also enabled my exploration of middle-class schooling anxiety from different perspectives, such as the way mothers connect with other mothers.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored ideologies of motherhood in both academic and everyday discourses. I have introduced key debates on communities of practice and social capital in relation to education, motherhood, and digital community, as these form the theoretical lens for my research. Concepts like informal learning, identity and performance were also discussed and underpin my analysis of *how middle-class schooling anxiety shape/reshape motherhood and what role online communities play in it*.

In exploring middle-class mothers' schooling anxiety and how it shapes their everyday practice in online and "offline" communities, I also drew on Bowlby's (1951) attachment theory, Piachaud's (1984) ideas about 'the cost of children' and key sociological debates on motherhood, such as 'good mother' criteria, parenting styles, work-life balance and 'sharenting' (Richardson, 1993; Hays,1996; Orgad,2019; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). These were helpful in identifying my participants' practices in their online and "offline" communities. The key ideas here led me to examine academic discourses and everyday discourses of motherhood within my research data, then comparing these public perceptions with mothers' individual perceptions and experiences of mothering/parenting.

Rogers' (2014) ideas about informal learning and learning as a continuum, helped me to look at mothers' everyday practices through the lens of learning. They also drew me to recognising the importance of peer learning in communities. Wenger's (2008) theory helped me to narrow down my focus on communities to communities of practice, to investigate mothers' everyday practices. With this learning lens, looking at *what role do online communities play in reshaping motherhood*, I designed my research accordingly. Furthermore, the work of Butler (1999), Jenkins (2004), and Dyer & Abidin's (2022) work helped me to conceptualise mothers' online identities and performances with their collective peers, and to draw my attention to the dynamics between learning, identity and performance.

Bourdieu’s (1986) work on social capital, particularly on the connections between group members in ensuring one accesses, maintains and develops potential resources, provided me with a lens to explore mothers’ schooling anxiety and their activities in different communities of practice. I have shown how the different kinds of social capital, network capital, participatory capital and community commitment (Wellman et al.,2001) relate to my research, enabling me to investigate mothers’ interactions and practices in both online and offline communities. Specifically, they enable me to investigate my participants’ networking activities and their implications within and out of the communities. Having discussed my theoretical framework, in the next chapter, I introduce my methodology and research design.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce my research journey of using online platforms and in Shanghai. I first explain how I decided to use ethnography rather than netnography. Then I describe my research design, providing details of my decision-making process regarding the research site, as well as gaining access and recruiting participants. I elaborate on my experience in building and maintaining a friendly relationship with participants. I discuss the research methods I used, namely, participant observation, individual interview and participatory group discussions. I then reflect on ethical concerns and emerging issues during the fieldwork. Finally, I introduce the recording tools I used and the data analysis process in this research.

4.2 My methodological stance: ethnography

As mentioned in Chapter 1, my former job prompted my interest in investigating middle-class parents and their schooling anxiety. Because my main customers were mothers, I decided to focus on middle-class mothers' perceptions and experiences of parenthood and their children's education, as well as the role/function of online communities in this regard. Therefore, my participants are a group of middle-class women, mainly mothers but also grandmothers and other educational helpers or childcare supporters. As mentioned in 3.3.2.1, when I refer to mothers' practice in this research, I mean mothers' 'social practice', since my ideological stance in this research is 'learning as social practice'. To explore what happens in the group of middle-class mothers, what makes them different from other groups and what is the meaning of "being a member of the group" (Gregory, 2005, p. xviii), I decided to look at participants' everyday activities through doing ethnography.

As a methodology, ethnography based on direct observation has more than one hundred years of history. It involves two primary observational approaches: 'non-participant observation' and 'participant observation' (Gobo & Molle, 2017, p. 6). Non-participant observation entails researchers observing subjects from a distance without interaction, while participant observation emphasises the researcher's engagement with social actors to comprehend their behaviour (ibid.). Ethnography was originally used in anthropology, which is a fieldwork-based discipline (N. Nelson & Wright, 1995). Broadly, an ethnography aims to explore what is occurring, how it is occurring, how participants perceive the events, what is required to be a member of the group, what social learning take place; it also describes the research context/environment, the group membership, the particular social interactions, and the product of those interactions. To summarise, it defines the meaning of being a member of the group and what happens in this particular group.

Having adopted the ethnographic lens, I then had to decide which data I would focus on since our research work is situated (Gregory, 2005). I hoped to provide descriptions of the ways in which middle-class groups of mothers “take knowledge from the environment” (Heath, 1982, p. 74), which would also help to analyse different types of ‘learning events’ and how mothers as a group negotiate its meaning. I believe that doing ethnography and looking at middle-class mothers’ everyday life, their mothering practice and participation, is also a practical way to investigate how educational policy is experienced in an individuals’ life. Since I have had working experience in Shanghai, I could draw on my experience when seeking participants as I had existing networks. I could even imagine myself walking with participants on the road or standing in front of the school gate having interesting conversations with them while waiting to collect their children.

4.2.1 Netnography and digital ethnography

As stated in my research questions, I also hoped to explore the role online communities/social media play in responding to middle-class schooling anxiety and motherhood, so I thought that I would include digital research methods in this study or indeed, conduct the research entirely on a digital platform. Then my supervisor suggested I look at ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 2019) to learn more about doing research on social media.

Using social media as a main research site to observe, participate and interact with participants sounded very suitable for my study, as I planned to use WeChat as the main platform to collect data. However, upon reading more about netnography, I realised it is not simply a matter of collecting data online or doing online ethnography: it is a very specific way of doing qualitative social media research. As Kozinets (2019) has stated, “netnography is a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media” (p. 14). The procedures of netnographic research are clearly structured, with a well-written ‘recipe’. For example, the key element in netnographic investigation is the concept of ‘online traces’, like Kozinet explaned,

> When people post images, video, or text online, or when they comment, share, or do anything else that is accessible online to anonymous or networked others, what they leave behind are online traces (p. 16).

And there are particular questions and guidance on researching on online traces, such as,

> what they are, what they mean to social scientific research, how to search for them, how to collect them, what ethical responsibilities accompany their use, the ways that they interact with research searches and search engines, how to analyze them, how to describe them in publications (Kozinets, 2019, p. 16).

However, online traces are not a part of traditional ethnography. Back to my research design, my focus and interest was not in participants’ online traces but to explore what is going on in their present everyday life on WeChat. Furthermore, online traces would likely involve privacy issues which I was not sure if my participants would be willing to share. My research is more about *people* rather than the *platform* (social media itself); it seemed therefore that netnography was not the approach I was looking for.

During the exploration of doing online ethnography, I also learned terms like ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine, 2000) and ‘digital ethnography’ (Murthy, 2008). They seemed to be referring to the same thing – using digital technologies to do ethnographic research. According to Murthy (2008), the ethnographer’s presence in virtual field site is often “physically invisible”, passively “lurking” (p. 840). Therefore, as a researcher, we need to consider the meaning of lurking and its implications for the people being investigated. Murthy (2008) examined online questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites, and blogs to investigate the impacts of digital technologies on the relationship between researcher and respondent. For example, he stated, “the respondents-led videos and blogs are considered as possible inversion of traditional researcher/subject roles” (p. 839). He concluded that a combination of physical and digital ethnography is more fruitful for researchers, generating not only “a larger and more exciting array of methods” but also enabling the researcher to “demarginalize the voice of respondents” (Murthy, 2008, p. 839), because the access to those digital technologies is limited and stratified by race, gender, class of both researchers and respondents. This idea impacted my understanding of digital technology, the digital divide and inclusion. Although my research participants are middle-class mothers and I was confident that they would have access to WeChat, there was still the question about whether they would be confident and comfortable with using WeChat to participate in academic research. I felt I should provide an opportunity for them to meet me and each other in person too, to establish connections and spend some time together to interact, to discuss issues they are interested in.

I soon made the decision that combining physical and digital ethnography would help me to complete my research task. I hoped to start with digital and then to move to the physical, but I was also concerned about how smooth the transfer from online to in person would be for the research and my participants, and whether we would have built enough trust.

4.2.2 Ethnography and participatory research

Wright and Nelson’s work comparing participatory research and ethnography inspired me to investigate participatory research as a potential methodology for my study. As the main method in the ethnographic approach, participant observation is often mixed with participatory research. Based on Malinowski (1922) and Boas (1943) in the late twentieth century, participant observation became the main method to collect data. But participation was not simply considered as a means of collecting data based on observation and questioning: it emphasised participating in daily activities and obtaining “performative competence”. It is distinctive in that it is a “long-term, intensive, personalized, qualitative” research method (Nelson & Wright, 1995,

p. 44). In other words, participation in participant observation/ethnography is a means to achieve the aims of the project. However, as a research approach, participant observation is not the only way to collect data in ethnography. There are many other means to gain different data, such as life-histories, interviews and case studies, even surveys and other statistical methods.

In contrast to participant observation, in participatory research, a community or group “set up a process to control the development” of the study (N. Nelson & Wright, 1995, p. 51). The first aim of participatory research is “help participants understand their situation and ability to use the information … to generate change for themselves. The second aim is to contribute the disciplinary knowledge” (ibid.). Thus, with the researcher’s help, participants are agents in the research rather than objects of the research: they set the goals and define the issue to be studied, also transferring local knowledge to the researcher. The researcher provides the most appropriate research methods and strategy. Therefore, participants as subjects, work with the researcher to “examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better” (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 1). So, participatory research is not just “with” participants but “on, for and with” them (Cameron et al., 1992).

Nelson & Wright (1995, p. 57) distinguish five key differences between participant observation and participatory research. Firstly, the meaning of participation varies. In ethnography, participation involves close data collection through immersed observation; it emphasises physical and emotional involvement via full participation in everyday life. It is ‘our research’ in ‘their’ life. But in participatory research, participation is highly relevant to the participants’ involvement in the research process. The second difference is the research relationship. Participant observation usually separates “researcher/researched” and “subject/object” during the study, while in participatory research, the researcher shares the power and works in partnership with participants, who are positioned as “subjects” of the study. The third distinction is sharing the research process and outcomes. Participant observation keeps these private while in participatory research, both process and results should be shared with participants. The fourth difference is the research purpose. Participatory research aims to change, which not the intention in participant observation. Lastly, knowledge generation differs. Participatory research generates the local knowledge to local people for local use, while participant observation focuses on disciplinary agendas and critiques of world-ordering knowledge. Cameron et al. (1992) describe participant observation as ‘on’ people, contributing disciplinary insights and challenging global knowledge constructions. Particularly, the local knowledge holder tends to be constructed as “ignorant, passive and ineffectually critical” (Nelson & Wright, 1995, p. 59).

Based on the above literature, I realised that I am not undertaking participatory research as I had no intention to ‘change’ my participants’ everyday life. My interest was simply to observe their daily practice and explore what is going on in their life. Therefore, as I discussed above, participant observation/ethnography was a more suitable approach for my research. However, doing ethnography did not mean that I could not use participatory research methods in my data collection. I felt that including participatory research methods would be a good idea in face-to-face activities, offering my participants the chance to play an active role in the study; I therefore added it to my research design at the final stage.

I thus decided that my methodology would be ethnography and that it would include both online and in person activities; it would also include participatory research methods to give participants some agency in this study. My research design included three stages: the first part consisted of online participant observation; the second was individual interview; the third part involved participatory workshops (group discussions). My next challenge was to gain access to the field and start research with Shanghai mothers whilst I was physically in the UK. In the next section, I introduce my research sites and the stories about how I gained access to the digital communities.

4.3 My research journey

4.3.1 Research sites and gaining access

As explained in Chapter 1, I came to this research topic because of my own working experience in Shanghai. Shanghai has top-level education resources as well as being a highly competitive environment, representative of current schooling policy in China. I worked in Shanghai for one year for an educational company and had the opportunity to learn about the relevant policies and information in terms of schooling and tutoring. Therefore, choosing Shanghai as my research site was a natural decision since I knew the context well. Besides, as explained in the context chapter (see 2.2.1), migrants from other parts of China are being encouraged to join Shanghai's workforce: as a result, many well-educated migrants are applying to be Shanghai *hukou*. These 'permanent' migrants are referred to as the 'New Shanghainese'. Based on their occupation, income and educational background, these are mainly middle-class young adults. Therefore, given this large group middle-class, I felt that Shanghai could be a good context in which to find suitable participants. With my existing knowledge of the context, choosing Shanghai as my research site also meant that I could design the research drawing on this real-world knowledge of place rather than an abstract idea of what Shanghai might be like.

As I decided to look at middle-class mothers' perceptions and practices (see Chapter 1), I had to seek access to this group and know more about their activities. I did not think that gaining access would be a problem for me at the beginning of my research design, because I assumed that I would use the chatgroups from my former employer (see 1.2). Besides, I am very familiar with WeChat so using it as a research platform would not be difficult. However, as Abidin & De Seta (2020) described,

> new generations of ethnographers are often as familiar with digital media as their research participants, and yet this familiarity does not necessarily grant smooth entrées, flawless interactions, effortless participation and clean-cut conclusions.

> Rather, despite their interactional proficiency and insider positioning, digital ethnographers can encounter deadlocks, rejections and failures (p. 3).

I faced some difficulties in gaining access to WeChat groups. To start with, I decided not to involve my former employer in my research for several reasons: first, company-managed groups have many restrictions for commercial security considerations, and these groups are likely to have strict rules and guidelines to follow which might influence the results of my data collection. In addition, I posited that non-company managed groups/individually managed groups are less bound to an institution or a business and their priorities. This would provide a broader view of what is happening in group members' daily lives (Chan, 2008). Therefore, I needed to find new groups, organised by individuals, preferably women, and geographically based in Shanghai. It was not easy for me, since I am not a mother nor was I living in Shanghai at that moment – In short, I was a total 'outsider'.

However, when I discussed my research with a former colleague at the beginning of my PhD journey in November 2019[21], she kindly recommended a number of WeChat groups and public accounts that she liked and used. As a mother herself, this colleague introduced me to two chat groups: both were active and mainly involved female members. She immediately added me into the first group (no need for my action to 'agree', I was 'in' the group), which later became Group 1 in my study. She also shared the second group manager's contact since adding new member was strictly monitored in that group. I did not yet have a clear direction for this study nor had obtained ethics approval at that time, so, I did not follow the instructions to join the second group[22]. Since I was already in the first group, there was no reason to leave, so I remained as a silent member like most people, for seven months, before I decided to recruit Group 1 as one of my research sites and introduce myself to the group manager (Qiu) in June 2020.

Originally, I planned to conduct online participant observation first, then do in-person interviews and group discussions. However, before I finalised my research plan, the whole UK went into lockdown in March 2020 because of Covid-19. Luckily, as planned, the first stage of my research was online, so the pandemic did not affect my study too much at the beginning. I contacted Qiu (the group manager of Group 1) and introduced myself and my research on 29th June 2020. I then shared the information sheet and consent form with her via email. She was travelling so I waited several days until 7th July. We had an audio call through WeChat to settle the details. It was 5 am in her time zone before her children awoke. During the call we discussed the following issue: when and how do I introduce myself to the group; how would I manage to be both ethical as well as flexible; what kind of online groups was I looking for and would she be willing to introduce her friends to me. Qiu was very friendly; she introduced me to two friends who manage educational groups. Then I was connected to Dong and joined Group 2. Interestingly, Qiu's other friend turned out to be the same person my former colleague had recommended. As stated before, I intended to recruit individual-managed non-profit online groups in this research; thus, I stuck with my decision to not use Cang's group as a research site in this study[23], but I observed her own WeChat Moments (see context in 2.4.1) as a part of data collection, with her individual consent (see 4.3.3.1).

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[21] This former colleague was from a different department, we started talking after she left the company. She gathered I am doing a PhD in the UK (from October 2019) and I am interested in my research topic.

[22] This group requested new members add the manager's WeChat account as a contact first, then report specific personal information and pay a small amount of money for annual membership. I was not convinced and quite hesitant about this group.

On 8th July, as agreed, Qiu introduced me to the whole group; I told them about the study and invited female group members to join. By the end of that day, I had added at least five mothers as contacts on WeChat, including Di and Xuan. Once I added participants as 'friends' on WeChat, I sent greetings separately and asked permission to observe their WeChat Moments[24]. After this, most participants kept quiet, except Xuan. She sent messages to me and asked if I knew any Shanghai-focused educational groups. I recommended Group 2, but there was an age gap between her son and the Group 2 members' children. Then I realised that members of Group 1 were parents (mainly mothers) with young children (kindergarten or Year 1 or 2), while parents in Group 2 mainly had children in the higher grades of primary school (Year 5 or 6). Xuan was not interested in Group 2 but mentioned that she had joined a group which might suit my study, since the group manager is Shanghainese. Members in this group were from multiple cities and usually discussed educationally relevant topics, especially the group manager Ying. Then Xuan added me to this group and I contacted Ying to gain permission. Ying's group became Group 3 in this study. While Qiu had introduced me to Group 1, as a kind of gatekeeper, I introduced myself and the project directly to Group 2. Then in Group 3, Ying did not want to address the group and introduce the research, preferring not to disturb the others and "keep the atmosphere pure" (in her words). Instead, to recruit participants, Ying allowed me to contact individual members separately and then invite them to join my research. I followed her advice so as to gain her permission to observe group discussions and collect data. Once I received participants' consent, I remained silent and focused on observation. Like most silent members, I kept quiet and did not join any group conversations during data collection. Thus, in Group 3, I was an observer without introducing myself to group members while I obtained the group manager's consent to observe. However, I was aware that as a researcher I must seek participants' consent before directly collect any data they were involved in. So, I sought for individual consent when it was needed (see 4.3.3.1).

All three online groups in this study were individual-managed groups and could be distinguished from company-managed groups through certain features. For example, individual-managed groups often emphasise their non-commercial nature which means that they are relatively free from advertising, people selling products or services, disguised as genuine users. This feature attracts people who are looking for information and support (Chan, 2008) and see a like-minded group (mothers). In addition, such groups are 24-hour chat groups, without any process of opening or closing; they are user-driven and do not feature any 'specialists' to answer members' questions (ibid.). All these features create a community atmosphere and this was certainly the case for Group 1 and Group 3. I looked at three groups primarily, but during the data collection, Group 2 was largely inactive and was dominated by just one voice (Dong, the manager) sharing educational resources. After data collection, the group picked up again and seemed to be more active. Thus, I have kept Group 2 in this chapter but it does not feature much in the results of the data analysis.

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[23] I interviewed this group manager later in a case study for UNESCO GEMR background paper which focuses on non-state actor in adult education.

[24] A function to post texts, pictures, videos, share music, article link etc. like the function of Twitter.

In the next section, I will introduce the methods I used during data collection and some ethical considerations.

4.3.2 Research methods

My original plan for the fieldwork was to conduct online participant observation in WeChat groups for three months, to familiarise myself with the field and my participants, to formulate interview questions, then do face-to-face in-depth interview and finally organise the participatory research activities. However, because of the worldwide pandemic in 2020, my research had to switch to online-focused mode and there was no knowing when and if I would be able to conduct in person research. The quarantine rules in China restricted my activities; people were afraid of the situation in the UK, so I did not feel I would be welcomed. I therefore decided not to go to the 'field' as planned, and instead, stayed in Norwich to complete the first two stages of my research.

> Considering participants' feelings and worries about coronavirus in Western countries, I have decided not to go back to China until the outbreak ends. Also, I need to consider my own safety… (Fieldnote, 8/5/2020).

After three months' online participant observation I had enrolled several participants and added them as WeChat contacts, but not all of them stayed and participated in the whole process (see 4.3.2.1). Then, from September 2020, I interviewed 21 participants through texting or audio call via WeChat. All interviewees were women, including 17 mothers, a grandmother, a nanny[25], a staff member from a private tutoring institution and a manager from a postpartum care centre (see Table 1). The decision to include a grandmother and other childcare givers/helpers was because mothers mentioned them during ongoing interviews. I felt I should include different voices and this would help me to be more critical in my exploration of motherhood. All interviews were conducted online until February 2021, when I finally received permission to conduct face-to-face research. Finally, in March 2021, I conducted six face-to-face interviews and held three participatory research workshops.

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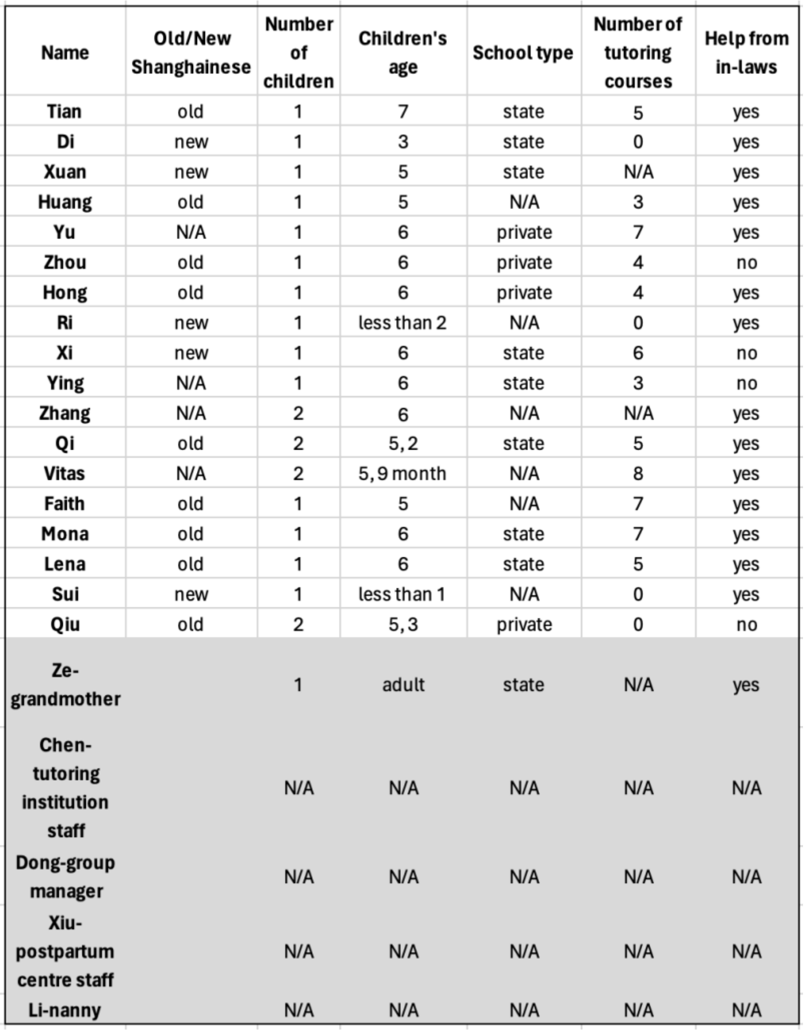
[25] Also called maternity maid, or '*yue sao'* in Chinese which means monthly aunt. In China, the first month after labouring is important for women to recover, so usually they need to stay indoors for a month while their mothers/mothers-in-law taking care of them and children. For middle-class family, hiring a maternity maid/nanny has become popular and affordable. Some family choose to go to a postpartum care centre which has all professional service for recovery.

Table 1 Participant information



Name	Old/New Shanghainese	Number of children	Children's age	School type	Number of tutoring courses	Help from in-laws
Tian	old	1	7	state	5	yes
Di	new	1	3	state	0	yes
Xuan	new	1	5	state	N/A	yes
Huang	old	1	5	N/A	3	yes
Yu	N/A	1	6	private	7	yes
Zhou	old	1	6	private	4	no
Hong	old	1	6	private	4	yes
Ri	new	1	less than 2	N/A	0	yes
Xi	new	1	6	state	6	no
Ying	N/A	1	6	state	3	no
Zhang	N/A	2	6	N/A	N/A	yes
Qi	old	2	5, 2	state	5	yes
Vitas	N/A	2	5, 9 month	N/A	8	yes
Faith	old	1	5	N/A	7	yes
Mona	old	1	6	state	7	yes
Lena	old	1	6	state	5	yes
Sui	new	1	less than 1	N/A	0	yes
Qiu	old	2	5, 3	private	0	no
Ze-grandmother		1	adult	state	N/A	yes
Chen-tutoring institution staff		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dong-group manager		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Xiu-postpartum centre staff		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Li-nanny		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

I used ‘snowball sampling’ to recruit participants. As a popular sampling method in qualitative research, “snowball sampling is often combined with purposive sampling, and to a lesser extent quota sampling, whereby participants are selected based upon their specific characteristics or membership of a group” (Parker et al., 2019, para. 3). Most of my participants had multiple identities (see 3.3.3) when I approached them: for example, participants might belong to several WeChat groups, be Shanghainese who owned local property and *hukou*, mothers with school-aged children, middle-class educational consumers, employees or self-employed/non-employed, self-media practitioners or WeChat business practitioners.

I posited that people who joined a particular group would have some shared values, identities or interests (see 3.3.2). Therefore, I assumed, a mother introduced to me by an existing participant would probably fit the profile I was after. As discussed in 2.2.2., my main criteria were: mothers and middle class. Although middle-class in China does not have entirely the same connotations as the term has in a Western context, generally, the four factors used to ascertain whether someone can be said to be middle-class are not alien to Western contexts. They are occupation, educational background, consumer/lifestyle and income. These were difficult to identify during fieldwork which is why I chose to focus on social identity and lifestyle. In fact, all my participants turned out to have a higher education degree; they sent children to tutoring institutions for at least two courses; they had a stable family income such as their own salary and/or their husbands' salary. Based on this understanding, I thought that recruiting participants would be easy, but the process was far more time consuming than I expected; collecting data online did not make the process easier:

> Online research is not as convenient as signing a consent form offline. It may be because you can explain the key content at one time if meet offline. When contact online, it is generally not suitable for video or phone calls [when you first contact], and it takes time to send emails and wait. The email to DXY has been sent for five days, but no reply has been received yet. The WeChat group is the same situation. After two days of sending, no reply. [I] Need to understand the hard work of adult working/full-time mothers, [they may] have no time to check WeChat [privately] during the day, and only after 9:30 in the evening is their own time (Fieldnote, 1/7/2020)?

Having introduced my research design consisting of three stages and my research methods, briefly described my sampling strategy and the recruitment process, the next section focuses on my fieldwork and the difficulties I encountered[26].

4.3.2.1 Online participant observation

The first stage of my data collection was online participant observation, which helped me to explore the different functions of online spaces and find out what role online communities play in shaping motherhood. Broad observations in the three groups gave me time to familiarise myself with participants' daily social practices, which helped me in designing the interview questions for the second stage of the research design. When doing ethnography, it is important to select what data to look at (see 4.2). Although many topics and themes are discussed in online communities, initially, I just wanted to get a general impression of what goes on rather than to report a dominant voice or identify particular themes.

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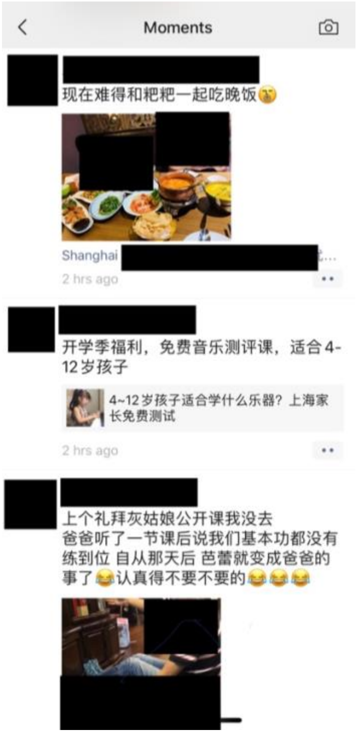
[26] Some contents in this section had been talked in a methodological reflection published by SENTIO in 2021. Available at: Sentio Journal, issue 3: Transformations. Also see reference list.

As explained, I spent seven months in Group 1 before beginning data collection. During this time, I noticed that most group members were 'qualified' participants in the sense that they were Shanghainese *hukou* (see 2.2.1), owned property and had school aged children; more importantly, they were regular online community users. I had obtained all the group managers' digital consent (with screenshot) to observe members' daily interaction. They had agreed that all public conversations in the groups during the research period could be recorded through screenshot but that I needed to be aware of anonymity. I was not sure about the idea of screenshot since a typical conversation in Group 1 or Group 3 usually consisted of substantial conversations. However, I was able to use the function of selecting and collecting messages to restored data by conversation thread. Later, I realised that there were too many group messages every day and I did not have the time or energy to follow every conversation with the 7/8 hour time difference. Therefore, I decided to be flexible and to only follow important conversations, as well as imitating other members who were busy and only occasionally checked the group chat. If an interesting topic had emerged or an interaction, I could check the chat history and comment on it regardless of the time lag (see Chapter 6, Mona's story).

Data from the online groups included words, photos, audios (transcript), videos and web pages. I copied parts of them to a password-protected file and list through a timeline. Usernames were collected at this stage: since there were a lot of users in the group (around 400), focusing on a specific name made it easier to follow through a conversation or interaction; I did not refer to their usernames in later analysis.

When conducting online participant observation, I did not interrupt any conversation unless group members asked me a question (this only happened in Group 1 at the beginning of recruiting participants). Group members could contact me individually, however. Similarly, when I saw someone interesting in the group chat, I would contact her and invite her to be a participant; I then asked for extra permission to collect data from their 'Moments' (see Figure 6). I kept in touch with them through WeChat to get more information about them, such as their views about the group – what this group is for, why they joined etc. I asked their permission to collect these conversations as a part of my data.



[redacted] [redacted]
现在难得和粑粑一起吃晚饭😣

[redacted] [redacted]

Shanghai [redacted]…
2 hrs ago

[redacted] [redacted]
开学季福利，免费音乐测评课，适合 4-12 岁孩子

4~12 岁孩子适合学什么乐器？上海家长免费测试

2 hrs ago

[redacted] [redacted]
上个礼拜灰姑娘公开课我没去
爸爸听了一节课后说我们基本功都没有练到位 自从那天后 芭蕾就变成爸爸的事了😂认真得不要不要的😂😂😂

[redacted] [redacted]

Figure 6 Display of WeChat Moments

I planned to do participant observation for three months; however, I realised that this method could be used during the whole process of data collection because of trust building. In fact, I realised that the researcher-participant relationship has a new mode in digital world. When conducting online participant observation, I felt I must devote time to checking participants' posts: liking or commenting were the easiest way to show my interest and willingness to engage. Thus, I spent time and energy on digital research, observing, interacting, playing with participants online, to build the trust and allow them to become familiar with my presence.

At the same time, my immersion in online communities also raised concerns. As described by the Italian anthropologist and linguist Alessandro Duranti (1992, in Gobo & Molle 2017),

> the more [the ethnographer] immerses himself in social reality and acquires a way of behaving and interpreting reality similar to those of the subjects he is studying, the more their behavior and relative vision of the world seem natural to him and therefore difficult for him to grasp (p.9).

Practically, it seems "impossible to acquire full empathic knowledge and be able to communicate it at the same time" (Gobo & Molle, 2017, p. 9). Duranti also states that:

> It is precisely the constant reflecting, taking notes, asking questions, completing questionnaires, taking photographs, recording and then transcribing, translating and interpreting imposed upon us by our profession that prevent us from getting completely 'inside' the culture which we want to study (ibid., p. 9).

In my case, the first three months of participant observation were difficult. It felt hard to manage my role as a researcher as well as a group member. I was confused/misguided by my research plan for the first stage to only focus on observation without ‘disturbing’ participants by asking follow-up questions: I thought that this is what a ‘group member’ should do. I did not start any in-depth conversation with participants until the second stage of the research. Therefore, I only observed their discussions in the chat group and individuals’ posts in Moments and when I saw something interesting, I noted it down with the intention of asking participants later during interview. However, with this strategy, I lost several participants: since we did not chat at the beginning, when I contacted them for interview in October, they did not respond to my message at all. At the end of the first stage of data collection, I reflected on these mistakes:

> It has been three months since the online observation started in July, but there has not been as much communication with the participants as I expected. The reasons are simple: 1. I paid too much attention to the group managers and neglected to find more new members; 2. I didn’t introduce myself continuously in the group, so missed opportunities to meet new people; 3. The group managers are too busy, and their WeChat have over 1000 friends so my likes and comments are inconspicuous. Or there are too many comments, and the group manager is not able to reply all; 4. I did not have the habit of regularly chatting with the group manager and did not join in the group chat. My identity as the researcher is too obvious, and there is a sense of "purpose" in asking any questions (Fieldnote, 5/10/2020).

In summary, I felt I did not perform well as a researcher in this online environment, since the main thing I did was to be an ‘invisible’ group member. In later research, I took actions to improve my performance in Moments (see Figure 4) and increased my ‘visibility’ (Abidin, 2020) on this platform. I focused on maintaining a friendly researcher-participant relationship. I kept liking and commenting on participants’ posts; I also tried to post some English learning resources on Moments to show my professional background in education (‘self-brand my academic work’, see Abidin 2020) and encourage more interaction with participants. However, the frequency of interaction was hard to control and there was no guidance. I could feel that there are unseen boundaries in online communities between a stranger and a friend, and I had to ensure I was not doing too much – like an online stalker, or an annoying researcher. In addition, my identity, particularly as unmarried and without children, was not very helpful during online participant observation, as recorded in my fieldnotes:

> I thought it would be easy to get along with everyone after joining the group chat, but in the past few months, I found that as an unmarried researcher with no children it is difficult for me to join the conversation. Because my speech is likely to be "asking questions". This strikes a delicate balance, so I've remained silent and

> not participating in the group chat. In addition, I can't get in the conversation. If some opportunities are missed, there will be no second time (Fieldnote, 23/10/2020).

Given these concerns and problems in the first stage, I continued online participant observation during the entire research process, which helped me a lot with preparing for the interviews and workshops.

4.3.2.2 Individual interview (online and in person)

As McGrath et al. (2019) have stated, “Qualitative research interviews are preferable when the researcher strives to understand the interviewee’s subjective perspective of a phenomenon rather than generating generalizable understandings of large groups of people” (p. 1002). In my case, I intended to use interview as a data-collection tool to explore middle-class mothers’ perceptions and understandings on certain topics, such as children’s education, family division of labour, work-life balance etc. Rather than seeking to generalise their opinions, I wanted to listen to their individual voices.

During participant observation, I had noticed some interesting topics being discussed or posted online; these were noted in preparation for the semi-structured interviews I intended to conduct from October. However, it seemed hard to find the first interviewee and I did not know where to start. At that time, I was still in the UK and waiting for in person research permission; I had been indoors and away from people for eight months; the thought of starting a conversation was challenging. Then one day, in Group 3, someone was talking about how the family nanny had been reading books to her 4-month old daughter and how this had educated her in the importance of early year education. This person’s story interested me and I immediately contacted her: that was how I started my first interview with Sui.

As a valuable research method, qualitative interviews enabled me to delve deeply into subjects that were specific to the interviewees' experiences, giving me insights into “how different phenomena of interest are experienced and perceived” (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1002). In terms of interview mode, I offered Sui the options of having audio call/ video call or typing. Sui preferred typing to voice call because her daughter was sleeping. The interview was very flexible and more like an unstructured, free conversation. Soon, I found out that Sui and I were both working for a private tutoring institution in Shanghai; in other words, we shared certain knowledge about relevant issues. This made it easier to show my empathy to encourage her to speak more.

In fact, the informal text-based online interview worked very well, particularly for mothers with a busy schedule. These asynchronous conversations were particularly convenient considering my participants and I were in different time zone and it gave participants more time to think about their answers. As Mann (2016) comments:

> If you are working synchronously (in real time) you will be able to probe, check, and clarify more easily. If you are working asynchronously informants may have more time to construct their responses (p. 90).

I continued to use this informal text-based method with another two participants and found that reflexivity in practice is very important not just for the researcher. My participants had busy schedules: it was hard for them to carve out sufficient ‘spare time’ to complete a more formal semi-structured interview (as planned). Especially for working mothers who cannot have long phone call, text-based chatting was a more convenient and practical way to complete the interview. They could take time to reply during their working day without worrying about it affecting work or their colleagues. In my fieldnotes, I reflected on this different “mode” (Mann, 2016) of interview.

> I find. . . It is easy to start a conversation based on the content of Moments, and mothers are also very willing to give feedback on their own family situation and their views on a certain topic. Furthermore, this kind of dialogue composed of text, pictures and emoticons is more relaxed, and there is room for delay, giving participants sufficient time and power: they can decide whether to reply, when to reply, and how to reply. In contrast, formal interview may not be able to collect more useful information (Fieldnote, 4/11/2020).

In a later conversation with Sui, I shared with her my difficulties in recruiting participants; in response, she introduced her ‘friends’ (former students’ mothers) to me. Because of her kindness and keenness, I had soon recruited another 10 participants.

As mentioned above, according to my experience of the first several interviews, I noticed that typing messages or voice messages through WeChat worked well. So, I continued with this approach over the next few months. During this period, I interviewed Sui, Tian, Qi, Xuan, Di, Huang, Yu, Zhou, and Hong. All participants mentioned above were interviewed via text and/or short voice message (WeChat) and sometimes, they shared pictures as well.

After the first nine interviews, I spent several weeks reflecting on and rethinking the in-depth interview. I felt some participants were less keen on communicating in this way, while others chose this as being the most convenient. After some analysis, I realised that for working mothers, chatting through WeChat could be easily managed within their working day. However, the length and frequency of their responses to my questions varied, depending on how busy they were on that day. For full-time mothers, daytime was usually not the best time to chat. Then I noticed how significant timing is to the quality of the interview.

> During the chat with Xuan, I found that it was difficult to concentrate on replying to messages [for her] during the day, and [she] only had time to answer questions carefully at night. The rhythm of answering questions was different during the day

> and night, or when she was free. She had to take care of the children during the day, and there were other things to pay attention to, so the chat rhythm was fast (not that the reply was fast) - a few short replies, and the messages were mixed and short. Text-heavy replies appeared during free time [at night] … At the same time, I found that instead of giving a direct response [after her long message], I could delay the response. [Providing her enough time] to write while thinking, and she would offer more information. But because of the time difference, I often forgot that she had already been up late, and when I realised, it was already around 00:30 am (Fieldnote, 10/11/2020).
>
> Weekends and Friday nights are never good times to contact mothers. It seems that from Friday night, mother's busy time begins. Working mothers are more inclined to make contact during the week, so that they will not be disturbed when they spend time with their families on Fridays and weekends. Stay-at-home mothers are also very busy at this time, maybe because the children and husband's rest days add more work to her? According to my experience, the replies received by WeChat on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings are very slow and irregular. Weekdays are much better, especially after the children are asleep at night: mothers have more time to chat online with a [lighter] mood (Fieldnote, 13/11/2020).

In addition, participants have very different personalities, which impacts their answers. For example, some participants were willing to share individual experiences and family stories. Once I asked a question, they answered several messages with long sentences which immediately formed a small story. Other participants were not keen to share details and used simple words to respond. I would usually ask a follow up question which would elicit another short reply. Based on this experience, I decided to do audio call interview with the rest of the participants, to see if I could collect more detailed data. However, I only conducted four of these audio call interviews in the following weeks (with Faith, Mona, Zhang and Ying) as other participants (such as Vitas, Ri, Lena, Xi) were working during our interview.

> Audio call interview requires two-way stable internet connection. My first audio interview was disrupted two- or three-times which slightly affected the comprehension. Some interviewees prefer texting, some prefer audio call, it works better when I follow their specific needs and use different methods to interview (Fieldnote, 25/1/2021).

I felt that having an audio call was an effective way to establish trust between participants and me. Moreover, as Nind et al. (2021) point out, phone interviews[27] can generate rich narrative data on sensitive topics, while also having the benefits of “logistical convenience” and “feeling of anonymity and lesser intrusiveness” (para. 5). However, I was only able to call participants once for interviewing, and around 40 minutes for each call with the semi-structured format. By contrast, typing messages on WeChat could be repeated and conducted over a longer period of time. As a result, I felt more familiar with participants who were interviewed by text, since we had chatted several times. Later, when I received in person research permission in February, I contacted all interviewees to arrange a one-to-one meeting in person as an opportunity to recruit participants for the group discussion. Only 10 participants agreed to meet in person and all of them had been interviewed by WeChat texting rather than an audio call.

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[27] WeChat audio call practically same with phone call with no extra fee, it only needs internet connection.

The decision to conduct face-to-face meetings with participants was made at an early stage of my research design. As explained earlier in this chapter (see 4.2), I thought it important to provide an opportunity to participants to meet me in person as this might produce the feeling of knowing me and therefore help to build more trust between us. I hoped, after online interactions, that some offline meetings could help to build a friendly relationship between me and my participants. This could help with follow-up interviews. Besides, it would provide me – the researcher, “an opportunity to feel the conversation” (Longhurst, 2016, p. 126).

However, the shift from online to offline was not straightforward, depending on the personalities of participants and how much they trusted me by that time. For most participants, the online environment is experienced as safe enough to share and discuss real life problems because of the anonymity (and other elements). When I invited participants to have a face-to-face meeting, half of them responded with silence or polite refusal. This phenomenon is interesting: half of the participants felt safe with offline meetings while the other half were uncomfortable. In fact, anonymity still works in offline meetings - nobody asked others’ real names (except I as the researcher, offered my full name and relevant details at beginning to encourage their participation).

As mentioned earlier, I was only able to do online research before February 2021 because of the research restrictions during Covid-19 pandemic. However, I decided to go back China first and apply for an exemption of face-to-face research since the situation in China was much improved and people were able to do in-person activities. I arrived in China at the end of November, following three weeks quarantine, then I backed to home (Zhengzhou) continuing online interview and recruiting in-person participants. This recruiting process took me longer time than I expected, since it was nearly winter holiday and Chinese New Year, my participants preferred to spend more time with children and family. Besides, it was the peak time of travelling, many participants were not even in Shanghai. So, I had to stop and keep waiting until the holiday ended. Finally, I got the permission of in-person research in February, then I immediately booked ticket and accommodation. I arrived in Shanghai in the beginning of March 2021, and organised six in person interviews. Later, to ensure I elicited some rich data and based on an initial analysis of the data collected up to that point, I conducted another four interviews through audio call: a staff member of a tutoring institution and a grandmother (interviewed in May); and a nanny and a staff member of a postpartum care centre (interviewed in July). Based on the six in-person interviews, I organised three face-to-face group discussions in the same month (March) by using a participatory research approach.

4.3.2.3 Group discussion (participatory workshop)

As written in earlier sections, I decided to use participatory research methods to facilitate group discussions. I refer to it as a participatory workshop to distinguish it from a general group discussion and because I drew on methods associated with the participatory research approach.

When designing my research, I had hoped that participants would work with me (the researcher) to "examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better" (Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007, p. 1). As stated elsewhere, participatory research has been described as not just "with" participants, but "on, for and with them" (Cameron *et al.*, 1992, p. 148). This notion underpinned my desire to conduct these workshops. My aim (or hope) was to provide mothers with a chance to talk about motherhood and schooling -related topics face-to-face. I thought that the participatory activities might help mothers identify their needs in terms of the household, community and broader society. The activities might also give mothers an opportunity to work together and share ideas around coping with the anxiety.

Before doing my fieldwork, I had read about potential participatory activities. I thought I would be able to recruit a group of mothers to join all three workshops and that we could meet once a week. I envisaged the workshops as pre-designed as well as flexible, using a range of participatory activities such as *river of life*, *social mapping*, *problem tree* etc.(Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). I also found some 'interesting' ideas while planning the workshop, such as anxiety marking and screen time sharing. I planned to invite participants to mark/map their anxieties. When it came to the workshop, however, it seemed too psychological for someone who is not a professional counsellor. Screen time sharing means inviting participants to take a screenshot of their 'screentime report' weekly. I would then use these as data to analyse mothers' digital platform usage. But this raised ethical problems (e.g. privacy) so I decided not to. Thus when it came to designing the participatory activities, I felt that did not use the more 'interesting' methods. On the other hand, I simply focused on my research questions. I then decided to use *card sorting*, *problem tree* and *solution circle* methods (ibid.) which seemed more 'effective' for collecting data although perhaps less 'participatory'.

When I started to organise the participatory workshop, I had known my participants for a while (through WeChat) and that helped me to contact them easily for in person meetings. However, organising the group activity proved to be much more complex than the one-to-one meetings.

First, confirming time and place was not easy. As mothers, my participants were very busy, with different schedules and often having to change their timetables due to one thing or another (such as children being sick). In addition, participants lived far away from each other, although we lived in Shanghai. To save their time, I had to compare the distance and choose a middle place to meet (everyone still spent an hour travelling). Then, based on everyone's timetable, I figured out who could join which workshop, where.

Secondly, when inviting them to join the study, I thought it was important to know what participants needed from me and my research and invited them to make requests. During the one-to-one in person meetings, I received two requests: one (Xi) hoped to talk with a professional teacher; another one (Xuan) wanted to meet more full-time mothers. Unfortunately, the second request was not fulfilled as the other full-time mother (Qi) I contacted was not able to join because of timing. In the end, seven participants joined in the three workshops (see Table 2).

Table 2 Activities in participatory workshops

	Activities	Participants	Topics
Workshop 1	Card sorting	Xi, Hong, Zhou	What qualities a good tutoring institution should have?
Workshop 2	Problem tree	Xi, Huang, Xuan	Conflicts with grandparents on childcare and education
Workshop 3	Solution circle	Hong, Tian, Di	Time management on family responsibilities and personal life

Thirdly, it was challenging when participants argued with each other. For example, in workshop 2, participants held totally opposite opinions and they all tried to persuade each other with personal stories. To avoid misunderstanding and further conflict, I had to interrupt several times and lead the conversation back to the main theme, especially given that we only had limited time. Finally, the environment and other uncontrollable factors also affected the workshops. Because of the limited choices of place – near an underground station, easy to access, quiet but enough privacy to allow talk, bright enough to draw and to take photos etc., all three workshops were organised in a café. However, sometimes the indoor café could be very noisy (like workshop 2), so we moved outside. Also, if mothers brought their children with them (like in workshop 3), it could be very difficult to manage the interruptions.

After the three workshops in Shanghai, I found that one of the main problems was that participants did not have exactly the same problems so it was hard to reach an agreement and discuss it. In the following week when I wrote up the workshop summary, I almost regretted the activities I had chosen. In retrospect, I felt that drawing their daily routine or sharing one impressive moment with a photo would have been much easier to facilitate and more interesting and maybe less argumentative. But I knew that there was no point in regrets in my fieldwork: I could not go back and do it again. At the same time, reflecting later on those workshops, they were very successful:

> I prepared some icebreaking activities just in case any participants felt awkward to meet a 'stranger'[28]. However, I did not have chance to use even once, as they just started conversation naturally without any awkwardness, such as asking each other where they live, which grade their children are, boy or girl, any tutoring class they are having etc. (Fieldnote, 21/3/2021).

I also asked myself, what are the criteria of a successful participatory activity? What is the definition of an 'interesting' activity? I finally make peace with myself. After all, I reflected, my data was rich, the participatory workshops had provided a valuable space to mothers for exchanging ideas and discussing important and highly relevant topics to them, and the arguments, the unending story sharing reflected the value of those workshops. I also asked participants' feedback after the workshops, their reflections made me realise how the workshop had inspired them to make actions/changes. For example, Xi wrote:

> …I enjoyed chatting with the other two mothers. There are two points that struck me during the conversation: the first is, those two mothers hardly ever allow their children to watch TV at home, while we watch it almost every day for 20 to 30 minutes. Most of the time, we watch animations like WWD. In fact, I am not against children watching TV, I like it very much myself. Also, there are many documentaries that are worth watching. In the future, I think I should limit their viewing to some extent, perhaps minimising the frequency of watching TV. Another point is that one mother had a large book collection to support her children's reading. I did not do well on this, [I] don't like reading. I think in my spare time, I should read with the child, for example, on weekends' afternoon, having 1-2 hour, she reads her book, I can read mine, no toys, no mobile phone, just read silently. This is what I should treat seriously and improve now (Written reflection from Xi, 25/4/2021).

Although there were a lot of difficulties during the participatory workshops, I think in terms of what I offered to the participants, it was the most useful part of the study. As mothers, my participants deserve a space and time like this to have coffee, ice cream and cakes, without children, to chat with other women who have similar or completely different situations, to receive full attention, to be listened to, to be witnessed. As a researcher, I learnt to 'lose control' in the group discussion and let the participants speak, reflect and lead. Meanwhile, as a participant observer, I experienced the tensions of trying to combine participant observation and participatory research. As Nelson & Wright (1995) argued, participant observation and participatory research have different aims during the research: in the former, the emphasis is simply on observing while the emphasis in the latter is about initiating change. I attempted to involve participants' ideas in research and that is why I designed group discussions structured by participatory activities. However, the experience of those workshops reminded me that my intention was not to bring 'big change' into participants' everyday lives but simply to invite them to reflect on their concerns and problems and seek potential resolutions with their peers.

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[28] Participants who joined group activity do not know each other before the workshop.

4.3.2.4 Constructing and concealing researcher identity

Anthropologists frequently use a binary framework, such as 'insider/outsider' (Merton, 1972) or 'emic/etic', to establish their position in relation to the individuals they gather information from. This framework helps anthropologists navigate their role and perspective in the research process. As Abidin (2020) explained, "being 'insiders' with empathetic knowledge and intimate access to their community, and 'outsiders' with more neutrality and a natural curiosity to critically examine cultural repertoire that is otherwise overlooked or presumed to be mundane" (p. 57). In my case, I attempted to join the group I studied while remaining in my researcher role, which was not easy. As mentioned before, I clearly knew I am an 'outsider' – unmarried, unpregnant, not living in Shanghai. Yet I hoped to be more like an 'insider' to make my participants feel that they are talking with their 'own people'. Therefore, during the data collection, I was conscious of how to present myself in front of participants.

