DIGITAL PARENTING BURDENS IN CHINA

PRAISE FOR *DIGITAL PARENTING BURDENS IN CHINA*

"Lim & Wang's book provides us with a rare peek into the world of family life in China, a global technological leader, as it is embracing digitalization in all aspects of its life: Parenting, education, leisure, and social relationships. Their thoughtful empirically based observations in this unique culture are highly valuable for readers worldwide well beyond China as they raise the challenges and opportunities facing all families adjusting to the ever-changing digital advancements in their everyday lives."

Dafna Lemish, Distinguished Professor of Journalism and Media Studies, Rutgers University

"A definitive volume, this book offers nuanced analysis about children, parenting, and digital media in urban China. The implications are, of course, far beyond China as AI and tech-facilitated practices fundamentally transform parenting itself, wherever you are."

Jack Linchuan Qiu, Shaw Foundation Professor of Media Technology, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University

"In this insightful and timely book, Sun Sun Lim and Yang Wang provide a groundbreaking exploration of the burdens Chinese parents face due to the digitalization of family life and intensifying academic pressures. Empirically rich and theoretically nuanced, this book offers invaluable guide to anyone seeking to understand the evolving strains and shifting dynamics of parenting in a digitalizing world."

Bingchun Meng, Professor, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics & Political Science

"Parenting and family life are not what they used to be, particularly since COVID. Many of the tasks and events that marked family life have been changed via digitalization, such as online shopping, gaming and social networking. In their book Digital Parenting Burdens in China: Online Homework, Parent Chats and Punch-in Culture, *Lim and Wang walk us through these changes as experienced in urban China. Thanks to the work of Lim and Wang, this book provides us with perhaps the first glimpse into digital parenting in China. A must-read."*

Rich Ling, author of *Taken for Grantedness: The Embedding of Mobile Communication into Society* (MIT Press, 2012)

"This book gives us unparalleled views into what was a black box until now: everyday digital parenting dilemmas playing out in the households of another technological superpower, China."

Anne Collier, Founder and Executive Director at
The Net Safety Collaborative

"The global rise of China is accompanied by major technological changes, which reveals important challenges for society and family life. Digital Parenting Burdens in China *explores one such significant challenge in studying how digital connectivity affects parents in how they navigate their children's educational journey in a country dominated by a quest for academic excellence. This is an insightful and thought-provoking book which should be essential reading for every parent and government worried about education in an increasingly digital fueled world."*

David De Cremer, Dunton Family Dean of D'Amore-McKim
School of Business, Northeastern University

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Online Homework, Parent Chats and Punch-in Culture

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We dedicate this book to our families whose support make all the difference.

1

DIGITAL PARENTING: WHY THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE MATTERS

When conducting fieldwork for this book, we travelled to Hangzhou, China, in 2019, the year before the world would be overturned by the COVID-19 pandemic. We were blissfully unaware that an epochal event was around the corner and immersed ourselves in the city's famed tech-friendly environment, juxtaposed against its legendary historical opulence. Often referred to as the Silicon Valley of China (Zhang, 2018), the capital city of Zhejiang province is home to several leading technology companies including online retail behemoth Alibaba, ride hailing and delivery pioneer *Didi Chuxing*, as well as internet, video game, and music streaming giant NetEase. These relatively youthful innovations are woven into the city's centuries-old landscape with iconic landmarks such as West Lake, *Leifeng* Pagoda, and the Tomb of General *Yue Fei*.