I had some 'secrets' to share in order to establish my identity as a reliable researcher and to forge a bond of trust. To start with, when we met in person, I shared that I have a little brother who is struggling with school study and that I was helping him. This always worked well when I then expressed my empathy with the challenges of facilitating children's homework. Sometimes, participants even asked my advice about bringing up boys, since I literally participated in my brother's whole childhood (being 13 years older than him). This element of my own story suddenly brought me 'inside' the topic. I also used my 'outsider' identity when asking questions. As an unmarried, non-Shanghainese PhD student who had just returned from the UK, I was entitled to ask 'silly questions' and they seemed happy to answer by telling stories.

I also made efforts with my clothes and make-up before face-to-face meeting, as it felt important to choose the correct style to meet different people. Choosing the meeting place was also crucial. I usually invited participants to choose the place but sometimes they preferred me to make the decision. We met in a café, a shopping mall, an indoor skiing court, an indoor playground, all places associated with the 'middle-class', no matter who chose it. So, I tried to make myself presentable in those places, not too causal, too assertive or overdressed.

I also began to notice that I was unintentionally imitating or mirroring participants' speaking style during the interview. It started with texting: I would copy certain words from Shanghainese because a participant mentioned it or used that term. Then when I noticed this, I intentionally began to adopt a Shanghainese accent and certain modal particles in later audio and in person interviews. This usage was somehow symbolic of my history in Shanghai –while I cannot speak Shanghainese, I have lived there before so am not entirely an 'outsider'; I gave them my best performance. I am still not sure if this performance helped with the data collection but it did help me emotionally - it made me feel much more involved in the conversation.

4.3.3 Ethical concerns

Many ethical considerations appeared during and after my fieldwork. The process of negotiating between different cultural backgrounds and making decisions on ethical issues was always with me during the research. As Robinson-Pant (2005) described, 'cross-cultural' researcher face two major ethical dilemmas, the first is "whether and how to adapt to cultural difference in behaviour" (p. 99), such as how to give gifts/payment within a certain culture; the second dilemma is "how far to question or adopt new or contrasting ethical values within the research study in response to working within an institution with a differing code of practice" (ibid., p. 100). As an international student from China studying in a UK institution, I had to follow the ethical guidelines which are designed to protect me (as a researcher) as well as the research informant (Robinson-Pant, 2005).

However, as an 'insider' of this cultural context, I also adapted my behaviours in this research. For example, often the researcher offers payment or a voucher to participants as a 'thank-you'. I felt uncomfortable to do so, since my limited budget could not match my participants' contributions and I did not think they would appreciate the awkwardness this might generate. In the end, I selected some coffee mugs and handmade placemats in an independent designer's shop (very middle-class style) within a limited budget and gave them to those participants who met me in person as a present (either coffee mug or placemat). Suffice to say, I addressed the many ethical considerations in this research with the awareness of doing research in a 'cross-cultural' context. In this section, I discuss the three main ethical considerations in my study: consent, anonymity and commitment.

4.3.3.1 Consent

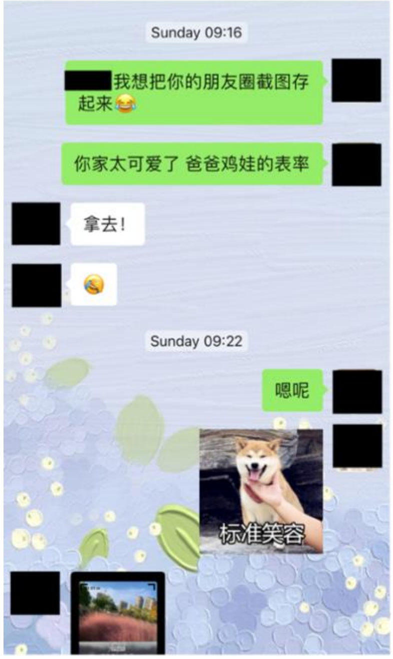
Conducting research online sounded straightforward at the beginning; surely, I assumed, online participant observation and online interview would be easily managed. However, the fact is "doing ethnographic research about, on, and through contemporary digital media is most often a messy, personal, highly contextual enterprise fraught with anxieties and discomforts" (Abidin & De Seta, 2020, p. 4). During data collection, I realised how many details I had not considered until I had started my fieldwork. When preparing my ethics application, I wrote in my field diary:

> I will only collect data from the members who agree to participate. If there are interesting data I want to collect, I will contact members who are involved in the conversation and ask their permission to collect it. To make sure all group members know what I am doing/will do in the chatroom, I will repeatedly remind them of my

> existence in the group during the first week of data collection. Also, I will leave my information on the group announcement board. If there are any questions or feedback, group members can contact me directly (Reflection notes, 9/10/2020).

In practice, it was hard to completely follow this plan. To start with, I was not able to obtain every member's consent during observation. As explained in previous sections, there were many messages every day (usually 900+ messages were waiting for me when I got up in the morning). These came from a large number of members and I was not able to contact them all. Then, because of Ying's request, I was not able to introduce myself in Group 3. Therefore, I had to amend the details to ensure I that I followed the approved ethics regulations. Instead of collecting all the conversations, I decided to observe only and collect the topics or opinions from the groups without identified information. When I found something interesting, I selected those messages and combined them in collection (a file storage function in WeChat). Also, if I did not get consent from the participants, I would not use any direct quotes from them but used my observation notes as an alternative. I also found that verbal or texting consent were more manageable in this study, since for several months, communication between me and my participants was solely online. While for online participant observation and online interview, having an informal agreement via text was acceptable, for the participatory workshops, I usually asked participants to sign a consent form digitally, which is much easier to manage than printing and signing by hand.

However, since my fieldwork continued over a long period, I was afraid that participants might forget that I was still collecting data from their Moments, so I always took a screenshot and asked separate consent again (see Figure 7). After each interview, I wrote a summary of the content which I shared with the participant, asking their permission to use the data. This ensured that participants knew what had been said and that they were happy with it. Equally, there were free to highlight anything they were not willing to share, which I then removed. In practice, none of my participants withdrew anything they had shared. For the participatory workshops, I created small WeChat groups after each group meeting and shared all the photos with them, including the outputs of their discussion, so that they were aware that I would potentially use some of those photos in my thesis.



Sunday 09:16

[redacted] [redacted]我想把你的朋友圈截图存起来😂

你家太可爱了 爸爸鸡娃的表率 [redacted]

[redacted] 拿去！

[redacted] 🤣

Sunday 09:22

嗯呢 [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Figure 7 Specific consent for certain pictures & contents

The process of gaining consent was not a pleasant experience. For a start, the administrative ethics procedures largely restricted my data collection. As mentioned in 4.3.1, the manager of Group 3 did not allow me to introduce myself and my research to the group; she thought it might be awkward and preferred not to interrupt the group. I decided she knew the group better than me and in case, as the gatekeeper, she had the power so I accepted her advice. Yet within the online culture in China, it is not seen as a big deal to take a screenshot and share it with others as long as users' IDs are protected. This is also what managers assumed I was going to do. However, research ethics regulations here in the UK prevented me from doing this. As a consequence, I had to give up on many excellent potential data sources because of the lack of flexibility in qualitative research ethics (especially for online research). Instead, I had to find indirect ways to describe what was going on (see 4.3.3.3).

4.3.3.2 Anonymity

To protect participants, their anonymity was ensured throughout the research and I did not ask anyone to share personal information such as name, age, career, salary etc. However, during the chatting (interviewing), I learned personal information from most participants, especially about their work. I then double checked this information with them through a written summary (in Mandarin) after the interview. In general, I used pseudonyms rather than their usernames on WeChat, but several participants asked that I use their English names in this study and that is why there are names like Vitas, Lena, Mona and Faith. Those participants who did not request an English name were given pseudonyms based on an old Chinese textbook, *Qian Zi Wen* (a basic literacy book). The first sentence of this book is: "Tian Di Xuan Huang Yu Zhou Hong Huang". Then

I named my participants accordingly, in the order of the interviews. This idea came from another ancient Chinese book– *Bai Jia Xing*[29], which is an assemblage of surnames in China. I planned to use *Bai Jia Xing* first but then found that using surnames would make it hard to manage data since I knew some participants' real surnames and those surnames do appear in the first several sentence of *Bai Jia Xing.* This might have led to a misunderstanding between my participants as well, if they read the manuscript one day, as some of them knew each other. To make it simple therefore, I used *Qian Zi Wen*.

In terms of anonymity online, I also noticed that my participants often posted pictures or texts with their children's real name or nickname in WeChat Moments. In contrast to Weibo, audiences in WeChat are selected from the existing contacts. In other words, it is not a 'society of strangers' (see 2.3) which could mean less caution needs to be applied. However, I still felt uncomfortable collecting data that included children's full name, class number, school name etc. Therefore, I decided either not to include those pictures in my data or cover that information if the data is important. I realised that not all users had the sense of protecting personal data. As a researcher, I felt I had a responsibility to consider cyberspace privacy and safety regardless of participants' approach in this regard, in order to better protect participants as well as myself.

4.3.3.3 Commitment

As a researcher, I hoped to be a 'friend' of my participants because it would help to build trust and to have in-depth conversations. So I told my participants I would be there if they needed someone to talk to, at any time. It was only when I officially stopped data collection that I realised the price I had paid for my commitment to my participants.

Sui was one of my 'online friends' who shared many stories and she helped me with participant recruitment, so I naturally felt 'I owe her so much'. This led to it being difficult to say 'no' to her whenever she wanted to talk about personal life (mainly about her marriage). This was my commitment to her - being a good listener, although her story was intensely emotional and heavy at times (see Sui's story in Chapter 7). During the fieldwork, I felt I could handle most of the difficult emotions that participants shared and I could just leave them behind after listening. However, when I completed fieldwork and returned to the UK, I began to feel the heaviness of their stories. Sui's story took a new turn which was both depressing and shocking. It meant that our conversation sounded more like a counselling session, which was stressful for me because I am not a professional marriage counsellor nor an experienced person who can help. I was worried about her and it directly affected my health - I could not sleep at night.

While there were other reasons for my insomnia, I knew Sui's story played a main part. I was not sure whether I should include her story in my data chapter, because of privacy and sensitivity. During data collection, I decided not to include her personal story because I wanted to protect her, despite her assurance that I could use anything I wanted, since for her “there was nothing to hide”. However, when I pieced together the whole story again with the latest development in the group chat (Group 3), I doubted my previous decision. Should I include the sensitive story if the participant had ‘openly’ shared it in a group with 276 members? Could I include group members’ comments on this story given that I had the group manager’s and the storyteller’s consent? I was struggling with the decision: I still felt I should protect Sui even if she did not seem to care. Meanwhile, it was impossible to ask all group members’ consent and I concluded that “this case will be perfect evidence for the online community chapter (and the grandparents) and I have asked Sui’s consent” (Quote from my email to the supervision team, 25/10/2021). The suggestions from my supervisors reinforced my instinctive initial caution:

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[29] It is also a literacy book for children or adults in ancient China, nowadays people do not often use it anymore.

> It reminds me of some (F2F) issues I have had in the past where as a researcher I have had to decide what to put in the public report/thesis or not, based on what I feel the participant/s understood the situation to be. Sometimes it has meant excluding excellent data due to that relationship of trust or because I realised they had forgotten my researcher role when they shared information with me (Email from Anna.R-P, 26/10/2021).
>
> It’s often the case in online research that you may spot something interesting, but just because it’s interesting and useful doesn’t mean you can use it… As Anna mentioned, the decision about what to include or not are a little complicated, but I would trust that if it feels wrong, trust that feeling (Email from Harry.D, 26/10/2021).

I followed the advice and decided not to mention the details of Sui’s story. I used the relevant information, removing any unconsented direct quotes from data. This discussion on ethics and sensitive data reminds me of the importance of protecting participants and myself. It was also a wake- up call: I was becoming overwhelmed by participants’ stories and it was time to stop checking group messages.

4.4 Data record, analysis, and writing up

Throughout data collection, I had used a ‘recording system’ to organise my data. I hoped it would improve the efficiency of my data analysis later on. During the online participant observation, I selected group chat histories and copied them in a stored file on WeChat-collection, which means only I can see the collected items. Meanwhile, because of ethical regulation, I could not collect direct quotes from group members who had not given their consent, so I had to write down my observation notes (see Figure 8, left) by summarising what was happening in the group. Once I noted down the story/conversation from group chat, I usually wrote my basic analysis and reflections on the side as well, which would help with later deep analysis. In terms of participant observation of Moments, I took screenshots and recorded them in a folder in OneDrive.

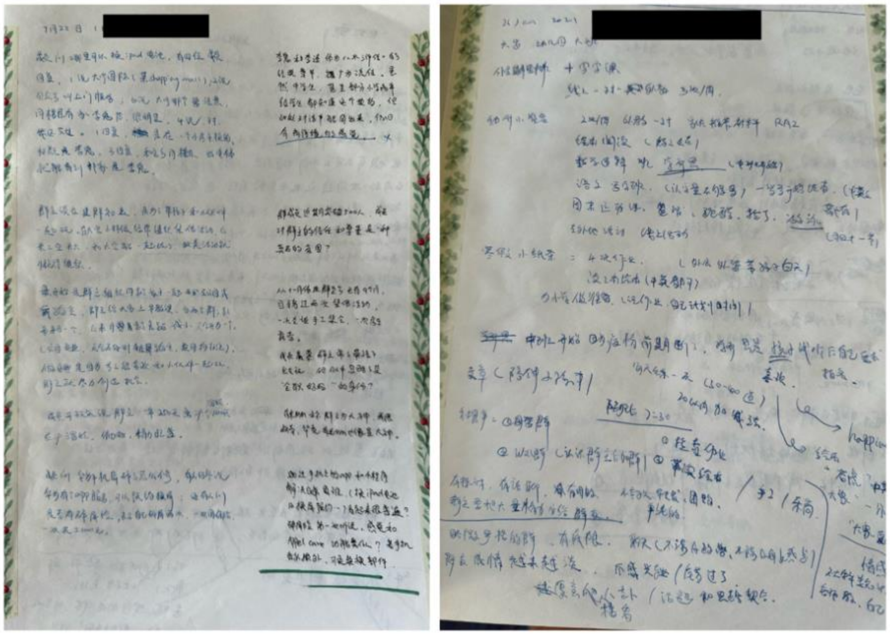

Figure 8 Online participant observation notes and audio interview notes

Online interviews (including text and audio call) were directly recorded via text itself or by a voice recorder on my iPad (which could be synced to my other digital devices). Brief notes were taken by pen and paper (see Figure 8, right) during audio call interviews and had to be transcribed into a word document after. All online interviews were shared with participants via a written summary which included some quotations. In person interviews were not recorded by mobile phone (but digital notes were taken afterwards), since I hoped to encourage participants to speak more freely and authentically, rather than being aware of their participant role which might have elicited more formal responses. During the participatory activities, an audio record (via mobile phone) was managed and transcribed later. I also provided large sized papers and pens for participants to use for drawing and writing. During the workshop, I also took photos as a record of the activities and shared them with participants later. All interview summaries and transcripts were stored in OneDrive. I also copied them onto OneNote and listed the data with participants' pseudonyms. I did not translate all my data, because the whole fieldwork was conducted in Chinese, and it was not necessary to translate everything. I decided to analyse the data first and then translate the relevant quotations and notes.

Fieldnotes as a part of my data played an important role in the later analysis. Here I explain the logic of my notes system. Just to clarify, my fieldnotes were a combination of Chinese and English[30]. For example, I used Microsoft OneNote as a platform for brainstorming notes, follow up ideas, screenshots, post-activity reflections and all these notes were written in English. I also used mobile phone memos to record audio and text notes in Mandarin. This form of notetaking usually commenced on the way or way back to an in-person meeting.

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[30] My mother tongue is Chinese, and my second language is English.

Apart from digital notes, I also used an A4 size notebook to record observation notes and some basic analysis (see Figure 8), which was written in Mandarin. Meanwhile, I used another blank notebook to record methodological notes and reflections (see Figure 9). To make it more personalised, I used mask tapes, cards, stickers to decorate it and to make writing and reviewing notes more enjoyable. This idea came from my non-PhD life hobby which is using collage in my travel journaling. Compared to digital notes, writing in the journal was instantly fulfilling. Besides, since my academic writing had always been done on digital devices, when I made notes on paper, it feels like I was doing something personal and non-academic which felt less pressured.

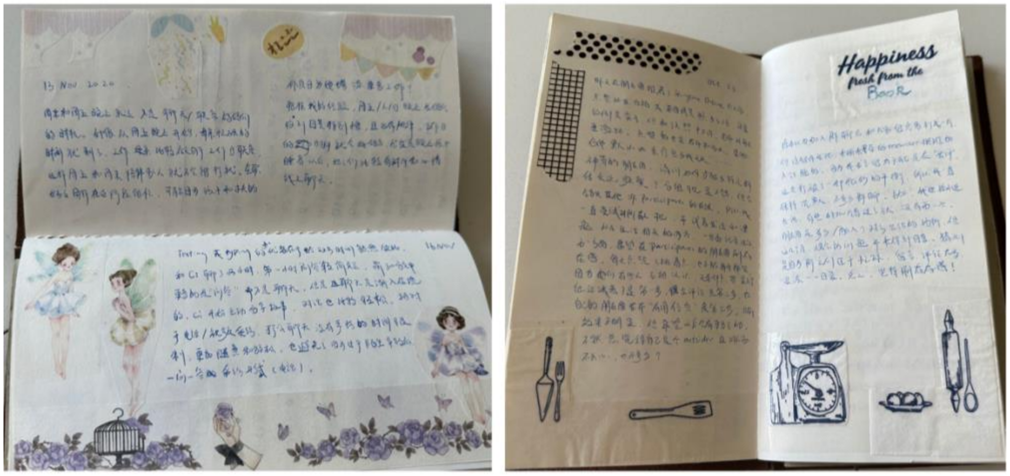


Figure 9 Methodological reflection notes

I also wrote a monthly fieldwork report to my supervisors in English as a record of the research process, which mainly focused on some basic analysis of my existing data – the key topics, themes and stories that had emerged in that month.

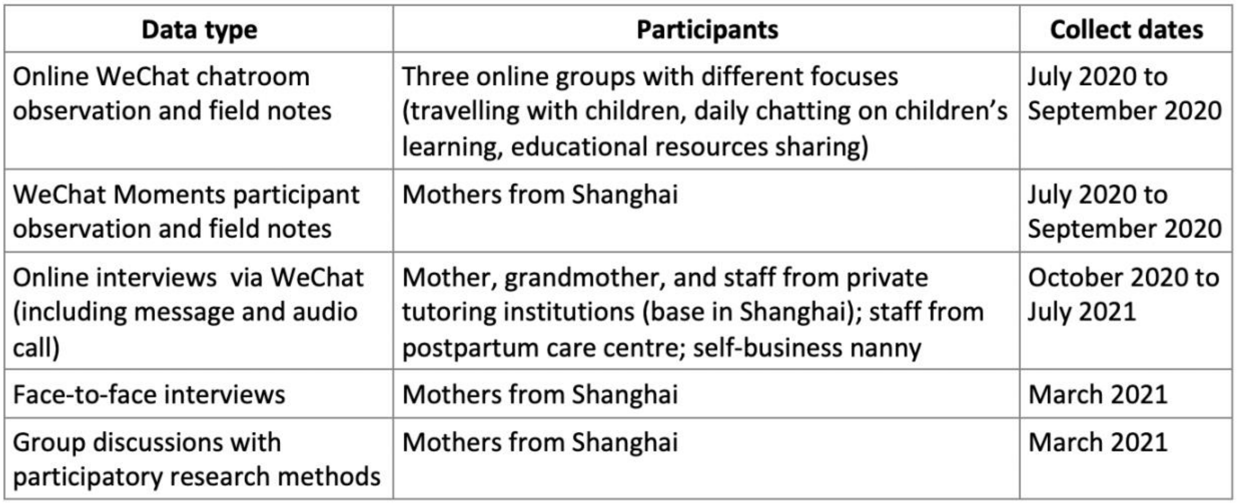
My decision to include multiple languages in the research is based on the differing context of my researched site and my current institution. Robinson-Pant (Robinson-Pant & Wolf, 2017) describes how she transcribed Nepali direct speech into Romanised script or translated the meaning directly into English because she wanted to “capture as much as possible” and it was “easier and quicker” to do this in her first language using a familiar script (p. 2). Similarly, my first language is Chinese, and my working language is English so while all official paperwork during the PhD had to be written in English, I was able to use Chinese in my own notes to ‘capture’ important information and speed up the notetaking.

I also only used Mandarin to communicate with participants, although my participants sometimes used Shanghainese or even English words sometimes. Most participants could not speak English fluently but a few of them used English terms during interview. For example, when

Ying described how she "**pushed**" her daughter at times to do something (see Chapter 5), she used the English word rather than the Chinese one '*bipo*' (逼迫) or '*tuidong'* (推动). I wonder if it is because the Chinese word sounds negative and is more associated with power, although it does not sound very positive in English either. Another explanation could be that using English words in speech is another 'middle-class' feature in this context, although sometimes they are used sarcastically to depict those who pretend to be fancy/international even though they have limited English vocabulary.

The process of reviewing data and drafting a report encouraged me to analyse data alongside fieldwork, which helped me to spot emerging topics and themes and then go into more depth in later data collection. In qualitative research, data collection and the analysis of data are not "strictly distinct phrases", instead, they are "closely intertwined processes which proceed circularly in reciprocal interaction because the data analysis drives closely-focused sampling and information collection" (Gobo, 2008, para. 3). The types of data and relevant participants are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3 Fieldwork data



Data type	Participants	Collect dates
Online WeChat chatroom observation and field notes	Three online groups with different focuses (travelling with children, daily chatting on children's learning, educational resources sharing)	July 2020 to September 2020
WeChat Moments participant observation and field notes	Mothers from Shanghai	July 2020 to September 2020
Online interviews via WeChat (including message and audio call)	Mother, grandmother, and staff from private tutoring institutions (base in Shanghai); staff from postpartum care centre; self-business nanny	October 2020 to July 2021
Face-to-face interviews	Mothers from Shanghai	March 2021
Group discussions with participatory research methods	Mothers from Shanghai	March 2021

I manually analysed all the data, with the help of an iPad and a software package on the laptop called XMind[31]. An inductive, data-driven approach was used in my data analysis. All qualitative data – my fieldnotes, screenshots, interview transcripts, participatory activities and transcripts - were analysed through the coding system. Coding systems generally trace a path from descriptive to interpretative (Watt, 2014). There are several ways to do this, for example, the line-by-line coding from grounded theory (see Moghaddam, 2006), and the three-level coding system "which progress[es] from simple descriptive coding, through a level of data led interpretative coding, to a top-down level of interpretative coding driven by theory and concepts drawn from a relevant theoretical or substantive literature (Langdridge, 2004, in Watt, 2014, p. 5). In every case, the aim of this coding system is to identify the key themes, issues and meaning within the data (Watts, 2014).

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[31] A software to draw mind map.

In this research, I digitalised all data and uploaded them on OneNote. I then highlighted the data under three big themes: education (blue), online community (purple), family division of labour (green) with different colours. Then, I read the transcript several times and typed key themes alongside data in a different column. After that, I read through the data again, using a digital pencil to directly write down notes and themes connected with the theories. Finally, I used Xmind to organise all the themes and distinguish the levels of the themes. Then I made connections and fleshed out the three main stories: the relationship between schooling, tutoring and mothering (Chapter 5); the untold stories in motherhood (Chapter 6); and mothers' performance in online communities (Chapter 7).

When I returned to the UK and started writing up this thesis in September 2021, I was told to map the data for each theme and using sub-themes, provide examples and actual quotes in writing. Then, my supervisors also suggested that I start each chapter with a particular mother who captures the main theme and from then, analyse mothers who had different or similar concerns around this theme. Another suggestion was to begin with critical incidents, a moment in the conversation that changed the way I thought about my data, such as one of the conversations I observed in online communities (Supervision meeting, 13/9/2021). I then decided to use a telling case at the start of each findings chapter, which helped me to organise different themes closely in the story.

During the writing up period, I was often distracted by the challenges of translation. I found it difficult and frustrating at times to translate quotations and fieldnotes, particularly when I attempted to capture the scene and translate participants' emotions into sentences. I worried about meaning getting lost in translation. In addition, my supervisors' comments in my monthly report helped me to realised that there are many Chinese terms I needed to explain to Western audiences. Terms that seem to me to be 'common knowledge' need to be explained in order to be understood by readers unfamiliar with the cultural context. Therefore, the challenge was not only linguistic but cultural. In fact, the whole writing process was one of "negotiating and mediating different values, practices, and identities in recognition of multiple audiences/readers (including research participants)" (Robinson-Pant & Wolf, 2017, p. 91).

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the process of finding my methodological stance which reflects the process of learning and my growing understandings about doing research with/on/through digital media. I explained how I chose to combine physical and digital ethnography.

This entire research journey has taught me about the uncertainty of doing ethnographic research, compounded by conducting research through a global health crisis. I have also discovered the flexibility of communication on digital platforms and learnt to be aware of the need to protect participants. I described my fluid identities between 'insider’ and ‘outsider’ and how empathy for participants transcended these distinctions, sometimes impacting my own wellbeing. Through the process I have come to appreciate why people say that one of the attractions of doing ethnography is that there is no recipe (Hine, 2000).

My methodological design and practice provided me with many opportunities to ‘learn by doing’. As an ethnographic researcher, I believe that the best way to learn about this methodological approach is to conduct an ethnographic study. Throughout the process, informal learning has occurred all the time, from terminological discussions about ethnography to ‘learning as social practice’, from being self-reflexive to seeking the balance and negotiation of multiple cultures and adjusting my behaviours in both contexts.

In the following three chapters, I will share some key findings from the research data: the relationship between schooling, tutoring, and mothering (Chapter 5); the untold stories in motherhood (Chapter 6); mothering experiences in online spaces (Chapter 7).

Chapter 5 “My child is not talented”: Exploring the relationships between schooling, tutoring and mothering

5.1 Introduction

During my fieldwork in Shanghai, I became aware that mothering and tutoring were woven together, and that tutoring had somehow become a part of mothering. Those mothers then can be seen as a part of shadow education. Not every mother was happy with this ‘work’ but according to their online discussions, they had very limited choices. Places in key schools are limited so to help children have a chance to get into one of these schools, parents (especially mothers in this research) dedicate a lot of time and effort to their children’s education. Considerable time and money were spent on encouraging and pushing their children to succeed academically. These middle-class well-educated mothers, having experienced the whole educational system, usually had the knowledge of schooling and were able to help with their children’s study. When education provided by the school was not enough for their family or did not fulfil their requirements, private tutoring played an important role in filling the gap. However, when as a result of the ‘Double Reduction’ policy (see 2.2.3), tutoring classes were restricted and monitored, some mothers decided to rely on themselves to support children’s education and explore their new role as active educational agents, positive educational practitioners and family tutors. It seemed that they needed to ensure that their children were not only smart but smarter than others. Thus, peer competition compounded school pressure.

As clarified in 1.4 (RQ1), I set out to investigate how middle-class mothers support their children’s education. I introduced the ideas around middle-class parents’ educational pressure and how shadow education works in relation to schooling competition in 2.2.3. Therefore, in this chapter, I intend to use private tutoring as an example of mothers’ efforts and practices in supporting children’s education. Thus, this chapter seeks to explore the newly emerging relationships between schooling, tutoring and mothering by questioning how commercialisation influences parenting and how mothers respond. I will first provide an overview of private tutoring in Shanghai by investigating the tensions between formal schooling and private tutoring, which includes middle-class mothers’ engagement with tutoring and the pressure they experience. To explore the role that private tutoring institutions/companies play in shaping schooling anxiety, I will also investigate the commercial mechanism of tutoring and how mothers cope with commercialism. I will then discuss those mothers’ experience of children’s education and their response to the current educational system. Finally, I will discuss whether the ‘Double Reduction’ policy could be a relief or a burden to middle-class families and how it may relate to participants’ everyday lives.

5.2 A holistic picture of tutoring in Shanghai

I will unpack the various reasons for taking tutoring lessons in this section and provide a holistic picture of what role tutoring plays in Shanghai and why it is important. Multiple forms of tutoring operate alongside one another in Shanghai, including out-of-school tutoring classes delivered by private tutoring institutions (including one-to-one and group session), and home tutoring which is provided by parents (mainly mothers in this study). I will also explore how mothers feel about the extra work of tutoring and their different responses to this work.

5.2.1 Reasons for having out-of-school tutoring classes

I met most of my participants online. Usually, I would start a conversation by commenting on something that I had found interesting from their Moments' post (see Chapter 4) and this is how I began a conversation with Lena.

One day, I saw Lena had shared a picture of her son's timetable for the winter holiday. I immediately texted her and asked if she was willing to talk about it. According to the timetable, Lena's son had English tutoring in the morning, handwriting and soft pen calligraphy training in the afternoon, then Maths lessons in the evening. It seems she was putting a lot of effort into her son's learning, especially with Maths and English. I then asked why Lena had not included Chinese in her son's timetable, given the emphasis on Chinese language in the national curriculum. Lena's explanation was simple:

> the progress and intensity of Chinese learning [in school] exceeded my expectations. All headteachers are Chinese teacher, their qualifications and teaching experience are impeccable (Interview with Lena, 26/01/2021).

She had no concerns about the teaching of Chinese being provided in the school and so did not feel the need for any additional input. By contrast, she was concerned about English and Maths, both of central importance, and was not so confident of the school's performance in this regard.

Lena is a working mother in Shanghai; her son was 6 years old and had just started Year 1 in 2020. Due to the 'yaohao' (摇号) policy[32], Lena's son had to go to a state school after being unsuccessful in enrolling in her preferred private school. This state school focused on Chinese and the teaching of Maths and English was "too basic", Lena commented, and "we have to do some extra practices by ourselves". For Lena this meant that once she was back from work, she spent the evening helping the child to complete homework then they would do extra Maths and also read English picture books together before going to bed. These practices showed how Lena helped her children's learning without external tutors, meanwhile, Lena also sought for professional tutors' help on English and Maths learning. Her son had two online English classes on weekdays whereas on weekends, he attended art, chess and Maths lessons. Lena's son was busy on different tutoring lessons apparently, while Lena too, devoted considerable time on scheduling these activities to help the child achieve a better performance.

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[32] Private schools randomly recruit students from the computer enrolment system with all applicants' names.

When I asked Lena which kind of learning she prefers, studying at home or in a private tutoring centre, without hesitation, Lena chose the tutoring centre. She explained that tutoring her son at home "may not have enough constraints and it's easy to give up". Besides, teachers in tutoring institutions are "more professional" with helping children to study (Interview with Lena, 26/01/2021). Lena clearly knew the limitation of home tutoring since she was not 'professional' enough, thus seeking a professional and knowledgeable teacher to do extra practice for the child seemed like a 'must-do' rather than an 'add-on' for her. Lena was not the only one who prefer tutoring institutions, her friends' children were doing the same handwriting course too. I wondered if the handwriting tutoring was requested by school, Lena clearly stated that it is not the school's requirement:

> The state school asks nothing. But *zhongkao* (high school entrance examination) and *gaokao* (college entrance examination) mark on the computer, so neat handwriting is indispensable. Is it too much to ask to address the writing requirements ahead of time (Interview with Lena, 26/01/2021)?

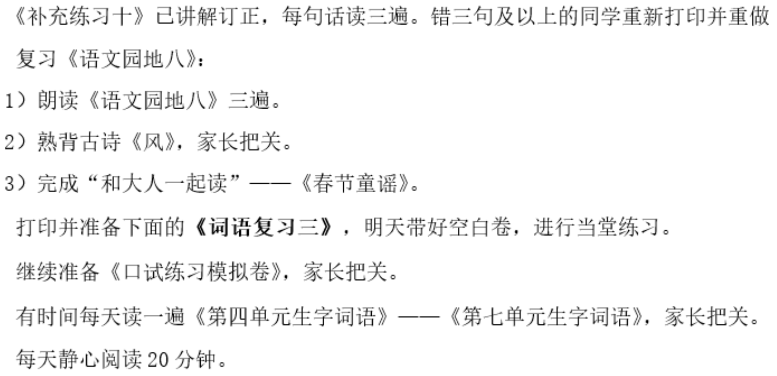
Although the state school does not request extra practice, parents automatically prepare their children in advance:

> My child is taking handwriting quite seriously and this relates to the atmosphere of his class - on the whole, the families of children in his class pay a lot attention to handwriting (Interview with Lena, 26/01/2021).

In Lena's case, except for home tutoring which she moderates herself, her son also attended extra English and Maths classes in the local tutoring centre since the school curriculum in these subjects was in her view, 'too basic' and she wanted her son keep up with the others – students in good private school. The competitive exam-oriented environment and the peer pressure from other parents compelled her to pay more specific attention to her child's education, such as signing him up to a handwriting course. It interested me that the pressure was not coming from the schoolteachers: parents were paying for these handwriting courses because of peer pressure. I asked Lena if the schoolteachers requested any cooperation from parents. It turned out that parents were also required to complete certain tasks for school, as I explain in the next section.

5.2.2 Reasons for providing home tutoring for children

Apart from organising the timetable of her son's tutorials, Lena had other education-related tasks, as mentioned in 5.2.1: she helped with her son's homework, which included checking the results, ensuring the quality and meeting the expectations of his schoolteachers via the ‘homework list’. Lena shared a typical daily Chinese homework list (see Figure 10) as well as tutoring guidance for parents and students.



《补充练习十》已讲解订正，每句话读三遍。错三句及以上的同学重新打印并重做

复习《语文园地八》：

1）朗读《语文园地八》三遍。

2）熟背古诗《风》，家长把关。

3）完成“和大人一起读”——《春节童谣》。

打印并准备下面的**《词语复习三》**，明天带好空白卷，进行当堂练习。

继续准备《口试练习模拟卷》，家长把关。

有时间每天读一遍《第四单元生字词语》——《第七单元生字词语》，家长把关。

每天静心阅读 20 分钟。

Figure 10 Year one Chinese homework

[Translation]

> Practice Paper No.10 has been reviewed in school, [the students] should read every sentence three times. For students who make mistakes over three sentences, you need to print the paper, and rewrite it.
>
> Review ‘Chinese Garden No.8’:
>
> Read aloud the text three times.
>
> Memorise the poem Wind - parents control the quality.
>
> Complete ‘Reading with adults’ - poems about the Spring Festival.
>
> Print the Vocabulary Review Paper No.3, bring it to school the next day to do in-session practice. Continue to prepare for the Oral Exam Practice Paper - parents control the quality. If you have time, read the vocabulary list from Unit 4 to Unit 7 every day, parents check the results. Do silent reading 20 minutes per day.

From this guidance, it seems that parents are being positioned as extra educational helpers who will provide home tutoring. I wondered whether all parents would feel able to facilitate these tasks. Lena commented: “It is not easy for the educational helper to complete all tasks perfectly … this is only a single subject [as example] and there are other subjects everyday”. Later, she shared another photo which was a homework list on Friday and said, “there is no more homework at the weekend. It might be because schoolteachers know that children also have out-of-school tutoring classes”. Friday’s list looked like the previous one, but specifically added the following notes for parents: “Parents must urge the children to review carefully and master all the content on this test paper. In addition, parents can also create the same type of questions for the children to practice” (Interview with Lena, 26/01/2021). It is clearly noted that parents’ facilitation on homework was expected.

Lena was satisfied with the clear-written homework list and the instructions, as “it pointed out a way to parents, at least let me know how to do it, and to what extent. After all, it’s our first time of being parents”. After completing these tasks with/ for her child, however, Lena still felt anxious. She explained that:

> Anxiety is the norm … I often think about whether we are not doing enough and can’t match the pace of teaching in private school, worry that the gap will become bigger and bigger in five years [primary school]. Also, the education environment in Pudong (a district of Shanghai) is not satisfactory and there are too many candidates [for next level of education’s exam] … (Interview with Lena, 26/01/2021).

Lena is a typical case in my study, she was unhappy with the school curriculum and therefore did what she could – a combination of practicing at home and private tutoring but still worried about her child’s future education. According to Lena, private school and state school have different curriculum/speed with regards to English, with private schools’ main attraction being its superior reputation for English teaching. The feeling of ‘not doing enough’ pushed Lena to continuously review her actions and invest more time and money on home practicing and private tutoring. I felt her worries and anxieties were largely fuelled by peer competition, which was difficult to ignore.

5.2.3 Learning in advance - pressures from peer competition

The less than satisfactory English teaching in the state schools was also a concern for another one of my participants. As a middle school teacher, Faith did not have problems with choosing schools for her child: she had planned every step and the choice was clear: state primary school, then in the next stage, her child could go either to Faith’s or her husband’s (also a teacher) school to study, as a privilege of being a teachers’ child. Because the English curriculum in state schools has the reputation of being basic, Faith had signed her child up for private English classes from the first year of kindergarten. Now (when I conducted interviews), her child was at primary school. Talking about English learning, she reflected that:

> Everyone is learning [before primary school]. So some of them have even got quite far [with their English] before starting primary school, If you didn’t learn [in advance] and been a totally ‘blank paper’ in the class, that would definitely not be okay [as you would fall behind] (Interview with Faith, 25/01/2021).

When we talked about her plans for her children, Faith frankly shared that children from teachers' family may come under more pressure because:

> They (the teacher parent) are more aware of where the students' ascent pathways are, such as what standards they can reach, where they can go for *zhongkao* or *gaokao* … non-teacher families may be blind ... But we are very clear about this, so our requirements for children will be very high (Interview with Faith, 25/01/2021).

It seemed that peer pressure and the competitive environment influenced parents' plans for their children and directly impacted children's daily learning activities. Parents felt pressured to make considerable efforts to ensure their children's education and encourage their children to study. Peer competition compounded parental stress and anxiety and drove parents to turn to private institutions – almost as though paying for private tutoring classes released some of the pressure and responsibility they felt for their child's education. At the same time, parents seemed to think that paying for tutoring or buying a lot of books for children were not necessarily the solution, but they could not resist – "because everyone is doing so" (Online observation, 12/08/2020). Another participant, Vitas, described how the pressure came to her family:

> Originally, there was no plan for the child to learn to write before the age of seven, but when he was in a Chinese tutoring class, the teacher reported that he was the only child in the class who could not write his own name (he was five). After that, he would not be able to keep up with others in primary school (Interview with Vitas, 24/01/2021).

Vitas said her husband was anxious after hearing this and "he immediately registered our child for a handwriting module" (Interview with Vitas, 24/01/2021). Apparently, the child was not alone in the handwriting class - his playmate was in that module too. This conversation between teacher and parent and the parents' actions are typical of the current problem with education for these parents:

> the environment is this, everyone is learning in advance, some parents may be against it or feel anxious, but they have to do the same in the end. It is very ambivalent (Interview with Chen, 08/05/2021).

The contradiction and struggle between 'following others' and 'accepting being left behind' is further exacerbated by the famous slogan from a private tutoring institution which encapsulates the educational environment I have been describing: "You come, we train your child; if you don't come, we train your child's competitors" (see Figure 11).

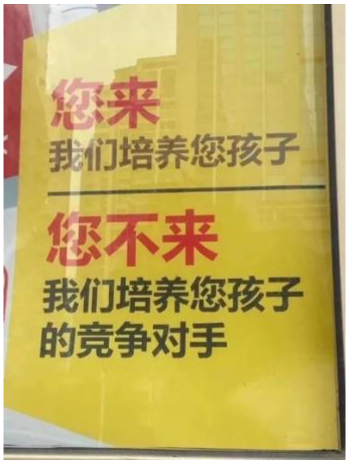


Figure 11 A poster from private tutoring institution (online resource)

This slogan was widely circulated online so that parents would have difficulty ignoring the message that competition is serious. While they were well aware that the tutoring institution was exaggerating the competition for their own financial ends, they (the parents) could not entirely ignore the message, as that would feel like giving up on their children's future.

For example, Daqi's mother (introduced in the context chapter) admitted that the reason she had booked thirteen tutoring courses for her daughter was because "I cannot bear that I did nothing when all the mothers in the group were planning tutoring classes for their children" (BRTV Youth Channel, 2019). Similarly, Vitas and Faith were paying for handwriting and English course in advance of their children starting primary school essentially because everyone else was doing so: if they did not follow their peers and sign up to private tutorials, they were putting their children at risk of being left behind.

According to national educational policy, most primary schools accept that Year 1 students will begin with no subject knowledge. From my observation, I found that in the first week of Year 1, children usually learn simple readings and write simple words in Chinese and the homework might be writing these new words in the exercise book. This is not exactly starting from 'zero'. Di shared her concerns with me, in this regard:

> Teachers in primary school do not teach *pinyin* (the official romanisation system for standard Mandarin) in primary school, which is the basis of speaking and reading. Instead, it seems primary school teachers assume that *pinyin* will be learned in kindergarten, while kindergarten must follow the policy which is not to burden children but simply to deliver 'happy' education, so they do not teach *pinyin* either. So who teaches children *pinyin* finally? It has to be either parents or private tutors (Interview note, 10/3/2021).

This disconnection between kindergarten and primary school and a certain disconnect in terms of policy directions, pushes parents like Di to take on the responsibility for preparing their child for primary school, although Di refused to do so. When the school system skipped teaching something basic, parents have to make extra effort to manage it in advance either at home or via private institution. The pressure to do so increases when other students appear to have acquired this basic learning. On the other hand, when most students have learned that knowledge in advance, it is a challenge for schoolteacher as well: they need to follow the instructions and curriculum but might also need to consider the individual situation of students. Di's reflections illustrate how private tutoring addresses a need and how parents' own educational background determines their children's education in that. It will influence how much they can supplement their child's learning, whether at home or by signing up to private tutoring.

The experiences of Faith and Vitas demonstrate how competitive the educational environment of Shanghai is while Di's reflections illustrate the educational dilemmas faced by parents. Putting learning in place for their child in advance of starting primary school is an action that is undertaken as a response to peer pressure. The reasons for seeking support from private tutoring institutions include: the school curriculum is not seen as fulfilling the requirements of competitive education; peer pressure from other parents and students; the influence of tutoring institutions that can be seen as exploiting this anxiety. The reason to home tutor one's children is clear too: teachers expect cooperation from parents, as seen in the homework lists. As a result, parents are under immense pressure to support their children with their learning.

5.3 The commercialism of private tutoring

I have introduced an overview of private tutoring in Shanghai in previous sections. In this section, I will explore the role private tutoring institutions play in responding to the competitive educational environment and developing commercialisation of education in China. I will also discuss mothers' reactions to the commercialisation of tutoring.

5.3.1 Brainwashing: the secret of success

In order to gain a different perspective of Shanghai's private tutoring institutions, I talked with Sui, a former teacher in one of those institutions. She admitted that the main strategy for selling tutoring courses was to fuel peer competition. Sui had multiple roles in the institution, such as teacher, headteacher (administration work) and salesperson. She had experienced the "best time" of private tutoring institutions - around 2015 - when there were over 1000 students on her institution's waiting list (Interview notes, 22/01/2021). I could feel, through her texts, that she was proud of the institution. She shared with me "a widely known secret" regarding the institution she worked for:

> The funniest thing was, in fact, X (the institution) did not have educational qualifications and government departments tried to close it down but parents

> complained and did not want the institution to be closed! Then, X had the opportunity to complete the necessary procedures and the required certificates in order to continue operating (Interview with Sui, 22/01/2021).

We agreed that it is unbelievable for a tutoring institution to not have obtained the required certificates, but for Sui, it was their "best time". She remembered the many courses that were set up in order to prepare students for exams and how her institution launched 'school exam classes' to prepare students for entrance exams for different schools, with different types of questions: "There was no need to explain too much and sell courses, parents just came and paid the fees" (Interview with Sui, 22/01/2021). The '*gong min tong zhao'* policy requiring private and state schools to open their admissions on the same day, to ensure that students could only choose one school at a time, clearly impacted parents' decision-making process. **As explained in Chapter 2, if the student's first choice was a private school and they did not get a place, they would then arrange to apply to a nearby state school after the first round of admissions was complete. More cautious parents applied to the nearby state school as they knew their child would be accepted**. Although the level/quality of state schools tends to be less satisfactory, they are more likely to get in, whereas being admitted to one's chosen private school is less certain (see context in 2.2.3). Originally, the policy was proposed in order to address the educational pressure to pass private schools' entrance examination, and it worked: compared to 2017, the ratio of applicants and admissions to Shanghai's private primary schools in 2018 dropped from 3:1 to 1.4:1 (Ministry of Education, 2018). "After that [the implementation of the new policy] selling our courses became difficult" (Interview with Sui, 22/01/2021). Tutoring institutions had to figure out how to win over indecisive parents: their new strategy was to explain the policy and argue that peer competition is unavoidable if you are in the system.

To this need, private tutoring institutions came up with various slogans to promote their courses, targeted at different parent groups. For example, 'Abilities for Lifelong Benefits' from one famous subjects-training company[33] and 'Make a little progress every day' from its online course webpage[34]. The most popular agency providing English courses claimed that 'A BETTER YOU, A BIGGER WORLD'[35].These marketing slogans sought to persuade parents and students that studying and tutoring are important not simply to improve one's academic scores but also for a future that included both personal and career development.

Apart from these marketing strategies, staff from tutoring institutions had built up their experience of communicating with parents. One such person was Chen, a professional course salesperson. Chen was introduced to me by one of her customers who also happened to be one of my participants (Huang): "I knew the staff in an English language institution, there should be no problem [to contact her as your interviewee]" (WeChat conversation with Huang, 05/05/2021). She sounded very confident in Chen's reliability.

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[33] Peiyou, https://www.speiyou.com (Accessed: 30 October 2021).

[34] Xue Er Si, https://touch.xueersi.com (Accessed: 30 October 2021).

[35] Xin Dong Fang, http://www.xdf.cn (Accessed: 30 October 2021).

Chen claimed that she would use different approaches when communicating with different parents depending on their educational understandings and attitudes. The general procedure was:

> First, ask the parents for their ideas [about education]. If there is one [such as plans for children, go to a state or private school]. Then this part will be passed quickly; if not, parents must be "washed". If the parent is anxious, first ask how the anxiety formed, has it improved, and where is the difficulty in solving the problem (Interview with Chen, 08/05/2021).

I was surprised by Chen's use of the word "washed" which I guessed meant something like 'brainwashed'. These procedures designed to persuade parents require excellent communication skills, including listening skills, and knowledge of the challenges faced by parents in the educational arena. Part of the strategy is to convey to parents that these companies, through individual salespeople, are there 'to support you and help you solve problems' as a route to commercial success. The trust would be built between parents and individual staff members which then directly affected which agency a parent chose. Since tutoring was not cheap, the higher the frequency of interaction, the more a relationship was consolidated, which then increased renewals.

I pondered on the idea of selling and brain washing and compared Chen to another salesperson, Sui. Sui was far more than a teacher; she was like a friend to the mothers and often chatted with them on WeChat in her spare time. In return, many of her clients valued her personality and professionalism. Indeed, as explained in Chapter 4, some of them joined this research as Sui's friend. I believe this is because they built considerable trust during the previous year(s) communication. I wondered whether Chen exaggerated her strategy of 'brainwashing' parents. It might work for 'newcomers' but for parents who came back to renew, would they be so easily manipulated?

What is clear is that both Sui and Chen as employees of a tutoring company, paid a lot of attention to managing their relationships with parents (both online and offline). Their efforts helped them to understand the parents' problems, concerns and worries about their children's education. As a result, they increased customer engagement and consolidated their source of students. This achievement directly reflected on their salary - salary structures in these companies are based on sales. Their marketing success is therefore reliant on parents feeling anxious about their children's education and feeling pressured to take action. In this sense, parents seem to be being manipulated very skilfully, but do parents believe what they are told?

5.3.2 Anti-brainwash: mothers' selecting criteria

Do parents really trust everything that they are told by the companies' representatives/salespeople? Mothers in my study appeared to have their own independent selection criteria. They booked courses offered by different institutions, based on their (children's) needs. In participatory workshop 1, I invited three mothers to discuss how they went about choosing a tutoring company. I asked them to write down their criteria on a card and then rank them. The three working mothers Xi, Hong and Zhou had no hesitation in selecting their priority as being "distance from home". Hong explained:

> Because the children do not go to class only once or twice … Basically every week, and two or three times a week, distance is very important. If you are far away, it will be a waste of time and adults can't manage it. I booked one [far from home] before. It was cold and dark. I didn't want to go all that way. My son didn't want to go … If it is a little closer, then you can walk, which is ideal. Or like now, we just bought an electric motor bike which means we can access all of them (Zhou: yes), all the tutoring classes located in the area near home (Zhou: within three kilometres). Distance is really important, distance is a priority (Workshop notes, 18/03/2021).

Besides, as mothers with "multiple identities" (Hall, 2011), they need to manage competing schedules of domestic, work and childcare- related tasks. In this case, saving on commuting is very important whether they or other childcare helpers are taking or picking up the children to/from their tutorials.

The distance factor was only relevant to face-to-face sessions but the mothers in this workshop were not keen on online classes. They worried about their children's eyesight as well as the quality of online classes. They had unsatisfactory experiences of online sessions and had not been impressed by the children's learning. Therefore, they, like many other mothers, preferred face-to-face tutoring.

Once they had agreed on the importance of distance, many factors needed to be considered. Xi, Hong and Zhou emphasised other important factors such as teaching ability, children's preferences (whether the child liked the tutor and/or the curriculum), comments from friends, price, teacher's affinity, the teaching material/achievement/environment/philosophy, and the company's reputation. They engaged in carefully researching the different companies before making decisions. For instance, when deciding where to send their children for English classes, they compared the different teaching materials used by the company:

> Hong: Will you pay attention to teaching materials? … I will look at the textbooks. Which set of textbooks do they use, especially English, because I have chosen many English Centres before…
>
> Xi: I think in all the recent English Centres, I have not seen a textbook that I am satisfied with. I don't know why.
>
> Hong: Because many of the current textbooks seem to use what, in English, many use that or what is it called?
>
> Xi: New Concept English.
>
> Hong: Yes, yes, yes, they all read NCE…
>
> Xi: I know, so, I am not … very satisfied with it.
>
> Hong: Would you choose the self-edited textbooks of the company, or the textbooks bought on the market? Have you ever thought about it?
>
> Xi: … it depends, but I prefer their self-edited textbook. They may have something of their own [features]. Just like before, P school said it doesn't matter that students don't have a basic knowledge of English [before Year 1], because they have their own methods to teach English. This, I think, if there is that tendency, I will feel that self-compiled textbooks may have a little bit of the feeling of family recipes, which is more 'legendary' (Workshop notes, 18/03/2021).

The textbook they mentioned here (NCE) is a series of English learning materials (four volumes) published by Longman Group and introduced in China in 1997. It was very popular over the past decades and could be easily bought from bookshops. This series has been highly valued with a good reputation and has been used in many English language centres, so it is general, not special. In fact, I learned English with the first three volumes of NCE as well when I was in school. When Xi described the self-edited textbook as a "family recipe", she might imagine something very special, high quality and rare, kind of like a secret weapon. It is as though what is widely used and easily available is somehow therefore not valued or not perceived as good quality. This phenomenon might be a mysterious result of marketing. Perhaps textbooks designed by local tutors and combining foreign learning systems or materials, such as *Cambridge English, Rainbow English, or Wonders, Unlock, Think,* are more valued. If the English centres do not provide a special in-house curriculum (different from that which is taught in schools), parents may find it difficult to trust them or find them less attractive. By contrast, if the company seems to be offering a unique product, it is likely to help the company build a reputation for 'creativity' and 'quality', which will capture the parents' imagination: a family-owned unique recipe, how attractive! These companies use this kind of information in their marketing to target different groups of parents and build different identities to ensure that parents want to commit to their courses; as such they are building their strategic manipulation of parents.

However, this kind of manipulation does not always work. Zhou did not join in the conversation since she has very limited experience of choosing English centres. She had not signed her daughter up to any tutoring classes at that point. This amazed Xi and Hong; indeed they were a little incredulous:

> Hong: Are they all art? You don't have a subject?
>
> Xi: They don't need it, their school[36] …
>
> Zhou: We haven't learned from kindergarten either.
>
> Hong: (Did you) Teaching at home?
>
> Zhou: No.
>
> Hong: What about first grade?
>
> Zhou: With no basic knowledge [when she started].
>
> Hong: Is she doing ok? Could she keep up with the others?
>
> Zhou: Fine. Fine.
>
> Xi: There is a clever mind [daughter] and a calm mother (Workshop notes, 18/03/2021).

This conversation made me smile, Hong questioned again and again, hardly believing that Zhou's daughter had not attended any English or Maths or Chinese tutorials in Shanghai. What was most surprising for them was that according to Zhou, her daughter was able to keep up by herself and furthermore, Zhou appeared to have no worries at all about her academic performance. Hong was surprised at first, then admiring. Xi's reaction reflects everyone's conclusion, including mine: Zhou's daughter must be very clever while Zhou is so calm and isn't feeling the need to put in extra work to ensure her daughter's academic development. However, Zhou's background goes some way to explaining her more relaxed attitude: she is a psychology teacher at school, which means that she has more professional knowledge to support her educational decisions.

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[36] Xi means Zhou's daughter does not need extra subject learning because she can go to Zhou's working place in the next stage, as Zhou is a psychology teacher in a famous middle school. But Zhou misunderstood, she thought the school Xi mentioned is previous school - kindergarten.

Mothers in this study offered help of various kinds to their children, in order to be good mothers. Like others, Xi and Hong did what they could by providing basic childcare, arranging tutoring classes, helping with homework, comforting their children when they encountered difficulties, arranging family activities etc. All these actions reflect assumptions about what mothers, as primary caregivers, are expected to do to be ‘good’ mothers (see 3.2.2.1, Bowlby, 1951; Wall, 2004). In this sense, Zhou’s “hands-off parenting” style (Lloyd, 2019) is a departure from what the other mothers feel compelled to do. If anyone can counter the brainwashing of educational companies’ marketing strategies, it is probably Zhou, who seems to be free of the peer pressure and schooling anxiety I have described so far. As a psychology teacher, she may also be aware of how manipulation works and therefore be in a position to resist it (her story will be discussed later in this chapter).

Meanwhile, in the workshop, the conversation had moved on to a discussion about tuition fees in different agencies. In this regard, Xi and Hong are experts. Zhou described herself as a “realistic” person because she does not care about a company’s reputation. Xi immediately agreed but provided a different explanation: “yes, we are all realistic people … I also compare prices. The very important question” (Workshop notes, 18/03/2021). It was Zhou’s turn to be surprised: she had not realised that tutoring classes were priced differently, so she did not think to compare but simply picked the one nearest to home (for drawing and piano tutoring). Xi and Hong explained that there are different ways of comparing these offers:

> Zhou: Do you look at the overall tuition fee of a subject, or all your class hours? I mean, do you still look at the total price of these lessons that children take every week, or do you just look at [the price of per hour] ...
>
> Hong: I will compare with the same category, and then calculate it. Maybe this one class here will cost 200 yuan. That one might be 250, and the other one is 300. And the length of the class time may be different, some are one and a half hours, some are two hours.
>
> Xi: Then you have to follow all the other [factors] in it, and then compare them all. See one and choose the one that you think is more cost-effective. You didn't do all of this? (Zhou: I...) You rich people!
>
> Zhou: After you explain it this way, I actually...
>
> Xi: Did a comparison?

> Zhou: I really don't compare, just as you said, I won't do this process, it's just... (Workshop notes, 18/03/2021).

Zhou's lack of concern about tuition fees shocked the other two. It seemed to me that Xi and Hong are very serious about comparing and selecting companies and that money is a key factor. In this sense, booking a tutoring course is like purchasing a product and there are prices to negotiate. This highlights the commercial aspect of tutoring as well as the "economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) a middle-class family requires in order to provide for their children's education. In this regard, Vitas had a similar experience of 'purchasing education':

> Anyway, this kind of organisation costs tens of thousands a year. So, raising a child is really [like raising] a 'four-legged gold swallowing beast'[37]. From the age of three and a half, starting to learn things, and now less than seven years old, about 200,000 yuan has been spent. My husband said that I can buy a car [with that money] (Interview with Vitas, 24/1/2021).

In this quote, Vitas uses the purchasing of a car as a currency to describe their investment thus far in children's education. It demonstrates the importance of money in this context. Moreover, their child is described as a "four-legged gold swallowing beast", reflecting the parents' (Vitas and her husband) attitude towards their child: it is natural and accepted that money has to be spent on them, since they must be 'swallowing the gold' for living. This reminds me of discussions about "the cost of a child" (Piachaud, 1984) (see Chapter 3) and the need for "economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986). During my conversation with Vitas, I could see her that this form of self-sacrifice (she could have bought a car but instead she invested it on her child's future) brought her feelings of pride and fulfilment.

I was struck by the amount of money parents spent and expected to spend on private tutoring so during the workshop, I asked more questions about tuition fees. I wanted to know just how much they spent on average in supplementing their children's education. They all stated that this fee was paid out once a year. However, as far as I knew, to protect parents' benefits, the relevant policy was that tutoring company should charge the fee every three months[38]. Hong explained the 'secret' of dealing with this policy:

> Let me tell you about this. For many such companies in Shanghai, you (the government) have policies and I (the agency) have methods. What is the method? You buy half a year's classes, and they (the agency) give you extra half as a gift. In fact, it is paid for a year. You know, it was originally 20,000 yuan a

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[37] 四脚吞金兽, a slang to describe children.

[38] See document from Shanghai State Council: https://www.shanghai.gov.cn/gwk/search/content/cce03930a6cb49c285cbfd07da5cbe79 (Accessed: 19 June 2023).

> year, you still paid 20,000 yuan, but the contract was signed with you for half a year … they just use another way to do this with you … I think there are fewer and fewer formal ones now… (Workshop notes, 18/03/2021).

The definition of 'formal' in this conversation is interesting as it directly relates to money. In fact, to distinguish if a company providing tutoring is 'formal' and low-risk, parents need to check its financial status. Some institutions may sell courses with a significant discount but charge two- or three-years' fees in advance: this is what Vitas did for her son's basketball course. Hong and Xi comment that parents should be very wary of companies who ask for fees in advance like this: they never would. Xi suggested that anyone who is willing to pay three years' fee in advance, "might be brainwashed at that moment … those course sales are really persuasive!" Xi's analysis echoes Chen's comment that brainwashing, as a form of persuasion, is the key method used to sell courses to parents. Yet from Vitas' perspective, paying fees in advance in exchange for a significant discount reflects her concerns about her finances (as well as her trust in the agency). Like Hong and Xi, Vitas had engaged in comparing different companies in terms of price offers, as it is a key strategy in coping with financial pressure of being a responsible parent.

Overall, mothers in this workshop were confident with their criteria and comfortable with their identities as mothers. They had invested time in getting to know the offers of the different companies offering private tutoring, what the contents of the courses were and how these companies worked with or avoid the legislation issue. They were familiar with the marketing methods of tutoring: the 'tricks' these companies played to promote their services included tapping into parental anxiety about schooling, concerns about their children's future prospects and building relationships of trust with parents. These methods did tend to be successful, particularly in the past. However, the social media generation who have access to so much relevant information from less biased sources (see Chapter 7), including each other, are more resistant to such brainwashing. At the same time, these mothers appeared to benefit from the genuinely useful guidance company staff could provide in choosing the most cost-effective company, which reflects the value these mothers place on education as well as the financial pressures they face.

5.4 Mothers' different responses to tutoring

As paying for private tutoring has become commonplace, do parents feel they have the option or courage to say no? Faced with high pressure marketing and the 'brainwashing' from representatives of the company, it is hard to resist the trend. Mothers in this study had different attitudes and responses to tutoring. At the same time, whether they were *foxi* ('Buddhist' in English, it describes people who prefer not trying too hard to achieve the result or win in the competition) or *jixue* ('Chicken Blood' in English, it usually means being energetic. In this context, jixue means a style of education that making great efforts on practicing on a daily base), they devised their own ways of helping their children to develop. The terms *foxi* and *jixue* as descriptors of parenting styles were not invented by my participants. I had heard parents being described using these terms by other parents in 2018, when I was working in the private tutoring sector in Shanghai. Then, during my fieldwork, I noticed that my participants also used those terms so I decided to adopt them in this thesis as a tool to analyse mothers' different education-related practices. In this section, I look at two different ways of coping with schooling anxiety and how these attitudes influenced the ways in which mothers approached private tutoring.

5.4.1 Being *foxi*: resistance to tutoring

In analysing the data, I found *foxi* mothers (calm and easy-going) had developed this style for different reasons. For those mothers who had failed many times to improve their children's academic performance, such as Huang, accepting that and being *foxi* seemed to be the easiest choice. Other mothers had themselves experienced education throughout their younger life as intense and tiring. They did not want their children to have a similar experience so they were instinctively against competitiveness in learning style, like Di. Mothers like Zhou were *foxi* because they valued their children's psychological development and lifelong ability more than their children's scores, rank or performance in school. Some mothers on the other hand, referred to themselves as *foxi* but still expected their children to achieve a certain level of education, like Ri. Perhaps *foxi* is an attractive term for those who like to look as though they are making less effort but still achieving a lot.

I interviewed Huang about her attitudes to her children's education since I often saw her posts about her daughter's school life. She appeared to be very satisfied and proud of the current achievements of her daughter. Huang reflected that her attitudes had changed: "I'm quite peaceful now. I am unwilling to break up the mother-daughter relationship because of study" (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020). Before, although her daughter was in kindergarten, she had been an anxious parent. Now she did her best to avoid any subject-related tutoring (except English): "Maybe do it later if she cannot keep up in primary school". When we talked about her daughter's future or expectations Huang might have, she stated that she was not ambitious: "There is no big goal, I just hope that the basic courses will not be too bad, and the middle and upper reaches (within the class) can be maintained…" (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020).

I could see that while Huang claimed that she was at peace in terms of her daughter's education, she nonetheless expected that her daughter would "keep up with others" and be in "the top half of the class". As a mother, she clearly knew her daughter's strengths and weaknesses:

> Not every hard-working child can get a distinction. Higher education is not the only way out, just one way. After working hard, if she still can't reach a certain level, you should stop and see what her strength is. Everyone is different, personality, growth, background, hobbies, etc. Under the influence of these

> comprehensive factors, everyone’s strong suits and interests are different... Instead of what I want you to do, it is better to ask her, what do you want (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020).

It seems like Huang had undergone a significant shift and her willingness to focus on her child’s strengths and recognise her limitations, seemed to me a brave position to hold. This position emerged from Huang’s personal experience. She explained that her parents did not “take medicine for the disease” (对症下药); in other words, they had not paid any attention to finding a specific development pathway that would match her personality. Instead, they wanted to improve her academic performance and booked as many tutoring classes for her as they could. “If I had trained as a chef instead, maybe I would be a Michelin-level by now” (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020), Huang joked.

Compared to Huang, Di was “lucky” because her parents had been “supportive and did not expect too much” when she was younger. However, within the education system she still experienced the pressures of competition. As a mother, Di now resisted high stakes competition because of her own experience: “I have my reasons about nurturing my son in such a loose way” (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020). As a girl from a small city, Di has endured the competitive atmosphere that dominates education: “Every learning was for exams, nothing about interests”. She admitted that her academic performance had been average and that she had developed a negative attitude towards her studies, arguing that “learning in advance is not always the solution” (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020). Then, when she started higher education in Korea, something changed：

> I went abroad, I received a new educational method. Then I realised, it turns out that learning can be so challenging and so fun! And my active learning was much more efficient than passive learning (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020).

When Di graduated from Korea and successfully applied for a *hukou* in Shanghai and finally became a New Shanghainese (see chapter 2), she thought that her child would have access to better resources in this big city. Later, she found that she was wrong: education in Shanghai was just as competitive as it had been in her hometown:

> The pressures are different [in differing cities] … so I feel that I have some anxieties indeed, but I hope my child could be happy, and don't reject accepting new things … let it (the pressure) go (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020).

It seems that the learning experience in Korea changed Di’s understandings of education and this reflected on her attitude towards private tutoring. Di has thus far resisted involving her son in tutoring classes but I could feel that she also understands that this attitude may change as her son gets older. In her plan, he “could have some English lessons to cultivate language sense but no others at this stage” (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020). Her son in her view is too young anyway

(3-4 years old) to learn logic (basic Maths) or other classes. Furthermore, she does not entirely trust the qualifications of the tutors and the quality of the companies.

Like Di, Zhou has resisted paying for any subjects-related tutoring. She wants to keep life simple and effortless. As mentioned earlier, her daughter does not even attend English classes, which is very unusual in Shanghai or indeed, in China generally. As a psychology teacher in the middle school, Zhou believes that the best way to parent is to: “let the child be herself”. Her method of parenting contrasts with “intensive parenting” (Hays, 1996) and “helicopter parenting” (Weber, 2016). Instead of “hands-off parenting” (Winston, 2019), Zhou had chosen her own way which involves establishing a friendly non-anxious mother-daughter relationship. To achieve this, she emphasised, the parent “should not be anxious or short of money” (Interview with Zhou 03/12/2020). Zhou unpacked the secret of her relaxed approach, warning that:

> It (this attitude) is not suitable for every family… First, my daughter is the child of teachers, and she can go to the affiliated primary school of my working school. In addition, the child’s performance in all aspects is not worrying and her academic work is satisfactory. In terms of mentality, we really don’t care about her learning...because learning is only one aspect of the process of human development...20 years later, even if she is what she is now, current habits, abilities, preferences, personality, we think it’s fine (Interview with Zhou, 03/12/2020).

The idea of letting the children being themselves sounds hopeful and not difficult to follow. As Huang and Zhou state, it is simply about asking what the child wants rather than deciding for them. However, practically, it is not so easy. As Zhou admitted, being a non-anxiety family requires specific conditions. Based on my observations and interviews, I found that Zhou’s peace and calm was dependent on both her own profession and her daughter’s performance, the family environment and the family’s “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986). Although Zhou claimed that they “never asked” about her daughter’s academic results or sought feedback from the teacher, the fact is that her daughter is in a private school, loves reading and writing, and has been able to read long stories without *pinyin* (phoneticized in English) since a very young age (before 6 years old). Zhou was even considering cancelling her piano classes because her daughter prefers reading to playing the piano which is time-consuming. While other families struggle to encourage their children to read for 40 minutes a day, Zhou’s daughter spends two hours on reading, writes her own stories or diary, every day. In addition, Zhou’s husband (a psychology teacher at university) shares her attitude towards education:

> Our education [in home] is good as long as we don't put our backs into it, do less and make less mistakes”, and emphasised, “there is no additional

> homework [from us, the parent], as all additional requirements and tasks are unwelcomed for children (Interview with Zhou, 03/12/2020).

Zhou and her husband's attitudes about no additional homework from parents is quite unique in this study, as every other mother worried that they were not doing enough to support their child's development. This worry is what pushed them to pay for tutoring.

Another *foxi* mother is Ri who sold her small flat in the city and bought instead a bigger one in a rural area to avoid competition. Ri had a totally different understanding of education; she did not think schooling in the early years is valuable and rejected any kind of tutoring. She believed that "parents' company is the best for children" (Interview with Ri, 25/01/2021). My interview with Ri was filled with her "anti-anxiety" approach. When talking about her friend's two-year-old daughter who attended many tutoring classes, she commented, "it is too hard (for the child), the fun of childhood is gone". When talking about the expectations on her son, she was very relaxed:

> Letting the child grow up healthily and happily is more important … as long as my son does not study too bad, and the teachers don't come to trouble me every day, I think it is completely unnecessary to have tutoring (Interview with Ri, 25/01/2021).

I invited her to explain what she meant by "not too bad" when it comes to studying, she replied:

> Go to university … Mom and Dad are college graduates, so it's not possible for our child to attend vocational school. If he's willing to pursue higher education, I'll give him my full support (Interview with Ri, 25/01/2021).

Ri sounded very positive and full of confidence: she believed that her son would go to university because his parents had been. According to other participants (such as Hong), the reason that Ri thought tutoring lessons are unnecessary might be because she had not really faced any schooling pressure yet, as her son was not even in kindergarten. I wondered what her attitude would be in five/six years' time when her son was at primary school.

Mothers in this section position themselves as non-anxious and *foxi* for different reasons. For different reasons, they have built up a resistance to schooling pressures. For instance, Huang at first tried to compete with other parents but then gave up, realising that there is more than one way to live. Di's own experience of competition influenced her attitude and expectations for her child, determined that her daughter would not be pressured in the same way. Zhou's relaxed parenting style is rooted in the belief that children should have the freedom to grow in their own way; this seems to mainly be informed by her professional background as a psychologist. Ri's rejection of tutoring comes from her belief that it has no value. Each of these parents has learned from their own experience and attempt to help their children so as to avoid the difficulties they themselves encountered growing up. Whatever their beliefs and motivations, for most of them, they hope their children will be happy and follow their own path.

5.4.2 *Jixue* mother: fighting for a better result

By referring to *jixue* or *foxi* mothers, I am not suggesting that these are fixed identities. Indeed, mothers might be unaware of their parenting style or they might change their position quite abruptly. When someone positions herself as un-*jixue* mother and refuses to be anxious, is she therefore *foxi*? In this thesis, when I use the terms *Jixue* or *foxi*, I am not only interested in how mothers position themselves but also look in their performance in daily life. According to mothers' performances on tutoring, I could see their real identities finally appear.

5.4.2.1 Suji - Having non-subject tutoring

During fieldwork, I found that not every *jixue* mother was keen on subject tutoring; similarly, not every mother clearly knew or expressed their identity. For example, as a stay-at-home mother, Yu described her life as follows: "I do nothing during the daytime but reset and recharge myself and wait for overseeing the child's homework in the evening" (Interview with Yu 30/11/2020). Her daughter (in Year 1) attended English tutorials but other than that, was encouraged in her various non-academic interests such as Chinese dance, taekwondo, chess, kunqu (a sub term of opera) and traditional Chinese painting. I wondered who decided to sign up for all these courses. Although they were not academic/school-related, it looked a lot for a little girl. But Yu claimed that "the girl loves it … she wants to learn this" (Interview with Yu 30/11/2020). I could feel her pride in booking these non-school related classes. For example, when the Shanghai education department announced that there would be sports and arts examinations for all secondary school students from 2021, she posted the news screenshot and commented that:

> Sports and arts will be involved in *zhongkao*, don't say I asked her to learn too much, now you see, can I get rid of any? I'm afraid not and I must add football or basketball later. I really admire myself for the comprehensive quality education of morality, intelligence, physical education, and art since my daughter was in her first year of preschool. I really have a sense of achievement. Well, I still can't zip up my wallet (Online participant observation, from Yu's post).

Yu's post reflects her attitude towards children's education, which also links with money (see 5.3) – the economic capital investment she is prepared to make in her child's future and the expectations that result from such an investment. When we discussed what her expectations are, she said, "I did not plan which pathway the child will follow"; she just hopes that her child "can go to high school and then just go to a university" (Interview with Yu, 30/11/2020). Thus, that her child will eventually go to higher education is a given but Yu is open to the major the child should learn (or at least she did not share with me). However, according to her post and money spent on non-academic courses, she did not seem to me to be someone (as she described) who had no plans or ambitions for the child's future path in life.

Yu positioned herself like her daughter's educational agent and for her, education was related to how much money was spent on acquiring it. Signing her daughter up for more and more classes was evidence of her own status, aspirations and social position. Also, while she adopted a broader approach to education, in that it encompassed arts and sports, ultimately she saw the purpose as related to passing examinations. Yu seems to have made similar choices to Zhou in that they both focused on non-academic tutoring. However, the difference is that Zhou did not sign her child up for as many courses as Yu and Yu's motivation was quite different. In choosing courses that were interest-related, courses referred to as *Suji* (素鸡, vegetarian chicken), a sub category of *jixue*, means a focus on sports, arts, music and dance. The reasons parents encourage their children to attend these courses, vary. I was given an interesting one by Faith who told me why she wanted her child to learn the piano:

> Children who want to learn piano, there is a strong self-discipline ... Practicing the piano, mastering a skill is on the one hand, more important is to hone her mind in the process, this is the fundamental purpose of letting her learn the piano (Interview with Faith, 25/01/2021).

The idea of self-discipline or "honing the mind" through an interest-based course like playing the piano was common in this research. For example, Huang signed her daughter up to ping pong because "the painting teacher said doing sports is good for practicing concentration" (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020). Vitas and her husband signed their son up to archery to "exercise the boy's mentality - he is too impatient now" (Interview with Vitas 19/02/2021). These interest-based courses might be more enjoyable than more traditional academic subjects for children, but for parents, as Ying indicated, "the children might be engaging in physical education lessons, but parents are utilitarian [in their reasons for paying for these lessons] …" (Interview with Ying 19/02/2021). In other words, every course was booked for a particular purpose.

5.4.2.2 Hunji – subject-focused intensive tutoring

With this emerging topic of learning purpose, I revisited my interview notes. For example, I reviewed my interview with Ying and considered Ying's mothering practices through a 'tutoring' lens. The activities she arranged, such as booking a one-day trip for her child to a local science museum or occasionally treating the child with cakes after she had completed memorising an English vocabulary list or dressing her up in ancient Chinese style when she was going to take part in a poem reading competition; they all had a specific purpose which was to encourage the child's learning. Ying had a detailed plan for her daughter's study which she carried out meticulously. Her experience of encouraging, motivating and tutoring children's learning inspired a lot of mothers: they followed her by copying what she shared in the WeChat group, mainly regarding resources and information on learning traditional school subjects. This focus on what could be referred to as academic subjects, is also called *hunji* (荤鸡, meat chicken, means subjects-focused tutoring).

As a *jixue* mother, Ying was an expert on choosing tutoring classes. In fact, the WeChat group she had set up was about using the *jixue* approach to help children's academic performance. While the courses she booked for her child (6 years old) such as sports, reading and handwriting were not directly subjects related, Ying explained her rationale for these choices and how she sought to balance her child's interests with the need to support her school learning:

> Reading class is what she would prefer. [booking this tutoring course is because] there are some parenting considerations in [this decision]. I am using this as an opportunity to push her to do more Chinese and English reading … in regard of the interests tutoring class, of course her liking it is important. Given the pressure of school, I cannot insist on extra learning if she dislikes it. If she really likes it, it's great to use it as an adjustment [of school study] and comfort. It is best if [her] interests [session] could also have good impact on school study (Interview with Ying, 19/02/2021).

Ying chose the specific tutoring classes to "push" the child to read more. Her approach is in contrast to those mothers (like Di, Huang, Zhou) who prefer to follow their children's interests. It seems that those mothers respect the value of children's hobbies but perhaps it is a compromise since most children still have to learn English and Maths. Ying is different because she provided less choices and these choices are very much exam-oriented (including sports test) and subjects-related. As a working mother, Ying devotes all her spare time to her daughter and to arranging daily learning activities. Most impressively, she coordinated specific tutoring classes by herself since none of the tutoring companies met her criteria. She admitted that there is a gap between what the tutoring company teaches and what she wants to achieve. As she could "easily find a good teacher" through her job as a teacher, it makes sense for her to organise the classes by herself. However, she encountered certain difficulties when arranging classes due to the shortage of students, commenting that, "parents in Shanghai rely more on agencies" (Interview with Ying, 19/02/2021). The effort Ying put into organising her child's extracurricular time and the pressure she was under during the process, were enormous. When we talked about where the pressure came from, she reflected that:

> My child is not talented ... Of course, I didn't expect too much, but still I hope she can experience higher education, which has many uncertainties … when children study in primary school, parents can [intervene/control] … in middle school [what parents can do] is very limited, I think this causes a lot of pressure. The source of stress is that I cannot guarantee her future. In terms of economic

> and social resources, we have to rely more on the child's own efforts, but the child's qualifications are ordinary, or not ideal … This stress also affects the child's daily life. I automatically push her to do more things (Interview with Ying, 19/02/2021).

When Ying described her daughter as “not talented”, she is referring specifically to academic talent and this is why she worries about the child’s education and future development. Her assessment that her child’s academic achievements are ‘ordinary’ and ‘not ideal’ seems to be at the heart of most mothers’ worries and concerns. During my fieldwork, I heard mothers use the word ‘ordinary’, sometimes in a positive way: someone hoping that their child would be an ‘ordinary person’, doing an ‘ordinary job’. But others used it in a derogatory way, lamenting that their child was too ‘ordinary’, not extraordinary. Is being ‘ordinary’ something that can be chosen? Maybe not. But many mothers believe that children can be extraordinary through working hard. Tutoring companies also promise that the child will do better so parents add more and more tutoring to their children’s timetable.

After the conversation about pushing a child to do more, I asked whether the chid would ever disobey her mother’s wishes Ying answered:

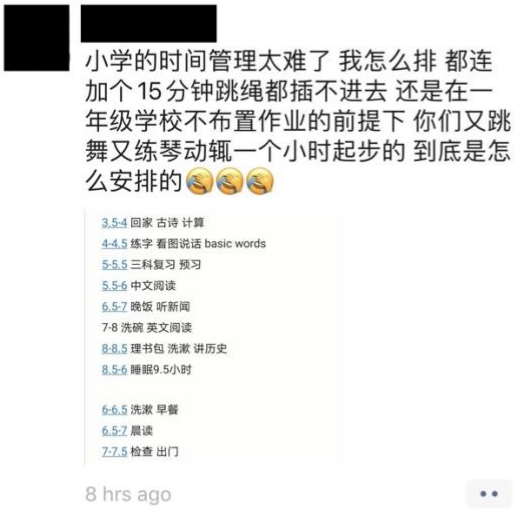
> Yes … she is a very cooperative child and accepts what her parents told her. After the winter holiday, she experienced the freedom and couldn’t bear working hard any more… but she will feel the pressure from classmates when the new term starts ... I will keep thinking how to communicate with her and help her understand the thing [the meaning of study] later on (Interview with Ying, 19/02/2021).

It seems that for Ying a “cooperative child” obeys her parents. At the same time, she needs to use multiple strategies to ensure that the child “accepts the ideas” her parents tell her. In this sense, the communication between Ying and her daughter resembles “a negotiation” or business deal; parenting seems to involve this process of back and forth. Here Ying is enacting not only her identity as mother but also as a “psychology teacher” who works on explaining the importance of hard work to her child and ensuring that the child understands; as such, there are echoes of the brainwashing process referred to when discussing the sales representatives of the tutoring companies.

5.4.2.3 Home tutoring - when mothers became tutors

For *Jixue* mothers, especially those who focus on *hunji* (academic subject tutoring), private tutoring companies might not be able to meet the parents’ expectations by guaranteeing that their child will improve by attending their courses. These mothers will involve themselves in the tutoring to help as well. In the first vignette discussed in this chapter, Lena was asked by the schoolteacher to help with her child’s homework. She also provided home tutoring to her child as extra practice to fill the ‘gaps’ in the school curriculum with regards to Maths and English. Lena is typical in this regard. Like Lena, in many Shanghai families, the mother will also be a part-time tutor and given the reliance on tutoring agencies, her role also resembles that of an educational agent, scheduling tutoring classes for her child. Ying, by contrast, mainly tutored the child herself at home (while doing a full-time paid work too) rather than paying an external agency (see 5.4.2.2). The decision to tutor one’s child at home or sign them up to an agency appears not to depend on whether or not the mother works but, on her ability, and willingness to do so, or perhaps the extent to which they trust the agencies to provide quality tutoring.

I got the sense that Ying was a full-time home tutor, even though she was also a working mother. According to her posts on WeChat Moments, she scheduled every moment of her daughter’s time outside school (see Figure 12).



[redacted] [redacted]

小学的时间管理太难了 我怎么排 都连加个15分钟跳绳都插不进去 还是在一年级学校不布置作业的前提下 你们又跳舞又练琴动辄一个小时起步的 到底是怎么安排的🤣🤣🤣

3.5-4 回家 古诗 计算
4-4.5 练字 看图说话 basic words
5-5.5 三科复习 预习
5.5-6 中文阅读
6.5-7 晚饭 听新闻
7-8 洗碗 英文阅读
8-8.5 理书包 洗漱 讲历史
8.5-6 睡眠9.5小时

6-6.5 洗漱 早餐
6.5-7 晨读
7-7.5 检查 出门

8 hrs ago

Figure 12 Ying’s post about scheduling activity

[Translation]

3:50 - 4 pm Going home, ancient poem & calculation practice

4 - 4:50 pm Handwriting practice, look at the picture and talk [Translator’s note: a type of Chinese language practice], basic English words

5- 5:50 pm Main subjects learning (about schoolwork)

5:50 - 6 pm Chinese reading

6:50 - 7 pm Dinner, listen news

7 - 8 pm Do the dishes, English reading

8 - 8:50 pm Organising schoolbag, washing, talking about history

8:50 - 9 pm Sleep (9.5 hours in total)

6 - 6:50 am Washing, breakfast

6:50 - 7 am Morning reading

7 - 7:50 am Checking, go to school

Managing her daughter’s daily timetable in this way could be seen as adding to her workload, combining the role of mother and tutor but Ying seems to enjoy it. Her post containing this timetable supported by a few sentences, did not contain any traces of negative emotions. On the contrary, it was posted with a kind of pride in herself:

> Primary school time management is too difficult, no matter how to arrange, even 15 minutes rope skipping cannot be inserted. This is still on the premise that Year 1 students do not have homework. You guys (your children) dance or do piano practice for at least an hour. How do you manage? (Online participant observation, 19/02/2021).

Ying’s role in this situation is not simply what other researchers have identified as that of “the educational agent” (Y. Zheng, 2019) but involves far more knowledge and skills in that it combines the role of agent and tutor, a mental health supporter (therapist), as well as a mother and full-time employee. However, not all mothers are able or willing to be involved so intensively in the home tutoring/learning/studying of their children. Instead, they might simply read a bedtime story or do handicrafts together as a connected parent-children time.

The multiple roles of mothers, especially their role as home tutor, involves an attitude to education and expectations that might not be easily fulfilled by tutoring companies**.** Mothers’ criteria on selecting tutoring course seem to have more requirements than they proposed.

5.4.3 A tutoring exception: going outside the system

It seems that terms like *foxi* or *jixue* all exist within the education system. According to my observation, mothers in this research were aware of different educational pathways but they also knew the limitations of their options. The underlying message seemed to be that if one wants to escape schooling anxiety or supplementary tutoring, one should jump out of the system, by for example, sending the children go to an international school. One participant, Qiu, chose a different path for her child, inspiring many of her ‘followers’ to attempt this experiment.

As a full-time mother, Qiu with her two sons ‘escaped’ from Shanghai to a more relaxing rural city in Yunnan province - Dali. Her adventure in Dali was a great success. In the selected school, her children could reclaim the land, grow vegetables and fruits, do farm work, carpentry, pottery, cooking and sell their own products. They raised chickens and ducklings, climbed mountains and rode their bicycles around the lake. All these activities sounded very tempting to other mothers in her WeChat group. Even me, as the researcher, found myself fantasising about living in Dali, surrounded by nature while delivering a more creative and experimental education to children. Qiu posted lots of pictures and reflections on this 'run away' journey: both she and her children were clearly enjoying the country life as well as the creative activities. As one group member commented, it was a choice of inside or outside the system and apparently, Qiu chose the latter.

The first time Qiu went to Dali was in October 2020, for travelling. Then she took her children there in February 2021, for short term study in a kindergarten which focuses on innovative education. Later in March, she took the decision that the boys would complete the first year of primary school there too. As she explained to other mothers in the WeChat group: "[We are] not sending them to state school … we plan to simply be *ordinary* [children], not to fight too hard … life is short" (Online observation, 15/03/2021). Other participants who knew her all believed that she (and her family) were the very opposite of *ordinary*. Based on my year-long online participant observation and several interviews with group members, everyone agreed that Qiu and her family are not 'normal'. In fact, Qiu represents the extraordinary: for a start, not many mothers (and their families) could afford to travel for a whole year: it requires a certain amount of economic capital. Qiu has a very supportive family, which could be why she had the strength and the means to resist tutoring. Qiu shared in the group that her whole family plans to move to America when her older son finishes Year 1. Thus, rather than escaping from schooling anxiety, Qiu is embracing the experience of something exciting and different, involving a shortcut to better education. For those who have less support, schooling anxiety is simply a fact of life that must be overcome. I noticed that, by the time I was drafting this thesis, some mothers in Qiu's group had managed to arrange a short-term exchange or a summer camp in Dali for their children. And this is not the only group tempted by innovative education, I learned that many middle-class parents are doing similar things. They might not be able to run away from their current life but they try to create happy memories for their children, to give them more energy to survive when they are back in the field, 'fighting the battle' (S. Lin, 2023) of educational achievement.

In this section, I have explored mothers' experiences of and approaches to schooling and tutoring. I used the terms *foxi* and *jixue* to describe and analyse mothers' practices in relation to their children's education. This allowed me to identify different kinds of tutoring and mothers' reasons for making certain educational decisions. I have argued that mothers have multiple identities in the context of their children's education: they are mothers as well as educational helpers dealing with homework; they are educational agents scheduling tutoring class or/and home tutors who teach their children themselves. Their tutoring role forms a new identity within the family and this influences their relationships with their children, the schoolteachers and tutoring agencies. On the other hand, schooling policies and the ways in which tutoring agencies market their products and services, also affect mothers' choices regarding tutoring. Different types of 'capital' also influence mothers' attitudes towards private/state school and the tutoring companies they choose. The distinction between different styles of tutoring (*hunji* and *suji*) and different attitudes towards tutoring (*foxi* and *jixue*) help to shed light on current educational culture in Shanghai – you have to choose one as your position, either giving up or being prepared: it seems that parents and their children cannot avoid the educational battleground. However, within this 'fighting' culture, when policy changes, what adjustments do the tutoring companies have to make? And how do mothers comply while achieving their goal?

5.5 A new tutoring policy: a solution or a burden?

To lessen schooling anxiety, in the past decade, the government has attempted to reduce the burden in schools such as limited school time and ensure children's sleeping time (see 2.2.3) but so far, there is little evidence that it has been successful. As my participant Huang told me,

> the lighter task of schooling, the heavier task of out-of-school learning, [the government] reduced the time and burden on schools but as a result [children] spend twice or even three times as much time on out-of-school training [supplementary educational activities] (Interview with Huang, 13/11/2020).

Children are spending the same number of learning hours as before the policy was introduced. As I have shown, the anxiety about their child's academic performance, drives many parents to pay for extra tutoring since 'everyone is doing so' (see 5.2), In a sense, it seems to be that the reliance on private tutoring is more about peer pressure - keeping up with others - rather than the desire to improve their children's grades or performance.

However, the situation changed again in 2021. The latest policy (July 2021) sets out to reduce the burden both in and out of school (Ministry of Education, 2021a). A series of actions were proposed which have changed the educational landscape: private tutoring in compulsory (K9) subjects is now forbidden and/or strictly monitored. For instance, no tutoring classes are allowed on weekends (but can be conducted on weekday evenings); in primary schools in Shanghai, there are no term time English examinations; children are not marked or ranked during compulsory education (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2021). The policy appeared to set out to reduce schooling anxiety among parents which perhaps was being recognised as detrimental to the wellbeing of parents and children. I could see from online discussions that parents responded to the policy with a mixture of dissatisfaction and relief.

The first month after the "Double Reduction" policy was introduced, parents faced a new problem: traffic jams on weekday evenings. My participants shared how their life was impacted by the policy on WeChat Moments. For example, Hong described how "the gate [of the tutoring centre] was crowded with people which is like a market [rather than an educational centre]" (Online observation, 10/09/2021). The reference to the 'crowded gate' was to highlight that the policy had not stopped parents sending their children for private tutoring. The need to compete with peers continued to drive parents to pay for tutoring. The government policy designed to discourage parents from spending extra on their children's education seemed to have failed in terms of lowering middle class parents' anxiety about their children's future. Cang, a teacher as well as a *jixue* mother, commented that "well, the government just want us to clearly know our limitations. Children don't have to study hard anymore, just accept the fact that they're going to be blue-collar workers". Then, about two weeks later, Cang posted, "[we are] following the policy, doing *suji* (non-academic subject tutoring)", with a photo of her daughter playing ping pong in a one-to-one sport class but wearing a dancing outfit (Online observation, 04/09/2021). Apparently, the "Double Reduction" policy did not impact her daughter's non-subject learning on weekends. The little girl did not even have time to change. However, changes did happen in Xi's family. On the same weekend that Cang was watching her daughter playing ping pong, Xi was listening to Jay Chou's (a famous Chinese singer) music with her daughter. Xi reflected that the first weekend after "Double Reduction" had been "quite relaxing" (Online observation, 05/09/2021).

As can be seen from Cang's post, not everyone was happy and willing to accept the new policy. For example, when the scaling down of the focus English within compulsory education was announced in Shanghai, some parents might have felt relieved, but as far as I could see, in Group 3 (Ying's online group) it caused a panic. Ying's response was to purchase learning materials from online platforms, printed by a small agency that might run into problems with copyright, because the official edition was so expensive. These materials included English reading books (RAZ, Oxford Tree etc.) and a Chinese (ancient poems and articles) practice book. Although her child was still in Year 1, Ying also bought textbooks for middle school Physics and Chemistry, "for my own reading", she claimed (Online observation, 24/09/2021). As a manager of a WhatsApp group, Ying's 'panic buying' of learning materials influenced others. It seemed that rather than lowering schooling anxiety and reducing the burden on parents, the new policy increased some mothers' anxiety.

The new policy could be seen as a solution as well as a burden for middle class families. Considering mothers' capabilities regarding tutoring, the new role as home tutor could be seen as one more burden for families who thus far, have relied on tutoring companies. Mothers like Faith and Ying, on the other hand, who have plenty of knowledge and methods to teach their children at home at this stage (primary school), will no doubt be benefit from this policy. These mothers will become their children's 'official' tutor at home even at weekends. Their new identity has been undervalued thus far but would be recognised in the near future.

On the other hand, the policy will clearly negatively impact tutoring agencies. Already a huge number of teachers who worked for these agencies have had to seek work as private one-to-one tutors for families who are not able to teach their children themselves. Others may seek teaching positions in schools. The policy reflects the government's desire to monitor out-of-school education as well as reduce the pressure on students. It seems that they are blaming the tutoring companies for exaggerating schooling anxiety and thereby affect school choice (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, the consequences of this policy may not be what the government intended since it seems to treat parents as though they have no agency, which is clearly not the case. Then I noticed a 'loud voice' on social media stating that men should marry well-educated women, especially teachers, if they wish to secure their future children's education. Through a feminist perspective, I felt that women were being seen as goods with a price tag on the marriage market. But there was no reaction to the comment online. It seemed that I was alone in seeing the comment as unacceptable.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the commercialisation of education, by looking at how economic and cultural capital influence parents' attitudes towards schooling and tutoring. I adopted existing terms *jixue* and *foxi* to analyse mothers' reactions to tutoring agencies and children's education. Mothers in this study seek external help from these agencies to ensure their children's academic achievement. Meanwhile, they develop a new identity as a result of supporting their children's education, from helping with homework to scheduling tutoring classes, from overseeing extra practice to tutoring their children themselves. Thus mothers' identities are changing and developing alongside the increasing commercialisation of education.

Aside from tutoring, there are many other styles of learning in children's everyday life, but it seems that many participants used a 'tutoring' lens when looking at learning activities, one that is more intensive and purposeful. Although bedtime reading, handcrafts or a visit to the zoo may be informal (non-formal) learning, not many parents realise they are doing it, or they do not consider these activities as helpful to academic performance. The exception is Qiu who shows how mothers as a group look at peers who practice 'learning by experiencing': it is clearly an alternative pathway that requires significant economic and cultural capital.

The new policy ("Double Reduction") reveals tensions between formal schooling, private tutoring and parenting. As a strategy for reducing schooling anxiety, the government might attempt to gain 'control'. Meanwhile, some families feel that they are being pushed to limit their aspirations for their children's future and accept that they may simply become blue collar workers. Most participants in this study hoped that their children could at least go to university. However, with the restrictions on private tutoring, some of them will face a big challenge if they have to help their children by themselves.

In next chapter, I focus on mothers' different experiences of family life and investigate how they balance their multiple roles between work and family and how they learn about motherhood.

Chapter 6 “I am not just a mother”: The untold stories of motherhood

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I talked about mothers’ different responses to their children’s education which influenced their identities in family life, particularly with regards to children’s education. This led me to wonder what role women generally play in home and society. According to Moser (1989), women have triple roles: their productive role, their reproductive role and community managing role. In a low-income context, women not only undertake reproductive responsibilities such as childbearing and rearing but are also required to do productive work as a second earner of the family. In addition, women are often involved in community managing work at the local level in both urban and rural contexts. Thus, the gender stereotype of women as ‘homemakers’ and men as ‘breadwinners’ has long been challenged.

In China, as mentioned in Chapter 2, women have been encouraged to work since the 1950s. Then from 2000s, a shift in ideology required women to devote more time to their domestic life particularly on childcare (see 2.3). Most participants in this study were middle-class working mothers from dual-earning families; thus they were ‘breadwinners’ as well as ‘homemakers’. With multiple identities, many mothers found managing work, domestic duties, family care and selfcare in a limited time, enormously challenging and pressured. As discussed in my theoretical framework, childcare does not only include financial cost but also cost in terms of time, which invariably means mothers’ time (see 3.2.1.2). In addition, these time pressures can lead to feelings of anxiety and guilt because of failing to spend more time with children or failing to have some personal time without family responsibilities or failing to make more effort in developing one’s career (see 3.2.1).

In this chapter I want to explore this delicate balance of motherhood between work, family, and self, while providing gendered insights into power, agency and control within Shanghai households. Through the lens of learning and gendered motherhood, aiming to tackle RQ2, I plan to investigate how motherhood is learned, conceived, experienced, and negotiated by mothers themselves.

6.2 Learning about motherhood

As mentioned in 6.1, women have different roles in their everyday lives. Particularly, they have different practices and experiences in relation to their multiple identities. In this section, I will analyse mothers’ learning practices and explore how do middle-class mothers learn about motherhood.

In chapter 3, I reviewed how psychological discussions on the mother-child relationship impact the conceptualisation of motherhood, more specifically, how mothers are expected to learn how to be a ‘good’ mother. This learning requirement is not merely a theoretical discussion but appeared in everyday conversation as well.

When I asked participants how they define ‘being a good mother’, some of them (like Huang, Faith, Zhang) pointed out the importance of learning. Faith shared that being a mother is also a learning process:

> I only have one child, [the development of] motherhood and child’s growth are synchronised. How long she has been a child means how long I have been a mother. Sometimes I have some guilt, anger, then I will self-exam, reflect on my behaviour... Everyone is at the stage of exploring… (Interview with Faith, 25/1/2021).

As first-time mothers, women like Faith and Zhang placed a lot of value on their learning process. Their learning activities included formal, non-formal and informal learning (Rogers, 2014) and occurred in everyday lives. For instance, Tian obtained a master’s degree in early childhood education, which could be a powerful background of good mother, since she formally learned how to facilitate children’s learning, which is about equal to how to be a good mother in this context. Similarly, Zhang was interested in childhood relevant course as well, although she did not learn it in university, she booked a non-formal psychological course when she encountered mothering difficulties.

The reason Zhang accepted to be my participant is interesting, according to her, she was facing dramatic difficulties on nurturing her son and she wanted to talk with someone professional. When we talked on the phone, I soon realised that as a well-educated woman, she was very professional on using psychological and educational terms to analyse her children’s behaviour. Zhang has twins, a boy and a girl. At the time of our interview, they were in first grade in the same primary school but had been placed in different classes to “avoid comparisons” between the siblings. Zhang felt that her daughter was very well-behaved, could complete homework alone whereas her son had many problems that required extra attention, which she referred to as “low psychological maturity”, “lack of concentration”, “low self-confidence”, “hyperactivity”, “fear of difficulties” and “low emotional intelligence” (Interview with Zhang, 28/1/2021). Zhang was very concerned about her children’s development and decided to stay at home full-time in order to better take care of them. She read relevant books to seek answers of her confusions and communicated with other parents to exchange experience and figure out a possible way to solve her problems, those self-directed informal learning happened a lot in her daily activity.

However, it seems those learning practices did not completely fulfil her desire of learning. When I interviewed her, she was studying *“Positive Discipline*” courses in a learning salon (or an institution) taught by professional psychologist. Zhang explained that the main reason of joining the course is she found that childrearing is very challenging and thought that attending a ‘professional’ course might be helpful. This non-formal learning course seems to have provided Zhang confidence on mothering.

Zhang believed that education in one’s birth family has “a negative impact” on people. She did not want to pass these influences on to her children, so she kept learning and hoped to guide her children effectively. What prompted her to take extra classes to learn about discipline was that she felt “helpless” when facing her son and she wanted to change the situation.

I was interested in Zhang’s approach to mothering and her desire to learn how to be a mother, how to deal with the mother-child relationship, and how to help her child learn self-discipline. This led me to wondering where else mothers learned about mothering/parenting or childcare, aside from a salon-based non-formal parenting course. When I asked my participants, both Sui and Ri stated that they learned from *yuesao* (the hired nanny) non-formally; some learned about parenting informally, from their own experience of taking care of nephews and from social media platforms such as Red and Douyin or childcare Apps. Few mentioned learning about parenting/mothering from their own mothers. This was usually a deliberate choice: mothers in this research consciously adopted different ways of parenting from their own parents. As Sui put it: “Do you think you can listen to what they say? This (their experience) has been an outdated educational concept” (Interview with Sui, 10/11/2020). Thus, those mothers rather prefer to learn from peers through online group chat or one-to-one communication. As an important element of learning, the use of WeChat groups is discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Alongside learning how to be a mother, there is another term that was mentioned a lot during the interview: how to be a good mother. In fact, an important interview question in this study was “how you define a ‘good mother’”. I received various answers: some of them made me feel that it is an unattainable goal – their definitions of ‘good mother’ looked not only ‘good’ but ‘ideal’ or ‘perfect’. In the following sections, I will explore my participants’ perceptions of good mothering in contemporary China and how mothers learn about good motherhood.

6.2.1 Defining a good mother

When mothers in this study learn about motherhood, they were not only skilful on how to learn but also very determined about what achievements they want to obtain. For them, being a good mother seems not as simple as providing food and security and contribute to children’s development (as mentioned in chapter 3). Their definition of good mother was much more complicated than those psychological experts proposed. I was often surprised by my participants during the interview: they seemed to have such high expectations of themselves. For example, when I asked Xi what kind of mother is a good, she immediately listed a series of requirements:

> Sense of humour, well presented – not saying good looking but good at matching clothes and being elegant, having sympathy, able to play with children, knowledgeable, cooking well. It will be good enough if I achieve these … the

> sense of humour is the most difficult one… As the child grows, her laugh threshold will get higher and higher, now [I] can handle it well [although not sure how it goes in the future] (Interview with Xi, 27/1/2021).

Xi believed that being a good mother is attainable, but “temper management, communication ability, positive attitude and knowledge level are decisive factors” (Interview with Xi, 27/1/2021). I felt Xi’s definition of good mothering to some extent reflects her personality. As a doctor in a community hospital, Xi was in her “busiest time” during the covid-19 vaccination period and it was impossible to wear nice clothes or spend enough time with the children. This might be why she mentioned those qualities. Also, based on Xi’s posts in Moments, I do believe she has a good sense of humour. In fact, her posts often made me laugh. At the same time, Xi’s list of good mothering traits are by and large hard to measure, such as elegant, sympathetic, knowledgeable, even-tempered and good communicator. These attributes add up to a high level of interpersonal abilities that seem to amount to an ideal mother rather than a ‘good mother’ or a ‘good enough mother’.