Amidst this blend of ancient and modern, the entire city of Hangzhou has emerged as a veritable testbed for technological innovations that residents and visitors frequently encounter as they go about their everyday lives. Facial recognition is used for routine payments in stores big and small and malls boast of smart maps tracking human congestion to guide the movement of patrons. These temples to consumerism are also peppered with new-fangled technological diversions that attract teens and young families alike. There are photo booths featuring giant touchscreens for printing instant selfies with snazzy filters that parents and kids rambunctiously jostle over. Another draw is vending machines selling chocolate – three-dimensional (3D)-printed in a Pokémon character of your choice – right before your eyes. Besides such entertaining wares, technologically enabled conveniences such as public smartphone chargers and shared bicycles and cars can be easily accessed on street corners, activated through mobile phone apps. It was in this techno-centric,

techno-optimistic environment that we first commenced our research on Chinese families' use of technology in parenting.

DIGITAL PARENTING WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

The critical role technology plays in parenting in Chinese households is best illuminated (literally) by a popular study lamp known as the *Dali deng* (powerful lamp). Developed by ByteDance, the parent company running popular social media platforms such as TikTok and its Chinese counterpart *Douyin*, this lamp was introduced as a reliable and capable study companion for children (Lim, 2021). Beyond its basic functionality as a lamp, the *Dali deng* is equipped with two integrated cameras – one directly facing the child and another positioned above the seated child. These cameras enable parents to keep a vigilant eye on their children remotely, whether they are at the office, the mall, or even in a different country altogether (Chen, 2021a). In instances where parents are occupied and unable to provide direct supervision, they have the option to enlist someone else to monitor or tutor their children through the lamp's phone-sized screen. Notably, this intelligent lamp is capable of providing educational guidance itself, leveraging artificial intelligence to assist with maths problems, recite Chinese poems, and pronounce English words. The range of services is expanding, with additional features and academic subjects in the development pipeline (Lim, 2021). Children also have the ability to upload videos of their homework for parental review, as well as record video responses to interactive quizzes that can be shared with other Dali customers (Chen, 2021a).

This voice-activated device combines the features of lamps, smartphones, home assistants, and social media. Higher-priced models include additional features like identifying poor posture. If the device detects the child hunching over, it triggers a voice alert, takes photos of the child, and retains these images for up to three days, allowing parents to review them at their convenience. Despite the substantial price of USD120, ByteDance successfully sold 10,000 units of the lamp in its initial month of release. Additionally, the Chinese tech giant Tencent was in the process of developing its own version. This telling example illustrates key aspects of Chinese children's lives and the parenting practices surrounding them. In China, academic achievement of children is a household priority, and parents invest considerable resources to bolster these academic pursuits. Any technological innovation that can boost educational accomplishments is welcomed and actively incorporated into their parenting practices. Indeed, with technology encroaching into virtually every facet

of society, Chinese families have incorporated digital devices and services in their everyday routines as our subsequent chapters will reveal. Significantly, as households domesticate technology, integrating it into their daily lives to meet their demands and desires, they embrace the advantages and conveniences it brings but grapple with managing the associated costs and drawbacks. For Chinese parents, technology is unequivocally both a blessing and a curse.

Indeed, what had principally motivated our study are rising concerns that technology has intensified Chinese parents' responsibility for their children's educational endeavours. Exemplifying this growing unease is an incident involving a father who was kicked out of a school chat group after he had complained about his Primary 3 child's homework (Yan, 2023). On the evening of 17 March 2023, his child's form teacher had informed the parent–teacher group on popular Chinese social media app WeChat that all students should watch an educational programme and submit a report of around 300 Chinese characters thereafter. Whereas several parents sought clarifications from the teacher on the assignment, the father instead lamented in the group: 'Parents have been assigned homework again', only to be removed from the group within 20 minutes.

Irate, he took screenshots of the chat group and posted them on his WeChat account that was visible to other parents and teachers (Yan, 2023). This triggered an angry phone call from the form teacher who demanded to know why he had shared the screenshots so openly. The father then recounted the entire incident in a video taken in front of the school gate, which he posted online for public viewing. It quickly went viral and led to an investigation into the incident by the Qinyang Education Bureau of Henan province. His video practically ignited a firestorm of debate across China, with many parents empathising with him and venting fervidly about the practice of making parents directly accountable to teachers for their children's homework.