By contrast, Huang’s criteria of a good mother were more focused on her children’s experience and her role in facilitating their development:

> A good mother should help the child find suitable tutoring classes, which actually is her duty… she should interact with the child and know her/his thoughts… need to trust the child… personality, career, mentality, personal experience and other factors determine whether a person can be a good mother… it is important to avoid bringing the emotional side (temper) into family life (Interview with Huang, 22/1/2021).

Huang’s response encapsulates her attitudes towards her children’s education: she believes that the mother should ‘do her homework’ and make decisions for her children. Huang believes that as she married at a mature age and gave birth later than her peers, she was mature enough to “adjust mentally” for better mothering. While she did not behave like a good mother all the time, she was “consciously working hard to improve [the performance]” (Interview with Huang, 22/1/2021). She also believes that knowing one’s child’s inner thoughts is vital while also trusting the child. I wondered how this could be achieved. Does it mean that a good mother should trust her child but also frequently interact with the child and monitor the child’s evolving thoughts? This idea is contradictory, but it seems Huang saw it as achievable if the mother fulfils the criteria on personality, career, mentality and personal experience.

After my interview with Huang, I revisited the data discussed in Chapter 5: as a *foxi* mother, Huang mentioned that with regards to the diligence of their child, when parents try hard with no results, they should “stop and see what the child’s speciality is” (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020).

Huang sees it as the mother's responsibility to "see" their child's unique pathway, to know when to stop pushing, which requires a lot of knowledge and capacity from the mother indeed.

According to Xi and Huang, the main requirements of a good mother are be experienced, self-controlled, caring and able to learn/acquire more skills/abilities. They both emphasised being emotionally stable as very important, which is very interesting because mothering seems like a job with full of emotions for me. As discussed in Chapter 3, mothers tend to have the responsibility for parent-child time and the mother-child bond is seen as the most important (see 3.2.1). Huang valued parent-child time. Indeed, to create more quality time with her child, Huang had quit her job in a national bank and had been a stay-at-home mother for two years. She enjoyed being able to take her daughter out rather than staying indoors for tutoring sessions or learning activities. They travelled to many places not only within China but also to Japan and other Asian countries. Mostly, Huang drove the car and her daughter sat in the backseat and they would visit nice places around Shanghai. She felt good about these trips:

> I think I'm good enough. I'm not like the others [who] intensively take care of children at home, or book many tutoring classes… no, we had early year education lessons, but only once a week… I took her to play for two years… before the kindergarten, we didn't learn anything except the early year education class (Workshop 2, 24/3/2021).

She emphasised that "growing up [with the child] together is important" (Workshop, 24/3/2021). Based on Huang's experience, I felt her understanding of 'growing up' with children is more about spending time together rather than 'learning together' like Faith proposed. The process of learning to be a good mother was important to Faith, not merely about being a mother, but includes learning about future development and helping children make 'correct' decisions.

6.2.2 Helping children make decisions

As a secondary school teacher, Faith seemed skilled at thinking and reflecting on her role. She admitted that as a mother, she had different anxieties and priorities at different times but one key element in her thinking was "what kind of child do I want to nurture?" and this question led her to "better support the child" (Interview with Faith, 25/1/2021). Like Huang, Faith believed:

> As a good mother, one should know the child's potential development route, respect the child's decisions at different life stages, but also offer more options and help the child make decisions (Interview with Faith, 25/1/2021).

For example, Faith shared some thoughts about her daughter's future career:

> Her father and I are both teachers, I think it would be nice if she could be a teacher later… especially, as a girl, I won't ask her to be busy or make a lot of

> money…it's good to be a teacher… she currently wants to be a doctor… although the doctor's income is relatively high, but for girls, I may not need her to make too much money, she can find a doctor later to be her husband, it will be very nice too (Interview with Faith, 25/1/2021).

I was interested in how Faith sets about achieving her goal to be a good mother: she defined it as knowing the child's potential, respecting their decisions**.** However, in practice, she already had her own idea for her child's career. Faith offered other important aspects of good parenting such as always thinking about and helping with the child's development, respecting their interests, and guiding them in making the correct decisions. To ensure that they make "correct decisions", Faith suggested that mothers should keep learning and reflecting during motherhood. In this way, they can help the child with making difficult choices, such as whether to be a teacher or a doctor. It would seem that the "correct decision" is mainly controlled/decided by the parent or by the mother in her case, while other choices might be avoided (by parents) because they are difficult to achieve. When referring to responsibilities, Faith only mentioned mothers rather than parents. This might have been because of how I phrased the interview question about being a 'good mother'. Faith only mentioned her husband in reference to the child's future career.

The idea that a child might choose the same occupation as her parents came up in my interview with Xi. When we talked about the difficulty of going to a good state high school in Shanghai, Xi confided her backup plan for her daughter – she could go to a vocational nursing school and be a nurse in the future. Being a doctor herself, Xi does not want her daughter to do the same job, but it would be nice to have a nurse in the family, although she knows it is not an easy job either:

> My father was a doctor, so I really didn't want to be a doctor at the beginning, but when I chose my major for undergraduate, I followed my parents' suggestions and put Public Health as my second preference. Finally I was selected to this major …I don't want my daughter to be a doctor, the doctor-patient relationship is strained, [we are always] overworked, and the salary is average (Interview with Xi, 4/3/2021).

Both Xi and Faith are already considering their children's future careers and making suggestions based on their own experiences. This shows the influence that parents' careers can have on their children's development and the power (and control) parents seem to assume over deciding their children's future in the name of "helping". I did feel those mothers' good intentions and desire to contribute to their children's future development. However, I wondered if it is because mothers are expected to do so. As highlighted in the psychological discussions on motherhood, mothers are seen as having a central role in children's development (see chapter 3) which might lead to what looks like interference in children's choices.

6.2.3 Being 'balanced'

Regarding the 'good mother' question, Mona, as a middle-class working mother, believed that a good mother must "spend time accompanying the child as well as having their own time and life" (Interview with Mona, 26/1/2021). She suggested that mothers should devote most of their time and energy to their children. At the same time, they should have some time and space for the self and for enjoying their own life. Mona confessed that she was not so good at having her own life, as it was not always possible to carve out the time. Like most working mothers, she usually spent eight hours on paid work as a professional and needs to manage all the tasks of mothering. Finding the balance during motherhood is a topic of discussion among sociologists (see 3.2), mainly pertaining to the work-family balance. But it seems that Mona also valued personal time and space (will revisit this point later in this chapter). She listed it as a key feature of good mothering, while in reality, mothers were encouraged to sacrifice/devote more time to their children. With time restrictions, many working mothers often feel guilty or anxious because of lacking mother-child time or not doing as well as their peers in this regard. For working mothers in particular, being a 'good mother' means they have to be a 'balanced' woman who can balance work, family and self in everyday life, which seems unachievable for most.

This section has explored my participants' definitions and understandings of 'good' mothering and how they learn about motherhood formally, non-formally, and informally. Often the requirements or standards of the 'good mother' sound unachievable. They aspire to being a good mother, which requires them to: physically spend plenty of time with their children; have a psychological understanding of their child and know their children's thoughts; able to make "correct" decisions on multiple levels; have attractive personalities and skills; be a 'balanced' woman etc. Moreover, all these abilities require them to keep learning during motherhood. I was curious how they would have responded if I had asked them to define the 'perfect mother', given that the mother they described sounded like an 'ideal mother' rather than merely a 'good mother'. At the same time, I felt they themselves knew that the criteria they listed regarding good mothering were unrealistic and that is why they proposed them – as a goal to encourage them to learn how to be a good mother. In the next two sections, I focus on one of the traits of a 'good mother': achieving the work, family and personal development balance, and explore different practices of motherhood.

6.3 Work-family balance

Under pressure of being a good mother, some mothers may choose to give up their career. Some insist on working but all of them have to complete the tasks of mothering with limited time and energy. I found that my participants had various experiences of balancing work life and family life, alongside different understandings of career development and family care, although the content of family care might be very different in each case. In this section, I will investigate the difficulties mothers encountered in seeking to balance work and family, and the potential solutions they proposed with the help of internal (family) and external (nanny, cleaner) support. First, I provide an "ideal" case of what a successful balance of work and family might look like. I then, explore mothers' perceptions and attitudes towards this idea of work/family balance. Finally, I involve fathers and grandparents in the discussion to see what role they play in family life.

6.3.1 A 'balanced' case: the self-employed mother

As discussed in last section, one of the requirements of being a good mother, according to my participants, is balancing work, family and personal life, which sounds largely unachievable. Of all my participants, Qi seemed to have succeeded best with achieving that balance – largely through the support from her family. Thus, in this section, I unpack Qi's story to explore how she made peace and achieved balance in a family with two children and what kind of support she received during motherhood.

As a self-employed piano teacher, Qi has two sons, one was five years old and in the final year of kindergarten; the younger one was two years old and was in nursery. When I first 'met' Qi in a WeChat Group (Group 1), she was talking about requesting absence from kindergarten for the rest of the term. She hoped that her elder son would go back to kindergarten on their return but it was difficult to follow the kindergarten's Covid-19 measurements, as they travelled a lot and would travel again soon. So she decided to request a long break for her son, since "the kindergarten does not teach anything" and Qi preferred to teach him herself (Interview with Qi, 13/10/2020). When I met her online, she gave me the impression that her elder son was either studying at home or travelling to somewhere out of Shanghai, while the younger son had to go to nursery with other family members' care. I was curious, why Qi did not bring the younger son to travel together. Qi said, "the family (children's grandparents and the father) did not allow me to bring two children to travel at the same time [considering how difficult and unsafe it is since they are both very young]" (Interview with Qi, 13/10/2020).

When they were not travelling and "stuck" in Shanghai, outdoor activities with homework were considered the standard deal. In fact, this was very popular among mothers in Group 1. Mothers like Qi enjoyed taking their children to outdoor play areas and do academic practice papers while having breaks. Sometimes, they stayed at home and practiced piano or went to tutoring institutions to attend other classes such as drawing, street dance, LEGO crafting, badminton etc. Qi enjoyed her current life with children and she shared a normal day:

> On sunny days, we go outdoors and enjoy the sunshine, [which is good] for the boy's eyesight … sometimes we pick up the younger one from nursery in early afternoon and play together till evening (Interview with Qi, 13/10/2020).

Her life sounded really flexible and enjoyable for both adult and children. It also gave me the impression that Qi might be a stay-at-home mother, as I thought working mothers would not manage these activities on weekdays. However, she did have a job but she worked from home.

Qi scheduled her working hours, only teaching piano on weekends and holidays which meant that she had plenty of time to take care of the children and family on weekdays. Although self-employed, Qi never worried about recruiting students, as piano playing is a long-term learning which means that she has a certain number of students over years, and previous students and parents introduce new students to her - like a snowball.

On weekends, while Qi gave piano lessons, her husband took over the childcare. This cooperation worked efficiently which ensured Qi's working hours and therefore also a steady income. Qi told me that her husband only shared certain childcare responsibilities, namely, playing with children or help them at bath time. He did not do any housework so Qi would do it during weekdays in her 'off-time'. Qi's parents also helped her a lot: they ran a restaurant near Qi's home, so Qi and her family could eat there. Sometimes, the grandparents offered comments or suggestions regarding Qi's mothering but she chose to ignore them. Her secret in dealing with these comments was to "live separately, [so the grandparents] cannot control" (Interview with Qi, 13/10/2020). I realised that Qi received help from her husband and her parents although she was ultimately the one with absolute power to decide how much the father and grandparents could be involved in childcare.

Qi knew what she wanted from an early age. She became a private piano tutor after the final year of high school. Then, after graduating from university, she went to work for several months. Soon, she decided to quit her job and officially become an independent piano tutor. At the beginning, she went to big institutions as a training partner. Later, she got married and was soon expecting a baby, so she started a home business – daily piano classes with childcare service in the summer holidays. Then after childbearing, she made changes in her timetable and started to teach at weekends. During the first few months of motherhood, she had the help of a nanny and then gradually developed her own pattern of working and childcare without paid helpers.

Not every mother can make the same choice as Qi to be a stay-at-home mother but also have the possibility and ability to work. Qi's case shows that being a 'balanced' woman is possible if you have certain capabilities. For example, first, Qi is a piano teacher in a city (Shanghai) where there are plenty of students who want to learn the piano. So it was easy to become an independent tutor; second, her husband has a regular job which means he is free at weekends and willing to help with childcare, which means she can teach at weekends; third, her parents provide their daily meals, leaving Qi time to arrange her teaching timetable. All these factors have impacted Qi's decisions in her current life. I could feel that Qi is comfortable both in her position as a mother as well as piano teacher, since her values have been achieved in both the family and social sphere. However, Qi's case is also an illustration that if a mother is lacking support from husband and grandparents, and is not able to work flexibly, she might have less chance of balancing the different demands.

6.3.2 Decisions on working or non-working

During data analysis, one question continually surfaced in my mind: if work-family balance is barely achievable and working mothers are so overwhelmed, why do these middle-class women still insist on working? In this section, I will explore how mothers make decisions about their career development during the early years of childcare, through Di and Huang's work trajectories.

Di did not see family and career as an 'either…or…' question: she could manage both very well. As a working mother, Di had changed job twice in the past three years in the search for the best way to balance work and family. Her first job was in "an extremely competitive environment", which requested staff "not leave the position for more than one month, otherwise the position will not be retained" (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020). So Di had to "keep the normal pace" and manage short business trips overseas, even when she was pregnant. After maternity leave, she lost the original position and applied for a management position (in another department) instead, which was successful but also brought more duties. "Under this circumstance, you can only fight" (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020), Di sighed, remembering her typical working day:

> It was normal [for me] that my one hand was dealing with customers' cases while the other hand was holding the baby and the milk… sometimes, if the case was urgent, I even had to manage a day-return business trip overseas, since the baby haven't left me to sleep alone yet…… I think I have done my best on balancing career and family (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020).

However, Di's hard work did not satisfy all family members. She still had to face "the not-so-comfortable vision of the in-laws" and "the incomprehension of the child's father" (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020). These reactions disturbed her a lot and pushed her to give up competitive work and seek a more peaceful/slow-paced position for better mothering. She explained her reason for making this decision:

> After six months, I considered changing job, not for career development but for family life. I wanted to return to the family a little bit more…That's okay, I can return and make some concessions. After all, I'm a woman, no matter how strong the career is, family is also important (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020).

To create more mother-child time, Di left her management position and got a job in an early year education centre (private company) with a much lower salary but fewer duties. Di chose this position because the workplace was nearby and her son could have free early year education there. However, this job did not last very long, Di explained, "The ideal (status) is beautiful, but the [working] pace needs to be adapted from fast to slow…" (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020). She only stayed there for a year. Once her son was able to start nursery, she immediately found another job and returned to a busier but more flexible working pace. For Di, work was clearly not just a necessity: "Compared to salary, the job must make one happy, achieve one's value… my value is not only to be a mother" (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020). For Di work is important and reflects an awareness of her self-worth. Her achievements are not limited to being a mother but include being a professional too. In other words, her job is a platform for her to achieve self-value which may not be so easily achieved in family life, although she gave up the job for better childcare.

Like Di, Hong too, once she became mother, looked at the world of work differently. When her child was young, Hong wanted to devote more time to family life, which meant changing jobs. Hong initially tried to find a job in a private educational institute in the marketing department, but she gave up this idea immediately when she realised that marketing staff have no weekends which did not fulfil her original purpose of creating more family time. She finally found her current job that fulfilled her requirements: easy to manage and requiring less energy:

> I have given up many times...many times… for him (her son), even if the salary was cut by more than half at once, I would go. I think, I just treat myself like a full-time mother… and whatever, the company pays the insurance…right? Then, I have my own time, no need to stay at home in the daytime with my mother-in-law… (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021).

Regarding a career, Hong knew that she would achieve more if she dedicated less time to her son's development but she chose instead to devote more time and energy to mothering. her decision about full-time work provided her with "a sense of safety and freedom" (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021). As Hong described, in contrast to the job of full-time mother, she had an income and insurance. She also had "own time" away from the home and her mother-in-law. Hong's choice echoes Di's in terms of having different criteria when applying for a job at different life stages. Huang's experience was quite different. As mentioned in 6.2, Huang was a full-time mother who had taken her daughter travelling a lot before she started kindergarten. However, before being a full-time mother, she had made the decision to quit her job with family members' approval.

After having a baby, Huang moved back with her parents for better caring since the grandparents could help with childcare. Before making any decisions about her career, she discussed with the whole family – her husband, and her parents. When she decided to give up her job in order to be a full-time mother, her mother reacted very negatively. When sharing this story in workshop 2, Huang acknowledged that her mother's reaction was understandable: as a bank officer, Huang's job was very respectable and proud by her parents:

> She thought it's meaningless and that she could help with childcare… but my husband thought it's not good [if grandparents look after the baby full time rather than parents] and I agree with him (Workshop 2, 24/3/2021).

This disagreement created tension between Huang and her mother. Huang even thought about moving out of her parents' home but she decided to try to persuade her mother:

> It became like I'm a disobedient one… I spent half a year to persuade my mother and gradually, she agreed, then I quitted my job (Workshop 2, 24/3/2021).

Huang's experience highlights the power dynamics of the extended family, when one is living together with the grandparents. It seems that Huang's mother still has power over important life-changing decisions in the family, even though her daughter Huang is married and has a child of her own. Huang did not what to be "disobedient", hence her efforts to convince her mother before leaving her job. Yet Huang appeared very strong, independent and resourceful during our meeting. She stated that "I'm the person who solve problems in this family" and "I have often taken my daughter to other cities for a short trip alone and we have been to Japan twice – only me and her". At the same time, she appears to be very dependent on her parent's help in their daily life and therefore, on their opinions too. In other words, power ownership in Huang's family appears to be fluid with Huang being both independent and dependent at the same time, in different moments and situations.

Huang was a full-time mother for two years and then when her daughter went to kindergarten, she went back to work. She explained the reasons for returning to work and her current concerns about changing job again:

> My daughter went to kindergarten, then I had nothing to do at home, I had to work after all. Otherwise, what should I do in the daytime? I wanted to find a more flexible job, so I went to an insurance company, since I had been a financial manager of the bank… now, I was thinking what to do when my child goes to primary school. The problem is the school would not be nearby… and I have to watch her doing homework, but sometimes I have evening meetings and trainings… these things will happen after work, so I'm quite flexible in daytime, but …I haven't decided to change job or something… (Workshop 2, 24/3/2021).

Huang's main reason for working was to have something to do: she needed a place to go in the daytime. However, as Hong discovered, her main focus was her child's education, which requires much more evening time than before. Her worries about whether to change job again illustrates that as the mother, she is the one who is expected to take responsibility for her children's education. In this sense, Huang's experience is somewhere between Di and Hong's experience. Di was still focusing on her career since her son had not started formal schooling yet. Hong clearly knew that her current focus is schooling and tutoring, so she did not pay much attention to career development. Huang was a little bit uncertain at this stage. She wanted to contribute more to supporting her child's education, so she thought about being a full-time mother again. Meanwhile, her parents were helping with the childcare, and she enjoyed her current work: it would be a pity to quit. Achieving a balance between work and family seems very difficult, as Di pointed out:

> As a woman, either give in or don't try to balance… and men never worry about this, as if people automatically agree that men don't need to worry about their families (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020).

Di was unhappy about the reality that only women were restricted by family duty, although she tried very hard to balance work and family, she still felt "it is impossible" for working mothers to achieve the balance. As mentioned, she did not want to be a full-time mother because:

> [She] might only have husbands and children in her life and all attention is directed to them, which could bring a lot of pressure to them and leads to conflict…There must be a certain distance between the husband and wife, not completely transparent and gap-free" (Interview with Di, 10/3/2021).

Again, Di pointed out the importance of personal time and space in marriage. On the other hand, her understanding about being a fulltime mother was based on her own experience (or imagination) which may not represent other fulltime mothers. For example, as a fulltime mother, Yu explained that there were different types of fulltime mothers. Personally, she was very comfortable and did not want to work so chose to stay at home. Yu had been a stay-at-home-wife/mother for ten years when we met, and it seems she did not want to change the current situation yet. Like Yu, Xuan chose not to work since her child was still very young and she preferred to spend more time with her son and contribute to his education. Xuan believed that fulltime mothers have certain advantages over working mothers in terms of the quality of their mothering and the impact on the child's development:

> Fulltime mothers spend much more time and energy on children [and their education] … these children must be different… you see those best-performing children's mothers are all fulltime mothers (Interview with Xuan, 16/3/2021).

It seems that mothers like Xuan find it relatively easy to balance family and career as their priority is their children and they have already made the decision not to work. Interestingly, while Di and Huang wanted to resume full-time work once their children went to nursery, in order to seek their own self-value. Xuan and Yu happily gave up work in order to be stay at home mothers in order to provide better mothering and achieving their values regarding their children's education. I do not think those mothers' decision to work or to not work were easily made: they had given the decision much thought. Also, while it might look like these decision were made by the mothers themselves, the whole family, especially their spouse, was involved. Financial considerations were probably important in the decision making, although most participants did not refer to finances. During our in-person meeting, Xuan measured the salary she would earn as a working mother and the achievements her son might obtain if she were to a fulltime mother: she concluded that “it is not worth it” and she “could not give up time when she could be helping her child for such an average income” (interview with Xuan, 16/3/2021). Therefore, it would seem that Xuan’s priority was not earning money or having personal and social time but ensuring her son’s achievement. I wondered what role Xuan’s husband played in her plan, since she did not mention him at all. It sounded like the father was not involved in the childcare. The next section explores the role of the father in the accounts of these mothers.

6.3.3 Father’s participation and non-participation

While it is unclear whether the work-family balance is attainable for working mothers who want to also support their children’s education, it seems that without the support from family members, especially fathers, it is far less achievable. Qi, who it can be said seemed to have found a good balance, received help from the father, the grandparents as well as a nanny. On her own, a mother may abandon the pursuit of the work/family balance, as Ying reflected:

> I have no energy to considering how to balance work and family…I am not even considering this balance question anymore…Since balance seems to be a question which requires actively making choices to solve the problem and at the moment everything is overwhelming… this is normal…I dislike it, but I have no choice… If family members are highly consistent with your own educational philosophy and can implement a division of labour and provide support, then you are lucky. If you don’t have it, you’ll be very tired. When you’re tired, you don’t have the energy to think about balance (Interview with Ying, 19/02/2021).

According to Ying, feeling overwhelmed was “normal” in everyday life since she had “no choice” with no/less family support. She agreed that family members’ help is important: it would be “lucky” to have that support for childcare and education, especially from someone “highly consistent with you”. In other words, Ying would have liked to receive support from family members who agree with her and trust her regarding the children’s education. However, when I conducted online participant observation in Ying’s WeChat group (she was the manager of Group 3, see Chapter 4), she rarely mentioned other family members. Sometimes she talked about her husband who was blamed for “not being helpful”, although Ying also believed that there was, “no need to ask the husband’s help if it can be solved by money”.

This thought came from an online discussion in which Ying talked about her experience of ordering a bookshelf. Ying shared photos of her new bookshelf which occupied the whole wall. When other members asked where they could buy a similar one, she explained that she had designed it herself. She had drawn the design and booked a special service from an online store to create it and deliver it (as a flatpack). Then she paid for someone to help to carry all the pieces upstairs and assemble it. The whole process went smoothly on a weekday without any help from her husband. The group members complimented her and agreed that her husband was the lucky one and must be very happy. However, according to Ying,

> My husband does not feel happy, he thinks this is extra work. I have no energy to argue with that … No need to ask the husband's help if it can be solved by money (Online observation, 18/07/2021).

A few days later, Ying updated the story of the bookshelf in the group. Her husband was shocked by the quantity of books: the bookshelf had been empty before he went out in the morning and on his return, it was almost full. This was a very interesting moment when Ying posted the screenshots in the group chat. Apparently, Ying's husband had no idea how many books they had in the home. Again, without his help or permission, Ying had independently managed it anyway. The bookshelf story expresses a feeling that Ying's husband easily accepted the fact that he had to make concessions in certain conditions, for example, if it was related to children's education, or good for children's developments. On the other hand, as a glimpse of Ying's everyday life, I felt that the husband's needs or opinions were being neglected in family life and parenthood. Meanwhile, considering his absence from the children's education, it seemed they had found a way to deal with the division of labour in the family.

In terms of roles within the family, according to my participants, most fathers choose joining in with children's activities as their main participation in family life, while the mothers are in charge of organising the family activity itself. For example, Huang called her husband a "part-time chauffeur". She could drive but she hoped that by involving the husband in this way, the family could do something together, thereby creating a nice family environment for the kid. In her description, the father was in charge of watching their child brush their teeth and then they would have breakfast together. On weekends, Huang usually organised family activities, such as driving to tutoring institutions, eating outside, or just hanging out. For Huang, the sense of being a family was built on physically being together and on interactions. For example:

> I asked Dad to teach [their child] to ride a bike or play on the scooter, and I stood aside holding their bags and cups. Then the whole family was doing one thing together (Interview with Huang, 22/01/2021).

Huang's arrangement of family activities was a way to increase the fathers' participation and engagement in family life and she seemed to enjoy being the one in control. To ensure harmony in the family, Huang and her husband had different tasks. She explained that helping with the children's education was her job, since the father "had no patience on tutoring and he usually would be angry with the kid after five minutes" (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020). However, this does not mean that the father was excluded from the children's education. He managed other things, such as "he could help with practising ping pong, if we booked the ping pong course later" (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020).

Like Huang, Hong also arranged different activities to encourage the father's participation. She shared the secret to increasing her husband's engagement: "My husband is the one who doesn't organise or cooperate actively, so that we can organise everything by ourselves, and Dad just follows us" (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021). The way Huang and Hong included their husbands in family activities and children's education looks very efficient and successful. More importantly, they both sounded happy with their husbands' current participation levels.

Tian had a different experience from them, her husband was the family tutor and she was the tutoring assistant (see 5.4.3 about mothers delivering home tutoring). She shared a screenshot with me showing that she had brought her daughter to play outside and then her husband sent messages in the afternoon saying: "Come back as soon as possible, her homework isn't finished yet" and Tian replied, "ten more minutes" (Screenshot shared by Tian, 25/10/2020). This is what happened in Tian's daily life. She joked about this and sent me another screenshot, explaining that on one occasion when the father was not going to be at home, he did not trust Tian with overseeing homework so he gave her clear instructions:

> The father: Finish schoolwork before dinner and do home practice after dinner.
> Use a timer when doing Maths' practice. Send photos to me if finished.
>
> Tian: doing Maths' schoolwork now.
>
> The father: take a photo of her notepad, I will guide you how to supervise her.
>
> Tian: [picture]
>
> The father: has she finished [Chinese] vocabularies? How about English?
>
> Tian: English is done. Chinese too (Shared by Tian, 25/10/2020).

Tian was happy with her husband's active participation in the child's education, although as a husband, "he needs to improve" (Interview with Tian, 26/10/2020). Tian also "hesitated and struggled" on whether to be a fulltime mother, but all her fulltime mother friends told her "No" (Interview with Tian, 26/10/2020). Tian could feel their insecurity while not working. Tian emphasised:

> Childrearing is a big issue for mothers but it's rare to see how it changes fathers' lives…my husband said one sentence before and it made me sad immediately. Because he chose to start a business in the year my daughter was born, he chose a way that was risky and unstable. Then because of this choice, my career choices have changed. After two years, it wasn't really going well, but he said to me with great force, "I think my future is full of possibilities". I was like, I wanted to cry, I think my future is over. I think there is a difference between

> fathers and mothers, I was at that moment, I was really... (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021).

In Tian's story, being parents seemed not to have changed the father's daily activities or career choices; it was still full of potential. By contrast, as a mother, when the child was only two years old, the only future for Tian was mothering. Tian's story shows the different attitudes towards parenting between the father and the mother. Although her husband played an important role in tutoring their daughter, now when her daughter was in Year 3, in early years of childcare, Tian had dealt with the parenting pressures as well as financial pressures. Their expectations of the "future" depended on their understandings of childcare, parenting and career development. It might also have been influenced by their requirements and expectations of each other, which seemed to be formed largely by comparing themselves with their peers. For example, Mona defined her husband as 'a good father', because he participated more in their children's daily life than his peers. He also helped to lessen Mona's anxiety and shared the housework. Mona was satisfied with her husband's contributions, while understanding that he has limitations:

> He wouldn't be able to teach the kid studying at home, so he shares chores … we've discussed the family division of labour and agreed that everyone should do the things they're good at … [we] can't require the father to be perfect (Interview with Mona, 26/01/2021).

Through understanding, Mona and her husband have found their way to coping with parenting anxieties. When Mona worried too much about their son's education and felt pressured by other mothers, her husband was the one to reassure her:

> When I felt that other children are better than my child, the first thing I do was to talk with my husband. He immediately removed this idea from my mind and complimented our child. He is the one who can beat my demons. He makes me less anxious and stops me from transferring this anxiety to the child (Interview with Mona, 26/01/2021).

Mona explicitly refers to peer pressure in exacerbating her schooling anxiety (also see 5.2). In terms of the sub-question of my research, *how to lessen mothers' anxiety,* Mona's case illustrates that fathers' active participation and support can help. In fact, as 'a good father', Mona's husband also shares responsibility for their son's education. Sometimes, he too discussed the child's learning process with friends in online groups, such as what book the child was reading, what courses he was taking etc. (Interview with Mona, 26/01/2021). At the same time, Mona stated that while fathers were able to talk about the learning process, "mothers were the ones deciding what and how to learn" (Interview with Mona, 26/01/2021).

For me, the stories above also raise the question, what level of participation is a good father expected to provide in family life? According to Mona, Tian, and Huang, it seems to highly depend on what mothers expect from the fathers and how they arrange their daily activities. Mona claimed that fathers' active participation in family life was a key point of being a 'good father'. However, based on Ying's experience, fathers' non-participation or peripheral participation in family activities was normal too. It seemed that the expected participation was also difficult to achieve for fathers, as they might participate in family life but in a different way from mothers. It did seem that it generally the mother who 'controlled' the power to arrange family activities.

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, a 'balanced' mother not only needs the father's help but also the support of extended family, primarily grandparents. In next section, I explore the involvement of grandparents and how this relates to mothers' everyday practices.

6.3.4 Grandparents' involvement and non-involvement

As discussed in the previous section, fathers' participation is recognised (by mothers) as an important part of family life but some mothers have to face the fathers' non-participation (also see 3.3). Di thought that it was grandparents' involvement that could explain why fathers took less responsibility for children and family. In her view, grandparents were too involved, which decreased the opportunity for father's engagement in family activities:

> My parents-in-law, they are too engaged…Obviously, sometimes the child can make it, I want the child to do it by himself or with Dad's help…But in most cases, grandparents do it together with the child, including **my part** [of parenting] too! For example, if we went out to play, I hope it was more like the parent taking their kid, but in our family, the situation was that grandparents arranged it. We (the parents) were just like participants or observers … I can't tell them that "you shouldn't do it, you need to ask your son to play his part". This might be too … not good (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021).

Di explains that the grandparents have taken on the parents' duties which undermines her role. She clearly knew which should be her "part" and what she wants to do with the child but felt that she did not have the chance to contribute because of the grandparents' interference. Di's experience is unusual in this study, since most mothers had the power to decide when and how much the grandparents engaged in family life. For example, in Hong's case, the grandparents helped by providing daily meals which meant that Hong and her husband could "immerse in the child's education and development" (Interview with Hong, 15/12/2020). Thus, I was curious about the grandparents' position in Di's family and their position of power in terms of childcare responsibilities.

Revisiting Di's narrative, I was able to piece together some explanations for the high involvement of her parents-in-law. As mentioned in the previous section, when her son started nursery, Di got a new job which although it was flexible was also in a fast-paced working environment. However, Di’s work place was in a different district from her home, requiring around a two hour commute. So Di rented a flat near her workplace for short stays during the week. She managed to go back home to see her husband and her son two or three times a week. In other words, she was not living with the child during the week. When Di left home and concentrated on working, the grandmothers took turns in looking after the child and the main childcare giver was her mother-in-law. This may explain the closeness between the grandparents and the child, and their significant role in family activities.

Di’s concerns about the involvement of the grandparents capture the power dynamics in her family. Her parent-in-laws might not be aware that their support should have certain boundaries that respect the nuclear family. For example, in general, if parents take their child out to play outside on weekends, grandparents should rest at home rather than go with them (like what Tian and Hong shared later). As Hong joked, the grandparents “have finished their weekdays”, and the duty automatically shifts to parents on weekends. Tian’s parents could not manage outdoor activities on weekends, so they “just have lunch or dinner together… and the outdoor activities are small family only” (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021). This arrangement is probably the most popular in terms of how grandparents are involved in childcare, especially once children reach school age.

Conversely, Di also reflected that the father’s absence might be the main reason for “the over-involvement of grandparents”, rather than the other way around. On many occasions, she had to bring the grandmother instead of the father with them on family activities. Di explained:

> Our family is just like a single-parent family… the father doesn’t like to participate in these [parent-children] activities… It stimulates some unnecessary problems… I personally love these events and I think the interaction with children… [is important] (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021).

It seemed that fathers’ participation levels influence the grandparents’ involvement in the nuclear family. This is a hard balance for all family members. Some grandparents actively involve themselves in family care in order to support the parents who might be busy working and therefore, not able to take care of the child. On the other hand, grandparents can become overly involved, thereby not allowing parents to develop their own experience of parenting.

Based on Tian and Hong’s perspectives, it might be easier for everyone if grandparents only help with essential family care during weekdays. For example, many participants rarely have to cook on weekdays since usually the grandparents provide this. Thus, I wonder, as a part of the extended family, how far grandparents should intervene in family life. For the mothers themselves, there seems to be a clear boundary: parenting and education must be under their ‘control’. Considering this requirement, grandparents should know when to step aside and when to fill the gap. This is not an easy job, especially if the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are unable to communicate.

As Di said, “I could tell my own mother when to stop helping, but not my mother-in-law… it sounds very ungrateful” (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021). Therefore, in her case, a good relationship between the mother and her parent-in-laws may highly depend on the grandparents’ awareness of these boundaries.

Conversely, I found that the grandparents had their own strategies to cope with this family issue. For instance, my participant Ze, a retired grandmother, managed a good relationship with her daughter-in-law. Ze had two grandsons, one six year old, one three year old. She shared that as grandparents, while they fully supported their grandchildren’s education, they would not say anything about how to educate them:

> The grandfather and I didn't interfere in this aspect. Doting [grandchildren] is [naturally] from the heart but [we] will not interfere with them too much. Because we are very wise, we pay...not to contribute, but to pay [for children’s education]. In terms of education, I know that there must be a gap between our concept and theirs… Well, so, we are very wise, we really did not force the children to do anything. I have always felt that it is unnecessary. I think if you manage too much, you will be unhappy (Interview with Ze, 6/5/2021).

Ze emphasised that as grandparents they did not want to interfere or contribute too much but only financially support their grandchildren’s education. I discovered that in fact, Ze contributed far more than she presented. For example, Ze shared the reason why she was still working after retirement:

> Since my daughter-in-law is a full-time mother, I think, I wouldn’t spend a lot of time to help her with childcare. Besides, the two children have a babysitter at home, so it’s enough... Then I'm still young, I can still go to work… (Interview with Ze, 6/5/2021).

Yet she later revealed that she did have grandmother duties alongside working: she helped with taking the older grandson to school before work and picking him up after work. On weekends, Ze also dedicated a day to childcare, such as sending them to different tutoring classes. Therefore, as well as paying educational fees, she also helped with daily childcare, creating more spare time for the mother. As Ze pointed out, they were just trying to reduce the pressure on the young couple:

> We do as much as we can, and their lives will be easier if we help them…Anyway, his grandfather said that all the school expenses of the children, including tutoring classes' fees, will be paid by us. Anyway, his grandfather promised 1 million for each child (as education funding) from kindergarten to university, which will definitely be enough (Interview with Ze, 6/5/2021).

As grandparents, Ze and her husband participate in the nuclear family's life in a way that fits with what most mothers would like, based on their views outlined in the previous section. I could feel her love for her grandchildren and her awareness of the boundaries between the parents and grandparents. Grandparents try to reduce the pressure on their children, both in terms of finance and childcare. It would seem that middle-class grandparents like Ze and her husband, do not have financial pressure to work after retirement but choose to do so.

For some mothers, however, grandparents' contribution brings with it an additional pressure in terms of the consequent obligation towards them. Tian expressed her concerns about future for the grandparents: "they are very helpful now, with daily meals, chores and childcare, but they are losing energy…we have parents on both sides to care for, a lot of pressure…" (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021). Thus while as part of the extended family, grandparents can help a lot with childcare which may reduce pressure on the mother at this stage, they add pressure to the small family as well, whether they help with childcare or not.

It is hard to say how much support grandparents provide, since it is usually negotiated between mother and grandmother. Mothers may have the power to seeking grandparents' support and managing everyone's positions, but only if the nuclear family is financially independent. When the grandparents contribute a lot both financially and physically, they may have more power in deciding how much they want to do or the extent to which they will intervene and make decisions.

In summary, I have analysed the difficulties and possibilities regarding mothers' work-family balance in this section. Qi, being a self-employed mother has been able to achieve a successful balance since she has flexibility as an independent piano teacher. In addition, she received support from family members and hired helpers. Most working mothers, however, face the difficult decision of whether work, the aims of working, the correct moment to give up a career and the time to return to work. Working mothers in this study had changed jobs several times in order to be better mothers. For them, working was more like leaving home and having a place to go, achieving personal values, or avoiding being stuck at home with the mother-in-law.

To balance work and family, working mothers need help from husbands and grandparents. Mothers by and large expect more participation from the fathers than they get, although some are willing to accept peripheral participation or even non-participation. Grandparents' involvement in family life is helpful as well as stressful for these mothers. Boundaries between extended family and nuclear family can exist but need to be negotiated or decided by the power holder. Meanwhile, the changing family structure in China, from 'big family' to 'small family', has affected the power dynamics within the family (see 2.3). The whole idea of work-family balance requires mothers to make a series of decisions which will affect their individual life in multiple ways. In the next section, I want to investigate mothers' understandings and practices with regards to balancing their different roles as mothers and individuals.

6.4 Mother-self balance

As I mentioned in 6.2, participants in this research had very high standards with regards to their definition of a ‘good mother’. A key requirement to being a good mother is balancing their work, family and personal life. However, some of them acknowledge that family life especially mother-child time occupies almost all their spare time. Mothering as a lifelong job can be very exhausting and there are moments when mothers may want to resist this role and simply be themselves. In this section, I will explore mothers’ experiences of and negotiations around balancing family duty and self-identity.

6.4.1 Love, responsibility and duty

Under the multiple pressures from self, peers, family and society, mothering can be tiring and become a duty. For example, Tian shared:

> In addition to love, being a mother is more about responsibility… the child is an independent individual, I just do my duty and grow up with her (Interview with Tian, 26/10/2020).

Tian was not the only one who referred to mothering as a duty. Huang also emphasised that finding a suitable tutoring class for the child is “just a part of one’s duty” (Interview with Huang, 22/1/2021). I wondered how many duties mothers have to complete? It looked like the idea of ‘duty’ was highly relevant to the standards of being a ‘good mother’.

As the previous section has suggested, whereas fathers’ peripheral participation or non-participation seemed to be acceptable in some families, mothers’ absence was not tolerated or “not allowed” (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021). It seemed that mothers did not have the option to leave the responsibility behind and be “selfish”, even for a moment (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021). It might be difficult, particularly when the child is young and needs a lot of care.

For example, when I first interviewed Sui, her baby was around six months old. She was the only caregiver at that time. I sent my request to add her as a WeChat contact in the early afternoon of UK time and did not expect to have a conversation the same day, since there was an eight hour time differences so it would have been her bedtime in China. However, she immediately accepted my request and started talking to me. So I asked what time she usually goes to bed; she answered:

> I guess you don't have a baby, maybe not married either… I don't sleep, just have a nap when my daughter is sleeping … after having a baby, I finally understood why those mothers are always late responding to messages - sometimes you are just too busy to answer it (Interview with Sui, 7/10/2020).

Childcare was not an easy job for Sui and she felt that love is not enough to raise a baby, “being a mother is more about duty” (Interview with Sui, 7/10/2020). In comparison, some mothers assumed that love could conquer all: Xuan claimed, “with children, happiness is more than exhaustion” and “feeling tired with your child is because you did not use the right method” (Interview with Xuan, 16/3/2021). Based on her view, mothers should not have feelings of exhaustion or upset, but should always feel love, with ‘positive energy’ (see 3.2.2.4). If they did have any negative feelings, she implies that the mothers are to blame as they are simply doing something ‘wrong’. This value judgement does not solve mothers’ tiredness or pressure but strengthens the unattainable expectations of motherhood. With this idea, the unstopped mothering might become a practice of finishing duty and a job with no (or very few) pleasure.

6.4.2 A moment of resistance

Lacking personal time was a common problem for most mothers in this research. Although many mothers had decided to devote most of their time to the children, there still were some moments of tiredness and struggle. This struggle sometimes brought guilt and shame to mothers, as Tian shared:

> Everyone is trying to accompany their children, if I want to do something alone for myself, I can’t accompany her then…I will fight a little bit … What about your vocation as a mother (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021)?

It sounded that sacrificing personal time to one’s children is the nature of motherhood and how can it be resisted? In fact, mothers had very different experiences with regards to creating time for self. For instance, during a conversation in workshop 3 when everyone was eating ice cream and sharing the enjoyment of it, the discussion turned naturally to personal time:

> Di: Just think about it, I haven’t eaten this for years, last time was probably taking the child to an event…
>
> Tian: A workshop? (Turns head to me) You see mothers’ activities, all mother-child events, very boring.
>
> Me (the researcher): what about your own time?
>
> Hong: personal time… occasionally…
>
> Tian: Really, I often skipped work and left them behind.
>
> Hong: Alone? Going out to have fun? On weekends?
>
> Tian: Not having fun… they (the family) wouldn’t allow it …just, sometimes I want to watch a show or something, and don’t want to bring them (family members, particularly refer to the father and the child) together… (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021)

I was surprised how precious this 'ice-cream time' was for mothers. For me, this was an afternoon of collecting data which meant a certain amount of stress and concentration. For my participants, it might be a few hours of leaving work and home behind, chatting with women and eating ice cream. As Tian mentioned, most events they attended were children's activities. The way she created personal time was by squashing time from work and going to 'meaningful' activities such as musical shows or exhibitions[39]. I could feel that she carved out some free time but with invisible restrictions mostly coming other family members. As a mother who had an MA in Early Years Education and had worked in educational institutions, Tian clearly knew her desire for freedom, and was able to share her practical 'secrets' on how to create personal time:

> I always choose to work full-time because I want to have my own time. Working time is my own time too, not 24 hours with children. Also, I strongly retain one or two hobbies. This is something I don't want to give up, no matter what you say, I still want to stick to it (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021).

Tian did her best to find potential moments to be alone, for example, by watching a show at the theatre during working time (flexible working time), learning French and joining a singing group. The songs were in French, because it is her husband's working language, and her daughter had been learning it since she was four. Learning it in order to accompany and better support the little girl was a perfect excuse. None of these activities were simply about "going out and having fun", as Tian mentioned before as it might not be tolerated by the family. What is striking is the reason Tian gives for choosing to be a working mother rather than a stay-at-home mother: she saw it as allowing her personal time, since working meant she could leave home and be legitimately away from the family.

Not every mother could manage a few hours to learn French or go to the theatre, but most mothers were able to carve out little bits of time for themselves through daily activities. For example, Di and Tian discussed how they relaxed by completing daily tasks:

> Di: The only time I can relax is probably after I've been exercising …almost one or two hours…
>
> Tian: Yes, that's really enjoyable.
>
> Di: But I didn't go to the gym this year, so I even lost this time.
>
> Tian: My most relaxing time lately has been going for a walk in the evening and then feeling relaxed for half an hour.
>
> Di: Have you ever taken ages to throw out the rubbish?

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[39] Tian did not mention these activities, but I observed them in her WeChat posts during the fieldwork.

> Tian: Not really, it’s nearby the building.
>
> Di: Yes, just nearby. I can sometimes throw the rubbish out first and then walk around…
>
> Tian: I do this when I buy breakfast, sometimes I can get all things in one shop**,** but I think, no, there’s nothing I want… [then I can walk around to other shops]
>
> Hong: It’s so hard (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021).

Mothers might just need some moments to be themselves and to breathe fresh air rather than always being together with family members. That is why the gym time, throwing out the rubbish or buying breakfast were so enjoyable: they were moments free of mothering.

> Tian: It's been a happy time. So, isn't there always that joke? Why does dad spend so much time in the bathroom? Because mum would want to have this time too...
>
> Di: I used to love going to the bathroom, or, if I was alone with my mother-in-law at home, and she started talking to me about my child, and then, invisibly, my overwhelmed heart was so tired, I would prefer to go to the bathroom (Workshop 3, 29/3/2021).

The bathroom joke illustrates parents’ desire to be alone, especially those mothers who have to share a space with their mothers-in-law. For mothers in this study, living with one’s mother-in-law might save time in terms of housework and childcare, but it also brings more pressure and less space. Thus, spaces like the bathroom become seen as their own space to escape from family members.

In this section, I have explored mothers’ experiences of balancing the identity of mother and self. Love and the sense of responsibility lead mothers to devote most of their spare time to their children and to family life, but the exhaustion and tiredness of mothering encourages them to seek more personal time as a moment of resistance. Therefore, bathroom time, throwing out the rubbish time, the gym time, buying breakfast time and walking time, even working time become little moments of freedom. The more fortunate are able to do other activities, legitimised by being related to their child’s education (e.g. French singing group) as well as other kinds of space such as online space (see Chapter 7).

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented how mothers learned about motherhood and what difficulties and potential solutions they encountered in balancing work, family and personal life. According to mothers in this study, being a good mother is not easy. Mothers are expected to devote as much time as they can on childcare, managing family life, and self-improvement as well as developing mothering skills with children together, while a good mother is also required to have personal time. However, working mothers in this study encountered many difficulties in achieving this balance, such as limited time for multiple tasks. Some mothers chose to give up work for several years or a long period in the name of better mothering (e.g. Huang) while others on working (e.g. Tian) because they need a reason to leave home, a place to go, a value to achieve and time for self.

To ensure the quality of childcare, working mothers sometimes need support from family members and other helpers (babysitters, nannies etc.). Fathers' participation in family life is required but there is no agreed criteria of their contribution level. A good father was required to actively participate in family activities, although their peripheral participation and non-participation was also accepted. However, grandparents' involvement in family life, especially in children's education, could require delicate negotiations, the (usually) unspoken boundaries affected by changing family structures and power dynamics within the family. In this study, some mothers owned more power and 'controlled' family life through allocating different childcare tasks to family members. With help from husbands, grandparents and nannies, some mothers may have time for career development and self-improvement. However, mothering was generally experienced as exhausting, characterised by love but also emotional turmoil and inescapable responsibility. Some realised the value of personal time and were able to carve out space for themselves, however limited. This creation of personal time, which included working time, bathroom time and all the other pieces time where mothers were alone and away from home, can be seen as moments of resistance.

A 'good mother' might be able to balance work, family and self perfectly, but in general, this is only an ideal of motherhood, rather than a realistic standard. The ideology of being a good mother, the competitive performance among peers, the requirements from family members, and the awareness of losing self-identity all added to the pressure that these middle-class mothers experience. To cope with these pressures, women might change jobs several times during motherhood and perform different identities at various life stages.

These pressures and difficulties were largely invisible and could not be discussed with family members. Thus, they sought a place where they could discuss their experiences, perceptions and understandings of motherhood, womanhood and children's education. The internet has created such spaces online: digital platforms have changed parenting practices and what it means to share experiences. Parents use screenshots and photos to share their difficulties and triumphs with other parents. They also use them as proof other family members that they are monitoring their children's study and work progress. In next chapter, I will focus on the characteristics of digital platforms and explore mothers' experiences and practices in online communities.

Chapter 7 Mothers’ experiences and performance in online spaces

7.1 Introduction

As I explained in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, my inspiration for this study was my own experience facilitating middle-class mothers’ school choices for their children. We used WeChat, which is one of the dominant social media platforms in China. Then, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, I joined three online groups and observed their discussions in everyday life. Meanwhile, I also observed mothers’ posts in WeChat Moments. During the research, I found that mothers had different ways of using online platforms and different ways of performing motherhood. In this chapter, I will investigate how mothers experience and perform motherhood in online spaces through their usage of WeChat, which relates to RQ3.

7.2 The management and characteristics of online groups

On WeChat before people join an online group, there must be someone who creates the group with a certain aim in mind. I was curious about these group owners’ original aims for creating a new online community: I wondered why they had created the group and what features they intended to build. In this section, based on my observation in three WeChat groups, I will investigate why people create online groups, how they manage these groups, and what does it mean to mothers.

As mentioned in the methodology chapter (Chapter 4), I conducted online participant observation in three groups but only focused on two of them (Group 1 and Group 3) because of the inactivity of Group 2 during my fieldwork period. I attempted to find out why it was inactive and concluded that it might relate to the group owner’s management style. There are different ways of managing online groups: Group 1 and Group 3 were managed more flexibly and lightly while the management of Group 2 was ‘heavier’ with more strict rules. For example, on the announcement board (a message to the whole group), the group owner/manager Dong wrote:

> The following topics are welcome:
>
> (1) Share all kinds of learning experiences and exam experiences, not limited to foreign language, math Olympiad, Chinese, sports, art, etc.
>
> (2) Recommend cost-effective courses, book, and videos. Share network disk information.
>
> (3) Welcome to add friends with the same values into the group.
>
> Cautions:

> (1) Be cautious about publishing too much of your own privacy. No screenshots, especially screenshots without any mosaic! If this behaviour is noticed, you will be kicked out of the group immediately.
>
> (2) Jixue[40] varies from person to person. You should learn from other people's methods, rather than point fingers at other people's plans. Cynicism and ostentation are not welcomed.
>
> (3) Ask the group manager before sending ads.
>
> (4) Please be aware of your values, no politics, no uncomfortable videos and photos.
>
> (5) Please be careful when adding group members as individual friend. If you are not sure, you can contact the group manager for inquiries, but the group manager cannot verify the true identity and intention of the individual, sorry.
>
> … … Edited on, 10/01/2021. (Group 2 announcement board, Collected on 8/7/2021).

The function of this group was obvious – exchanging educational information and resources among parents. As mentioned in Chapter 4, at the early stage of participant recruitment, I contacted Qiu, the manager of Group 1 and asked her if she could introduce any group manager friends to me, preferably, ones who manage education-focused groups. Then, Qiu introduced Dong, a middle-class father who managed several online groups. The one Dong invited me to join was a group of parents whose children study in Year 5 (and over), and the topics they were interested in, as written in the announcement, centred mainly around schooling, tutoring and examinations. Group members valued digital copies of learning resources since they are "cost-effective", as emphasised in the announcement, and I could see Dong shared those files on a regular base.

As the group owner, Dong emphasised that having the "same values" was important for this group, such as *jixue.* Meanwhile, he was sensitive on privacy and security in online spaces, which shows his knowledge and awareness of group management. However, this group was not active during my data collection so I could hardly collect any conversations. I wondered if it is because the 'no irrelevant talking' atmosphere scared members? The power dynamics in this group was interesting: mostly, the group was quiet, and I could see Dong often shared learning resources while no one responded. It felt very difficult to contact anyone in this group, including the group owner. As a researcher, I did not recruit any participants from this group after introducing myself and sharing the information sheet. Since the group owner permitted my observation in the group,

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[40] Chicken blood in English, very enthusiastic on improving children's (academic) performance.

I stayed until Dong disbanded this group in 2021. Then, I rethought about my decision to not interview Dong, and the reality of Group 2's inactivity. I found that it might because of those written announcements and the style of management. In addition, he was a father and my target participants were mothers. His 'rules' imposed restrictive boundaries of communication, and a strong sense of 'not trusting others in this group', which might have prevented any in-depth communication (or even any communication) between members.

In contrast, the owner of Group 3 used a more flexible management style with a similar educational purpose. Group 3 was created as a *Jiwa*[41] group, which means mothers in this group are *jixue* mother, and all discussions are aimed at facilitating children's education. The group owner Ying, as a working mother, created her own group in 2019, when she was on holiday and her daughter was still in kindergarten. Ying explained to me that she did not have much work nor home tutoring to do during that holiday and could spare time for online chatting, so she actively joined conversations on several online groups, shared personal experience and knowledge around children's education. However, she found that the group owners somehow had business aims: "they might be booksellers or similar roles, which has a lot of limitations with some subject purposes…" (Interview with Ying, 19/2/2021). At the same time, her active performance in these chat groups attracted many mothers who then added her as a WeChat contact. In fact, she received too many friends' requests, as she did not want to spend too much time answering repetitive questions. Thus, Ying thought it might be better to create her own group for educational information sharing/exchanging rather than individually replying to these messages which required a huge amount of time and energy. This is how Group 3 was born.

Ying aimed to create a community-led online group which was shaped by her own preference - a "pure" space for *jiwa*, helping children's education. The founding members of her group came mainly from previous networking in selected groups, which means that the first members in her new group had to have shared values. Ying announced several rules in the group which formed the baseline of the group but did not limit the discussion or active communication among mothers:

> (1) This group prohibits advertising, attracting customers, selling courses and books, collecting likes and followings. If necessary, go to the 'forwarding dedicated group'. If violated, once, warned, twice, kicked out.
>
> (2) Don't discuss political issues, don't make personal attacks, don't make extremist remarks (Group 3 announcement board, Collected on 21/7/2021).

According to the group rules, Ying disliked advertisements and commercial activities in the chats, which just followed her purpose of creating a group purely for *jiwa*. Ying's announcement reminds me that there was similar content in Group 2. Dong also disliked advertisements but instead of entirely refusing, he requested that people ask him for permission before sending any commercial contents. I wondered did this request to ‘ask permission’ relate to a ‘cost-effective’ purpose, since Dong may not want to miss something important for group members? I felt Ying shared a similar aim with Dong which is that cost-effective educational resources are welcomed, but Ying chose to open a new group for business information rather than sharing them in Group 3. Ying told everyone in the announcement that she had opened another group for forwarding commercial-related information. She also provided group welfare on children’s tutoring classes:

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[41] Tutoring/helping children on multiple levels to ensure they have better academic performance.

> All the selling classes or punch card cashback (activities) on your market, I can buy here. The sales commission is all returned to everyone (the specific commission will be screenshot when buying the class, not hidden and not advanced) But if it is reported, the benefit is cancelled, and the frozen commission cannot be settled, and the consequences are at your own risk (Group 3 announcement board, Collected on 21/7/2021).

This announcement was confusing to me but then when I talked with Ying during the interview, I understood that as an employee in the education industry, Ying did have knowledge and tips about saving money through those cards and return points scheme. Most importantly, she had information on all those tutoring classes. Her non-profit purpose helped this group maintain harmony and established trust between her and most members.

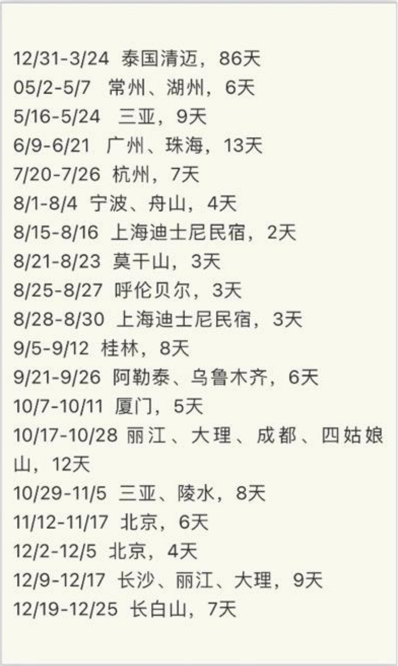
It seems that Ying only refused politics-related topics in her group. She restricted commercial content in Group 3 but opened another space for members to exchange coupons, links, discount codes etc. Although she hoped that group members would behave and refrain from personal attacks or extremist discussion, there still were conflicts, but Ying seemed not very keen to interfere unless they were out of uncontrol. At the end of the announcement, Ying emphasised:

> The group owner is busy every day, lazy, and tough, (we’re) an ordinary child and an ordinary mother, just wanting to quietly Jiwa. Edited on 09/01/2020. (Group 3 announcement board, Collected on 21/7/2021).

I felt when Ying claimed that she just wanted to “quietly *jiwa*”, the key message was “please do not bring any trouble to me”. Based on my observation, I noticed that there was an unwritten rule in Group 3 which is that you are not welcome to argue with the group founder/owner/manager. This might be a universal unspoken rule in online communities, since the group founders’ power in these communities seems to be unchallengeable. On the other hand, when newcomers join an online group or members ask for specific help such as voting for children’s performance, share discount coupon codes, several digital Red Envelopes (*hongbao*) with a small amount of money is another unspoken rule, which is not compulsory but shows respect and politeness.

As far as I observed, the role Ying played in the online community seemed like that of an expert in education, particularly regarding Chinese and English reading practice, as well as helping children memorise English vocabulary. She was keen on testing different learning techniques for digital reading, willing to share feedback and reflections on learning materials and helped other mothers avoid unnecessary purchases or practices. Ying and her group members all self-defined as *jixue* mothers, which means they had same purpose to improve their children's academic performance. The group gradually formed as a like-minded group with less conflicts and more efficient communication. The whole concept of Group 3 was entirely different from Group 1, which was created by Qiu.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, Qiu was the opposite of *jixue*. She had chosen a path out of the system so that her sons did not need to compete with others. Qiu created several online groups with multiple reasons; the one I joined was Group 1. Her original purpose of creating an online community was to find more playmates for her sons. Before her younger son was old enough to go outside and play with his brother, Qiu attempted to organise group events for children of her elder son's age, because her elder son enjoyed playing with peers. She tried to provide as many opportunities as possible. For example, as a former teacher in Early Year Education, Qiu organised face-to-face learning activities for the group members' children, such as reading practice. The meeting place was flexible: when the weather was nice, they met in a public park; if it was raining, mothers shared the fee and rented a dance studio. Also, mothers offered a children's picture book reading service in turns. At that time, Qiu had two online groups which organised events for different aged children, one for the elder son, one for the younger son. When the younger son could join in more activities with his brother, those two groups were made into the one I joined - Playmate Group (Group 1). Since Qiu travelled a lot, she would go somewhere and share the experience in the group; then others followed in her footsteps. Sometimes, she organised a short road trip for a group of parents and children or gathered in Shanghai and had a small party. At the end of 2020, Qiu summarised her year in a WeChat article titled "2020 in our family, 201 days on the go" with a list of places she had been in the past year (see Figure 13).

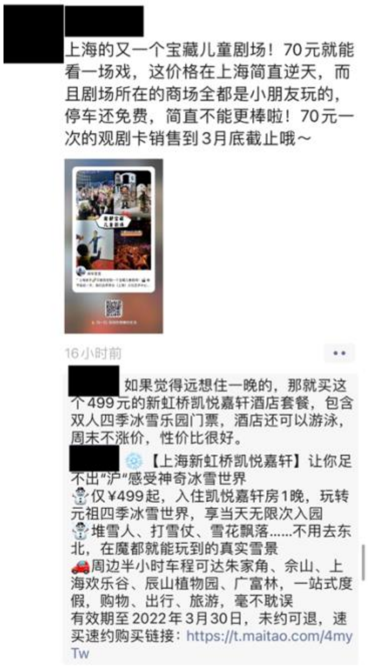


12/31-3/24 泰国清迈，86天
05/2-5/7 常州、湖州，6天
5/16-5/24 三亚，9天
6/9-6/21 广州、珠海，13天
7/20-7/26 杭州，7天
8/1-8/4 宁波、舟山，4天
8/15-8/16 上海迪士尼民宿，2天
8/21-8/23 莫干山，3天
8/25-8/27 呼伦贝尔，3天
8/28-8/30 上海迪士尼民宿，3天
9/5-9/12 桂林，8天
9/21-9/26 阿勒泰、乌鲁木齐，6天
10/7-10/11 厦门，5天
10/17-10/28 丽江、大理、成都、四姑娘山，12天
10/29-11/5 三亚、陵水，8天
11/12-11/17 北京，6天
12/2-12/5 北京，4天
12/9-12/17 长沙、丽江、大理，9天
12/19-12/25 长白山，7天

Figure 13 Qiu’s 2020 (month/date destination, length of staying)

Qiu stated that the atmosphere in Group 1 was more about travelling and playing with children. Every time when Qiu shared travel information, there were always some mothers who would happily join her, and they seemed become good friends afterwards. This raised a question for me, which was how far did the online communication spill into “offline” life behind Qiu’s posts? According to Qiu’s share, I assumed not very far, as the group members seemed to easily manage meetings in person. They even followed Qiu to Dali for short-term innovative education (see Chapter 5).

Apart from travel information, Qiu also shared some commercial content related to children, such as theatre tickets, children’s toys, clothes, cosmetic products etc. She did not overshare in the group, but introduced these products in her Moments posts (see Figure 14). With Qiu’s management, Group 1 was a place where you could not see any competitive schooling discussion: instead, it was all about travelling and playing in and around Shanghai. In fact, I did not notice any written rules about forbidding schooling topics, but I witnessed how Qiu banned external business links once all be it in a very friendly manner. It seemed like a commitment among group members that all commercial-aimed links should be approved by Qiu first, otherwise, it would simply be forbidden. Meanwhile, Qiu updated the announcement with the latest commercial information, such as discount codes for children’s shoes/books, or theatre ticket purchasing links, although “*she was not leaning on this as main income*” (comment from one participant who enrolled from Group 1).



[redacted] [redacted]
上海的又一个宝藏儿童剧场！70元就能看一场戏，这价格在上海简直逆天，而且剧场所在的商场全都是小朋友玩的，停车还免费，简直不能更棒啦！70元一次的观剧卡销售到3月底截止哦～

16小时前

[redacted] 如果觉得远想住一晚的，那就买这个499元的新虹桥凯悦嘉轩酒店套餐，包含双人四季冰雪乐园门票，酒店还可以游泳，周末不涨价，性价比很好。

[redacted] ❄️【上海新虹桥凯悦嘉轩】让你足不出"沪"感受神奇冰雪世界
☃️仅¥499起，入住凯悦嘉轩房1晚，玩转元祖四季冰雪世界，享当天无限次入园
☃️堆雪人、打雪仗、雪花飘落……不用去东北，在魔都就能玩到的真实雪景
🚗周边半小时车程可达朱家角、佘山、上海欢乐谷、辰山植物园、广富林，一站式度假，购物、出行、旅游，毫不耽误
有效期至2022年3月30日，未约可退，速买速约购买链接：https://t.maitao.com/4myTw

Figure 14 Children's theatre tickets information & nearby hotel information

As an online community leader, Qiu owned several groups with various themes, and those members mixed and crossed different groups with diverse activities. Once, Qiu shared that she had over 5000 WeChat contacts, and that is why she could not reply to every message in time. With or without business aims, Qiu built a massive network from which to receive playmates and income.

The differences between these three groups showed their founders' diverse personalities, positions, management skills, and their purposes for creating and managing these online communities. They all selected group members through written and unwritten rules to ensure that the community developed in accordance with the values they approved of. When I rethought about these three groups, I found that their members reflected different stages of families: most members in Group 1 had younger children (in kindergarten); members in Group 3 had children of mixed ages (from late kindergarten to early primary school) while members in Group 2 usually had children in their final year of primary school. The different schooling stages of children may have affected parents' (especially mothers') anxiety, behaviours in online communities, as well as the atmosphere of communication. Conversely, the atmosphere and communication of a group would influence a mother's criteria regarding online communities too. This leads to my third point: gender dynamics could affect group communication as well. In Group 2, group members were mixed gender while the manager was a father who seemed to have adopted a heavy management style that naturally formed a communication hierarchy. While members of Group 1 and Group 3 (or active members) were mainly female as well as the managers; as a result, communication was more like a reciprocal conversation, although the manager generally wielded more power than the others.

In the following section, based on different conditions among online groups, I will explore why mothers chose to join or not join online communities.

7.3 Mothers' experiences in online communities

Online groups as a dominant communication platform have huge numbers of users. For example, during my online participant observation, the three groups had over 500, 400 and 200 members. The group founders Dong and Qiu both owned several groups, while Ying gradually opened a second and third group. According to my observation, I found that most members in these groups were mothers, especially in Group 1 and Group 3. I wondered why these mothers joined online groups, what kind of groups they preferred, and whether anyone had rejected online groups, and if so, why. In this section, I will seek out answers to these questions regarding why mothers join or reject online communities and explore their experience in online spaces.

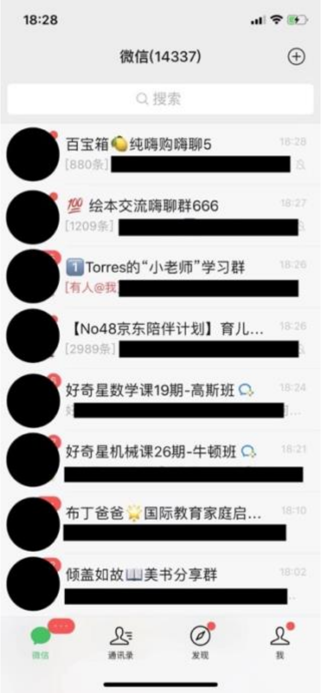
7.3.1 Mothers' choice on participation

Mothers' reasons for joining online communities vary but most of them join or leave a group because of personal interests. For instance, Xuan and Sui both joined educational groups but have entirely different aims.

As stated in Chapter 4, before my fieldwork, I contacted Qiu and received her permission to conduct observation in Group 1. After advertising my basic information and my research topic in the group, I received several responses immediately. That was the first time I 'met' Xuan online. Once she became a WeChat contact of mine, she expressed a strong willingness to join my research, and asked if I have any Shanghai-limited *Jiwa* chat groups to recommend. Xuan liked active groups where mothers are willing to share their experiences, but she knew "real *Jima* (chicken mother) have no time to share, they are concentrating on *Jiwa* …Unlike Group 1, mothers are more idle and willing to share" (Interview with Xuan, 09/07/2020).

Xuan had another requirement of online groups which was that it must be "useful". She explained that many group owners were using the group for their micro-business selling products which might make the group less active. Since "mothers have limited time with their babies. If there is nothing to learn in the group, it must be deleted" (Interview with Xuan, 09/07/2020). It seemed that being useful and always offering something to learn from were the most important factors in Xuan's criteria of online groups.

I was curious about what kind of group would be selected by Xuan as she had quite high standards. Xuan recommended Ying's group (Group 3) to me. She told me that this group had members from all over the country and mothers searched around for educational resources to share within the group. They discussed different textbooks, learning materials, and teaching methods etc. It was an active group. Although many members in this group were from Shanghai, as was the group owner Ying, Xuan still hoped to join a Shanghai-specific group which means the sharing and discussion might be more relevant. While Xuan sought for a group that met her criteria, she joined many others. Based on her standards, she was active on at least 10 groups via her WeChat, but she did not have time to check all of them. Each day, there could be over 5000 unread messages on her WeChat, she sighed: “there are too many groups, and the resources are overwhelming” (Interview with Xuan, 10/11/2020). Xuan shared a screenshot with me which showed 14337 unread messages at 18:28 in the evening (see Figure 15). Usually, those unread would be “digested” at night before she went to bed. Again, she pointed out, “the mobile phone is often short of storage so if the group is boring, it will be directly deleted” (Interview with Xuan, 10/11/2020).



[redacted] 百宝箱🍋纯嗨购嗨聊5 18:28
[880条] [redacted]

[redacted] 💯 绘本交流嗨聊群666 18:27
[1209条] [redacted]

[redacted] 1️⃣Torres的“小老师”学习群 18:26
[有人@我] [redacted]

[redacted] 【No48京东陪伴计划】育儿… 18:26
[2989条] [redacted]

[redacted] 好奇星数学课19期-高斯班 18:24
[redacted]

[redacted] 好奇星机械课26期-牛顿班 18:21
[redacted]

[redacted] 布丁爸爸🌟国际教育家庭启… 18:10
[redacted]

[redacted] 倾盖如故📖美书分享群 18:02
[redacted]

Figure 15 A screenshot of WeChat chatting list

The groups listed in the screenshot could be recognised by their names: shopping, children’s picture books discussion, English learning/facilitating (for-profit), parenting (for-profit), maths tutoring (parent-teacher group, paid), mechanical classes (parent-teacher group, paid), Buding Baba international family education, reading group.

Xuan believed that because of limited storage on the mobile phone as well as personal brain space, it was vital to select good quality online groups. Xuan proudly introduced her favourite group specialities. For instance, the founder of Playmate Group (Qiu) is an expert of *Liuwa* (遛娃)-walk the baby[42]; Buding Baba, who is a real “folk expert” on English learning:

> He doesn't have a WeChat public account, and his speeches in various English-learning groups have opened my eyes to a new world. He has thoroughly researched Raz… He also gave the Raz account to group friends for free… (Interviews with Xuan, 10/11/2020).

It seems Xuan received certain benefits from the chat groups, as she pointed out, “these groups have clear targets and a willing-to-share owner, which will be naturally active through group members’ participation” (Interview with Xuan, 10/11/2020). I felt that mothers like Xuan who were keen on checking and replying group messages, scanning multiple groups conversations as well as Moments posts, relied on social media and virtual communication at a certain level, were unbelievably strong and respectable. ‘Living in’ an active group could be a workload since large numbers of messages are waiting whenever one opens and checks, just like Xuan’s unread list. However, not every online group is as active as the one Xuan joined. For example, Sui joined a lot of educational groups for working purposes. She was a tutoring teacher in a private institute, and she hoped to learn more about competitors and potential customers. According to Sui’s experience in different education-focused groups, 90% of online groups are “dead” (non-active),

> If there is no interesting information or topic initiators, the group is almost done, that’s the end…managing a group requires great attention and energy, (the group founder/manager) needs to respond to the messages and share information in a timely manner (Interview with Sui, 8/10/2020).

Sui’s experience is a reminder of why management is important. Whether a group is active or non-active may be determined by whether those users/mothers are happy with the management style. For instance, a heavy management style might lead to inactivity but a light touch management style lead to too many business-ads which can also lead to a lack of activity. Thus, balancing the management of a group requires skill. However, these management and activity issue seemed only to exist in freelance groups, which means that mothers joined these groups for their personal interests rather than being forced to do so. Sometimes, mothers had less options whether to join or reject a group when it was a requirement of certain educational or work agencies. In next section, I will explore mothers’ experience of joining compulsory groups.

7.3.2 Compulsory groups: the choice with no choice

During the study, I noticed that not every mother was keen on joining online groups. Some mothers only joined the compulsory groups associated with their children’s school or tutoring agency. An example of this is Huang: she disliked joining parental online groups, because she did not like to communicate with "insincere people":

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[42] The term sounds like walk the dog, it means taking baby to different places join activities including zoo, museum, hotel, playground, park, beach, theatre etc.

> Some parents talk a lot about theories and truths in the group, but when you really have something, you want to consult, they are not willing to share… every child is different, if looking at too many excellent examples, it is difficult for parents to maintain a good … I did not join non-essential groups. Anyway, there is no shortage of families with children around me… it is more practical to communicate face-to-face with people who have a good relationship (Interview with Huang, 23/11/2020).

Huang valued face-to-face communication with sincere people because she was not happy with her experience of online communities. Years ago, she had joined several online groups during pregnancy. At the beginning it seemed fine, but later, Huang noticed that those group members often shared "negative energies", such as problems with birth inspections, conflicts with mother-in-law, etc. She felt it was "too negative", and she was prone to prenatal depression after watching too much, so she left those groups. Huang believed, "maintaining a good attitude" is important for her. So, when online communities influenced her emotions/feelings, she decided to only join the "essential" groups that were run by schools and her children's tutoring institute. Similarly, Yu did not want to join WeChat groups nor check group messages. She decided to only join the parent-teacher group from school, because she felt that "too many groups would be annoying, especially *Jiwa* groups", and she did not "want to be effected to anxious" (Interview with Yu, 30/11/2020).

Therefore, for mothers like Huang and Yu who were trying to avoid the negative influences of online communities, the key reason for joining an online group is because they did not feel able to refuse, as it is seen as a part of parental duty towards their child's education. As Sui described, each tutoring class would have a chat group to communicate homework and time arrangements, which means that parents, tutors and t administrators were in the same group, and they rarely discussed any irrelevant topics. Parents could hardly refuse to join these groups, since schools and tutoring institutes use online groups as their main communication platform. I wondered whether this was also a strategy for protecting themselves from schooling anxiety since they attempted to reject relevant information from their peers in online communities.

This 'no choice' situation reflected those mothers' choice on online groups – they only joined the one created by school or tutoring institutions to facilitate children's study, otherwise, they had no interests on chatting online. Mothers' different activities in those groups showed that they gravitated towards ones where they can participate fully as members of a themes-focused community, and away from those that constrain their sense of agency. Meanwhile, with their busy schedules and limited free time, the selection of online groups became stricter – those unattractive, not useful groups might be easily given up and deleted from group list by those mothers. Therefore, in joining online groups, mothers had flexible purposes and various aims but their experience in those groups affected their standards or preferences, which means that group management style and the general atmosphere could be both a factor in their decision to participate as well as not to participate. In next section, I focus on mothers' activities in online spaces, exploring their multiple reasons for joining online groups.

7.3.3 Learning activities in online groups

In the previous section, I mentioned that while some mothers actively choose to join online groups for their own purposes, others refuse to join online groups to avoid peer pressure and anxiety. I wondered what kind of topics were talked about in online communities that attracted some but did not appeal to others. I also wanted to know what kind of activities mothers engaged in online and how those activities might influence or reflect on their "offline" life.

To find out, I conducted online participant observation in three WeChat groups to observe mothers' general discussions. For group members who showed an interest in my research and accepted my 'adding as friend' requests on WeChat (see Chapter 4), I also sought their consent to observe their posts in Moments (a function on WeChat, involving sharing daily life). My participants generously agreed to my request to collect photos from the groups and take screenshots of their posts, some of which are used in this section. I also used different notes to record my observation (see Chapter 4), so extracts from my field notes are also used in this section.

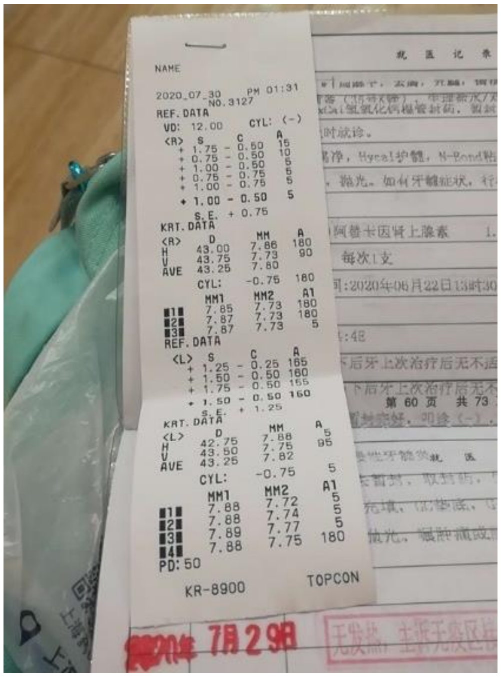
7.3.3.1 Asking question and approaches to informal learning

Based on my observation, I found that the conversations mothers initiated or joined in online groups, were diverse, especially in Ying's group which highly relevant to RQ3. Although Ying created the *Jiwa* group (Group 3) mainly for educational purposes, many other topics were addressed in everyday chats which covered many fields I did not expect before starting the research. An example of this is a discussion about children's eyesight. A typical conversation opener in this group is to start with questions: someone will invariably ask for an opinion.

> Ying, the group owner, posted an eye test result (see Figure 16) and asked "which number is curvature? Is it 43.25 D?". This question sparked a discussion about near-sightedness and farsightedness, and the efficacy of orthokeratology lenses (what they are and how to wear them). A mother wanted to know how to eradicate farsightedness, someone suggested using digital products, or sit in the last row of the classroom, while the others felt that the last row does not work very well for study and they should care more about how to prevent near-sightedness. Then they all agreed that outdoor activities would help with eyesight (Fieldnote, 29/7/2020).

This discussion started with an eye test but then moved on to encompass schooling, digital products and outdoor activities. It seems that whatever the topic, mothers' attention was around children and education. I was impressed by those mothers, as I thought generally eye test results are difficult to read and that is why we ask doctors to explain. Yet those mothers *informally learned* the technical terms through group discussion. Sometimes, in order to better understand the test results, mothers *intended to learn* certain terms by searching resources online and *self-learned* them, then they re-joined the group chat and shared the knowledge with others. This connects with Rogers' distinction between intended informal learning and unintended unconscious informal learning. Group members seemed happy to discuss those medical terms and learn new knowledge through different methods. Sometimes, they asked doctors for professional explanation and then reported back to the group as a clarification or proof too.

Although they had very different opinions during the discussion, finally they formed a consensus. However, this kind of medical knowledge-related discussion often does not end in agreement in online groups. I noticed that questions about relatively non-harmful or less-medical topics like eye tests were discussed while if someone raised a question related to healthcare or disease, group members would tend to suggest that they go to see a doctor rather than seeking answers or advice in the online group. It seems that online groups in this study had their own implicit rules for discussing healthcare related topics, and group members, especially group managers, were aware of their limitations regarding medical knowledge, so they while might recommend a certain hospital, they would not give advice about medicine or treatment. As a group, an online community, they shared values regarding medical information and group management. They were keen to learn from peers and professionals, rendering them not simply an online community but a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 2008).



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NAME

2020_07_30      PM 01:31
         NO.3127
REF.DATA
 VD: 12.00      CYL: (-)
 <R>  S       C      A
    + 1.75 - 0.50   15
    + 0.75 - 0.50   10
    + 1.00 - 0.50    5
    + 0.75 - 0.75    5
    + 1.00 - 0.75    5
    + 1.00 - 0.50    5
      S.E. + 0.75
KRT.DATA
 <R>     D        MM      A
 H     43.00    7.86    180
 V     43.75    7.73     90
 AVE   43.25    7.80
       CYL:     -0.75   180
        MM1      MM2     A1
 ▮1▮   7.85     7.73    180
 ▮2▮   7.87     7.73    180
 ▮3▮   7.87     7.73      5
REF.DATA
  <L>  S       C      A
     + 1.25 - 0.25  165
     + 1.50 - 0.50  160
     + 1.75 - 0.50  155
     + 1.50 - 0.50  160
       S.E. + 1.25
KRT.DATA
 <L>     D        MM      A
 H     42.75    7.88      5
 V     43.50    7.75     95
 AVE   43.25    7.82
       CYL:     -0.75      5
        MM1      MM2     A1
 ▮1▮   7.88     7.72      5
 ▮2▮   7.88     7.74      5
 ▮3▮   7.89     7.77      5
 ▮4▮   7.88     7.75    180
PD: 50

   KR-8900          TOPCON
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Figure 16 The result of eye test

Aside from children's eyesight, mothers in Group 3 talked mostly about schooling. For instance, one of the most memorable conversations was about family education and English learning. The conversation started with a question: why do English tutoring institutes want children to learn to translate from Chinese to English? The mother who asked this question could not understand why children had to learn to translate when exam papers are written in English. I was surprised by her question and curious about her children's age. As far as I know, translation is a typical exercise in most English exams in China, especially in higher education, but group members did not say anything about this. Then the discussion moved on to how to learn English, and someone announced that exam-oriented English learning, in her view, was not helpful. She went on to state that children who have a good level of proficiency in English do not rely on tutoring but do the hard work at home. Some mothers pointed out that they are not able to teach their children English at home, thus the necessity of enrolling them for private tutoring. Xuan pointed out that, "tutoring institutes are the product of exam-oriented education" (Observation note, 8/12/2020).

I could feel that the mother who raised this question had not been persuaded of the need to study translation given that there are no translation questions in the exam while the others were discussing the more general question about how to facilitate children's English learning at home. The conversation happened at a certain time but participants seemed not in the same time zone. I wondered if it was because:

> this group consists of mothers from different cities and they have different situations/policies regarding English education. Parents in the younger age

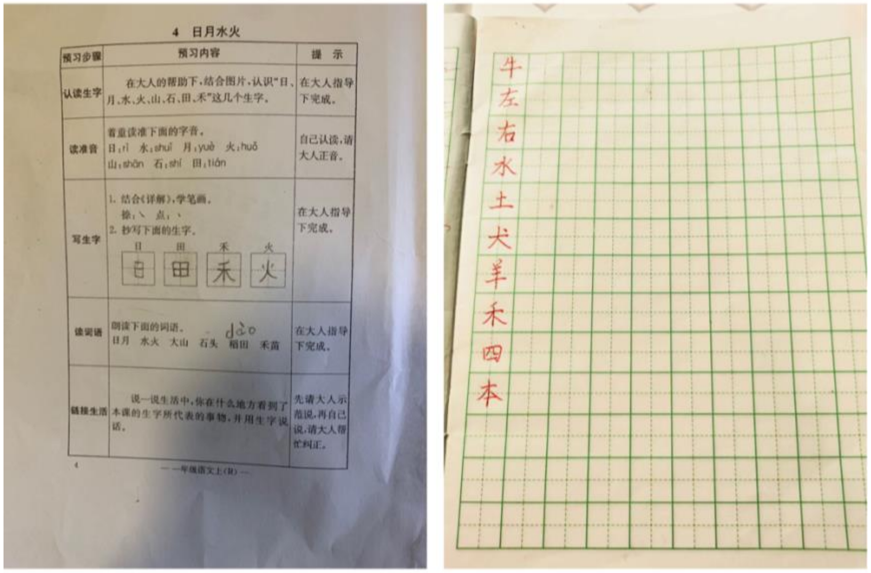
> group couldn't understand the examination system, or have a one-sided understanding, which leads to one-sided thinking, but through discussions among group members, there are differences in different places (Fieldnotes, 8/12/2020).

Mothers who joined online communities, asked questions, exchanged different views with each other, but they seemed to be seeking agreement so as to be reassured that their opinions are 'correct' just like the mother who asked about translation. From the way in which she engaged in the conversation, it seemed that she was seeking a like-minded peer to affirm her ideas. A similar pattern can be seen in the eye test conversation too, Ying asked the question but was not convinced by what others said. Then after some research, she confirmed that her opinion was correct. This pattern of asking for opinions and seeking agreement occurred many times, I felt it might reflect mothers' desire for approval in daily life. While those mothers could not have this conversation in their "offline" life, they had the option to post in online groups and discuss with peers who shared their values on some level (see 7.2). However regardless of these mothers' original aims, the whole group discussion still reflected different opinions of mothers according to their different backgrounds. The exchange process of those views could be seen in terms of *informal learning* as well, since the interaction was not planned and unintended (Rogers, 2020).

7.3.3.2 Exchanging (educational) information

In Group 3, I found that many of the conversations involved comparing the differences in homework in different cities. Mothers had their own standards on what constituted good quality homework. They liked to inquire about other schools' curriculums and homework to improve their own children's home-learning. This exchange of information, which could be seen as information learning, has become one of the main activities online as well as a key reason for joining this kind of online group.

September 2020 was a busy time in my observation groups since many participants' children were just starting Year 1 and mothers were sharing a lot of information about their children's new school life. Ying talked a lot about homework and schooling in her daughter's new school. To start with, she was "surprised" by the arrangement of Chinese learning in state school, as they had at least 10 sessions per week. She felt that her daughter's Chinese teacher was "too *Jixue*" and that the course was going too fast. Although Ying admitted that this is just what she hoped, it seemed too much for children. Other mothers were jealous of children who were given homework, because their children had no homework or very little homework in Year 1 (see Figure 17).



4　日月水火

预习步骤	预习内容	提　示
认读生字	在大人的帮助下，结合图片，认识"日、月、水、火、山、石、田、禾"这几个生字。	在大人指导下完成。
读准音	着重读准下面的字音。 日：rì　水：shuǐ　月：yuè　火：huǒ 山：shān　石：shí　田：tián	自己认读，请大人正音。
写生字	1. 结合《详解》，学笔画。 捺：㇏　点：丶 2. 抄写下面的生字。 日　田　禾　火	在大人指导下完成。
读词语	朗读下面的词语。 dào 日月　水火　大山　石头　稻田　禾苗	在大人指导下完成。
链接生活	说一说生活中，你在什么地方看到了本课的生字所代表的事物，并用生字说话。	先请大人示范说，再自己说，请大人帮忙纠正。

4

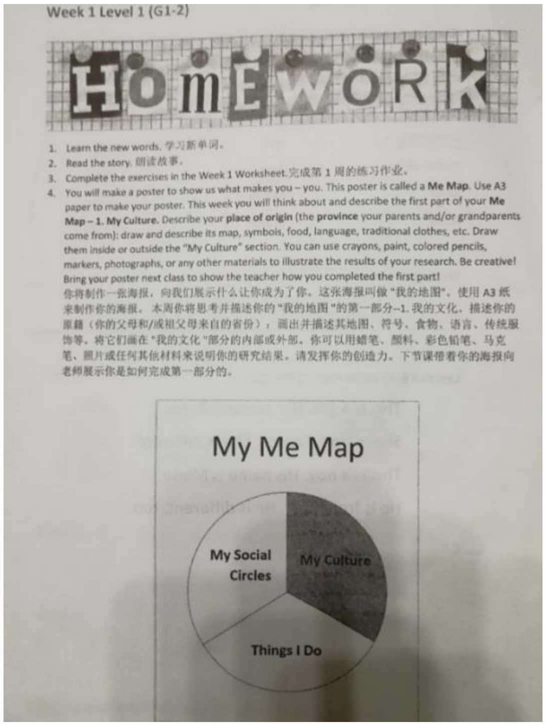
— 一年级语文上(R) —

牛
左
右
水
土
犬
羊
禾
四
本

Figure 17 Comparison of Chinese homework in Year one

As shown in Figure 17, Ying posted the right picture showing how much writing her daughter needed to do every day in the first month of Year 1. It was not easy, since children must follow the sampled character and fill in the whole line, which means nine times for each word, 90 words in total. This homework reminded me of my own experience in primary school, those unending Chinese character writing always took me hours to finish. Therefore, I was surprised that this method was still being used in 2020 Shanghai. Ying was not happy with this, especially when she saw the photo (left) shared by another mother (Jane). It was from another school in Shanghai, the same grade of primary school. The main task was to read the new words with the help of parents and then learn how to write four basic words (see the middle column with children's writing) and use the new words to practice speaking. Comparing these two kinds of homework, some mothers felt that they needed to practice more writing since Ying's daughter obviously did much more work than others and they did not want to be left behind. Some mothers pointed out that the left one in Figure 16 looks a more sensible level for Year 1 students.

Aside from discussing the continuum between no homework and too much homework, mothers also compared the design of the homework. For instance, group member Vivian shared her child's English homework (see Figure 18), which was too "difficult" for her to be able to help. The most difficult part for her was no.4 – make a poster to introduce what makes you, including "my culture, my social circles, things I do". It demanded a lot of literacy, and students in Year 1 did not seem to have the ability to complete the tasks independently. So parents were required to have a certain level of English proficiency and they self-learned how to facilitate this kind of homework. Ying could not believe that the homework was for Year 1 and from a state school like her daughter's, because "it is too advanced", while Ying's daughter only got homework like "read ‘school’ five times; read ‘I love my school’ five times; read an English children’s song”. Vivian agreed and felt it was “too much”, and that her undergraduate degree seemed not to be enough for tutoring children’s English homework anymore.



Week 1 Level 1 (G1-2)

HomEwoRk

1. Learn the new words. 学习新单词。
2. Read the story. 朗读故事。
3. Complete the exercises in the Week 1 Worksheet.完成第 1 周的练习作业。
4. You will make a poster to show us what makes you – you. This poster is called a **Me Map**. Use A3 paper to make your poster. This week you will think about and describe the first part of your **Me Map – 1. My Culture.** Describe your **place of origin** (the **province** your parents and/or grandparents come from): draw and describe its map, symbols, food, language, traditional clothes, etc. Draw them inside or outside the "My Culture" section. You can use crayons, paint, colored pencils, markers, photographs, or any other materials to illustrate the results of your research. Be creative! Bring your poster next class to show the teacher how you completed the first part!
你将制作一张海报，向我们展示什么让你成为了你。这张海报叫做"我的地图"。使用 A3 纸来制作你的海报。本周你将思考并描述你的"我的地图"的第一部分–1. 我的文化。描述你的原籍（你的父母和/或祖父母来自的省份），画出并描述其地图、符号、食物、语言、传统服饰等。将它们画在"我的文化"部分的内部或外部。你可以用蜡笔、颜料、彩色铅笔、马克笔、照片或任何其他材料来说明你的研究结果。请发挥你的创造力。下节课带着你的海报向老师展示你是如何完成第一部分的。

My Me Map

Figure 18 Year one English homework

The mothers I observed seemed to prefer creative homework design to repetitive practice, but they were also aware that good quality homework requires higher-level knowledge to better facilitate children’s learning. Aside from discussing homework, mothers also exchanged information about reading lists, textbooks, tutor feedback, learning techniques etc. As this was a *jixue* group, not surprisingly, everything revolved around their children’s education. During the information sharing, some mothers also shared their own occupation, educational background, and their children’s real name/nickname, school, class, grade etc. Those discussions in the group chat could also be seen as a kind of *informal learning* - mothers learned educational information and different teaching styles through their conversation, and whilst some of them might have intended to learn, others might be engaging in unintended and unconscious learning (Rogers, 2014). Meanwhile, this process of exchanging educational information was more like a way for those mothers to learn how far their peers’ children went in different subjects. Ying’s group expressed their worries and concerns about their children’s education and the group provided an opportunity to all members to exchange information and understand what is happening in different schools and cities. Again, this is one of the reasons why Xuan joined the group, and it also why some mothers did not want to join this group because they did not want to be exposed to the peer pressure or fuel their schooling anxiety.

7.3.3.3 Seeking help and mutual support

Apart from educational topics, mothers in these online communities also shared personal experiences and made practical suggestions. They learned how and when to seek support and what they could receive from peers, such as how to protect their consumer rights. In Qiu's group (Group 1), members frequently shared hotel discount information during my observation period, as they travelled a lot and discount information could be useful. Some mothers had bought a hotel membership card or voucher at a certain time with a discount (eg. Double 11 Shopping festival) but later found that rooms were invariably sold out in the period that they wanted to stay. So then they had to change all their travel plans and sometimes would face losing a large deposit because there was no cancelation policy, which is "inconvenient and annoying". However, one day Fiona reported to the group that she had received a full refund after following a complaint procedure which she proceeded to recommend to group members. Her experience encouraged and inspired others. It looked like,

> group members will consult online friends after being bullied by the hotel's unfair clause [on refunding]. This kind of mutual help and awareness of complaints gives me a very 'middle-class' feeling… The influence of experience sharing in online communities is amazing and should not be underestimated, especially in hotel and entertainment issues, which are universal (Field notes, 4/8/2020).

The sharing of personal experience to help others avoid financial loss is kind as it is not compulsory nor a response to a request from the group. Through such gestures, these mothers created an atmosphere of peer support, sharing and helping each other with their offline lives. In addition to inspiring others to fight for their consumer rights, mothers shared 'small' things with the group every day, including educational resources or online platform membership cards. Some mothers were very active and shared almost everything in their daily life, from which park she was in or where she had lunch. It seemed that the boundary between their online and "offline" life was thin and sometimes did not exist at all. Xuan as a senior online group user and a full-time mother, talked about this phenomenon in my interview with her:

> Some mothers lack the ability to make decisions. They don't know what to do with their babies alone. They like to share everything in the group. If there are any questions, they hope to get the opinions of the group friends, which would be more reassuring (Interview with Xuan, 16/3/2021).

Mothers may not necessarily share every detail in online groups, like 'sharenting', but given that many mothers are looking after their children alone without any help, online friends can provide invaluable support, both mentally and practically. Xuan's comments on 'oversharing mothers' might be personal, but she refers to the ability to make decisions as a vital factor in motherhood.

I was interested that mothers who were not so confident about making decisions independently sought the support from online communities rather than asking family members. I wondered why they would trust those 'strangers' more than family members. Or maybe those mothers just wanted to listen feedback/suggestions from people who shared the same values and ideas about mothering, which would not necessarily be the case with family members. The interaction in those online communities shows mothers' *mutual engagement* and their *learning practices* in the *communities of practice*. It also shows that community-based sisterhood plays an important part in these mothers' everyday life, indeed it is probably a key factor motivating them join and become active members of online groups.

7.3.3.4 Building online friendship and transferring to "offline" life

I found myself wondering whether the friendships made in online groups spilt over into face-to-face meetings. Based on my observations in Group 1, some clearly did meet up on several occasions. The group manager, Qiu, organised many "offline" events which offered opportunities to group members meet each other in person. This friendship transfer occurred in other groups as well. However, the boundary of online and "offline" life seems blurred and there is no clue to note down how to distinguish between them. Therefore mothers in online communities needed to self-learn the delicate balance of inviting online friends to meet in person.

For example, Xuan 'met' a mother from Qingdao in an online group through sharing their concerns about their children's allergies. They got on very well and became online friends. Coincidentally, this mother from Qingdao moved to Shanghai at some point due to her husband's change of workplace. The two women then arranged to meet in person and thus, the friendship moved "offline". Xuan also had another online friend from an online book club group who ordered books together for a better discount. Although they both lived in Shanghai, distance prevented them from meeting more often to exchange books. To solve this problem, Xuan and the other mother planned every meeting with specific purposes and activities, such as travelling together with their families or going to the theatre together to watch children's plays and used these encounters to also swop books. During these meetings, they learned that they had many shared interests and values which could be the basis for this friendship; even their husbands had much in common, although most of the activities involved just the mothers and the children. Their experience of making online friends and transferring their friendship to their "offline" life seemed seamless and straightforward, since they were both willing to build a friendship with someone from their online communities. Xuan explained that "in real life it is difficult to meet a mother who has money, leisure and common ideas" (Interview with Xuan, 10/11/2020).

Xuan chose online communities that generally shared her values; if it became apparent that the group did not match her expectations, she would leave the group immediately. Thus, her participation in these online communities already put her into contact with like-minded people, within a certain group that had unspoken values and rules that matched her own. In this context, opportunities to encounter like-minded mothers who could become friends online increased, making the process of building friendship and transferring it “offline”, more likely.

7.3.3.5 Developing online business

As mentioned before, Qiu ran small business activities in online communities, such as introducing child-related products or hotel discount coupons, although this was not necessarily her main income. The impact that a group manager’s business agenda might have in leading to inactive online groups was discussed in previous sections: participants seemed to dislike purely commerce driven groups. However, during the interview, I realised that some mothers felt differently about such groups, since they were using this ‘service’ in online communities. For instance, Di and Ri shared that they always checked for shopping information in WeChat groups and Moments. Thus, for mothers who hoped to develop online businesses, they had to learn the strategy of making friends and selling goods with trust, like Qiu.

Di had been invited to join many shopping groups on WeChat and enjoyed the purchasing experience: “I often buy trinkets, children's clothes, overseas milk powder and cosmetics in Moments” (Interview with Di, 16/11/2020). Ri had a similar shopping experience on WeChat, her shopping list mainly including children’s snacks, clothes, skin care products, toys etc. She felt that “shopping is a cure after giving birth” (Interview with Ri, 25/1/2021). Ri reflected that she rested a whole year after childbearing, and shopped a lot during that difficult time: “I once suspected myself of postpartum depression ... I can't sleep well at night, so I have a bad temper during the day, and I have no interest in anything other than shopping” (Interview with Ri, 25/1/2021). Ri overcame these difficulties when she went back to work, met people and had a life away from the family.

Thus, it seemed that mothers welcomed small scale online businesses on WeChat, seeing them as creating opportunities both for mothers wanting to earn money while taking care of children at home like Qiu, to people who liked to shop based on the recommendations of their trusted online friends, like Di and Ri. In addition, Ri’s experience of postpartum depression and the shopping cure, suggests that the social /peer aspect of shopping may have been as therapeutic as the purchasing itself. Perhaps that is also why she felt better after returning to work. While many platforms provide online shopping, the reason she chose WeChat seemed relevant to her communication style with people who sold products and the way they were presented in online groups and Moments posts. Online businesses in WeChat groups are welcomed if people conduct business in a strategical friendly way and/or if the products are attractive. This is possibly why Qiu was successful: she used her management skills to develop a friendly online community which then facilitated the expansion of her small business.

I also noticed other mothers selling products online in Group 1 but instead of interrupting group conversations or posting products in the group, they learned to use a more friendly strategy to be first active in the group and then add members to contact individually and advertise their products through posts in Moments. Sometimes they shared their ‘daily life’ online as part of selling products. Their children and family became a part of this business model and became part of how they built up the reliability of the products. However, the underlying success factor to this business model was undoubtedly the trust that had been built up in the group before any business aims were shared. This strategy of developing online business was more gentle and friendly and retained the supportive atmosphere of the group whilst helping to generate an income.

In this section, I investigated mothers’ learning practice online and their experiences in online communities, which included asking others’ opinions and seeking agreement, exchanging information, especially education-relevant, sharing personal experiences to help others solve problems, building friendship online and transferring it “offline” and generating extra income or fulfilling shopping needs. Online spaces play an essential role in motherhood by providing a free place where mothers can communicate with peers, build like-minded communities, and sometimes help them make decisions. In the following section, I will focus on mothers’ performance in online communities, to explore how they present motherhood in these online spaces.

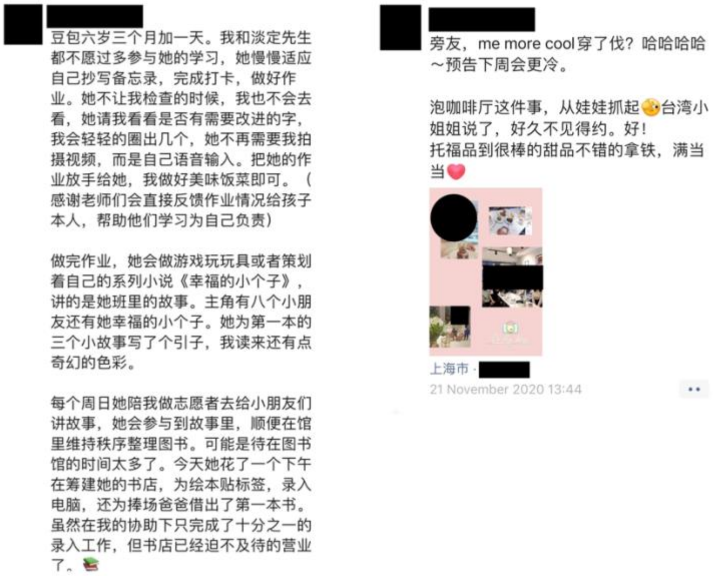
7.4 Mothers’ performance in online communities

As I mentioned in last section, mothers’ participation in online groups varied, with some sharing a lot of details of their everyday life, discussing every question or problem they encountered, seeking advice and making decisions from and with online group members. Some mothers, however, reflected that they felt very pressured through their online participation and that online communication could fuel their anxiety, partly because of the oversharing of “negative energy”. This reflection led me to wonder about the boundaries of sharing, especially the sharing of negative emotions in relation to mothers’ online and how they presented themselves. In this section, I focus on how mothers share and present motherhood in online communities and the potential restrictions on their shares and responses.