This increasingly avid use of digital platforms for education-related communication among parents of all socioeconomic brackets is in fact a notable trend in Chinese society. Schools across elementary and high school have adopted home-school conferencing and class management apps such as DingTalk, *Yiqixue*, and *Banji youhua dashi* for teachers to communicate with parents so as to better involve them in overseeing their children's studies and homework. Home-school conferencing refers to communication between educators and parents concerning their children and is considered a fundamental aspect of parental involvement in education today. It encompasses both individualised communication between teachers and parents about their children specifically, as well as broader communication addressing general school or class information. Whereas teachers previously relied on face-to-face meetings

and phone calls to engage parents on their children's academic progress or disciplinary concerns, the increased prevalence of online communication has significantly technologised home-school conferencing (Stright & Yeo, 2014).

Education technology or edtech platforms now have home-school conferencing features built in for enhanced parent–teacher communication. These edtech platforms offer various functionalities such as lesson schedules, tools for managing homework, notifications, online courses, and shared drives for uploading learning materials and assignments. Extensively utilised by both primary and secondary schoolteachers as well as parents in urban China, the frequent use of these apps enables effective, immediate communication between parents and teachers. This helps teachers to provide timely feedback on students' academic performance and to share daily instructions with parents to guide their children in their studies. Parents are required to respond to these requests while staying informed about their children's educational progress and achievements. A good example is the Home-School Communication System, known as *Xiaoxuntong*, extensively employed in schools throughout China's Guangdong province (Cheng, 2015). Teachers utilise mass messaging in the system to publicly praise students with commendable academic achievements while criticising those who perform inadequately: 'Xiao Mui improved a lot in the Maths exam; while Xiao Tian and Xiao Ming received a "fail" grade' (Cheng 2015, p. 122).

In addition to these specialised home-school conferencing applications, another notable trend involves parent chat groups on WeChat, China's foremost social media app (see Chapter 2 for information on WeChat's market share, user base, features, and applications). For instance, educational institutions in Chongqing mandated the establishment of official WeChat accounts to facilitate teacher–parent and teacher–student communication at all levels, from kindergarten to middle school (Sun, 2016). These chats extend beyond mere announcements and reminders, serving as crucial platforms for teachers to oversee and assess students' homework submissions. Teachers have been known to phone students to remind them of midnight submission deadlines, while sending simultaneous notifications to parents to enlist their support for timely completion of assignments (Sun, 2016). The incessant barrage of homework reminders to both parents and children has reportedly caused parents so much stress that some resort to muting these notifications.

These WeChat groups that can include teachers, one or both parents, and even grandparents are an entire ecosystem unto themselves with their own norms, linguistic codes, and applications. Schools leverage them for administrative tasks such as circulating official notices and collecting fees for uniforms and meals. Parents use them to seek anything from last-minute

requests for information, to the sharing of photographs taken during school activities, to assistance for challenging homework assignments. Regardless of the varied purposes to which these chats are put, parents invest considerable energy in responding to messages and requests that flood phones with intensity (Peng, 2023). As an American father who had enrolled his twins in Chengdu Experimental Primary School wryly observed:

> *On the first day of class, I counted forty-nine beeps from the WeChat group. There were seventy messages on the second day. Day Three clocked in at two hundred and thirty-seven – an average of one beep every six minutes for twenty-four hours. That was also the day that I figured out how to mute the alerts on WeChat. (Hessler, 2023)*

Nevertheless, however tiresome the chats could be, parents can ill afford to tune out. Yet another American parent who had enrolled her son in a Chinese elementary school in Shanghai lamented, 'A parent's reply to a teacher's WeChat message was expected to be immediate, if not instantaneous, and keeping up with this daily flow of information was part of my job' (Chu, 2017, p. 35).