To find out what is going on in mothers’ daily life, I mainly relied on my observations of online group chats and their posts in WeChat Moments. In these moments – and in contrast to group chats, mothers seemed to be more audience-oriented in their posts, with a clearer sense of their personalities (compared to their speaking in groups) as shared through texts, photos, videos, and article links. Since there are no word limits on Moments, some mothers posted preferred a few lines accompanied by pictures (see Figure 19), some participants’ posts looked like articles. The main themes in mothers’ posts were generally around children, sometimes about their learning progress. This might be musical instruments that they were learning to play, daily readings, sports activities or funny conversations that they had had with their child. Figure 19 – left is accompanied by the following text:

> Dou Bao[43] is six years old and three months plus one day, and neither Mr. Calm nor I want to participate too much in her studies. She has slowly learnt to write memos by herself, completing tasks, doing homework... Let her do her own homework and I only need to make delicious meals… (WeChat Moments, 2020).

Another regular theme in mothers' posts involved places they had visited and activities they had participated in as part of parent-children time, and this was usually updated weekly. Figure 19 (right) includes the following text: "Friends, are you wearing 'mian maoku'[44]? Hahaha, it's predicted that next week will be even colder. Going to a coffee shop starts from childhood. . . "



[redacted] [redacted]

豆包六岁三个月加一天。我和淡定先生都不愿过多参与她的学习，她慢慢适应自己抄写备忘录，完成打卡，做好作业。她不让我检查的时候，我也不会去看，她请我看看是否有需要改进的字，我会轻轻的圈出几个，她不再需要我拍摄视频，而是自己语音输入。把她的作业放手给她，我做好美味饭菜即可。（感谢老师们会直接反馈作业情况给孩子本人，帮助他们学习为自己负责）

做完作业，她会做游戏玩玩具或者策划着自己的系列小说《幸福的小个子》，讲的是她班里的故事。主角有八个小朋友还有她幸福的小个子。她为第一本的三个小故事写了个引子，我读来还有点奇幻的色彩。

每个周日她陪我做志愿者去给小朋友们讲故事，她会参与到故事里，顺便在馆里维持秩序整理图书。可能是待在图书馆的时间太多了。今天她花了一个下午在筹建她的书店，为绘本贴标签，录入电脑，还为捧场爸爸借出了第一本书。虽然在我的协助下只完成了十分之一的录入工作，但书店已经迫不及待的营业了。📚

[redacted] [redacted]

旁友，me more cool穿了伐？哈哈哈哈～预告下周会更冷。

泡咖啡厅这件事，从娃娃抓起😉台湾小姐姐说了，好久不见得约。好！
托福品到很棒的甜品不错的拿铁，满当当❤️

上海市 · [redacted]
21 November 2020 13:44

Figure 19 Examples of WeChat post

From the analysis of these posts and later interviews, I found that the mothers in my research had different performances online, influenced partly by their understandings od motherhood and self-identity. For example, some mothers liked to show their 'superpowers' in motherhood while others focused on displaying their fulfilment of the 'good mother'. in the following sections, I discuss the main themes to emerge from my analysis of performance in mothers' online interactions.

7.4.1 The super woman

I discussed the busy life of working mothers in Chapter 6 and how they attempted to balance work and family. I also noticed that some mothers put great emphasis on sharing how busy they were and were almost showing off about their 'imbalanced' lifestyle, as if to show their attitudes towards motherhood and their abilities. This discourse was underpinned by the implicit idea of these mothers being superheroes who could handle anything, just like the idealised ‘balanced’ woman. However, being a superhero was not an easy job and mothers had different reactions on this. Some mothers were very proud of multitasking. For example, one mother shared a typical weekend day:

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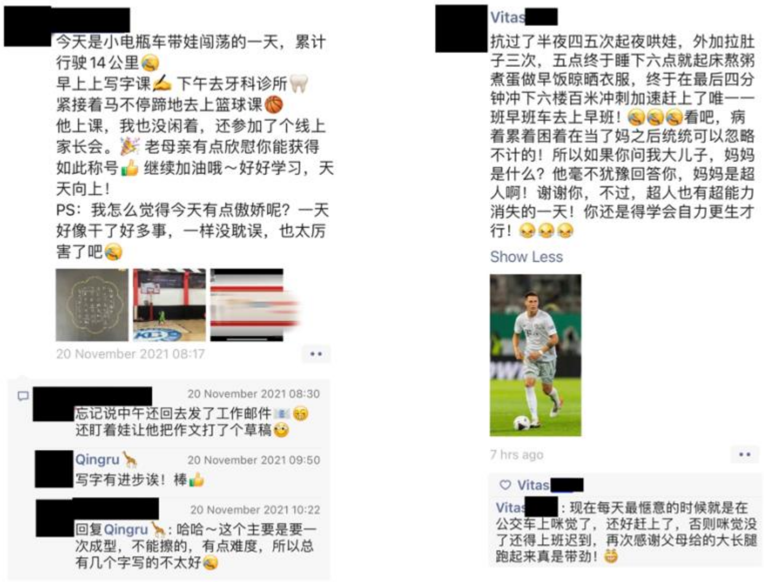
[43] The child's nickname, without any clue of her real name, so I kept it here.

[44] In original text she used 'me more cool', but she means 'mian maoku', cotton pants in English. In Shanghainese, 'mian maoku' sounds like English 'me more cool', and this is why she use it (for fun).

> Today is a day with child, a total of 14 kilometres. Writing class in the morning, dental clinic in the afternoon, immediately followed by a basketball class. I was not idle when he was having class, I participated in the online parent-teacher meeting. The old mother is a little gratified that you can get such a title, keep going. Study hard, improve every day. Why do I feel a little proud today? I seem to have done a lot of things in one day, and I didn't delay, and it's amazing! (Figure 20 - left)



[redacted]
今天是小电瓶车带娃闯荡的一天，累计行驶 14 公里😂
早上上写字课✍️ 下午去牙科诊所🦷
紧接着马不停蹄地去上篮球课🏀
他上课，我也没闲着，还参加了个线上家长会。🎉 老母亲有点欣慰你能获得如此称号👍 继续加油哦～好好学习，天天向上！
PS：我怎么觉得今天有点傲娇呢？一天好像干了好多事，一样没耽误，也太厉害了吧😂

20 November 2021 08:17

[redacted] 20 November 2021 08:30
忘记说中午还回去发了工作邮件📧😘
还盯着娃让他把作文打了个草稿😳

[redacted] Qingru🦒 20 November 2021 09:50
写字有进步诶！棒👍

[redacted] 20 November 2021 10:22
回复Qingru🦒：哈哈～这个主要是要一次成型，不能擦的，有点难度，所以总有几个字写的不太好😂

[redacted] Vitas[redacted]
抗过了半夜四五次起夜哄娃，外加拉肚子三次，五点终于睡下六点就起床熬粥煮蛋做早饭晾晒衣服，终于在最后四分钟冲下六楼百米冲刺加速赶上了唯一一班早班车去上早班！😂😂😂看吧，病着累着困着在当了妈之后统统可以忽略不计的！所以如果你问我大儿子，妈妈是什么？他毫不犹豫回答你，妈妈是超人啊！谢谢你，不过，超人也有超能力消失的一天！你还是得学会自力更生才行！😆😆😆

Show Less

7 hrs ago

♡ Vitas[redacted]
Vitas[redacted]：现在每天最惬意的时候就是在公交车上眯觉了，还好赶上了，否则眯觉没了还得上班迟到，再次感谢父母给的大长腿跑起来真是带劲！😁

Figure 20 A busy day/morning

However, so much multitasking within limited time could sometimes feel overwhelming, particularly for working mothers with young children and no external help. For instance, Vitas described her typical morning:

> After getting up four or five times in the middle of the night, plus having diarrheal three times, I finally fell asleep at five o’clock. I got up at six o’clock, cooked porridge, boiled eggs, made breakfast, and dried clothes. Finally, I rushed down to the sixth floor in the last four minutes, sprinting for 100 metres to catch up with the only early bus that would get me to work! Look, sick, tired,

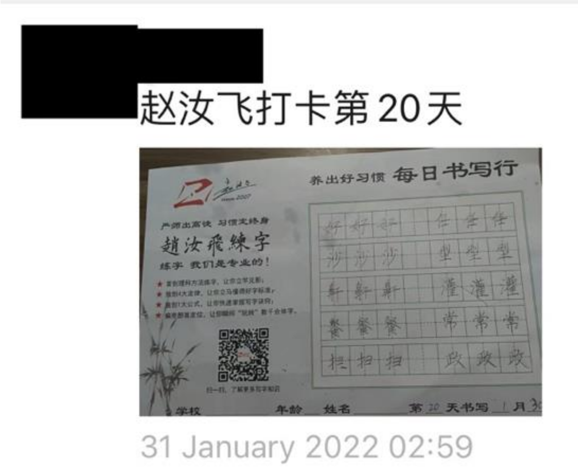
> and sleepy, all of them can be ignored after becoming a mother! So, if you ask my eldest son, what is a mother? He wouldn't hesitate to answer you, Mom is a superwoman! Thank you, but Superwoman also has a day when her superpowers disappear! You still have to learn to be self-reliant! (Figure 20 - right)

In both posts there is a certain amount of pride in having completed a list of tasks but the flavour is slightly different: while one emphasises the achievements, the other focuses on the tiredness. Numbers are often used to illustrate or quantify the achievement and the difficulties, such as "14 kilometres", "went to bed at 5 am then woke up at 6 am" etc. Also, 'ticking all the boxes' seems to be said with satisfaction. The message that seems to be conveyed by references to the tiredness and busyness of motherhood is that the more difficulty they overcome the better mother they will be. At the same time, posting these contents online can be a way of inviting/eliciting sympathy and admiration, which is just what they need and what they may get through ticks and responses. Playing superwoman can bring a sense of achievement and satisfaction but also the tiredness of being a good mother.

7.4.2 Good mothering: children-centred

As mentioned in the previous section, some mothers shared both the joys and difficulties of motherhood online by listing mother-child activities, posting photos and reflections. From those mothers' posts, mothering is more like a job that involves children, the pleasures as well as the dilemmas mostly affected by children. Being a good mother for them means having a children-centred life.

Many mothers' posts and conversations focused on their role as educational and emphasised their children's comprehensive development; sometimes they posted the same content. For example, almost all my participants at one time or another shared their children's handwriting practice papers from the same tutoring agency (see Figure 21). I felt that those mothers were trying to display to their audiences their children's efforts and progress with handwriting. However, in a way, I also wondered whether this was required by the tutoring agency since these papers displayed the agency's logo.



[redacted]

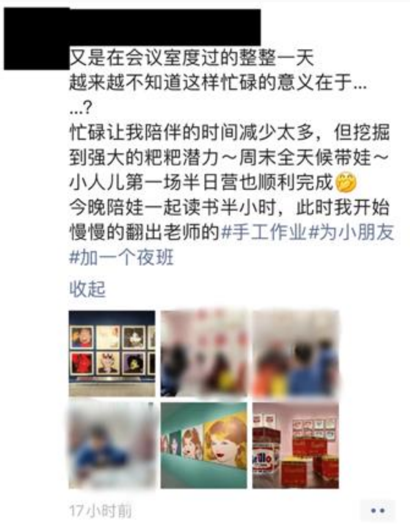
赵汝飞打卡第20天

31 January 2022 02:59

Figure 21 The 20th day handwriting practice

Mothers, in their role as educational helpers, would typically post content about how they had helped their children's studies; they shared different types of home tutoring which reflect the diversity of motherhood. For example, one mother posted:

> It's another whole day spent in the conference room, and I don't know the meaning of being so busy… Being busy has reduced the time I spend with [child] too much, but I have tapped the potential of a strong father who looked after my baby all day on weekends... I read with my baby for half an hour tonight, and now I start to slowly dig out the teacher's handcraft homework… (Figure 22)



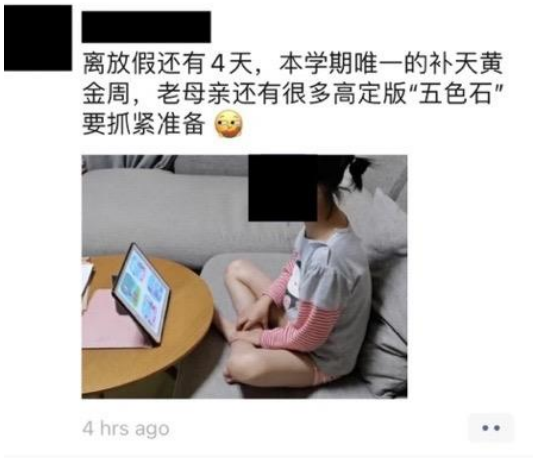
[redacted]

又是在会议室度过的整整一天
越来越不知道这样忙碌的意义在于…
…?
忙碌让我陪伴的时间减少太多，但挖掘到强大的粑粑潜力～周末全天候带娃～
小人儿第一场半日营也顺利完成
今晚陪娃一起读书半小时，此时我开始慢慢的翻出老师的#手工作业#为小朋友#加一个夜班

Figure 22 A weekend

Apparently, this mother had to spend more time working rather than being with her child which made her feel guilty and filled her with self-doubt. Fortunately, there was another educational helper and childcare giver in the family, the father, who contributed a lot when she was busy. After a whole day spent in meetings, the mother was planning precious mother-child reading time and planned to help with handicraft homework later on. These tasks seem to be more valuable and enjoyable. Similarly, another mother shared how excited she was when preparing training materials for her daughter's holiday learning:

> There are still four days before the holiday. This is the only golden week for 'mending the sky'[45] this semester. The old mother still has a lot of high-end 'five-colour stones', so she must hurry up and prepare (Figure 23).



[redacted] [redacted]

离放假还有４天，本学期唯一的补天黄金周，老母亲还有很多高定版“五色石”要抓紧准备

[redacted]

4 hrs ago

Figure 23 Four days before holiday

It was not a single case that mothers make more efforts on home tutoring during national holidays, since this was seen as a 'golden' time to catch up and make progress, especially for double income families in which mothers may not have much time to spend with their children doing homework on weekdays. For those mothers, it seems that holidays consist of a different kind of working day with the children. The clever use of metaphor in this post shows the mother's knowledge and 'cultural capital'. Not every mother will be able to use ancient stories in their posts, although it is a widely known one. It is not surprising that this mother can teach the child at home herself.

This type of catching up during the holidays normally only works for short holidays, since most mothers do not have the same summer/winter holidays as students and teachers do. During the summer vacation, most working mothers will not have days off and must find other ways to ensure home learning. I have noticed that some mothers were digitally 'watching' their children doing homework when they were at work and there was no educational helper at home, such as in Figure 24. The mother was laughing because her son wrote “homework done” on a piece of paper and put it in front of the camera: she felt that this was “cute”.

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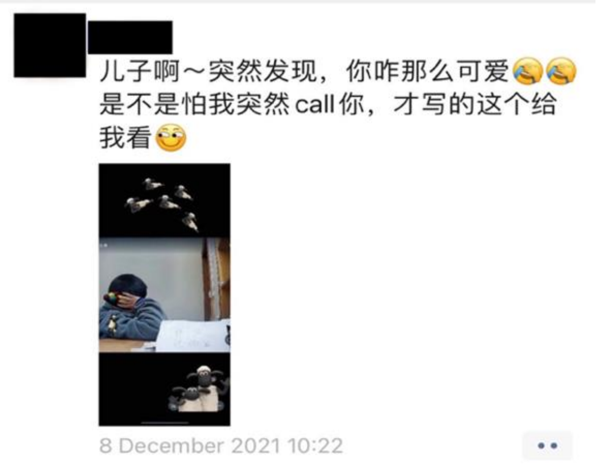
[45] From the ancient story *Nvwa mending the sky* (女娲补天), the goddess Nvwa melted five-colour stones to mend the sky and save human beings.



[redacted] [redacted]

儿子啊～突然发现，你咋那么可爱😂😂
是不是怕我突然call你，才写的这个给
我看😊

8 December 2021 10:22

Figure 24 Watching the child remotely

Working mothers could not easily juggle their job-related duties as well as watching their children. This juggling required some negotiations with their children: the mother in Figure 24 used a camera to watch their children studying online while at the same time being at work. This ‘watching’ and ‘watched’ culture seems common and looks more like surveillance. As far as I know, this kind of monitoring is used widely for indoor pets – to ensure that they are eating or that they are not destroying the living room. It is slightly alarming perhaps that is has become a popular instrument for parents to ‘survey’ their children while they are away. I was surprised that this mother posted the screenshot in Moments and showed her audience what is going on at home. This action seems to lack respect, especially towards her son and his right to privacy. Ironically, in previous posts she had raised the issue of how to ‘protect’ children from harm online. In some families, grandparents help with ‘watching’ children, supervising their homework when parents are at work. In this sense, grandparents perhaps take on the role of watcher’ and ‘reporter’, rather than simply providing childcare.

Sometimes I felt like I knew their children really well, because some mothers shared every children-related activity and reflection on Moments. This ‘sharenting’ became part of the proof that they were ‘good mothers’, an expression of their love, although sometimes it led to oversharing, a problem I discuss in Chapter 8.

7.4.3 Rules and boundaries in online community

In sharing everyday activities online, there seem to be written and unwritten rules about the content. For instance, during the interview, I asked mothers about the topics that they disliked in online groups. Not surprisingly, they all preferred not to have political conversations. Indeed, no politics is written in the rules of Group 2 and Group 3. However, mostly, people just know the rules instinctively it and do not need to be reminded. For group founders, there were many unspoken rules in their mind, such as “no personal attacks”, and no “crooked opinions” (Interview with Ying, 19/2/2021). Those unspoken rules could be the most difficult ones to follow since people interpreted them in different ways.

At the beginning of this research, I could not simply ‘read’ group members’ attitudes on a certain topic based on their texts. After a while, I began to pick up clues about inappropriate topics and opinions. Usually, if there was an active discussion and then someone said something which did not elicit any response, it meant that others were ‘not interested” or that the topic was considered “impolite” (Interview with Mona, 26/1/2021). On the other hand, according to Mona, if someone proposed a topic and many members joined in the discussion, it might also be because “the topic is impolite” and therefore generated a heated debate. For example, there had been an unpleasant conversation in Group 1 on the day I interviewed Mona. A mother asked in the group chat, “Should I interfere with my child being friends with a child from a divorced family?”. This question ignited a good deal of anger. It seemed that everyone objected to the question itself because “it is not good to teach children to select people and make certain friends from such an early age”, although many parents were doing this, as Mona indicated later that day when I interviewed her. “After all, choosing a school is also to select the people that will be around you” (Interview with Mona, 26/1/2021). The argument in the group chat did not last for long as the questioner was very gentle and no conflict ensued: the mother told everyone that she appreciated everyone’s opinions, criticisms and suggestions and that she would think about what had been said.

I felt that this resolution was a result of the online environment. The mother with the “inappropriate” opinions could not have survived the group attack if she had stuck to what she thinks and defended her opinions. She might not have been persuaded by the ‘group lecture’ but she seemed to have been educated in one crucial rule: do not argue with a group of people online. Her avoidance of conflict led to a peaceful ending. The other participants in this conversation would have no way of knowing whether they had convinced or not, since there were no face-to-face interactions and no one could see her real reaction. This might be a benefit of communicating in online groups; perhaps as if she had asked this question “offline”, it would have ended differently. Furthermore, I noticed that the issue of whether as a parent one should allow one’s child to make friends with a child from a divorced family is a little bit sensitive. It might feel inappropriate to mention it in face-to-face conversation or in a ‘public’ space online. I wondered whether this was why the question was asked in the context of a group that felt familiar and secure.

The discussion indirectly illustrated the level of tolerance for topics in these online groups. Also, it showed that mothers present themselves differently on different platforms with different audiences: in chat groups, the audience is mainly made up of strangers with no common friends in their “offline” life, so people are able perhaps to share sensitive topics. In Moments, by contrast, the audience tends to be “offline” friends, which means that all the comments are name-tagged. Generally, people like to give their best performance in front of people who know them and to share personal stories in a safe space with someone who do not really know them. Therefore, the chat group is more like a ‘public’ space with more privacy and without personal information, while Moments is a ‘private’ space with less privacy, since the individual can be easily located (see (Sugiura et al., 2017). Again, this explains why mothers might discuss divorce-related issues in group chat rather than post it in Moments.

In addition, the posts that refer to achievement, happiness and even (enjoyable) tiredness usually seen in Moments, are mainly positive and happy things that makes people jealous. Negative feelings which include conflict, regret, pain, struggle and anxiety tend to be ‘silenced’ and rarely shared in front of people except for group chats on a negotiated level (see Das, 2017). While there are boundaries in terms of what is shared in chat groups with certain level tolerance, there are no clear guidelines on this.

As mentioned before, negative stories (like divorce) can lead to argument but in some cases, negative stories can encourage each other, especially if the story does not cross the tolerance boundary. An example of this is a divorce story shared in Group 3 one day in October 2021. I had already stopped data collection and was only irregularly checking WeChat group messages at that time. There were over 999 unread messages from Group 3 in the morning, which was unusual, but I did not intend to open the chat until I saw the latest message was from Sui – one important participant (Chapter 4). Then I ‘climbed the stairs’ in the group and figured out what was going on. The conversation started with Sui’s question, “Are there any mothers taking care of their babies alone after divorce?”. This question led to several turns Q & A, group members actively asked her more details and then the whole story emerged, one which I had already heard from her months ago. It seems that Sui was ambivalent: she wanted to divorce but the baby was still so young. The main discussion therefore was about whether a woman should divorce and how to handle the practical issues such as money, job and childcare. Group members made numerous suggestions, especially the group founder Ying. She also sent several voice messages to the group, the gist being that Sui should find a job before seeking a divorce.

Initially, there was no firm agreement in Group 3 about the potential solutions to Sui’s dilemma. For instance, some mothers believed that being a single mother is not easy so suggested she should not get a divorce, while others thought that Sui should divorce immediately since she was unhappy. Similarly, some thought that domestic abuse is unbearable, while others insisted that having an affair is the worst. The various opinions expressed in the conversation made for a noisy group. However, eventually a consensus formed around the idea that earning money is the priority. They all agreed that being financially independent is more important than anything. This consensus might have been influenced by the group founder’s leading role, since earning money and being independent is very important to her., Sui responded to these suggestions by pointing out potential difficulties and problems, such as how to manage childcare and work at same time. The group members urged her to act rather than be hesitant. Afterwards Sui told me that many of the suggestions were not practical, but that she had appreciated the encouragement. Nonetheless she had followed some of their advice by talking about the current situation to her mother-in-law and negotiating an agreement over childcare so that Sui could go to work. Later, Sui reported these updates to the group and all members were delighted with the progress made. This was an expected happy ending for everyone, as the group founder said, “a new start of life” (Observation notes, 25/10/2021).

I have held back some of the more sensitive details in Sui’s story, because I feel that I need to protect her privacy even though she gave me full consent to use the story (also see Chapter 4). When Sui discussed the divorce details in the group chat, it seems that the group was a safe place for her to tell such secrets. In addition, during the group discussion, some mothers were trying to comfort others by telling worse stories. I did not see any boundaries in what was alright to share at that moment. I also noticed that Sui did not mention anything about divorce in Moments but posted something like “finally started a new life with a new person…” (Observation notes). It seems that people know what to share on which platform and the boundaries of sharing on each platform.

Through these critical incidences, I noticed that only the ‘loud voices’ in the group tended to be heard while ‘weaker’ voices were ignored. For example, one mother said something about traditional women not seeking divorce; since the main voice was encouraging Sui go to work, earn money, then divorce, this oppositional voice was instantly drowned out. In fact, the whole story illustrated mothers’ difficulties, courage, and confidence while also demonstrating their solidarity as a group: when Sui reported the progress she had made, the group was uplifted .These kind of stories, where a negative situation leads to a positive outcome are probably told in every online group. No matter where the invisible boundaries of the group are, at that moment, it seems that there was no limit to the topic. On the other hand, Sui’s story shows that the group founder has invisible power especially in terms of leading the direction of a conversation or consensus around values.

In this section, I explored mothers’ different performances in online communities. Mothers use the online space to present themselves as ‘super mother’ or ‘good mother’ , often with a focus on children’s education and their overall development but also their everyday life as mothers. Mothers also shared difficulties and dilemmas they face as part of motherhood. As online users, mothers in this research seemed to clearly know the rules and boundaries of online spaces: although sometimes they overshared about their everyday life, they still could be sensitive in sharing negative emotions and stories. These mothers’ performances show that online communication requires sensitivity, awareness of boundaries and the ability to negotiate those boundaries.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have investigated mothers' motivations in creating and joining online communities, and their experiences of using online spaces. I have found that mothers create online groups with multiple reasons and for specific purposes, although in this research, my focus is educational purposes. I have noticed that the group founders' original aim of creating these groups might be slightly different from how they evolve. For example, in Group 1, Qiu kept the atmosphere and function of sharing parent-children travel information while developing the business function of the community. I have argued that the group founders' or owners' management skills play a crucial part in creating an online community and the extent to which it thrives or dies. For those mothers who participate in online communities in their daily life, the motivations for joining vary sometimes they join for personal interests and purposes but sometime they join simply because it is compulsory.

Mothers felt able to say different things online from their “offline” life and had considerable control over what, when, and where to share online. With this decision-making power, many mothers joined online communities for different activities, although they had to follow the group owner/manager's rules. Those experiences of online groups formed mothers' understandings of these spaces and helped them to express their individual needs and difficulties. However, they also learned about how different online platforms operate and therefore, learnt to perform appropriately according to the rules. All three online groups in this study announced or implicitly expected 'no political topic' as a key rule. However, many topics in chatgroups were political, such as gender equality discussions, and the divorce discussion. This reflects how mothers (or adults in general) perceive politics in this context: apparently, participants did not think that discussing consumers' right or gender equality was political. Most people in this context shared the 'common knowledge' that 'no politics' meant 'do not attack/comment/discuss the government'. This shared understanding distinguishes my participants from mothers in Western society.

In the next chapter, I will use the theoretical lenses introduced in Chapter 3 to look at: how middle-class mothers support their children's education with social capital; how they learn mothering and how they perform different identities in communities of practice; and what role online communities play in these mothers' everyday life.

Chapter 8 Discussion

8.1 Introduction

I have investigated mothers' experiences of helping their children's education, learning about motherhood as well as their practices in online communities (see Chapters 5 to 7). In this chapter, I take the conceptual debates examined in Chapter 3 to explore the issues around middle-class mothers' educational anxiety, their everyday learning practices, and the function of digital platforms in motherhood. The discussion of those issues will be structured to match my three sub-research questions: first, I will discuss *how do mothers support their children's education?* (in 8.2); then in 8.3 I will discuss *how do middle-class mothers learn about, experience and practice motherhood;* in 8.4 I will discuss *what role do online communities play in shaping motherhood*?

8.2 Social capital, school choice and shadow education

In this thesis, I have discussed the notion of school choice and the popularity of shadow education, I also explained where schooling anxiety might come from and why parents worry about their children's education in Shanghai. In the empirical chapters, I introduced how middle-class mothers in this study experienced schooling anxiety and what expectations they had in relation to their children's education. In this section, I will use the key concepts discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, to explore how middle-class mothers support their children's education (RQ1) and how it relates to social capital.

8.2.1 Education as an 'easy' solution to sustain social status

Mothers played a pivotal role in shadow education, not just in selecting tutoring classes for children but facilitating children's homework on their own. As home tutors, 'chicken mothers' seemed focused more on children's success instead of their happiness. To ensure this success, mothers in this study had invested tremendous time in selecting the best educational resources for their children, while they also investigated, connected with peers and sought to improve their parenting skills/styles. It seems those mothers were suffering educational anxiety. However, just as childrearing or parenting are not merely about education, middle-class mothers' anxiety/pressure was not only about schooling. To better support their children's future, those middle-class parents were subject to various pressures from multiple aspects, such as financial pressure. A popular discussion about the middle classes on Chinese social media goes: "There are three elements for the middle class to return to poverty: the mortgage is tens of millions, the spouse does not work, and the second child goes to the international school"[46]. All three elements are about money and relevant to schooling on some level. For example, if a family has a stay-at-home spouse and two children, the first child studies in a state school which requires *xuequfang* (a property in the school catchment area) and the second child studies in an international school with expensive tuition fees. Thus, financial pressure becomes the main pressure on the family. Meanwhile, they also face the risk of losing their current social position, as the status of middle-class is unstable and insecure in China (C. Li, 2016). While education seems like the single path to climb the social stairs for children, middle-class parents invest more in children's education and future career development to maintain their own social status. However, according to their different background, those middle-class parents have different strategies on supporting children's education. As Meng (2020) states,

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[46] 中产阶级返贫三件套：千万房贷，配偶不工作，二娃上国际。See: https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20230625A02X4M00&wd=&eqid=a7c17668000695250000000066497fd46 (Accessed: 16 September 2023).

> There is a more finely tuned distinction between middle-class and upper-middle-class parents in their pursuit of the good life. The former focus more on the academic side, as most still expect their children to excel in the national college entrance exam in China. Upper-middle-class mothers who send their children to international schools have decided to break away from the Chinese education system early on. They aim at elite overseas universities for their children and are more relaxed about what the children should do in the future to achieve a good life (p. 183).

Middle-class parents, especially professional middle-class parents, have a perennial 'fear of failing' which comes from their perception of the social-economic structure. Unlike the really wealthy parents who know their children will be wealthy as well, professional middle-class parents worry that their children may not be able to get inside of the group they are members of (Ehrenreich, 1989, in Meng 2020). Therefore, investing in children's education seems like their easiest solution.

Middle-class mothers in this study then used their own (as well as their extended family's) knowledge and money to select a 'correct' pathway for their children: they had to study hard and win in *gaokao* (university entrance examination) or give up and leave the system. This selection was highly based on the possession of economic and cultural capital. Different pathways lead to different school choices and the school choice expressed their social position and social capital which could also influence their parenting style.

8.2.2 School choice as a reflection of capital

In this research, some parents made the choice of school at the last minute, while some already thought about school choices before they had children. When parents make a school choice, they usually have to make the decision well in advance to allow time for preparation (see 1.3 and 2.2.3). In this research, mothers like Zhou and Faith were teachers, which meant their children could go directly to their working school as a part of their benefits, although they would have had to make their school choice for children years ago, during their career development. Nonetheless, the preparation work for Zhou and Faith would be much easier than for others, since they had the social connections within the school already and received actual resources from its social network. Therefore, their children's individual educational success could be seen as closely linked to the different types of capital they own or do not have access to - namely, social, economic and cultural capitals (Coleman, 1988; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016).

For other families, school choice requires more efforts, such as moving to another district (Yu), or long-distance commuting (Hong), or generally spending extra time on tutoring to get a better result. Mothers in this study devoted themselves to their children. They saw their privilege as always supporting their children's education rather than their own career or personal development. For instance, Yu as a full-time mother had just moved to Chongming island (rural district of Shanghai) when I met her online, because the well-known primary school she selected for her daughter had established a new branch there. Thus, Yu and her daughter started 'boarding life'. They lived on the island during weekdays and went back home to spend time with the father during weekends and holidays. And this 'boarding life' will continue for several years until her daughter graduates from primary school. The investment and sacrifice Yu made illustrates what value middle-class mothers in Shanghai place on their children's education and take it on as lifelong career. Yu's case also illustrates how much economic capital plays in school choice: moving to another place and being a full-time mother require sufficient financial support from family members, mainly the father in this case. Comparing Yu to Zhou or Faith (their children will be enrolled by the school where they work), one can see that differences in social capital are a result of differences in economic capital (Bruen, 2014). At the same time, social capital can save an individual's economic capital.

Mothers' different types of capital not only influence school choice, but also their parenting style. As mentioned in Chapter 5, 'Chicken mothers' (*jixue* mother) like Ying who focus more on their children's study needed both economic and cultural capital to support the tuition fee and selection of shadow education. Sometimes social capital was required too; while 'Buddhist mothers' (*foxi* mother) like Xi preferred not to join the competition (although it is unavoidable to some extent), seemed to have more social capital to help their children's future career (she is a doctor and hopes her daughter could become a trained nurse if she is not able to go university). However, as a New Shanghainese (see Chapter 2), Xi has fought her own battle in the education field years ago, to obtain a Shanghai *hukou* for her child. When Xi gave up the option of a key state school or expensive private school, she made the choice based on her family's economic and cultural capital. Again, their ability to access and wield different capital impacted her school choice and parenting style, and in return, school choice reflected the capital, mainly the economic capital her family possessed.

Many middle-class parents like Xi are not able to purchase a property in the catchment area of a key state school, if they choose to go to a less popular state school nearby, they pay less tuition fees. Since private schools are more expensive than state schools on tuition fees and they normally have ‘hidden cost’ (see Chapter 2). Besides, school fees are only a part of educational investment since parents usually need to pay for children’s private tutoring too which requires significant financial resources (Bray & Lykins, 2012; X. Zheng et al., 2020).

It seems that mothers in this study prefer private schools to state schools when they plan their application at the very beginning. For instance, Lena mentioned several times that English teaching in state schools would not be as good as in private schools (see Chapter 5). However, not all mothers sent their children to private school in the end (Lena’s son was in state school) after the consideration of their own circumstances. I noticed that parents’ preferences regarding schools are changing, depending on their economic capital and their children’s academic performance.

I have talked about the hierarchy of school admission in Shanghai in Chapter 2, which mainly emphasises two factors: either the child’s academic performance is of a high standard, or parents have money to pay for private school tuition fee or have inherited or are able to purchase *xuequfang* (property in catchment area). Otherwise, there is no school choice: the child simply enrols in a nearby state school which might not be good quality. That is why some mothers complained that their children’s school did not have ‘real’ English homework (see Chapter 7). The preference for key state school or private school is about the quality of learning, the capital parents own and the future of their children. Therefore, if their child is in a state school, like Lena, parents might feel more pressured to pay for extra English tutoring to avoid being left behind afterwards. Thus, acquiring relevant curriculum information from peers in advance is important for parents before they make decisions on school choice; school choice therefore becomes a result of social capital.

8.2.3 Mothers’ efforts in acquiring and using social capital

For mothers who worked in the education industry were experts on children’s education already before they became mothers. They also had ‘network capital’ (Wellman et al. 2001) in education in that they could easily access resources that other mothers might find difficult to obtain, not only through the internal relationships within their educational institution, but also beyond (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Ying as a group manager (Group 3) partly shared her social connections and educational resources with group members, which in turn established a ‘community commitment’ (Wellman et al. 2001) for her. Therefore, her social network was growing during the management of online group which could transform into social capital in the future.

Similarly, selecting a school is also selecting the group of people your children will play with and grow up with (as Mona stated), which was one of the main reasons for parents’ school choice. For the same reason, mothers chose the tutoring centres with care (see 5.3.2) as well as their own online chat groups (see 7.3.1). Children’s classmates, playmates, friends and their parents could all potentially form their networks and resources. In other words, mothers helped their children to select groups and establish their social capital, particularly, the community commitment as a group. According to Coleman’s definition of social capital in terms of relationship and group norms, groups with a high level of trust have more social capital because the members are more likely to help each other (Coleman, 1990, in Ahn, 2011).

This reminds me of the mother who helped her child to make ‘correct’ decisions (see 6.2.3). It would seem that they were using their way to lead the child towards choosing a more connected group with more possibilities and opportunities. Therefore, I wondered if middle-class mothers’ schooling anxiety reduced once they had made all the important educational decisions for/with their children. After all, those decisions might be an assemblage of their social capital, ensuring the stability of their social status. However, evidence to support this would need to come from a longitudinal study, since the ‘results’ of their educational investment will not be known until the child finishes their education. Yet according to my participants, one of the requirements of good mothers is making ‘correct’ decisions for children (see 6.2.1), which is closely linked to how they also ‘help’ their children make decisions (see 6.2.3).

Education and consumption habits (C. Li, 2011; Q. Li, 2001; Xiong, 2020) as key defining criteria of the middle-class in China seem like the two elements that parents can control or actively engage with at an early stage, to ensure their children’s future development. Therefore, school choice is not a choice of school any more but more like a choice of lifestyle and class. Meanwhile, while the owned cultural and economic capital is hard to change in a short period of time or in one generation, building up social capital seems like a more attainable task for middle-class mothers. And the results of social networking could be seen as a bonus for children’s education. Education in this context not merely relates to school choice any more, it becomes a symbol of social position, a proof of consumer power, evidence of parenting skills and an attitude towards investment in one’s children's future, a signifier of economic capital.

Middle-class mothers have actively supported their children’s education by playing an important role in shadow education, making school choice based on the possession of capital and building social connections to acquire potential opportunities.

8.3 Learning and practising motherhood

In Chapter 3, I clarified that there are different types of learning as well as different types of communities. Then in Chapter 6, I analysed how mothers learn about motherhood and their personal experience of balancing motherhood (RQ2). Later in Chapter 7, I analysed how mothers use online communities as a learning platform to practice informal learning. In this section, with Roger’s learning lens and Wenger’s community of practice lens, I discuss how mothers engage in informal and non-formal learning in online and offline communities, and how they perform different identities in those communities of practice.

8.3.1 Learning activities in the family

When discussing parenting in Chapter 6, I mentioned how mothers learn childcare and parenting from books, courses, social media etc. as well as directly from people in their lives such as, relatives, nannies, nurses etc. However, mothers' learning activities are not limited to parenting knowledge and skills but also include diverse aspects, such as educational information, domestic task allocation, and online platform management/engagement. This largely informal learning takes place in different spaces (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), for instance, at home, in workplace, in online chatgroups, sometimes, in museum, in café, in camping site as well. Moreover, learning activities at home not only involve mothers but other family members as well.

Middle-class families in this study have different units but the most common one is nuclear family (parents and children) with extra help from grandparents (see Chapter 6). As explained in Chapter 2, China has multiple types of family (small family, big family, extended family etc.), relatively, different types of childcare givers exist (Razavi, 2008). Parents, other relatives or friends, private agencies and public provision are the four main types of childcare provider (Piachaud, 1984). However, given the differences between rural and urban areas, as well as the changing style of raising children, middle-class families have less help from other relatives, except for the child's grandparents in China now. Similarly, the changing lifestyle (which is quite different from lifestyles in the last century) limit how much support friends/neighbours/colleagues can provide (see 2.3). Therefore, the main support middle-class mothers rely on is private agencies and public provision.

For basic domestic tasks, middle-class mothers have the option of hiring a professional paid helper, like *yuesao* and *ayi*[47], and other helpers to release them from housework and basic childcare, like Faith and Qi did (see Chapter 6). These paid services bring more financial pressure so most mothers, like Mona, Lena, Tian and Huang, choose the grandparents as free childcare helpers. With all these 'helpers', mothers may achieve a better work-life balance by allocating different tasks to paid or/and unpaid helpers and occasionally supervising them. However, the power relations between mothers and different helpers are diverse. Whereas paid helpers are employees and there is a clear hierarchy between employer and employee, unpaid helpers are family members who need to be respected (especially in the Confucian culture) and appreciated. In addition, because mothers and grandparents have different parenting methods (see 6.2.2), this can lead to arguments or awkward compromises. Mothers then have to learn how to manage family duties and relationships through dealing with family conflicts.

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[47] Ayi is a term used to refer to paid domestic helpers and is also a way to say 'aunt' in English. It is typically used to address middle-aged women and can also refer to a household employee.

Taking the lens of ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to look at middle-class mothers’ parenting practices in the family, I identified three aspects: the domain - sharing an interest; the community - regular interactions and learning from each other; the practice - developing a shared practice (Wenger, 2009). Specifically, family members in this study had a ‘shared interest’ which is the child’s academic development. Thus, they worked together to improve the child’s academic achievement. However, in most cases, the co-working process was not as Lena proposed (see Chapter 6 ‘there is only one commander in the home’), where the mother was in charge. The more common scenario was that there were discussions and negotiations within the family and that they learnt from each other, formed similar values and methods regarding education and parenting, learning that was informal, unintentional and unplanned (Rogers, 2014b). For example, parents usually discussed with each other what tutoring classes the child ought to go to, like Vitas who decided to enrol her son on a handwriting course (see 5.2.1). Ultimately, the decision is made by the one who had more power over the children’s education, which varies in different families.

Furthermore, family members had clear labour divisions in the home (Moore, 1986; Moser, 1993) to better facilitate their children’s education, which can be seen as their ‘shared practice’ (Wenger, 2009). As explained earlier, for my participants, the domestic sphere of education was seen as mainly the mother’s responsibility. They were a group woman who had been through formal education and were now trying to help their children’s schooling by collecting information, relearning relevant knowledge, and helping children to improve their academic performance. However, when they were away, they had to divide the tasks and asked the father, or the grandparents fill in the gap. During the process, these mothers had to learn how to manage a timetable, manage the different childcare providers and allocate the diverse tasks. For instance, Huang asked her father to supervise her daughter’s English learning, but she soon found out that the little girl always read the same page to the grandfather (who did not know any English at all) to avoid practicing new content. Then, Huang realised the importance of allocating different tasks to different helpers. This kind of informal learning in everyday life (Rogers, 2014) occurred regularly and was sometimes consciously organised, which suggests that the learning was consciously planned and purposeful, rather than informal (Rogers, 2020).

Moreover, the on-going learning process in the home included the children as well. It is not only the mother, father and grandparents that are involved in the learning community. Children also play an essential role in learning. In many cases, the adults’ learning revolved around being able to improve their parenting, such as Ri’s informal learning via Red (a popular social media for sharing life). In some cases, children were seen as the ‘learning provider’ (Rogers, 2014); as Mona acknowledged, they learned from children as well, especially first-time mothers; they were still learning how to be a mother and hoped to grow/learn with their children. However, most of the time, children were seen as the 'learner' and even, without consciousness, such as joining an independent camping in a museum.

Mothers in this study sometimes used a 'learning' lens to arrange children's activities. For example, Ying booked her daughter onto a day-camp in a museum; such activities are mainly about gaining knowledge and learning culture, with educational purposes. The learning lens in those mothers' world seems more strategic and practical. Instead of believing in the informal learning that occurs through everyday activities, mothers like Ying prefer planned, structured, conscious, purposeful and intentional learning (Rogers, 2014a). However, those mothers had their own strategies to encourage children's learning activities – they signed for children up for different tasks, like museum camp. Therefore, for those children, they might simply think they are carrying out a task. In the meantime, the tour guide/museum staff as 'learning providers' were professionals in organising educational activities and delivering knowledge. Thus, for mothers in this study, sending children out for day activities is a planned non-formal learning (Rogers, 2020; Hodkinson & Malcom, 2003) day for children, while mothers could enjoy private time and restore their energy.

As a community of practice, family members gathered to learn, consciously or unconsciously, how to ensure the development of the child and how to keep the 'small family' (see 2.3) functioning properly. They are all learners as well as 'learning providers' in everyday learning practices, since informal learning is unintentional, unplanned, unconscious and occurs in daily interactions.

8.3.2 Learning to be a 'good mother': parenting methods and practices

As analysed in 6.2, to ensure their children's success, mothers realised that they needed to continue learning, not only about parenting skills but also about how to facilitate children's education. And this is why Zhang paid for non-formal psychological parenting courses to seek for professional help with parenting methods. This non-formal learning (Rogers, 2014; UNESCO, 2009) repeatedly happened when mothers required extra support from professional agencies since those mothers believed or hoped to be guided to do 'correct' things for their children. The book salon as an example shows mothers' desire to train children to behave and their anxiety around practising mothering. It seems mothers were attempting to be more skilled in parenting. To achieve this goal, they had engaged in some self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1984; Tough, 1989), which included how to be a 'good' mother. Thus, when answering the research question about how mothers learn about motherhood, I noticed that it was not only about learning but also about investigating how mothers' perceptions on motherhood had been shaped through different types of learning.

As a *community of practice* (Wenger, 2009) themselves, mothers learned the dilemma of motherhood especially the difficulty of achieving ‘good’ motherhood and they also learned from their own experience on how to deal better with the ‘unattainable’ mothering standard. According to my research, there is no clear definition of good motherhood thus the ‘textbook’ of mothering not only refers to the childcare manual/guidance but is more like a changing text which is shaped by social expectations (Moore, 1988; Edholm et al., 1978), parents and digital spaces. Mothers seem to be left in a situation of judging themselves and being judged in the family, community and society. In Chapter 3, I looked at different conceptualisations of good mothering; then in Chapters 5 to 7, I explored how mothers performed good mothering in online and “offline” communities. In this section, I focus on the analysis of motherhood discourses; specifically, I look at how women’s ideas on parenting and motherhood are shaped and how they respond to the dominant discourses.

Before being a ‘good mother’, women in China are usually required to be a ‘good daughter’ and ‘good wife’. We are simply expected to be a ‘good girl’ but how to define a ‘good’ girl? In ancient China, it means to obey. As introduced in Chapter 2, women were traditionally expected to obey different men in their different life stages, from father to husband and eventually, to their son (see 2.3). While in contemporary China, the requirements of a ‘good’ mother have changed (see Chapter 6), women are still judged as being ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mothers and are easily blamed if their children do not perform satisfactorily. Therefore, they are pushed into delivering ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays, 1996) to ensure their children’s achievement/development. Susane Bell (2004), who conducted research in US on ‘intensive performance of mothering’, argued,

> even mothers who disagree with and/or who do not conform to the ideology of intensive mothering are nonetheless affected by it. They are judged by others according to how closely their practices fit with it and position themselves against it (p. 49).

This applies to my research context too except that participants in my study seem to not just be ‘affected’ but be tied by the ‘good mother’ discourse. If they want to be identified as ‘good’, or even simply want to avoid criticism, they have to play by the ‘rules’.

To be a ‘good’ mother, some participants were keen to read those parenting books and even pay for a course to improve their parenting skills, especially when they encountered difficulties with their child’s development or with disciplining the child (see Zhang’s story). The idea of ‘scientific parenting/learning parent’ has been widely promoted in the Chinese mass media, with a heated debate about ‘whether parents need a certificate to be a parent’. The dominant discourse supports the idea that parents need training to ensure their children’s development. At the same time, childcare and childrearing are recognised as private, family-dominated tasks and a matter of individual choice (see 2.3). This is a significant departure from previous generations who saw parenting as a collective responsibility.

The term ‘parenting methods’ appeared several times in my empirical chapters and was emphasised by the mothers. Some of my participants were very confident with their parenting skills and knowledge, although comparisons with their peers’ achievements could generate self-doubt. For example, when reviewing other children’s primary school applications, they might find out that their children are far more ‘ordinary’. To improve their parenting results, they turned to the relevant theories from books (psychological and educational), courses, doctors, social media and peers (see 6.2.2). They saw the way they practice mothering as more scientific/qualified and different from the ‘old’ style parenting provided by grandparents. This highlights the shift towards quantifiable metrics and 'proof' within parenting discourse. It also illustrates an unspoken conflict between current individual parenting styles and the collective ‘old fashioned’ parenting of previous generations.

As mentioned in 8.3.1, some mothers in this study (like Sui, Di, Ri, and Zhang) had disagreements with grandparents over childrearing, which could lead to family conflict (see 6.3.4). Moreover, some mothers (Sui and Di, for example) felt that the grandparents were ‘stealing’ their children because they offered too much ‘mothering’, regardless of whether the mother was away or at home. This feeling is somehow exacerbated by what mothers read in the popular parenting books: as mothers, they are expected to provide warmth, safety and companionship to infants and young children, and devote plenty of time to their children to prevent any separation anxiety or depression (Bowlby, 1952; Arnup, 1994). These guides on mothering directly influence the social expectations of mothers: it seems that a mother who does not spend enough time with the child or provide good quality companionship will be a ‘bad’ mother, or a not so ‘good’ mother. Yet historically, in many cultures, children have been raised by the extended family rather than the mother. This again indicates a change in parenting style and reflects changes in family structure in modern day China and explains why there are contrasting understandings of childrearing across the generations.

Similarly, in the dominant narrative, it seems unacceptable if a mother had no professional knowledge on parenting; at least, this is the experience of some of my participants. Those bestseller parenting books are more like a public-agreed mothering practice model. On the one hand, they provide mothers with theoretical support for rearing and educating children; on the other hand, they tie the mothers to childcare, forcing them to perform according to the expected style, which is difficult for many of them. Thus, as pointed out in 3.2.1, overall, psychological perspectives of motherhood seem to have increased the burden on women rather than solving their problems; as a result, mothers have become more critical of themselves and wonder whether they are parenting correctly.

As mentioned earlier, different parenting methods between grandparents and parents can lead to family conflict. It is not all about differences but also about power relations in the home. Several of my participants who believed in parenting books/course more than they did in grandparents' parenting experiences, sometimes had to ask for the grandparents' permission or agreement to perform what they thought of as good mothering. In some families, the mother was still a 'child', and was not allowed to make 'big decisions' independently (see Huang's story in Chapter 6). Under these circumstances, the mother in the family was highly likely to perform her role as a 'good daughter'; the power relations within the family were dominated by the grandmother who performed 'the mother' role. Thus, good mothering practice in this family was hard to measure - the mother (like Huang) sought agreement from her own mother when they had opposing opinions: only if her mother permitted, she felt okay (as a daughter) to continue the process. However, at the same time she knew that her decision was good for the child and that her 'disobedience' was correct. Huang's experience raises the question of who decides if she is 'good'. In her case, it seems that her mother had the power to decide and judge, while Huang herself had her own criteria of being 'good'. Huang hoped to negotiate the two different criteria of being 'good', as she wanted to be a 'good daughter' as well as a 'good mother'. When those two definitions of 'good' came into conflict, Huang chose her identity as a 'good mother' and insisted on making the decisions. She still tried to persuade her mother to accept her decision so as to avoid any moral punishment for being 'disobedient'.