As these media reports and first-person accounts suggest, parent–parent communication in these WeChat groups has also heightened competition among parents, fostering an environment driven by self-indulgence and self-aggrandisement. Parents openly flaunt their children's achievements on these platforms and ingratiate themselves with teachers to earn preferential treatment (Lim & Wang, 2024), becoming effectively 'flattering groups' where parents strategically curry favour with teachers (Yuan, 2020). For example, instead of sending a private message to a teacher to express appreciation for her tutelage, a parent may send a message to the entire group of parents and the teacher in order to publicly praise her for helping the child win a competition. In doing so, the parent forges positive social capital with the teacher, while glorifying the child's triumph, although possibly earning the ire and resentment of other parents (Lim & Wang, 2024).

These chat groups have also been used for disseminating motivational messages, promoting products, and even gifting digital money to teachers through virtual red envelopes (Zhu, 2023). Consequently, the Chinese authorities sought to establish guidelines to prohibit commercial activities and ban the public disclosure of students' academic achievements (Cheng, 2015) albeit with uneven conformance and enforcement as media reports strongly suggest. Although efforts by Chinese parents to sharpen their children's competitive edge through gifts for teachers are not new, the publicness of such chat

groups has distinctly raised the stakes for parent–teacher communication and made the performative dimension of parenting significantly more pronounced (Lim & Wang, 2024).

As the preceding discussion shows, the digital parenting burden of Chinese parents is substantial. The empirical evidence we have gathered for this book comprising 80 interviews with 60 Chinese parents in Beijing and Hangzhou before and during the COVID-19 pandemic captures how they appropriate technology as they raise their children and steer them towards academic achievement. In our subsequent chapters, we will chart how these digitally enabled parenting practices have intensified even as parents bear the weight of social aspirations in their quest for academic excellence. We also capture how Chinese parents navigated the rocky terrains of children's online learning during the pandemic lockdowns, feeling both supported but also overwhelmed from being ceaselessly connected via always-on, always available digital platforms.

FAMILY LIFE AND PARENTING PRIORITIES IN CHINA

To fully appreciate why digital parenting responsibilities so consume the energies of Chinese parents, it is important to foreground our analysis with an exposition into the family life and priorities of urban Chinese households with schoolgoing children. Although China is a sprawling country with a population of over 1.4 billion spread across 22 provinces, generalising about the nature of childhood and family life is difficult. Nevertheless, for urban families, the country's integration into the global market economy has led to a 'growing commercialisation and standardisation of Chinese childhood' (Naftali, 2016, p. 3).

It has been observed that parentocracy – avid parental investment in child rearing – has become the prevailing trend in urban China (Meng, 2020), significantly transforming the role of parents and home-school interaction (Lyu & Zhong, 2023). The country's cultural lingo has also caught up with this intensifying shift, with terms like 'mompetition' or *pinma* (competitive mothering) (Xiong, 2018; Xu, 2017), 'wolf father', *jiwa jiazhang* (pushy parents)', and 'scientific parenting' reflecting Chinese parents' proactive involvement in children's education. So lofty is this parenting mission that it has been described as the 'moral project of Chinese childrearing' (Xu, 2017, p. 2), inextricably linked with 'the long history in China of parents finding existential meaning in the success of their children' (Kipnis, 1997, p. 215). The societal expectations pinned on the parenting endeavour have thus translated into

heightened parental involvement in caregiving and significant investments in their education and overall development (Gu, 2021; Jankowiak & Moore, 2017; Short et al., 2001).

Research in other parts of the world suggests similar trends, and the growing belief in the pivotal role of parents in shaping children's identity and future has been termed parental determinism (Faircloth, 2014). The shift towards parental determinism and the exaggerated perception of childhood vulnerability have been criticised for fostering too heavy a reliance on parents to shape children's development and discounts their resilience, instead encouraging and legitimising excessive parental involvement (Furedi, 2008). Consequently, parenting has become overly burdensome, and couples are thus discouraged from having children. Over time, the concept of parental determinism appears to have become more entrenched, and the societal belief in the fundamental influence of parents on a child's development is increasingly accepted without questioning (Furedi, 2002).