Another important requirement of 'good mothering' in my study was that mothers should be responsible for their children's academic performance, which expands the good mothering definition in a cultural context. In other words, 'good mothers' not only take care of children's health and development but also their school performance and future career (Alharthi & Lebeau, 2021; Liu et al., 2015; Niroula, 2023; Weiss, 1978). The expanded discourse of motherhood to encompass education and schooling reshapes motherhood gradually. As my participants emphasised, a good mother means that she must choose suitable tutoring for the child. The 'brainwash' strategy of tutoring agencies (see 5.3.1) plays on parents' desire to ensure their children's success and on mothers accepting the responsibility for their children's future development. The advertisements from these agencies (see 5.2.3 & 5.3.1) are clearly targeting existing parenting anxiety in a competitive educational environment and successfully fuel the pressure and anxiety. These slogans leave parents no choice but to join them to fight for their children's brighter future, particularly as there is a culture of blaming parents (particularly, the mother) when a child falls behind in class. The discourse around mothers/parents and children's schooling emphasises private/individual choice with regards to tutoring, a result of the commercialisation of education. Parents then become 'consumers' who purchase educational services. Within this logic, parents are the ones to take risks and actions for children's future, not society. As Doherty & Dooley (2017) suggest,

> Neoliberalism thereby morally enlists and mobilises autonomous individuals in the pursuit of socially valued goals such as literacy performance, but on the condition they do so under their own steam, at their own cost and at their own risk. With this has come a 'new prudentialism' (Peters 2005) whereby the citizen-consumer pursues strategies of self-investment that are informed by a calculative 'actuarial rationality' which weighs benefit against cost and risk (p. 552).

For prudent parents, this situation encourages them to pursue "insurance strategies" and seek for products that will help them to manage their anxieties, minimise risks and maximise benefits. In mothering studies, this 'insurance' has been constructed as "intense, sustained and gendered work of status safeguarding" (Doherty & Dooley, 2017, p. 552). Mothers do everything possible to ensure that their child's "future social and economic status in a competitive marketplace is sustained or improved" (Milkie & Warner, 2014, in Doherty & Dooley, 2017, p. 552). Thus, the whole logic of sending children to the tutoring centres and paying for various classes, reflects parents' current difficult position: sending their children to a tutoring centre has become something they have to do to ensure children's future success and show their care for their children. If they don't, they risk being blamed and feeling guilty. In this sense, the commercialisation of education can be seen as a weapon aimed at parents, especially mothers, to make them feel bad about not doing enough for the child.

8.3.3 Practising motherhood: the penalty of children, the 'forced' choice and mental load

As I discussed in the theory chapter, economists like David Piachaud (1984) have conducted research on the cost of children and emphasised parents' responsibilities for providing food, security and companionship. Research and discussions have also focused on the specific costs of motherhood (Casarico & Lattanzio, 2023; Miller, 2011; Simonsen & Skipper, 2006; Zhang, 2010), since childrearing practically 'consumes' not just parents' money and time, but also energy, emotion, knowledge etc. In this section, I discuss the invisible costs of motherhood and the dilemmas mothers faced in their everyday life, which sometimes are missing in the dominant narratives of the 'good mother'.

In Chapter 6, I have mentioned that Huang gave up work for a couple of years to better look after children. In fact Huang is not the only example. Many participants had experienced career disruptions because of childbirth, especially those working in private sectors, like Hong and Di. They both mentioned that after maternity leave, they lost their previous jobs and found new positions with reduced salaries. It is not easy to find a job with a competitive salary when returning to work after a career interruption (Goldin, 2014), and the loss of income seems to be common for women after childbirth (X. Zhang, 2010). Although Di applied for a management role after childbirth which came with more responsibilities, but she then left this job because family members disapproved of the lack of balance (as they saw it) between childcare and work. Women with young children are encouraged to participate in the labour force but are expected to take on fewer responsibilities, compared to men, “since women are more involved in childrearing”. As a consequence, women may choose a less demanding job, leading to a ‘glass ceiling’ – “females do not reach the best-paid positions” (Angelov et al., 2016, p. 546). In comparison, delayed motherhood leads to “higher earnings and wage rates and more hours worked” (Miller, 2011, p. 1086).

While finding time for both paid work and family care is “a significant challenge” for contemporary families (Cook& Dong, 2011; Cook & Razavi, 2012), many parents are dissatisfied with the balance between their work and family life but it is “especially problematic for women” (Craig & Churchill, 2021, p. 67). In Tian’s case, it is her husband who left his salaried job, leaving Tian as the sole ‘breadwinner’ in the family. But did Tian have more power as a result? The term ‘breadwinner’ is implicitly hierarchical, implying that the one who pays for the ‘bread’ should wield the power in the family. Most participants were in a double income family, so technically, both were breadwinners. However, reflecting on the long-standing expectations regarding the mothers’ role as caregivers and the fathers’ as breadwinners (Moser, 1993; Moore, 1988), usually it is mothers not fathers who adjust their work patterns to meet the family’s care needs (Ranson, 2012). In this study, both Yu and Xuan gave up work in very early stages of marriage to concentrate on looking after the family. As a woman, if she does not sacrifice one’s personal career for childcare, she will be labelled a ‘bad’ mother. Indeed, I noticed that most men and women in this context were not sharing the same obligations and rights in the home. Like Orgad’s (2019) research described, these well-educated middle-class mothers are nonetheless more or less ‘forced’ to make the decision to leave their career and be a stay-at-home mother. When the woman is ‘forced’ into being a full-time mother, it suggests that the ‘breadwinner’ is still and should be the father in the dominant discourse, which raises the question of gendered division of labour in the family as well as in workplace (Moore, 1988; Edholm et al., 1978). The gender gap on paid work and unpaid domestic care work seemed to become smaller during the Covid-19 pandemic when parents had to work from home and therefore shared more of the childcare responsibilities. However, the gender gap is still a big problem for women (Craig & Churchill, 2021), and maternity has persistently served as a key source of gender inequality in the labour market (Becker, 1985).

My research found that while men and women both earn for their livelihood, usually women are the ones who do the daily shopping yet are restricted in terms of spending money on themselves. Hong, Xi and Zhou talked about how after childbirth, they spent more on their children and husbands and far less on themselves (Workshop 1, 18/3/2021). This change is unintentional, they reflected; it simply seems that they suddenly lost interest in pleasing themselves. Similarly, Xuan felt she no longer had the desire to buy clothes or go to see a movie, try different restaurants with friends. All she wants is to accompany her son, that is and will be her main interest (Interview with Xuan, 16/3/2021). This feeling is sometimes combined with the idea of saving money for bigger things (in future); in other words, these mothers tried to minimise the investment in themselves and save money to invest in their children. In contrast, mothers like Tian and Di are more in touch with their own interests and keen to spend some time individually, such as at the gym or theatre (see 6.4.2), so they bought membership cards/tickets, which could be seen as the symbolic purchasing of 'freedom' or 'non-mothering' time. These mothers' different responses to 'pleasing the self' reminds me of how much mental load women carry as mothers.

Dean, Churchill & Ruppanner (2022) state that,

> the mental load is the combination of the cognitive labour of family life – the thinking, planning, scheduling and organizing of family members and the emotional labour associated with this work, including the feelings of caring and being responsible for family members but also the emotional impact of this work (p. 13).

The main factor that renders mental activity a 'load' rather than 'labour' is the involvement of emotional labour (Folbre, 2001). As I discussed earlier, mothers in this research not only lost their income but sometimes lost their motivation and interest in doing any self-targeted activities, because they are always in a family centred mode, which is an "invisible" and "boundaryless" emotional labour that can become a load. Dean et al. (2022) argue that the mental load is distinct from physical domestic labour (such as cooking, cleaning, shopping) because the latter do not necessarily include an emotional component. However, according to my participants, I think it might not be so easy to distinguish cognitive labour, emotional labour, and physical labour within a single domestic activity, such as shopping. When discussing shopping, not all participants referred to it as a negative experience. For example, Ri stated that she became "addicted" to online shopping after childbirth and she felt no desire to do anything else, but she mainly shopped for children's essentials (see 7.3.3.5). Xuan and Ying shopped for children's books online along with several group members, so as to get group discount. For them, the whole process included selecting, planning, organising and negotiating. In other words, it involved more than simply clicking the button but involved cognitive as well as emotional labour. These shopping experiences are aimed to save money and obtain a good bargain, as well as selecting suitable books for their children. Therefore, this invisible 'saving money' time and 'planning children's reading' time was also with mothers during shopping. The mental load in this case is invisible as well as gendered (Luthra & Haux, 2022). Meanwhile, as discussed in 3.2, there is a lot of pressure to be a 'good' mother, which is another invisible load in their daily lives. I argue that as long as they are mothers and are in charge of shopping, they will carry this mental load that has costs that are both emotional and energetic.

8.3.4 Strategic mothering: multiple identities in relation to education

In this study, I also noticed that mothers as a community do not simply gather together, but gather as a community of practice that is about learning how to perform motherhood and how to negotiate their multiple identities in their everyday lives (Moser, 1989; Moore, 1988; Edholm et al., 1978). According to Wenger et al. (2002, p. 4, cited in Xue et al. 2021), communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and experiences in this area by interaction on an ongoing basis”. As discussed in Chapter 6, mothers in this study appeared to have the same interests in children and mothering practices. They were learning how to be good mothers by practicing in everyday life. As a community of practice, they also learned about coping with their multiple identities as well as individual development.

Mothers in this study performed multiple identities in their everyday life based on social conditions. For example, in the workplace, they identified as employees; at home, they were daughters, wives, mothers, grandmothers etc. Some of them also took on roles such as cook, cleaner, nanny, driver, tutor or agent at home as well (see Chapter 6). Some mothers hoped to find their individual identity, against the collective identity of mother, just like Di, who refused the role of mother and tried to be a ‘sister’ to her son. Her rejection of mother identity is an indication of her attitudes towards performing motherhood: she wanted to be somebody individually rather than merely someone’s mother. She also demanded equality with her husband, pointing out that she just as strong and contributes the same income to the family. This is her understanding of feminism: to achieve her individual value and not be an object for men. As women, mothers’ gender performance is influenced by social norms, cultural expectations and power relations (Butler, 1999). Di, for example, challenged gender inequality by asking why she must be the one to give up her career in order to provide childcare. This process of self-awareness and identity resistance is a result of Di’s informal learning in the community of mothers.

Wenger-Trayner (2008) argued that individual identity and social identity are not opposite; where there is a conflict between the two, individual and social development can also enhance each other. For instance, Di’s individual identity seems to only affect her own family life but it is formed by her education and experience within society. In addition, her opinion on feminism has influenced people around her, which is also a part of social life. Thus, it is difficult to distinguish the individual sphere and social sphere in our everyday life (Wenger-Trayner, 2008). Di’s rejection of the mother role does not mean she could neglect her mothering duties. Identity is not something we can “turn on and off” (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 159). When I spoke to Di in Workshop 2, she explained that she hoped to be cared for by her son so she asked him “can you be my Gege (older brother)”. For her, this ‘role-playing’ might help her son learn the sense of responsibility during the process of taking care of others. However, even in this situation, Di was still performing the identity of mother unconsciously. The whole idea of refusing to be a mother and thinking of a way to teach her son to be more responsible and be a 'man', was in itself a method of parenting, which is a part of childcare activity. Therefore, Di was still performing her 'mother' identity even while resisting it. Similarly, when mothers like Hong went to work to 'relax' from childcare (see 6.3), or mothers like Qiu managed her online chat groups, they were not only an employee, a group manager, but also a mother, since Hong was also worrying about her son's homework and Qiu talked about child-relevant topics such as entertainment, short-term courses and commercial products with group members.

Negotiating the balance of mothering and non-mothering plays an important part in performing motherhood too. As my participants shared in Chapter 6, some mothers chose to be stay-at-home mothers because of the pressure of not spending enough time with children, while others chose to be working mothers since they needed a break from childrearing and family responsibilities. However, they all hoped to be 'good' mothers and for most of them, that means being a child-centred mother (Bell, 2004; Damaske, 2013; Myers, 2017; Wall, 2010; Walls et al., 2016) as well as a 'balanced woman' (Craig & Churchill, 2021; Orgad, 2019). However, as argued in 8.3.3, they also felt that achieving work/family balance was difficult if not unattainable (see 6.3). Therefore, the option they had was to find compromises: they sought out moments of resistance and negotiated the possibilities and boundaries of motherhood within the discourses. In practice, some mothers had their own 'tricks' to create a moment to pause and spend time in a place without husband or children. For instance, going to the gym alone, going out to buy breakfast for the family or even taking the bins out, became moments to enjoy. The way mothers created personal space and time was also an expression of loss, which is common for women after marriage during motherhood (Richardson, 1993). They had lost their previous way of life, lost their independence, status, privacy, social networks, personal identity etc. (ibid.). Therefore, to reclaim some individuality, sometimes they needed to have a moment to escape from mothering tasks, duties and emotions. Alongside the 'loss', there might be 'regret' too.

Mothers' experience of imbalanced motherhood in turn challenges the discourse of intensive mothering. In other words, the pressure to spend most of their time and energy on their children might be the main reason why mothers experience feelings of loss as well as exhaustion. Nonetheless, intensive mothering seems still popular among participants in this research. I conceptualised some of my participants as being 'chicken mothers' (*jixue mama*) or 'Buddhist mothers' (*foxi mama*) and I noticed that they are skilful as well as intensive in their mothering. In fact, for those 'chicken mothers', *jixue* was not the only option: they could flexibly combine *jixue* and *foxi* and find compromises in their own situation, such as intermittent *jixue*. They were aware of the importance of children's mental and physical health, so their study plans included sports exercise, outdoor activities and themed parties with friends, such as a sleepover party (which is not allowed by 'tiger mother' in Chua's book).

Thus, instead of trying to be ‘tiger mother’ or ‘helicopter mother’ or ‘hands-off mother’, they trust themselves and their peers in similar situations (such as most mothers in the online groups were from Shanghai). Thus, the new strategy towards mothering is more flexible and context-oriented, for those mothers, choosing to be *foxi* or *jixue* seems merely an identity that help them fit in the group they chose and obtain more resources. It means, their real identity or attitude on children education might not be the one they presented/announced.

I also found that mothers had their own opinions on hierarchies among women. For example, working mothers who made independent decisions looked down on mothers who relied on their husbands’ judgement. More specifically, they disapproved of mothers who had to seek permission to spend money on themselves or mothers who displayed any ‘non-modern’ ideas, particularly when discussing divorce issues (see 7.4.3). A mother who expressed her fear of a failed marriage or worried about her child making friends with children from a single-parent family was ‘lectured’ by the other online group members. The key idea of this hierarchy is financial independence. The power to spend money on herself, the strength to leave her husband, and the belief in being a successful woman all have a prerequisite: a reliable income. Their attitudes towards and criticisms of other mothers reminds me of ‘popular feminism’ in contemporary China (Ling, 2022; Yin, 2022) where the only ‘correct’ feminism involves being an ‘independent’, ‘modern’, ‘well-educated’ mother. This is a ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011; Orgad, 2017), since many of these mothers are not financially independent due to the expectation that they will provide ‘intensive mothering’, i.e. full-time childcare service (Ling, 2022).

Although many mothers in this study receive support from extended family, particularly the grandparents (see Table 1 Participant information), they still face difficulties with time management in relation to their children’s education. According to the ‘correct’ feminism, mothers are supposed to be ‘independent’ rather than reply on grandparents’ help. However, my participants showed that children often have more tutoring sessions with grandparents’ participation. This phenomenon reflects how family members’ participation influences mothers’ arrangements for children’s educational practices.

The discussion around mothering and motherhood in this section shows that widespread discourses around motherhood are being challenged by mothers themselves in this research. These middle-class mothers learned how to negotiate different discourses on mothering and parenting through practice. From informal learning at home to strategic learning in the workplace and society, mothers have different experiences in relation to motherhood as well as children’s education. Meanwhile, their perceptions of motherhood have been shaped by social expectations, multiple disciplinary discussions, gendered divisions of labour, and digital technologies (see 8.4). Furthermore, their response to those discourses of motherhood varies: some of them accept the mainstream discourses while others are ambivalent or resist the idea of good mothering. Some reject the idea of the work-family balance while others find compromises between their multiple roles as mothers, daughters, wives, employees, home tutors etc. Again, these responses express the mothers' ability to negotiate public discourses with their personal situations and cultural background in relation to pressures, attitudes, social status, as well as family structures. Their various practices can be seen as collective rather than individual actions of mothering which also shows the influence of time, background and the changing understandings of women and gender. It expresses the idea that women realise that idealised motherhood is unattainable and in this current situation of rapid change, they seek solutions or alternatives to the individualised marketized neoliberal motherhood and its 'cruel optimism'.

8.4 Digital communication and motherhood

In this section, I will discuss the role that online communities played in shaping both motherhood and schooling anxiety (RQ3).

As discussed in 3.2.2, there was a 'positive culture' around motherhood, which influenced mothers' reluctance to express negative emotions. Those negative feelings, including regret and depression, were usually invisible in mothers' everyday life, since these emotions could be subject to censorship in social life (Matley, 2020; Sihto & Mustosmäki, 2021). Meanwhile, online communities seemed to open a space for women to share those emotions with a certain level of tolerance (see 3.2.2.5 and 7.4.3). Thus digital media play an important role in this regard by providing a discussion platform for women, contributing to the slow rewriting of the discourse around motherhood (Donelle et al., 2021; W. Zhang et al., 2020).

In addition, mothers' identities and experiences in online communities were influenced by the design of social media (WeChat) and the functions they used. For example, what they share, where they post, and how often they post are all relevant to their identity construction. As Dyer & Abidin (2022) have stated, the design choices of social platforms constrain and shape identities and social experiences online. However, we also bring our social-cultural resources to the platforms which makes our experience online unique. In Qiu's case, as a group manager, a full-time mother of two boys, a person who loved travelling, a woman who was in a happy marriage, a Shanghainese, and a broker of parent-children entertainment activities, Qiu performed her identities through different platforms. For instance, she had several online groups with different purposes and in group chat, she only focused on information sharing, facilitating the group and some management tasks. She had over 5000 WeChat contacts which means that she had plenty of potential customers and resources, while they could check each other's posted text, photo, video in WeChat Moments.

In Qiu's Moment, she posted a lot of photos (with locations) to explain where she and her sons were, and what activities they had tried, how did they feel, who they had contacted (the trainer/agent/course director). This kind of frequent and high-quality sharing posts allowed her to quickly establish online friendships and greatly helped her online business development (S.

Yang et al., 2016). However, she did not emphasise her self-employed business identity, which in return helped her to build trust among group members. Meanwhile, Qiu also wrote articles through her WeChat public account, to share experiences and information relevant to children's activities (usually with a commercial purpose). New articles were directly shared with people who followed her, or she sometimes sent the link to chat groups to increase the reading rates. These articles became something mothers in her groups read before travelling to the places Ying mentioned, because they trusted her, and agreed that she was an expert in travelling with children. Therefore, the chat groups, the shared posts, and the targeted articles were different means to complete Qiu's everyday life which affected as well as limited her performance. She also adapted her posts to other platforms (e.g. Red) to achieve wider attention with different audiences. These different methods of digital communication empowered Qiu to become a more independent mother since she received economic benefits.

Therefore, digital communication in this study was found to have multiple influences on motherhood, such as providing an online space for women to express feelings, develop businesses, and explore their identities. However, in this research, I noticed two other main factors in the online community and digital communication that influenced mothers' everyday life: learning and support, sharenting and surveillance.

8.4.1 Learning and support

As explained in Chapter 7, many mothers in this study were interested in creating or joining online chat groups to find more people who shared similar interests and values. Sometimes, they sought online groups for their own benefits (see 7.3.1); more commonly, they were forced to join some chat groups by their children's school or tutoring centres (see 7.3.2): since WeChat is the dominant messaging app (Harwit, 2017), it has become the most convenient way to approach parents. Whatever the reasons were, mothers in this research were members of online chat groups with shared interests and practices.

With the lens of 'learning as social participation' I will discuss my participants' learning practices through their participation, non-participation and peripheral participation (Wenger-Trayner, 2008) in online communities. In Wenger's theory, social participation requires active participation and includes both participation and non-participation (see 3.3.2). In the online chat groups, I noticed how social participation works in mothers' everyday life through digital media.

Ying was the group owner of Group 3 (see 7.2) which means that her participation was core and was a leader to some extent. In my observation, Ying had some followers in the group; indeed, it resembled a gang who trusted each other and knew about each other's personal information in their "offline" life. For example, they knew each other's occupation, city, district and children's school, and often they met up in person with their children. Those core members' active participation in the group encouraged others to join in the conversation, although most of them were lurking, keeping silent, watching others' discussions, collecting the necessary information (7.3.3). Occasionally, those 'lurkers' also asked questions or answered questions relevant to their professional area or own experience in a way that resembled Wenger's notion of peripheral participation or non- participation. As Wenger (2008) points out, non-participation is a kind of participation: members in the chat group were all participating in learning, whether they were silent or verbally active, they were engaged in learned informally in different ways.

Similarly, when I interviewed Mona, she shared that sometimes a member asked a question in the group, but nobody replied to it, which felt awkward. However, she then suggested, no response is a kind of response. The non - response from the group could be understood as a sign of lack of interest, resistance, or embarrassment, which involves every group member until someone breaks the ice and starts a new conversation. Moreover, there were unspoken rules in these online groups. For example, as mentioned in 7.2, I noticed that in Group 3, when members asked for specific help, such as voting for their children's competition, or shared a discount coupon code, sending several digital Red Envelopes (*hongbao* in Chinese) with a small amount of money, while not compulsory, showed respect and politeness to the group. Newcomers to the group might not be aware of these unspoken rules and made mistakes by asking inappropriate questions or asking a favour without any *hongbao*; then they would learn the rules from the silent response. As Lave & Wenger (1991) posited, when newcomers join an established community, they spend time observing other members' activities to find out how this community works and how they can participate, which is a form of informal learning in the community. In this way, newcomers observe older members' participation which helps them to participate appropriately to fit in (Martin, 2005).

Ensuring that group members have a sense of membership in the community of practice, requires some 'maintenance' work (see 3.3.2) from the group manager. Based on the data, Groups 1, 2 and 3 have very different atmospheres with different styles of management (see 7.2) but all three group managers worked hard on 'maintenance'. To begin with, public announcements were made with the group rules (see 7.2), which largely pertained to avoiding any irrelevant commercial, political or random content. The managers also regularly followed up the conversations in the group, addressed any problems that group members encountered, or resolved quarrels between group members. Most importantly, they provided 'something' that group members could learn/benefit with/from (see 7.3.1), thus the group kept active and 'sticky'[48].

The 'community maintenance' work (Moser, 1989) was detailed and important in these groups. As mentioned, participants not only shared positive experiences: negative feelings were also a part of participation. As Wenger-Trayner (2008) explained, mutual engagement creates relationships among people and connects participants in deeper ways rather than surface similarities. For example, conflicts, disagreements, rivalry and negative emotions can all be forms of participation (Wenger-Trayner, 2008). However, the expression of negative emotions needs to have boundaries in online as well as ‘offline’ communities. For example, in China, the popular way for middle-class mothers to deal with pressure, anxiety and depression is to ‘go for a run’ (Orgad, 2019, p. 201). In this ‘confident culture’, women are expected to handle any negative or uncomfortable feelings through gym, yoga, outdoor exercise, and other mental health-benefiting activities. Therefore, mothers in this study probably have less opportunities to openly discuss their negative emotions in their “offline” life.

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[48] Means like a glue between members and the group.

In comparison, the informal atmosphere of online groups is more inclusive, making it more acceptable to talk about negative things and share problems on a negotiated level (see 7.4.3). For example, Sui shared her divorce story in the chat group and sought advice. Her story included many details which were not very positive. Other group members responded by sharing their own difficult experiences in marriage. Thus, it seems that this group was able to embrace negative stories. However, according to the chat group management rules, I found that there were boundaries in sharing negative emotions. Group members might be able to negotiate what is proper to share and what is not, but the group manager had the absolute power to ban any topics that made her/him uncomfortable. Sui’s story was acceptable because the group manager Ying was interested in the topic and actively provided advice as well as some action points. Most importantly, the whole discussion with Sui was not in a negative atmosphere. On the contrary, many group members used their own marital problems to encourage Sui to be brave and take action to change her current situation – to go to work and get a divorce. In a way, the chat group played the role of consultant in this case. Thus, when mothers encounter difficulties and problems, they not only have the option to ‘go for a run’ but can talk with and be listened to by their peers in the group chat. This could be seen as an alternative way to cope with pressure, anxiety, depression, guilt, regret and other negative emotions but only if they do not cross the invisible line of oversharing.

Sui’s story also illustrates the other two characteristics of a community of practice: joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. The group as a whole refused negative emotions and encouraged positive energy; however, when members encountered difficulties and asked for help, others shared the same value and the same ways of doing things and used their own experiences to comfort and support Sui. This “collective process of negotiation” reflects the complexity of their mutual engagement in the community, and their attitudes to Sui and her story is a “negotiated response to their situation” (Wenger-Trayner, 2008, p. 77). At the same time, initial responses were led by Ying (the group manager); then the conversation became a process of negotiation regarding the tolerance of certain topics. Joint enterprise here is “not just a stated goal but creates among participants relations of mutual accountability that become an integral part of practice" (ibid., p. 78). As mentioned earlier, the apparently 'negative' divorce story was discussed in a positive way: group members shared their thoughts about what Sui should do; they could not accept Sui giving up the idea of being independent – that is their shared value regarding marriage, and their shared repertoire in this community of practice.

Mothers in these online groups whether actively or passively, learnt the boundaries of different topics as well as the boundaries of privacy, the way to make connections and manage relationships etc. through their participation. This learning might therefore be both unintentional and unconscious. However, as a community of practice, online groups like Group 3, also intentionally share learning tasks, which is the main purpose of creating/joining the group as well. For example, Xuan joined Group 3 to learn about *jixue* methods to help her son's education.

The 'divorce story' also demonstrates the importance of online peer support in motherhood. Online communities provide important emotional support (Lupton, 2018) and knowledge exchange, especially for mothers who cannot find them "offline". Online communities can be especially crucial for first-time mothers, offering social support, facilitating connections, and helping women transition to motherhood (Johnson, 2015; Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Pettigrew, Archer & Harrigan, 2016).

On the other hand, some mothers believe that no one can help and that they must do their best to be a "balanced woman" (Orgad, 2019) by themselves. This idea echoes the discussion of "fear of weakness" (恐弱) between the Japanese feminist *Chizuko Ueno* and Chinese feminist *Jinhua Dai* in a book launch (J. Zhang, 2023). Ueno stated that some women refuse to admit that they are weak and do not want to be seen as victims, so they do not allow other women to express themselves in this way. Dai's response was that "fear of weakness" is similar to "worship the strong" (慕强), when everything encourages us to be winners, contempt for and trampling on the losers becomes inevitable (ibid.). As with the 'divorce' conversation in group 3 (see Chapter 7), many members reject the idea of being dependent or being worried about post-divorce life. They believe that no matter how difficult it will be, the stay-at-home mother can find a job and earn money if they want to do so. This just explains why those middle-class women refuse to be referred to as 'housewife', but not 'full-time mother': the implication of housewife is that they are entirely excluded from the workplace, while full-time mother implicates that they have options to be 'part-time'.

8.4.2 Sharenting and surveillance

Some mothers liked to join different discussions and share their everyday lives with their audiences on WeChat, although at times this strayed into oversharing, or 'sharenting' as it has been called (see 3.2.2.5). 'Sharenting' plays an important part for some mothers: they share their own and children's everyday activities online with other parents and a 'wider public' (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 110). In my study, their sharing is more 'audience-targeted' – in WeChat

Moments they could post certain content and shared with selected audiences (see 2.4.2) while those audiences would not know/aware this. Much of the work on sharenting is Western-focused and pulls out ideas around Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. My research on 'sharenting' is different by using a less represented and less public (compared to the mentioned three platforms) platform. As introduced in Chapter 3, 'sharenting' always along with the question of "what, where, and how much to share" (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 122), meanwhile, parents have the responsibility to protect their children's privacy while sharing children's daily activities online. However, in my research, participants surprisingly overshared children's information and privacy, such as their children's front face photos with school uniform, names, exam papers with grade on it etc. (see 4.3.3.2). In addition, they sometimes shared how 'surveillance' works in their parenting practice, like the one who remotely 'watched' her son doing homework at home through a camera (see 7.4.2). This kind of 'oversharing' partly because of the feature of WeChat – the shared posts are not randomly open to everyone but to people the sharer already knew, so they easily trust the audiences too much.

As mentioned in 7.4.1, some mothers presented themselves as 'super mom' on Moments posts, by sharing details of their daily life, personal thoughts and feelings, children's activities etc. The way they self-represent is with pride and self-satisfaction (see 7.4.1); I argue, therefore, that they share those details online as a way to obtain admiration and empathy from people they know, like Vitas sharing her son's opinion about her being 'superwoman' (see 7.4.1). The digital platform then became a means of showing off their parenting skills, their care and love for their children.

By observing my participants' posts in chatgroups as well as Moments, I realised that the 'sharenting' style is probably formed by the platform design and affects parents' understandings about sharing parental stories (see Qiu's story). As a researcher, I could see how mothers use texts to share stories in chatgroups which usually have instant reactions from members or are easily interrupted, while in Moments, mothers could tell a whole story with a few lines and nine photos or a video. As a result, these stories seem more vivid. Moreover, the sharer does not expect any immediate comments, unlike in a chat group. In a way, this platform is used more like a space to record one's digital diary.

As introduced in 3.2.2, 'oversharing' children's information and activities online (Lazard et al., 2019) has become a vital issue. Parents in this study have become accustomed to using digital media as a tool to 'watch' their children. For example, they use WeChat to communicate with the 'watcher' about children's homework (see 6.3.3) and CCTV to monitor children's activity at home (see 7.4.2). To ensure that children are behaving properly, parents usually 'watched' them doing their homework, playing, sleeping, eating etc. This need to 'control' and 'surveillance' is an expression of mothers' anxieties about ensuring their children's success and links back to the insecurity middle-class parents feel regarding their social status. In this context, their children's educational achievements become a vital part of confirming their membership in this group.

The pressure to sign their child up to tutoring classes or to be a 'good mother' was not only a social expectation or self-expectation or coming from parents/family members but from peers. As discussed in Chapter 7, mothers used online spaces as a place to exchange information, ask opinion, seek support, build friendship etc. (see 7.3.3) and responded with suggestions, recommendations and sharing similar experiences, but is also a space that fosters peer pressure. In a way, mothers were using the online community as a space to 'watch' other children's learning progress and compare this with their own children. These online experiences in turn affected their emotions, feelings, decisions and shaped their practice in their "offline" life as well. For example, what would happen if a *foxi* mother joined a *jixue* group? Would she feel guilty about not doing enough for children's schooling? As mentioned in Chapter 2, Daqi's mother in the TV programme admitted that she could not bear that everyone in the chatgroup was doing something to improve their child's academic performance while she did nothing. This feeling of being left behind and not good enough for the child was common in my research data as well and was influenced through communicating with peers online. Within this intensive mothering culture, it is hard to resist the dominant discourse and choose a different parenting style, while their peers are sharing successful experience in online groups every day. However, the online communities could also influence mothers' decisions to participate or not. For instance, some mothers in my research disliked this intense atmosphere and chose to leave and avoid online groups.

Therefore, online communities and digital communication could be a space to provide learning opportunities and support for mothers and to facilitate their parenting development. Conversely, it also could be a platform for oversharing and surveillance which exaggerated mothers' schooling anxiety in return.

8.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used the gendered motherhood lens, the social capital lens, and the learning lens to look at the dilemmas mothers faced in their everyday lives. I have explored how mothers learn from their everyday activities to be good mothers, to support their children's education, to negotiate their practical dilemmas with the 'good mother' imagination. Through these theoretical lenses, significant overarching issues emerge in this study, particularly in the context of changing notions of the 'good mother' within shifting communication methods, changing family structures, the individualisation of parenting, and the commercialisation of education.

This research has illuminated how the traditional idea of the 'good mother' has undergone substantial transformations. It has argued that contemporary middle-class mothers are challenging the existing narratives of motherhood and creating their own definitions, how they are grappling with new expectations and pressures that go beyond conventional roles and responsibilities. Particularly, to support their children's education, mothers actively played an important role in shadow education and immersed themselves in the task of helping with their children’s academic development.

The usage of social media and changing communication patterns are having a profound impact on how mothers perceive and enact their multiple identities. Meanwhile, the changing family structure is influencing caregiving arrangements, which could bring big challenges as well as opportunities for mothers to be ‘good’ mothers. This research has also highlighted how parenting has become increasingly individualised within the framework of neoliberalism. Mothers seem to have choices about parenting, but at the same time are ‘pressured’ to provide intensive parenting and to make decisions that align with social expectations and norms. This study has also underscored how education has become a commodified aspect of motherhood. The pressure to provide the best educational opportunities for their children has created additional stress for mothers, influencing their choices and priorities. The standards of ‘good mothers’ and the fantasy of the ‘good life’ encourages mothers to dedicate themselves to this lifelong career. However, mothers in this study found that despite their best efforts, it is unattainable and is more like an idealisation of motherhood.

The issues discussed in this chapter represent the core themes that emerged from the thesis, which provide valuable insights into the complex experiences of contemporary mothers. These mothers are navigating their roles within the constantly changing landscape of motherhood, communication, family structure and education.

Chapter 9 Conclusion and implications

9.1 Introduction

I started this research to investigate the educational anxiety that seemed to prevail among middle-class mothers by focusing on mothers' perceptions, attitudes and experiences of education and motherhood. Based on a contextualised definition of middle-class, I examined the dynamic between Old and New Shanghainese within the educational landscape in Shanghai, which provided a cultural overview for the research. I explored changing understandings of parenting and motherhood in China, as well as the impact of social media and digital communication on people's everyday practices (see Chapter 2). I then presented the theoretical framework that underpins my research. This included: a context-based conceptualisation of motherhood; different types of learning within communities of practice; and the three forms of capital (see Chapter 3). I adopted an ethnographic research approach consisting of a 13-month study with a group of middle-class mothers in Shanghai, and other unpaid/paid childcare helpers that included a grandmother, a professional nanny, and staff from private tutoring centres (see Chapter 4).

I investigated the relationships between schooling, tutoring and mothering in Chapter 5. This focused on the reasons why parents seek private tutoring for their children, with a focus on how the commercialisation of education contributes to their anxiety. Chapter 6 investigated the tensions between idealised motherhood and the reality of mothering experiences while in Chapter 7 I focused on mothers' experiences and performances in online spaces, exploring their activities and different identities within these spaces. Chapter 8 analysed the links between mothering, learning and schooling, with a focus particular on the contradictions between motherhood in public discourse and the real lives of mothers. I discussed how the informal/non-formal learning in communities of practice helps them in facilitating their children's education and negotiating their own living situations.

In this chapter, I summarise my key research findings and then discuss the implications of this research for theory, policy and methodological practice.

9.2 Summary of key findings

My overarching research question was: *how does middle-class schooling anxiety reshape motherhood and what role do online communities play in it?* To answer this question, I conducted ethnographic research and developed three main directions: the contradictory discourses around motherhood; the multiple types of learning that mothers engaged in and how they negotiate different identities in communities of practice; and the role of social capital in educational choices and motherhood. In this section, I summarise my findings and why they matter.

9.2.1 Discourses around mothering and motherhood: idealisation vs realistic practice

In the beginning of this thesis, I proposed a series of sub-research questions, one of them being: *how do middle-class mothers perceive parenthood*? In order to investigate mothers' perceptions, understandings, and experiences of parenting, I conducted online participant observation, individual interviews, participatory group discussions on WeChat and in-person meetings in Shanghai to collect data. I found that mothers had multiple definitions of and standards regarding what constituted 'good mothering', shaped by their personality, work life, education, family responsibilities, individual development etc. Their criteria of 'good' mothers seemed for most women to be unattainable (see Chapter 6) and more like an idealisation of motherhood based on a notion of having an attractive personality, excellent decision-making ability, and achieving a perfect 'balance' between work, family. and personal life. Their everyday experiences of motherhood were very different. There is a clear difference between *mothers* and *motherhood*, in that the discourse of motherhood was not grounded in reality and was moreover, contradictory; mothers, on the other hand, were simply engaged in the process of navigating these contradictions. In this study, mothers did a lot of this through their various networks.

I have argued that ideas about mothering are largely acquired and formed by and through social expectations, the family environment and digital communication. Meanwhile, the dominant discourse of 'good' mothering, work-family balance and being responsible for children's development, restricts these mothers' activities and became a reason for women's subordination (Moore, 1988; Edholm et al., 1978). The 'good mother' narratives led them to believe that they could achieve a 'balance' (Orgad, 2019) a 'good life' (Orgad, 2017). This 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011; Orgad, 2017) negates mothers' realities and adds to the burden of expectations on mothers. I showed how among these women, the 'cost' of motherhood is not only financial but involves time and energy. Motherhood significantly impacts mothers' career choices and lifestyle as well as wellbeing – the cognitive and emotional labour in motherhood can become a mental overload for mothers (Dean et al., 2022).

Mothers in this study stated that more than help with childcare, they needed other family members' active participation and support. They felt that childcare was not merely their work but the whole family's responsibility. Fathers who see themselves as 'helpers' with childcare have a limited impact on mothers' workload (Goldin, 2014) and situation in the home (see 6.3.3). The changing family structure and changing understandings around childcare and parenting also influenced mothers' practice in this research. In past decades, childcare in China was the responsibility of the whole society, as the extended family looked after the children with help from neighbours; those working in urban area could also send children to government nurseries (see Chapter 2). All these actions aimed to encourage those parents to join the workforce. However, nowadays, childcare has become an individualised choice and a more personal responsibility. In this context, parents (mainly mothers in this research) as the key childcare givers, with or without the grandparents' help, played multiple roles in contributing to their children's development.

Mothers in this study were highly strategic when working out arrangements for parenting and childcare. This involved allocating tasks to different family members based on their capability. In doing so, mothers made parenting decisions based on their children's current learning and future prospects. I described the power dynamics within the household, especially when mothers made 'big' decisions which could generate conflicts between the generations.

9.2.2 Learning motherhood and education in CoPs

In terms of *middle-class mothers' expectations on children's education* (my sub-RQ 1), mothers had different responses to schooling anxiety which influenced their learning practices in both their online and "offline" communities.

Alongside privatised childcare, commercialised education emerged as a growing phenomenon in this research context. Mothers in Shanghai used various terms to describe their attitudes to children's education, such as *jixue* (meaning 'Chicken blood') and *foxi* ('Buddhist'). Middle-class mothers had their own baseline of expectations for children's education, which could be summed up as 'going to university' (see Chapter 5). To achieve this aim, they attempted to help their children from early on by securing the best school and providing after-school tutoring. *Foxi* mothers claimed to have given up competing in education, simply hoping their child could simply be an 'ordinary person'. However, they still made great efforts when selecting schools.

Choices around schools and tutoring classes requires information and time management (see Chapter 7); these became vital in being good mothers. Papen's study (2012a) also focused on a group of women, although her research was about these women's 'information practices' on health and pregnancy. In relation to information-seeking which includes using the internet, identifying relevant books and asking others for support, Papen views information literacy as a social practice instead of a skill, while the key idea of information literacy is the question of what counts as knowledge in situated context (Papen, 2012b, para. 2). In this research, this kind of 'information practice' also social networking, which was closely intertwined with the entire family's social capital. In turn, parents were aware that the educational choices they made would determine their children's social connections and therefore, future social capital.

As the facilitators of their children's education, mothers formed learning communities in the home as well as in online spaces. As a community of practice, the family became a unit of learning with a focus on children's development. Family members then had different roles to play; for example, the grandparents and the father usually could be 'supervised' by the mother to deliver educational services, supervising children in completing certain tasks, for example (see Chapter 6). Managing educational activities required the ability to allocate tasks, which was learnt informally through everyday practice. In this process, mothers also learned more about power relations within their family and how to negotiate their expectations when faced with practical difficulties, especially when the situation involved their mothers-in-law.

Meanwhile, online communities provided an alternative learning space for mothers not simply for the exchange of information but also for pedagogical reflections. This was double edged: on the one hand, mothers could consider different ways to support their children's schooling; however, comparisons with peers could add to the pressure. Mothers' anxiety about schooling influenced their learning practice in everyday life, such as using online spaces to obtain information. In this sense, online spaces not only worked as places where information could be gained, but more importantly, provided opportunities to build connections with various audiences, including their peers, as well as being a space where they could develop their digital communication skills. In addition, these connections could be transferred to their "offline" life, becoming a physical support network as well. These experiences of informal learning and peer support online also provided mothers with a broader idea about how online spaces can reshape learning and motherhood in contemporary society. The friendships built online sometimes helped mothers to make decisions and address their difficulties with parenting as providing ideas about supporting their children's education.

Middle-class mothers in my research valued these networking opportunities: indirectly, they helped to maintain social benefits through exchanging information and resources; the groups they chose to participate in became as a part of their wider social network, thus contributing to their social capital and retaining their social status. Online spaces also contributed to mothers' mental health by providing emotional support. Although themes in digital conversations might still focus on children or family, mothers attempted collectively to create new mothering practices that involved negotiating the balance between individual feelings and social expectations. In this sense, they were suddenly not individual mothers but formed a collective place, in community with each other. This is unique for Chinese social media because of its long-lasting connections and multiple functions which facilitate mothers' communication. It also provides an example to Western social media developers of how WeChat can deeply impact mothers' everyday life.

9.2.3 Middle-class insecure social status and motherhood

Middle-class mothers in this study experienced schooling anxiety when helping with their children's education, particularly when applying for primary schools; this experience then influenced their decisions on later pathways of education. From limited interviews, I could see different mothers with differing parenting styles and educational expectations. However, these mothers shared insecurities about their children's futures. As discussed in 8.4, whether a *foxi* mother or *jixue* mother, they all hoped to use their social capital to help their children make 'correct decisions', or provide their children with an alternative pathway, a direction to work towards, such as to 'being a teacher' or 'being a nurse' (see Chapter 5). Those potential ideas for career development came from the mothers' own experience as well as the cultural and social capital they inherited. Although some decided to 'give up' the fierce competition that characterises the academic sphere, they nonetheless invested money, time and social capital on children's tutoring sessions, as they still wanted them to gain the 'ticket' to higher education and become a member of the middle-class 'club'. Therefore, even mothers who rejected the highly competitive educational environment, still participated in it in different ways, such as doing '*suji*' (focus on quality education) instead of '*hunji*' (focus on subject education). This was shaped by insecurity around maintaining their social status as the professional middle-class (Li, 2016), and they believed that education was the pathway to achieving this goal.

To help children make 'correct decisions', mothers themselves had to learn as well. This kind of learning centred on 'information learning', which was mainly informal and incidental but sometimes could be non-formal in the form of reading books or attending parenting courses. However, it seems that the decisions they made for their children were also restricted by the social position they held. To ensure their children's achievements, mothers in this study invested their economic, cultural and social capital from when their children were very young. They were aware that the capital they owned is limited and they wanted to make a 'safer' choice which at least could be confirmed as a 'good' choice, as with Xi and Faith. From school choice to career choice, middle-class mothers in this study made decisions cautiously, based on their family conditions. Instead of choosing to either 'fight' or 'relax'/*jixue* or *foxi* in the face of the educational battle, they chose to combine both approaches and adjust their practices flexibly according to their children's performance and wellbeing This emerged through my findings as a new strategy of mothering compared to the old-fashioned notion of 'tiger mother'.

9.3 Implications for theory

From a theoretical perspective, my research offers a deeper understanding into the complex dynamics of motherhood in contemporary society. I conceptualised motherhood through its academic and everyday narratives, investigating mothers' positions in the home/workplace/society, their responsibilities regarding childcare/family care/paid work, and the contradictory situation they find themselves in through trying to be a 'balanced woman' and having a 'good life'. I also drew on culturally-specific terms of motherhood in this thesis, such as *jixue, foxi, hunji, suji,* to develop my theoretical insights. Those terms enriched the 'category' of mothers and expanded the definition of a 'good mother', since both Chicken mothers and Buddhist mothers were all attempting to be 'good mothers'.

By taking a lens based on theories of informal learning and communities of practice on motherhood, I have been able to expand understanding of mothers' learning practices, from 'what they learn' to 'how they learn'. For example, how mothers learn motherhood and how they use multiple resources to support their learning behaviour, such as online communities, professional courses, psychological books, and family members' reactions/feedback. This theoretical lens helps me to broaden the conceptualisation of motherhood, which contributes to existing discourses of motherhood and learning, not just in China but in a broader context. In fact, mothers as the learning planners in communities of practice, were found to engage in different types of learning, not only informal and non-formal learning. For example, when mothers allocated tasks to family members and monitored their process of helping children's education or the execution of domestic tasks, such learning seemed not unplanned, unconscious, informal learning anymore, but planned, well-organised learning, including 'assessment' by the learning organiser.

Theories around informal learning in this context has enabled me to explore not only 'what' women learned but 'how'. Furthermore, the discussion of online communities and digital communication based on the dominant messaging app in China– WeChat, contributes to current social media research. With multiple functions, this Chinese-focused messaging app plays an important function in mothers' everyday activities. The use of the app also challenges the distinction made between online and 'offline' life. This idea contributes to current discussions on conceptualising digital/online/virtual spaces, specifically when the discussion includes a comparison of 'online' and 'offline'. In addition, the research was designed with flexibility in terms of gathering data online and offline and different forms of data (pictorial, text diaries etc.) thereby contributing to methodologies for doing ethnographic research in multifunctional online spaces.

The notion of social capital in relation to education provided me with a lens to explore the complexities surrounding middle-class social status and its inherent uncertainty. This study reveals how these mothers wished to secure their children's place in society through education, taking into account the commercialisation of education and the promotion of market driven products. In such a context, mothers are compelled to make choices that may seem like 'free choice' but are, in reality, 'forced choices' imposed by the pressures of a neoliberal society. This research therefore contributes to theorising motherhood within the context of neoliberalism, where it intersects with various social forces shaping maternal behaviours and choices.

9.4 Implications for policy

In terms of policy implications, the findings of my research highlight the challenges faced by middle-class mothers and their families. The 'Double Reduction' policy is an example of the Government's attempts to regulate commercialised education in China. As discussed in Chapter 2, it was designed to reduce homework and out-of-school tutoring (Ministry of Education, 2021a). Private tutoring companies were restricted in their activities and the educational market in general came under closer government scrutiny. It aimed to provide a fairer environment and less pressure for children. On the face of it, the policy was sound, in that it stipulated:

> No written homework for Year 1 and Year 2 students… the average completion time for written homework in Year 3 to 6 of primary school does not exceed 60 minutes, and in junior secondary schools does not exceed 90 minutes… encourage teachers to design flexible and personalised homework instead of repetitive, punitive homework (Ministry of Education, 2021a, no. 6).

However, my study shows that the policy is unrealistic because of the different capabilities of schools and teachers as well as students. As discussed in Chapter 7, mothers exchange homework information in online groups, revealing a huge divide between primary schools in the same city. Mothers whose children had no homework were not 'happy' and felt their children were missing out. In this regard, a follow-up training for all schoolteachers should be delivered to make sure they have the ability to design different levels of homework accordingly.

Furthermore, while the examination system remains the same, particularly, *gaokao* – the National University Entrance exam, so will the educational pressure. Similarly, if the next level of education is unchanged, the curriculum reform in primary schools will not work. Parents encourage their children to learn in advance because of this competitive environment and their expectations and hopes for their children's success. Parents who hope that their children will experience higher education are caught in the competitive trap: students must work hard to be enrolled in their preferred university. These findings suggest that higher education also needs to be reformed and improved to better facilitate students' as well as parents' requirements. For instance, students could be assessed for broader capabilities and potential, including their interests, group activities and personal development. This has proved effective in the Western context, although one possible difficulty with adopting this method in China is the large population.

Another implication for educational policy is improving the quality of vocational education, to provide students with different pathways which can also ensure a respectable income and social position. Training for parents is also necessary, particularly with regards to mental health and well-being, both their own and their children's. Middle-class parents would benefit from increased awareness of children's psychological development as this might help to release pressure and reduce anxiety.

In addition, this research provides a detailed discussion on mothering responsibilities and dilemmas. It indicates that mothers are still experiencing the high cost of childbearing, particularly with regards to career development and income reduction. This suggests the need for broader changes in society. For instance, a change on gendered-recruitment employment policy could mean that men have more parental leave and can share responsibilities for childcare; women could then be encouraged to continue their career on an equal footing. However, policy level change may not bring practical changes to women in the home unless men share household responsibilities. Therefore, both fathers and mothers would benefit from training that includes parenting, housework, marriage management, providing practical ideas and inspiration to bring about changes. Employers could also provide parents with more informal spaces such as a monthly group discussion/lunch event with support from a professional trainer. This would provide parents with the opportunity to reflect and learn together. They could also organise online fathers' groups to encourage fathers to actively join in conversations around parenting, childcare, family care and housework.