In China, this emergence of parental determinism and parentocracy has been attributed to China's introduction of the one-child policy in the late 1970s that morphed into a universal two-child policy in 2015 and, subsequently, a three-child policy in June 2021 (Zhai et al., 2014). During the one-child policy era, most families were restricted to having only one child, with limited exceptions granted for two or three children based on specific criteria such as ethnicity, health, socioeconomic status, and geographical factors including rural/urban distinctions (Peng, 1997). The one-child policy saw a rise in 4-2-1 families, comprising four older people (paternal and maternal grandparents), two parents, and only one child (Jankowiak & Moore, 2017; Long et al., 2021). These children are colloquially referred to as the X*iao Huangdi* (Little Emperors) in public and scholarly discourse due to the inordinate attention, care, and investments bestowed upon them by their families (Wang et al., 2009).

Indeed, with only one or a few children, Chinese families have become especially focussed on ensuring the quality of their children's upbringing. Chinese grandparents too, scarred by the deprivation they experienced during the Cultural Revolution, are particularly determined to confer every advantage on their grandchildren (Naftali, 2016). Hence, advertisements for products and services targeted at infants and children exploit this very sentiment by exhorting parents and other caregivers with the message: 'Don't let your kids lose from the beginning' (Yu, 2014, p. 123). Whereas under Maoist ideology, child rearing was heavily influenced by the state, the prevailing notion today is that individual families can determine parenting outcomes through consumption. Indeed, for Chinese society, it is 'important for parents to feel

that they have tried everything possible to ensure a fair chance for their only child' (Kuan, 2015, p. 183). Children have become a market segment in their own right and corporations conduct market research, even engaging experts to develop child-centric products while marketing campaigns equate consumption with good parenting (Yu, 2014). With this concerted shift towards parental determinism powered by consumerism, coupled with the quest for social mobility, contemporary Chinese families have never been more deeply invested in their children's academic endeavours.

The country's rigidly standardised pathways of academic progression have unyielding standards and impose considerable stress on parents and children alike, along the child's entire educational journey. At the preschool stage, five- and six-year-olds compete for the best urban primary schools by taking entrance tests and fielding interviews (Chu, 2017). The next major milestone to clear is the National High School Entrance Exam or *zhongkao*. Although 16–18 million students sit the *zhongkao*, fewer than 8 million will be accepted into academic high schools that qualify them to take the *gaokao* exam for entry into university (Chu, 2017), of which elite institutions such as Peking, Tsinghua, and Fudan Universities are especially coveted (Ryan, 2019). Chinese parents' eagerness to involve themselves in their children's academic endeavours is therefore understandable considering such fierce competition in the *gaokao* race.

Indeed, the stakes involved in the *gaokao* are overwhelmingly high. An intense multiple-choice exam taken over three days, it is heavily reliant on memorisation and is a 'terrible source of anxiety' (Rocca, 2015, p. 68), with most students spending 13 or 14 hours a day preparing for it during their final year in school. As Ash (2016, p. 31) recounted of a schoolgirl's 'coming of age' experience:

> *When Xiaoxiao started middle school, everything changed. Her dolls were taken away, TV was restricted and the fruit storeroom she played in became off bounds. The shift was so sudden that Xiaoxiao remembers thinking she was being punished for an unknown crime. Overnight, the pampering she was used to transformed into the true legacy of the only-child generation: crippling study pressure. Early childhood is a protected time, but the fairy tale crumbles as soon as you are old enough to hit the books twelve hours a day.*

For a sense of the collective anxieties surrounding the *gaokao*, consider how various consumer brands have launched campaigns to boost students' morale during the critical period (Jarrett, 2023). Food delivery company *Meituan* offered practical support through its 'errand-running' service, delivering