9.5 Implications for methodological practice

Methodologically, my research contributes to the field of ethnography by providing a detailed account of the research journey, including gaining access to online research sites, selecting appropriate methods, and addressing ethical concerns in online spaces. A lot of the methodological literature about social media through an ethnographic lens is based around Western platforms. My work shows the limitations of this literature for fast-moving platforms like WeChat, and also proposes some ways of navigating them. During the research, I learned how to 'read' conversations and notice conflicts online in a different way from face-to-face data. This provides future researchers with an example of 'learning by doing' and a possible way to conduct ethnography in online chatgroups. My experience of combining face-to-face and digital ethnography contributes to the existing knowledge on researching in an unstable situation and being flexible. Since my fieldwork started in the middle of Covid-19 pandemic, this approach allowed me to successfully complete the data collection in China and UK.

Moreover, since I was conducting research in a cross-cultural situation, my experiences of following professional guidance, fitting in with the contexts and adjusting my behaviours based on the research context, are valuable for researchers who face a similar situation. My experience with data translation with regards to culturally specific terms could be useful to other researchers who encounter language issues in data analysis and writing up. My use of culturally-specific terms such as *foxi* and *jixue*, became a theoretical lens to help me analyse mothers' parenting styles, their attitudes as well as practices with regards to their children's education.

9.6 Future research directions

When designing this research, I made the decision to exclude fathers and grandfathers. If I were to investigate family life and gendered power relations further, I could involve more grandparents as well as fathers in the research. However, my focus on women was justified in that I wanted to provide a space for them to express their perceptions, understandings, and attitudes on topics that mattered to them. Men already receive a lot of attention in the workplace and society generally. Also excluding fathers and grandfathers facilitated women-friendly research without the male gaze. In future research, I would look at fathers' and grandfathers' experiences in parenting and family life, use a gendered lens to explore power relations within the changing family structure. My experiences in this research could be an example of doing research with less represented groups, not only in China but a broader context.

I also looked at the influences of social media on mothering practice and educational anxiety. In future research I would look at how social media design shapes users' experience and practice. In addition, mothers in WeChat groups at times discussed political issues around gender equality and women's empowerment, despite agreeing that there should be no political topics in online communities. I would be interested in exploring these discussions around what it means to be a feminist in terms of the division of labour in home and what it means to be a feminist in social media and everyday life.

Another possible research direction would be to investigate family literacy and parenting in contemporary China. Since the family structure is changing, people also have different definitions of 'core family' and extended family, it is important to look at intergenerational learning among family members and the power dynamics within learning.

I have enjoyed my learning journey as an ethnographic researcher as well as a Chinese woman. My participants have shown me a complex but also the warm world of motherhood full of chaos, exhaustion, responsibilities and joys. This is a good opportunity for me to learn and understand what they think, how they live and why they suffer. I hope to continue my research with women, particularly with mothers and grandmothers, to listen to their stories and bring out their voices in a broader context.

Being a mother is apparently not easy, but these mothers navigated it with courage and strength. As Xi reflected:

> Life is short, [I] do not dream [we can] enjoy it while it lasts, but I hope there will be pleasurable moments in the memory. [I think] every age should have such a moment (Written reflection from Xi, 25/4/2021).

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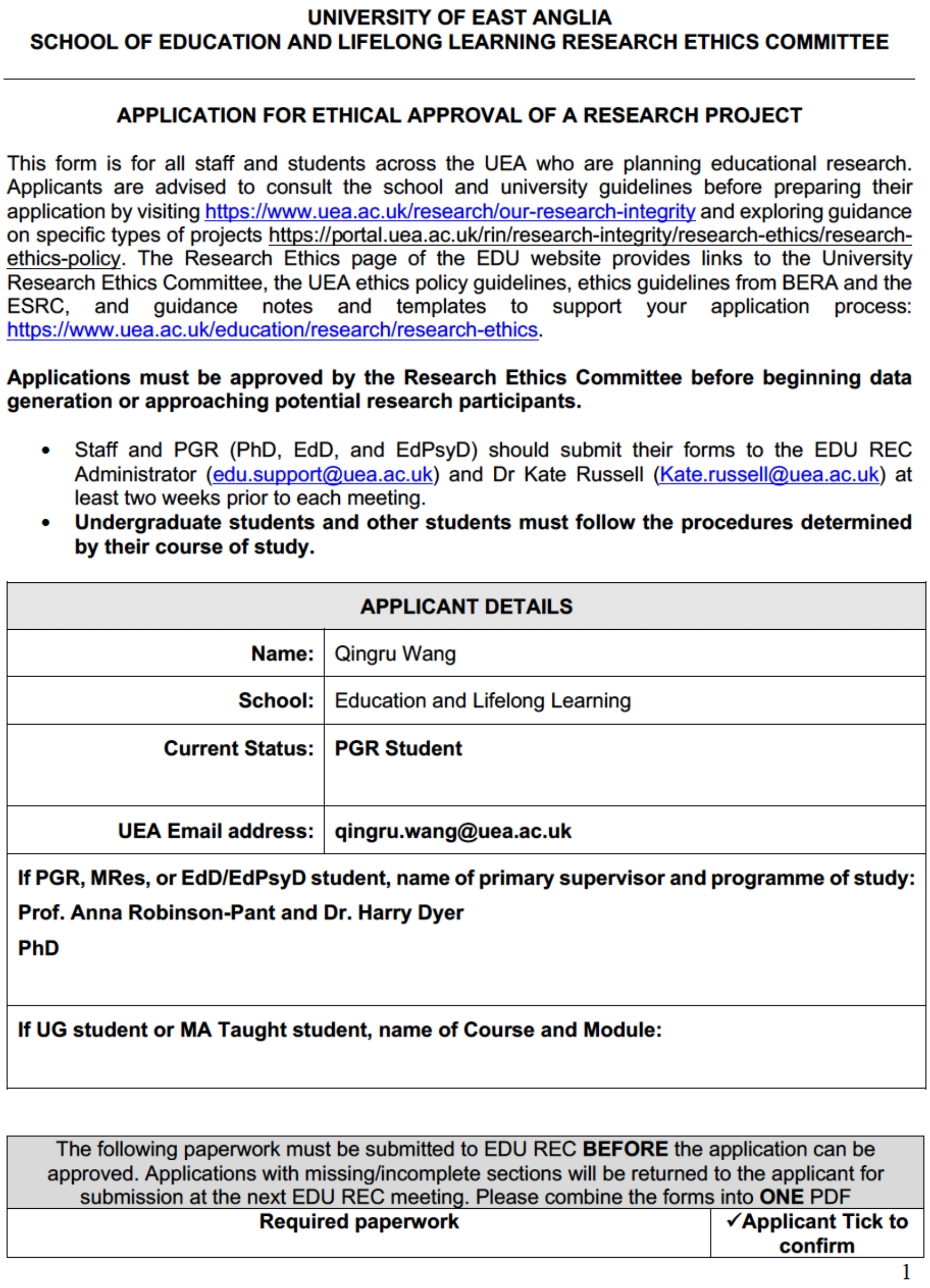
Zheng, Y. (2019). 社会变迁中的育儿模式变化与‘母职’重构——对微信育儿群的观察’ (Changes in child-rearing patterns and reconstruction of ‘motherhood’ in social changes——Observation on WeChat parenting groups’). 贵州社会科学, 355(7), 87–95.

Appendix 1 Ethic form, information sheet, consent form, risk assessment



UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

This form is for all staff and students across the UEA who are planning educational research. Applicants are advised to consult the school and university guidelines before preparing their application by visiting https://www.uea.ac.uk/research/our-research-integrity and exploring guidance on specific types of projects https://portal.uea.ac.uk/rin/research-integrity/research-ethics/research-ethics-policy. The Research Ethics page of the EDU website provides links to the University Research Ethics Committee, the UEA ethics policy guidelines, ethics guidelines from BERA and the ESRC, and guidance notes and templates to support your application process: https://www.uea.ac.uk/education/research/research-ethics.

Applications must be approved by the Research Ethics Committee before beginning data generation or approaching potential research participants.

- Staff and PGR (PhD, EdD, and EdPsyD) should submit their forms to the EDU REC Administrator (edu.support@uea.ac.uk) and Dr Kate Russell (Kate.russell@uea.ac.uk) at least two weeks prior to each meeting.
- **Undergraduate students and other students must follow the procedures determined by their course of study.**

APPLICANT DETAILS	
Name:	Qingru Wang
School:	Education and Lifelong Learning
Current Status:	**PGR Student**
UEA Email address:	**qingru.wang@uea.ac.uk**
If PGR, MRes, or EdD/EdPsyD student, name of primary supervisor and programme of study: **Prof. Anna Robinson-Pant and Dr. Harry Dyer** **PhD**	
If UG student or MA Taught student, name of Course and Module:	

The following paperwork must be submitted to EDU REC **BEFORE** the application can be approved. Applications with missing/incomplete sections will be returned to the applicant for submission at the next EDU REC meeting. Please combine the forms into **ONE** PDF	
Required paperwork	**✓Applicant Tick to confirm**

Application Form (fully completed)	√
Participant Information sheet and Consent Form (EDU template appropriate for nature of participants i.e. adult/parent/carer etc.)	√
Other supporting documents (for e.g. questionnaires, interview/focus group questions, stimulus materials, observation checklists, letters of invitation, recruitment posters etc)	√

2. PROPOSED RESEARCH PROJECT DETAILS:

Title:	An exploration of the relationship between middle-class schooling anxiety and motherhood in Shanghai, China
Start/End Dates:	Start date: 15/06/2020 End date: 30/02/2021

3. FUNDER DETAILS (IF APPLICABLE):

Funder:	
	Has funding been applied for? NO Application Date:
	Has funding been awarded? N/A
	Project code if known:
Will ethical approval also be sought for this project from another source? YES NO	
	If "yes" what is this source?

4. APPLICATION FORM FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS:

Please use the guidance notes to support your application as this can clarify what the committee needs to see about your project and can avoid any unnecessary requests for further information at a later date.

4.1 Briefly outline, using lay language, your research focus and questions or aims (no more than 300 words).

This research focuses on middle-class schooling anxiety and motherhood in online communities, in China. The idea comes from my work experience. I was a manager of an online information site in Shanghai that focused solely on primary school applications. I therefore had opportunity to participate in the online chat groups and gain insight into parents' concerns about their children's education. I found that most active users are mothers and I became interested in the influence of schooling anxiety for a family, particularly on shaping motherhood, and in the functions of online community. Based on that, the purpose of my research is to explore the relationship between middle-class schooling anxiety and motherhood in online communities, and to find out how this impacts their offline lives.

My main research question is **how does middle-class schooling anxiety (re)shape motherhood in online communities?** My sub-questions are:
(1) What do mothers expect from children's formal education and private tutoring?
(2) How do middle-class mothers perceive parenthood?
(3) What role does the online community play in shaping schooling anxiety and how does this impact motherhood?
(4) How can mothers' schooling anxiety be lessened?

4.2 Briefly outline your proposed research methods, including who will be your research participants and where you will be working (no more than 300 words).

- **Please provide details of any relevant demographic detail of participants (age, gender, race, ethnicity etc)**

Since my study focuses on middle-class mothers' perceptions on motherhood, children's education and online communities, the participants will be a group of mothers who live in Shanghai, have school-aged children and use WeChat[1]. I will select participants who use WeChat in daily life and take part in online chat groups for children's developments. The research will be conducted in Norwich and Shanghai. It has three steps:

1. Online participant observation via WeChat, in Norwich (Jul - Sep 2020). Initially I will request access to one or two chat rooms (around 400 members each) and if needed I will request access to others. All chatrooms are closed (invited only), and the conversation in groups are for specific publics. I will collect all public chatting histories (including words, photos, shared articles etc.) in a selected period. The public chatting history involves a great amount of data, more than 1000 messages per day, so during the three months' data collection, I will collect a week's data every month instead of collecting everything every day.
2. Online semi-structured interview via WeChat will be conducted (on laptop), in Norwich (Oct - Nov 2020). I will interview around 12 mothers, one-to-one over two months. Each interview will be around 40 minutes, I will record the audio through my mobile phone and take brief notes during the conversation. Considering the Convid-19 situation, I may decide to conduct online interviews at this stage instead of face-to-face one, but if the situation allows, I may change the plan and go back to China to meet participants in October.
3. Face-to-face interviews and participatory workshops will be held in Shanghai (Dec 2020 - Feb 2021). After the interviews, the 12 participants will be divided into three groups (according to their timetable). We will meet once a week one hour per time for 3 weeks, and we will have 3 participatory workshops together like a focus group, with visual methods such as drawing a picture of 'rive of life'.

4.3 Briefly explain how you plan to gain access to prospective research participants. (no more than 300 words).

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[1] WeChat is a mobile application like WhatsApp but it includes the 'sharing moments' function which can be set according to needs. This function enables users to share the posts to specific people/group at specific time period.

- **Who might be your gatekeeper for accessing participants?**
- **If children/young people (or other vulnerable people, such as people with mental illness) are to be involved, give details of how gatekeeper permission will be obtained. Please provide any relevant documentation (letters of invite, emails etc) that might be relevant**
- **Is there any sense in which participants might be 'obliged' to participate – as in the case of pupils, friends, fellow students, colleagues, prisoners or patients – or are volunteers being recruited?**

The gatekeeper in my study is the manager of a WeChat group. Once I get the ethics clearance, I will contact the manager, send the information sheet and consent form to her, ask her permission to conduct participant observation in the online group. She will introduce me to the group for full transparency, and if there is anyone interested in my study, they can contact me via WeChat.

If a member adds me as WeChat contact, I will ask her willingness to join the following interview and participatory activity. I will use a snowball approach to recruit participants. First, I will ask the manager to introduce some members to me, since group members already know and trust her. Then, once an interviewee agrees, I will invite her to introduce friends to me.

My former colleague recommended the online group to me many months ago. She is the entry of the group but not the gatekeeper. Since she is a member of the chat group, I will remover her data from observation and will not invite her to join the interview or participatory activity, to avoid her feeling obliged to participate in the study.

Children are indirectly involved in the study, only in that their mothers may be talking about them, such as their schooling achievements, hobbies, learning experiences and daily activities etc. All identifying information will be anonymised. Any photos (posted by parents) with children's faces will be blurred.

4.4 Please state who will have access to the data and what measures will be adopted to maintain the confidentiality or anonymity of the research subject and to comply with data protection requirements e.g. how will the data be anonymised? (No more than 300 words.)

Only me and my supervisors will have access to the data. All data will be separately stored in password protected files and every participant will have a pseudonym.

4.5 Will you require access to data on participants held by a third party? In cases where participants will be identified from information held by another party (for example, a doctor or school) describe the arrangements you intend to make to gain access to this information (no more than 300 words).

No.

4.6 Please give details of how consent is to be obtained (no more than 300 words).

Identify here the method by which consent will be obtained for each participant group e.g. through information sheets and consent forms, oral or other approach. Copies of all forms

should be submitted alongside the application form (do not include the text of these documents in this space).

- **How and when will participants receive this material and how will you collect forms back in?**

First, I will email the information sheet and consent form to the gatekeeper. Once I get her permission, I will introduce myself in the online group (the gatekeeper will introduce me to the group as well). If there is anyone interested in or confused about my study, I will explain to them privately and send the information sheet, consent form to them. If anyone refuses to join the online observation, I will not collect her data. If they are willing to join the following interview and participatory workshop, they can sign their name by hand or typing, then send the consent form or photo to me via email/WeChat, they can also text me on WeChat and show their willingness. Since WeChat is a national popular social media and my main research platform, participants may feel more comfortable and convenient to keep in contact via WeChat instead of email.

All forms will have a Chinese version, I will send both English and Chinese forms to them and they can choose one to sign in a week.

4.7 If any payment or incentive will be made to any participant, please explain what it is and provide the justification (no more than 300 words).

No.

4.8 What is the anticipated use of the data, forms of publication and dissemination of findings etc.? (No more than 300 words.)

I will use the data in my thesis and relevant publications, also, I may present the study in some academic conferences.

4.9 Findings of this research/project would usually be made available to participants. Please provide details of the form and timescale for feedback. What commitments will be made to participants regarding feedback? How will these obligations be verified? If findings are not to be provided to participants, explain why. (No more than 300 words.)

I will share a one-page summary (in Chinese) of the results at the end of the fieldwork with my participants, if they would like it. Before analysing data, I would like to send interview notes to them, so they can amend the content if there is any misunderstandings. If I decide to write any publications based on the data, I will let my participants know.

4.10 Please add here any other ethical considerations the ethics committee may need to be made aware of (no more than 300 words).

- **Are there any issues here for who can or cannot participate in the project?**
- **If you are conducting research in a space where individuals may also choose not to participate, how will you ensure they will not be included in any data collection or adversely affected by non-participation? An example of this might be in a classroom where observation and video recording of a new teaching strategy is being assessed. If consent for all students to be videoed is not received, how will**

you ensure that a) those children will not be videoed and/or b) that if they are removed from that space, that they are not negatively affected by that?

As all my participants will be mothers, they may have to work and look after children and it could be difficult to manage timetables and attend group research activities. I will fully support my participants so they can join or withdraw from the interviews and participatory activities at any time. Children are indirectly involved in the study as mentioned above, if their parents talk about them but they will not be participating directly in any research activities. All identifying information will be anonymised. Any photos (posted by parents) with children's face will be blurred.

4.11 What risks or costs to the participants are entailed in involvement in the research/project and how will you manage that risk?

- **Are there any potential physical, psychological or disclosure dangers that can be anticipated? What is the possible harm to the participant or society from their participation or from the project as a whole?**
- **What procedures have been established for the care and protection of participants (e.g. insurance, medical cover, counselling or other support) and the control of any information gained from them or about them?**

I am aware that the Covid-19 pandemic may influence my study. As people still need to keep a social distance, I will not ask participants to have face-to-face meetings before the authorities allow and/or it is safe to do so. I will make sure my participants are safe and prepared to meet people before any data collection.

4.12 What is the possible benefit to the participant or society from their participation or from the project as a whole?

Participants will have a real space to talk about their concerns and worries about children's education. Also, they can discuss any issues they are interested in and find a way to express it, solve it. They will have a chance to set up networks and make friends with mothers sharing similar experiences and backgrounds. I will try my best to support them with their worries about their children's schooling, particularly through the participatory activities of my research project.

4.13 Comment on any cultural, social or gender-based characteristics of the participants which have affected the design of the project or which may affect its conduct. This may be particularly relevant if conducting research overseas or with a particular cultural group

- **You should also comment on any cultural, social or gender-based characteristics of you as the researcher that may also affect the design of the project or which may affect its conduct**

All my participants are mothers in Shanghai, and most of them are middle-class. As a female researcher who lived in Shanghai for one year and worked in the education field, there are shared experiences between me and my participants which will help us to build up rapport.

4.14 Does your research have environmental implications? Please refer to the University's Research Ethics Guidance Note: Research with a Potential Impact on the Environment for further details. Identify any significant environmental impacts arising from your research/project and the measures you will take to minimise risk of impact.

I will take a flight to China in December.

4.15 Will your research involve investigation of or engagement with terrorist or violent extremist groups? Please provide a full explanation if the answer is 'yes'.

No

4.16 Please state any precautions being taken to protect your health and safety? This relates to all projects and *not just* those undertaken overseas.

- **What health and safety or other relevant protocols need to be followed e.g. a DBS for work in schools? Have you completed this?**
- **If you are travelling to conduct your research, have you taken out travel and health insurance for the full period of the research? If not, why not.**
- **If you are travelling overseas, have you read and acted upon FCO travel advice (https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice)? If not, why not. If acted upon, how?**
- **Provide details including the date that you have accessed information from FCO or other relevant organization**
- **If you are undertaking field work overseas you are required to submit a Risk Assessment Form with your application. This is even if you are a researcher 'going home' to collect data (check EDU REC website).**

I have read FCO travel advice on 7 May 2020. Risk assessment form is attached.

4.17 Please state any precautions being taken to protect the health and safety of other researchers and others associated with the project (as distinct from the participants or the applicant).

Children are only indirectly involved in the study, if their mothers talk about them but they will not be participating directly in any research activities. All identifying information will be anonymised. Any photos with children's face will be blurred. I will not be travelling to China for the third stage unless it is safe to do so (re the COVID-19 situation).

4.18 The UEA's staff and students will seek to comply with travel and research guidance provided by the British Government and the Governments (and Embassies) of host countries. This pertains to research permission, in-country ethical clearance, visas, health and safety information, and other travel advisory notices where applicable. If this research project is being undertaken outside the UK, has formal permission/a research permit been sought to conduct this research? Please describe the action you have taken and if a formal permit has not been sought please explain why this is not necessary/appropriate (for very short studies it is not always appropriate to apply for formal clearance, for example).

Yes.

4.19 Are there any procedures in place for external monitoring of the research, for instance by a funding agency?

No.

5. DECLARATION:

Please complete the following boxes with YES, NO, or NOT APPLICABLE:

I have read (and discussed with my supervisor if student) the University's Research Ethics Policy, Principle and Procedures, and consulted the British Educational Research Association's Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research and other available documentation on the EDU Research Ethics webpage and, when appropriate, the BACP Guidelines for Research Ethics.	Yes
I am aware of the relevant sections of the GDPR (2018): https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/ and Freedom of Information Act (2005).	Yes
Data gathering activities involving schools and other organizations will be carried out only with the agreement of the head of school/organization, or an authorised representative, and after adequate notice has been given.	N/A
The purpose and procedures of the research, and the potential benefits and costs of participating (e.g. the amount of their time involved), will be fully explained to prospective research participants at the outset.	Yes
My full identity will be revealed to potential participants.	Yes
Prospective participants will be informed that data collected will be treated in the strictest confidence and will only be reported in anonymised form unless identified explicitly and agreed upon	Yes
All potential participants will be asked to give their explicit, written consent to participating in the research, and, where consent is given, separate copies of this will be retained by both researcher and participant.	Yes
In addition to the consent of the individuals concerned, the signed consent of a parent/carer will be required to sanction the participation of minors (i.e. persons under 16 years of age).	N/A
Undue pressure will not be placed on individuals or institutions to participate in research activities.	Yes
The treatment of potential research participants will in no way be prejudiced if they choose not to participate in the project.	Yes
I will provide participants with my UEA contact details (*not* my personal contact details) and those of my supervisor (if applicable), in order that they are able to make contact in relation to any aspect of the research, should they wish to do so. I will notify participants that complaints can be made to the Head of School.	Yes
Participants will be made aware that they may freely withdraw from the project at any time without risk or prejudice.	Yes
Research will be carried out with regard for mutually convenient times and negotiated in a way that seeks to minimise disruption to schedules and burdens on participants	Yes
At all times during the conduct of the research I will behave in an appropriate, professional manner and take steps to ensure that neither myself nor research participants are placed at risk.	Yes
The dignity and interests of research participants will be respected at all times, and steps will be taken to ensure that no harm will result from participating in the research	Yes
The views of all participants in the research will be respected.	Yes
Special efforts will be made to be sensitive to differences relating to age, culture, disability, race, sex, religion and sexual orientation, amongst research participants, when planning, conducting and reporting on the research.	Yes

Data generated by the research (e.g. transcripts of research interviews) will be kept in a safe and secure location and will be used purely for the purposes of the research project (including dissemination of findings). No-one other than research colleagues, professional transcribers and supervisors will have access to any identifiable raw data collected, unless written permission has been explicitly given by the identified research participant.	Yes
Research participants will have the right of access to any data pertaining to them.	Yes
All necessary steps will be taken to protect the privacy and ensure the anonymity and non-traceability of participants – e.g. by the use of pseudonyms, for both individual and institutional participants, in any written reports of the research and other forms of dissemination.	Yes

I am satisfied that all ethical issues have been identified and that satisfactory procedures are in place to deal with those issues in this research project. I will abide by the procedures described in this form.

Name of Applicant:	**Qingru Wang**
Date:	**15/05/2020**

PGR/EdD/EdPsyD/MRes Supervisor declaration (for PGR/EdD/EdPsyD/MRes student research only)

I have discussed the ethics of the proposed research with the student and am satisfied that all ethical issues have been identified and that satisfactory procedures are in place to deal with those issues in this research project.

Name of PGR Supervisor:	**Anna Robinson-Pant**
Date:	**18/5/2020**

MA taught/Undergraduate Supervisor declaration (for MA Taught/Undergraduate student research only)

I confirm that I have read and discussed the ethics of the proposed research with the student and am satisfied that all ethical issues have been identified and that satisfactory procedures are in place to deal with those issues in this research project. I also confirm that all of the relevant documents are appropriate to conduct the proposed research.

Name of Supervisor:	
Date:	

Qingru Wang
Postgraduate Researcher
07.05.20

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: qingru.wang@uea.ac.uk
Tel: +86 (0)15102113739
Web:www.uea.ac.uk

An exploration of the relationship between middle-class schooling anxiety and motherhood in Shanghai

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about how mothers talk about their worries and concerns about their children's schooling in online chatrooms and how this experience impacts their offline everyday lives. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a member of online communities. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher: Qingru Wang, Postgraduate Research, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

Supervision team: Professor Anna Robinson-Pant & Doctor Harry Dyer

(3) What will the study involve for me?

Your participation in this study will involve you continuing your day-to-day group chatting as normal. I will collect your chatting histories over a period time, one week a month and three months in total (starting in July). I will not disturb your conversation in the group, but I may ask you some relevant questions privately if you are interested in my study and willing to join the interview (an online and an offline). You can refuse to answer any questions. You may also be invited to take part in 3 participatory workshops with 3-4 mothers in your chatting group. I will help you to discuss some schooling anxiety and motherhood relevant issues together, then you can express your thoughts on a piece of paper via drawing/writing.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

Each interview will take around 30 minutes, each participatory workshop will take around 1 hour, so that will mean a total of 4 hours of your time across the research. I will be in the online chat group one week per month for three months (starting in July) but this will be part of your normal everyday chatting and so no additional time is required for you.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You can do this by simply telling me at any time. You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want me to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results. If you take part in a participatory workshop, you are free to stop participating at any stage or to refuse to answer any of the questions. However, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual comments from my records once the group has started, as it's a group discussion. If you take part in an observation session, you are free to stop participating at any stage. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study, excluding your data will only be possible if the observation was videoed or you were individually identified at the time of the observation.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. Some women may find it difficult to talk about their feelings and opinions on specific topics if they have had a negative experience. I will be mindful of anything that might cause concern to you and no-one will be required to speak if they don't feel like it. If anyone does get upset, I will give information about possible support available.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

I hope that talking about the schooling anxiety with your friends of the online community will be fun to do and hope that what you say will help to lessen mothers' anxiety and make the education better for children.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2019).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?
When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact me, Qingru on qingru.wang@uea.ac.uk or +86 (0)15102113739.

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?
You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. This feedback will be in the form of a one-page lay summary. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?
The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Qingru Wang

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

qingru.wang@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Professor Anna Robinson-Pant a.robinson-pant@uea.ac.uk

Doctor Harry Dyer harry.t.dyer@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Nalini Boodhoo at N.Boodhoo@uea.ac.uk.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?
You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and give it back through email. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
✓ The researcher have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the group member now or in the future.
✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.
✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
✓ I understand that I may leave the participatory workshop at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started as it is a group discussion.
✓ I understand that I may stop participating in an observation at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to remove my data unless the observation is videoed or I am individually identified in some way.
✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Online observations** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Photographs** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Would you like to see the interview notes?** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If yes provide details:

....	....	....
Signature	**PRINT name**	**Date**

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2^{nd} Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the group member now or in the future.

✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

✓ I understand that I may leave the participatory workshop at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started as it is a group discussion.

✓ I understand that I may stop participating in an observation at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to remove my data unless the observation is videoed or I am individually identified in some way.

✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

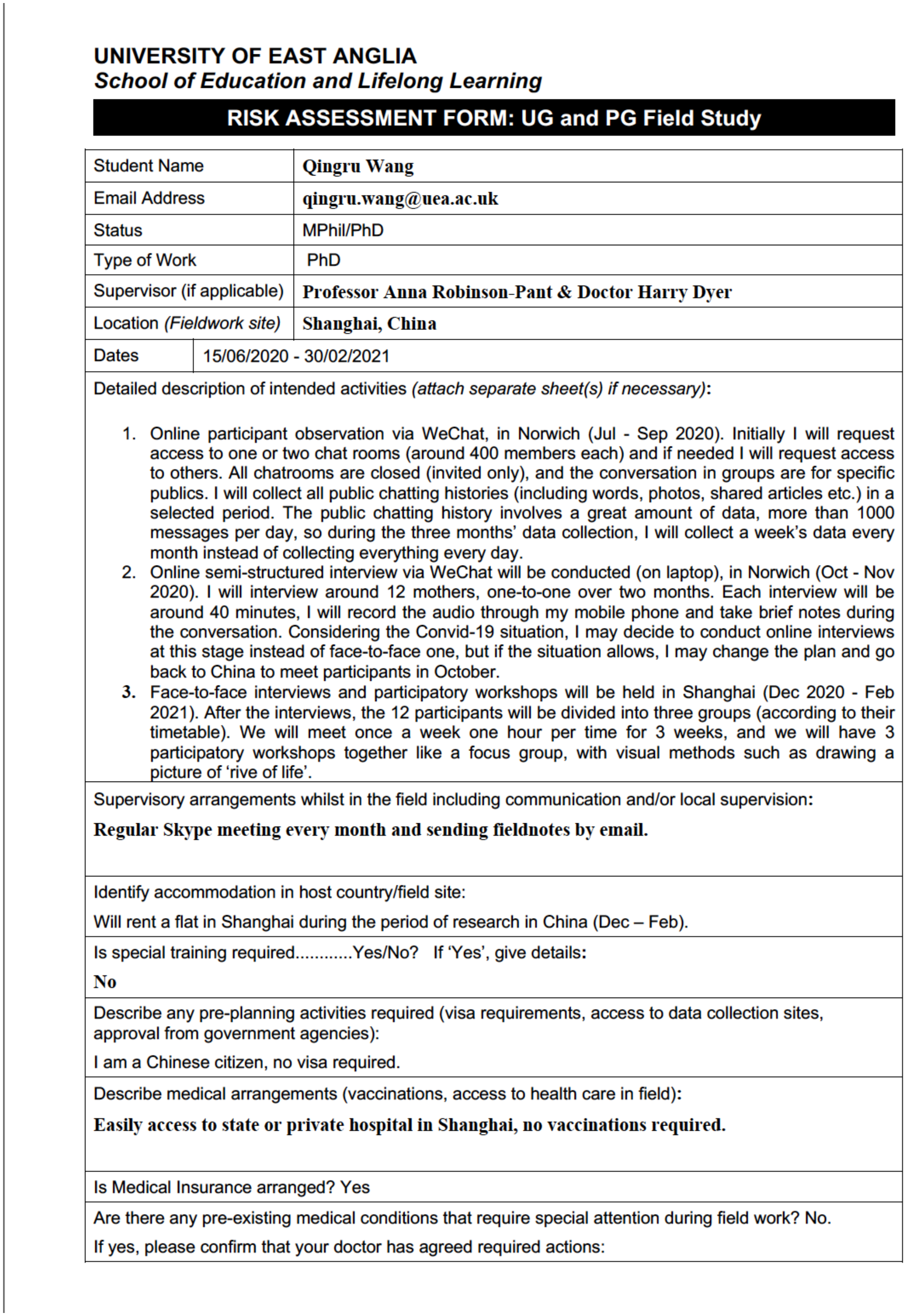
I consent to:

•	**Audio-recording**	YES	☐	NO	☐
•	**Online observations**	YES	☐	NO	☐
•	**Photographs**	YES	☐	NO	☐
•	**Would you like to see the interview notes?**	YES	☐	NO	☐
•	**Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?**	YES	☐	NO	☐

If yes provide details:

....

Signature **PRINT name** **Date**



UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

RISK ASSESSMENT FORM: UG and PG Field Study

Student Name	**Qingru Wang**
Email Address	**qingru.wang@uea.ac.uk**
Status	MPhil/PhD
Type of Work	PhD
Supervisor (if applicable)	**Professor Anna Robinson-Pant & Doctor Harry Dyer**
Location *(Fieldwork site)*	**Shanghai, China**
Dates	15/06/2020 - 30/02/2021

Detailed description of intended activities *(attach separate sheet(s) if necessary)*:

1. Online participant observation via WeChat, in Norwich (Jul - Sep 2020). Initially I will request access to one or two chat rooms (around 400 members each) and if needed I will request access to others. All chatrooms are closed (invited only), and the conversation in groups are for specific publics. I will collect all public chatting histories (including words, photos, shared articles etc.) in a selected period. The public chatting history involves a great amount of data, more than 1000 messages per day, so during the three months' data collection, I will collect a week's data every month instead of collecting everything every day.
2. Online semi-structured interview via WeChat will be conducted (on laptop), in Norwich (Oct - Nov 2020). I will interview around 12 mothers, one-to-one over two months. Each interview will be around 40 minutes, I will record the audio through my mobile phone and take brief notes during the conversation. Considering the Convid-19 situation, I may decide to conduct online interviews at this stage instead of face-to-face one, but if the situation allows, I may change the plan and go back to China to meet participants in October.
3. Face-to-face interviews and participatory workshops will be held in Shanghai (Dec 2020 - Feb 2021). After the interviews, the 12 participants will be divided into three groups (according to their timetable). We will meet once a week one hour per time for 3 weeks, and we will have 3 participatory workshops together like a focus group, with visual methods such as drawing a picture of 'rive of life'.

Supervisory arrangements whilst in the field including communication and/or local supervision:

Regular Skype meeting every month and sending fieldnotes by email.

Identify accommodation in host country/field site:

Will rent a flat in Shanghai during the period of research in China (Dec – Feb).

Is special training required...........Yes/No? If 'Yes', give details:

No

Describe any pre-planning activities required (visa requirements, access to data collection sites, approval from government agencies):

I am a Chinese citizen, no visa required.

Describe medical arrangements (vaccinations, access to health care in field):

Easily access to state or private hospital in Shanghai, no vaccinations required.

Is Medical Insurance arranged? Yes

Are there any pre-existing medical conditions that require special attention during field work? No.

If yes, please confirm that your doctor has agreed required actions:

Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice consulted? Please access https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice (Specify any locations you will need to avoid)

Will avoid Hubei province during the fieldwork due to the particular risks of COVID-19. FCO announced, '*The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is advising British nationals against all non-essential international travel at this time. Existing advice for China remains in place: the FCO advise against all travel to Hubei Province'*.

Updated at 1 May 2020, I will check the latest advice before travel.

Please note that if the location the applicant plans to travel to is flagged under FCO guidance as 'advised against all travel' EDU will NOT PERMIT the applicant to go into that area. If it is flagged as 'advised against all but essential travel' the applicant must submit this form and it will be considered at the EDU REC.

PLEASE FILL IN RISK ASSESSMENT OVERLEAF

RISK ASSESSMENT GRID

The form below is intended as a summary of a discussion between you and your supervisor. The general process for this is to identify hazards and identify ways of reducing the risk as much as possible (at least to an acceptable level). ***Your assessment must, as a minimum, cover the following hazards: health and physical hazards, and personal safety.***

Risk/requirements:		**Risk status – please check and comment if necessary**			
		Checked and not a concern or N/A	**Checked and organised – OK**	**Not yet checked**	**A problem (explain)**
Diseases	Typhoid, malaria, hepatitis, HIV infection etc.	√			
Food and drink	Food poisoning; food allergies	√			
	Drinking water diseases	√			
	Washing water diseases	√			
Training	First aid/health advice				
	Languages – if host country language is not your own indicate what training you might need	√			
	Country background awareness (culture, economy etc.)	√			
	Technical skills for equipment	√			
Personal safety	Culture/dress code	√			
	Civil unrest – emergency plans	√			
	Ease of contact with help in emergencies (local support network)	√			**I have friends and networks in Shanghai**
	Specific risks of research location (refer to FCO advice and other location specific details). If any identified, give details of support in case needed	√			
Biological hazards	Domestic and wild animals	√			
	Venomous reptiles and poisonous plants	√			
	Insects	√			
	Health risks not identified above	√			
Physical hazards	Climatic extremes	√			
	Hazardous substances	√			
	Severe terrain	√			
	Natural disasters	√			

	Local transport	√			**Shanghai is a big city, its public transportation system is well developed and the underground is very convenient, so it would not be a problem for me.**

SUPERVISOR'S COMMENTS ABOUT RISKS

We consider that Qingru has a close understanding of the risks (as a Chinese citizen familiar with the culture and language) and she has developed an alternative plan if it is not safe to travel to China in December.

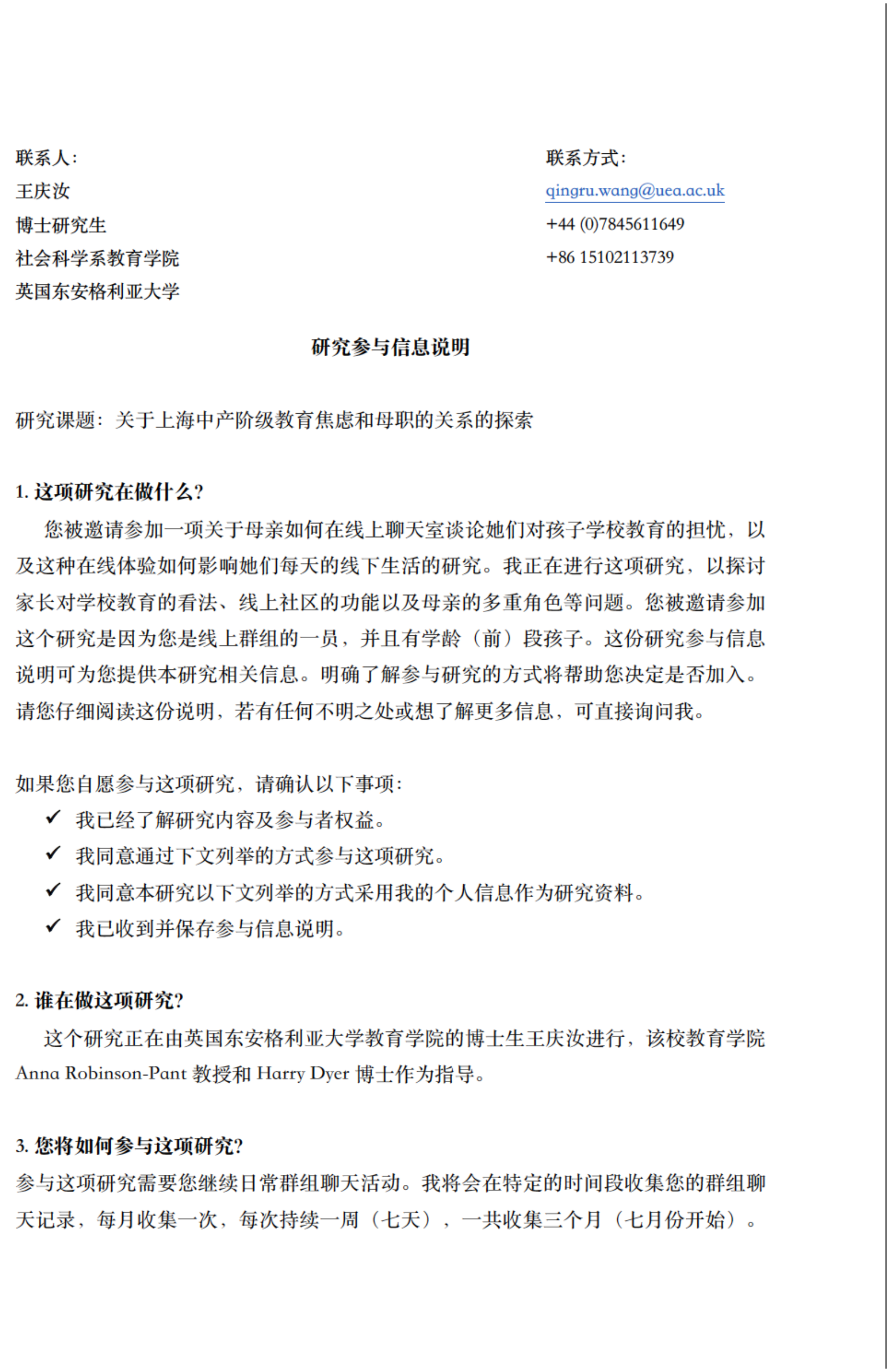
Student's Signature: **Qingru Wang** Date: **09.05.2020**

Supervisor's Signature: **Anna Robinson-Pant** Date: **14.05.2020**

Students: This form should be completed and signed by you. Once complete you will need to meet with your Supervisor to discuss the contents and obtain the Supervisor's signature confirming that this form is acceptable and complete. Once you have obtained your Supervisor's signature, you **MUST** submit this with your ethics application.

Supervisors: Please review the contents of this form and then if agreed, sign and return the completed form to the Student.

Appendix 2 Chinese version information sheet and consent form



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研究参与信息说明

研究课题：关于上海中产阶级教育焦虑和母职的关系的探索

1. 这项研究在做什么?

您被邀请参加一项关于母亲如何在线上聊天室谈论她们对孩子学校教育的担忧，以及这种在线体验如何影响她们每天的线下生活的研究。我正在进行这项研究，以探讨家长对学校教育的看法、线上社区的功能以及母亲的多重角色等问题。您被邀请参加这个研究是因为您是线上群组的一员，并且有学龄（前）段孩子。这份研究参与信息说明可为您提供本研究相关信息。明确了解参与研究的方式将帮助您决定是否加入。请您仔细阅读这份说明，若有任何不明之处或想了解更多信息，可直接询问我。

如果您自愿参与这项研究，请确认以下事项:
- ✓ 我已经了解研究内容及参与者权益。
- ✓ 我同意通过下文列举的方式参与这项研究。
- ✓ 我同意本研究以下文列举的方式采用我的个人信息作为研究资料。
- ✓ 我已收到并保存参与信息说明。

2. 谁在做这项研究?

这个研究正在由英国东安格利亚大学教育学院的博士生王庆汝进行，该校教育学院 Anna Robinson-Pant 教授和 Harry Dyer 博士作为指导。

3. 您将如何参与这项研究?

参与这项研究需要您继续日常群组聊天活动。我将会在特定的时间段收集您的群组聊天记录，每月收集一次，每次持续一周（七天），一共收集三个月（七月份开始）。

我不会打断您在群组的对话，但是可能会私下询问您相关的问题——以您同意加入本研究并接受（线上和/或线下）个人访谈为前提，您可以拒绝回答任何不想回答的问题。您还可能会被邀请和聊天群组内另外 3-4 人一起参加三个线下研讨会。我会通过一些互动性小组活动帮助大家一起讨论教育和母亲相关的问题，然后您和组员们可以将想法在纸上画或写出来（通过树形图、表格、图表等）。

4. 该研究会占用您多长时间?

每次个人访谈将会占用您 30 分钟左右，每次小组研讨会需要 1 小时左右，所以本研究一共需要占用您 4 小时左右。我每个月会在聊天群组出现一周，一共三个月（从七月开始）。但是这部分只需要您像平时一样参与，不需要投入额外的时间。

5. 您一定要参与这项研究吗？可以中途退出吗?

您可自由选择是否参与这项研究。您的决定不会影响您与研究人员或东安格利亚大学任何人的关系。如果您决定参与研究，但稍后改变了想法，您可随时告诉我。访谈过程中，您可以随时中止谈话，可以拒绝回答任何不想答的问题。退出后，已收集的您的信息将会被销毁，您的资料将不会运用在本研究中，除非您希望我们继续使用。如果您加入线下研讨会，您也可以随时退出，可以拒绝回答任何问题。但是，一旦研讨会开始，就无法从我的记录中撤销您的个人评论，因为这是小组讨论。如果您加入在线观察，您也可以随时停止参与。如果您决定以后再退出研究，则您的信息将从记录中删除，并且不会包含在任何结果中，直到我已经分析并发布了结果。

6. 这项研究存在可能的风险与伤害吗?

除了花费您的时间，我不希望您参与本研究会有任何风险或成本。某些女性可能会很难谈论她们对特定主题的看法和感受，如果她们在这方面有过负面经历的话。我会注意避免任何可能使您烦忧的话题，如果您不喜欢，可以拒绝回答。如果有人情绪低沉，我将会尽可能地提供支持。

7. 通过这项研究您会有什么收获?

我希望通过和线上群组的朋友谈论您对孩子教育的想法和担忧，会帮助您减少焦虑并找到与之相处的办法。同时，我希望这是一个帮助您交到更多线下朋友的机会。

8. 您参与研究的相关资料会被如何处理?

经您的同意，我将收集您的个人信息作为研究使用。信息使用仅限本说明中列举的方式。研究数据的管理将会遵从《2018年通用数据保护法规定》（2018 Data Protection Regulation Act）和东安格利亚大学 2019 年《研究数据管理条例》。

您的信息将会被安全地保存，未经您的许可不会泄露，除非法律要求。本研究的成果可能会被发表，但是您将会被匿名。这种情况下，研究数据将被加密保存并于 10 年后销毁。

9. 如果您想获得更多相关信息该怎么办?

当您读完这份信息说明，想获取更多信息，或有任何问题，可随时与我联系。在研究的任何阶段，您都可以与我联系：王庆汝 qingru.wang@uea.ac.uk 或者 +86 (0)15102113739。您还可以通过微信（15102113739）直接与我联系，我很乐意（在群里或者私聊）回答您任何问题。

10. 关于研究结果您会被告知吗?

您有权利收到关于这项研究的结果反馈。如您需要，可以在下面的知情同意书中勾选该选项。反馈将以一页摘要的方式呈现，您将会在本研究结束后收到。

11. 如果您对这项研究有意见或想法该和谁联系?

本次研究由东安格利亚大学教育与终身学习学员伦理审查委员会审查通过。如果您有任何问题，您与我联系：王庆汝 qingru.wang@uea.ac.uk

如果您想和其他人沟通，您可以和我的导师联系：Professor Anna Robinson-Pant a.robinson-pant@uea.ac.uk；Doctor Harry Dyer harry.t.dyer@uea.ac.uk

若您担心本研究的进行方式，或者希望向独立于本研究的人投诉，请联系教育与终身学习学院院长：Professor Nanili Boodhoo N.Boodhoo@uea.ac.uk.

12. 如果您愿意参与本研究，下一步怎么办?

您需要填写一份知情同意书（一式两份）并通过电子邮件的方式发送给我。请保管好这份信息说明和第二份知情同意书。

研究参与知情同意书 （一）

本人，____________________（姓名），同意参与本课题研究。经我同意，我认为:

✓ 我已经了解研究内容、参与方式和可能存在的风险与权益。

✓ 我已经阅读研究参与说明，并且可以与研究人员讨论我对这项研究的看法。

✓ 研究人员回答了我对这项研究的任何疑问，我对答案感到满意。

✓ 我知道这项研究是自愿参与的，我不一定必须参加。是否参与这个研究不会影响我和研究人员，东安格利亚大学，以及我所在的群组的成员的关系。

✓ 我知道我可以随时退出这个研究。

✓ 我知道如果我不想继续参加访谈，可以随时停止。除非我同意，否则所有和我相关的研究记录都会被抹除，相关信息也不会被本研究采用。我也知道我可以拒绝回答任何不想回答的问题。

✓ 我知道如果我不想继续参加线下研讨会，可以随时停止。我知道我可以拒绝回答任何不想回答的问题。我也理解除非通过视频观察或以某种方式单独识别我，否则无法删除我的数据。

✓ 我知道如果我不想继续参加线上观察，可以随时停止。除非我同意，否则所有和我相关的研究记录都会被抹除，相关信息也不会被本研究采用。

✓ 我知道本研究收集的关于我的个人信息将会被安全地保存并仅用于我已同意的目的。我了解，除非法律要求，否则只有在获得我的允许后，我的信息才会告知他人。

✓ 我了解本项目的研究结果可能会被发表，出版物中不会包含我的名字或任何有关我的可识别信息。

我同意:

录音	是	否
线上观察（群组聊天和朋友圈）	是	否
收集照片	是	否
您是否需要查看访谈笔记	是	否
您是否需要成果反馈?	是	否

若有兴趣，请提供电子邮箱：______________________________。

签名：　　　　　　　　　　　　　日期:

研究参与知情同意书 （二）

本人，____________________（姓名），同意参与本课题研究。经我同意，我认为：

- ✓ 我已经了解研究内容、参与方式和可能存在的风险与权益。
- ✓ 我已经阅读研究参与说明，并且可以与研究人员讨论我对这项研究的看法。
- ✓ 研究人员回答了我对这项研究的任何疑问，我对答案感到满意。
- ✓ 我知道这项研究是自愿参与的，我不一定必须参加。是否参与这个研究不会影响我和研究人员，东安格利亚大学，以及我所在的群组的成员的关系。
- ✓ 我知道我可以随时退出这个研究。
- ✓ 我知道如果我不想继续参加访谈，可以随时停止。除非我同意，否则所有和我相关的研究记录都会被抹除，相关信息也不会被本研究采用。我也知道我可以拒绝回答任何不想回答的问题。
- ✓ 我知道如果我不想继续参加线下研讨会，可以随时停止。我知道我可以拒绝回答任何不想回答的问题。我也理解除非通过视频观察或某种方式单独识别我，否则无法删除我的数据。
- ✓ 我知道如果我不想继续参加线上观察，可以随时停止。除非我同意，否则所有和我相关的研究记录都会被抹除，相关信息也不会被本研究采用。
- ✓ 我知道本研究收集的关于我的个人信息将会被安全地保存并仅用于我已同意的目的。我了解，除非法律要求，否则只有在获得我的允许后，我的信息才会告知他人。
- ✓ 我了解本项目的研究结果可能会被发表，出版物中不会包含我的名字或任何有关我的可识别信息。

我同意:

录音	是	否
线上观察（群组聊天和朋友圈）	是	否
拍摄照片	是	否
您是否需要查看访谈笔记	是	否
您是否需要成果反馈?	是	否

若有兴趣，请提供电子邮箱：____________________________。

签名： 日期