

Instilling Care: Self-care and other-care in contemporary Chinese families

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This paper explores the concept of care as a socialisation goal for school-age children among contemporary Chinese parents. Data was generated from interviews with parents from rural and urban families in Nanjing, China in 2011–2012. Parents' spontaneous remarks on care revealed how today's Chinese parents highlighted childcare as parental responsibilities, cultivated children's self-care skills, and promoted children's other-caring qualities. In so doing, parents attempted to motivate concurrent and future elder care, improve children's social competence, and inspire altruistic other-care in their children. Although Chinese parents' imagination of care is largely centralised within the family due to sociocultural contexts such as the culture of intensive parenthood, China's care deficiency in a neoliberal economy, and the One-Child Policy, Chinese parents also aspired instilling other-caring qualities in their children.

Keywords: socialisation goal, care, China

Introduction

“We failed our daughter.” These words from Mr. Zhang came to my surprise as we met at his home in Nanjing on a winter evening in 2011. Mr. and Mrs. Zhang, both college graduates holding respectable white-collar jobs, had a daughter in the fourth grade. As Mrs. Zhang was busy doing dinner dishes and their daughter studying by herself, Mr. Zhang sat with me in the living room with his coat on and his briefcase in his hand, ready to dash to a work meeting as soon as we would finish. Nevertheless, Mr. Zhang patiently and eloquently recounted his experiences as a parent. “There was so much going on when [our daughter] was little – both my parents and my wife's parents were very ill. We had to wean [our daughter] early as we had to attend to the elderly from both sides and had

no time for breastfeeding. When she needed our care the most, we couldn't..." he paused, "Now we spend as much of our limited time as possible with her, although there are always too many work dinners one cannot avoid ... one does need to keep in touch [with the network] to survive nowadays, isn't it? ... but we try our best ... so there is at least one of us staying at home for her company every day. We *could* leave her to her grandmother as she lives nearby, but you know how the elders can be doting – so we moved around our own schedule [to be at home] instead."

Mr. Zhang and his family were my informants for a larger study on parent-child interaction in rural and urban Chinese families. While the Zhangs were better educated and more affluent than average, their beliefs and reasoning about what constitutes good care for children resonated widely. In this paper, I will draw on narratives from Chinese parents with school-age children to examine parents' ideals about care flows within and beyond the family, and parents' practices to cultivate their children's propensity and capacity to care for themselves, family members, and others. In so doing, I aim to show how the socialisation of multiple forms of care were both grounded in China's socioeconomic, cultural, and moral realities, and oriented towards building a care-rich society in the future.

Parenting goals and practices in contemporary China

Parenting goals, or what parents hope and desire for their children, have long attracted scholarly interest from various disciplines. Developmental psychologists see parenting goals as the cognitive drive behind parental and family practices, which in turn determine the adjustment of children and youth ([Chao, 2000](#); Darling & Steinberg, 1993). For cultural and cross-cultural researchers, parenting goals reflect the social, cultural, historical and political contexts within which family and children are situated ([Keller et al., 2006](#); Super & Harkness, 2022). Numerous studies have captured diverse and changing parenting goals within and across national boundaries, and have attempted to link individual-level parenting goals to the broader macrosystem (e.g., [Park et al., 2014](#); [Suizzo, 2016](#)).

The present paper focuses on care-related parenting goals and practices in China, a fascinating site to explore the relations between the personal and the political due to the deep-seated family-state parallelism and the complex, rapidly shifting sociocultural

realities (Ji et al., 2017). Chinese parents have been found to be sensitive to contextual changes and to actively revise their parenting goals and practices to advance the public agenda, as visible during the early 20th century “family revolution” when public intellectuals openly vowed to raise a new generation of citizens for national salvation (Li, 2018). The experiences of today’s Chinese parents are shaped by a mixture of lingering (and revived) Confucian ethics that emphasise family lineage and bond, the ultra-low fertility that reshapes the intergenerational power dynamics, the expanding neoliberal economy and retreating state welfare, as well as imported (and sometimes state-sponsored) “scientific expertise” in childrearing (Binah-Pollack, 2014; Li & Eklund, 2022; Naftali, 2014). These political, economic, and ideological forces – sometimes mutually conflicting – jointly build a landscape of “downward familism” in which family life and childrearing is situated (Yan, 2021). In this context, the family returns to be the key (if not the only) provider of financial, social, and emotional resources for individual development, but with a new prioritisation on younger (instead of older) generations.

Recent scholarly conversations regarding Chinese parents’ dreams and desires for their children were partially fueled by the “tiger mother” narrative (Chua, 2011) which, together with other pop culture products, stereotypically portrayed Chinese parents as single-mindedly obsessed with children’s achievements and obedience. However, latest studies highlighted the changes and multifacetedness of Chinese parents’ goals for their children. For example, Way and colleagues (2013) documented how urban Chinese mothers with adolescent children underscored socioemotional well-being as a key parenting goal. Similarly, Kim and colleagues’ (2017) interviews with Dalian youth in northeast China captured a drastic intergenerational shift from emphasising children’s discipline and achievement to an endorsement of freedom and individual pursuit. Like a “mosaic” that mixes the traditional and the modern (Ji, 2017), Chinese parents’ goals for their children have been found to include inherent conflict and tension, such as the valuation of sociability and connections versus the pursuit of personal achievement (Fong, 2008).

These studies offer valuable initial insights into the embeddedness of parents’ vision for their children in contemporary China and their dilemmas and ambivalence among incongruent value systems. The present paper will zoom in on care, a spontaneously emerging and recurrent theme in Chinese parents’ narratives of their

parenting beliefs and experiences. Before introducing the practicalities and findings of this study, I will briefly review the concept of care in multidisciplinary social science literature.

Conceptualizing care: Vertical and horizontal models

Care is complicated, hard work that involves considerable time commitment, organization, and intense physical and emotional labour that “entails challenging demands, fluctuating and indeterminate assessment criteria, and recurring appraisals” for caregivers (Bornstein et al., 2003; Coleman & Karraker, 1997). Care work is indispensable for human survival due to human infants’ uniquely premature physique and lengthy period of dependency (Lamb & Sternberg, 1992). The recently prolonged life expectancy worldwide poses additional challenges for elder care ([Bengtson, 2003](#)). The attendance of physical and psychological needs of the vulnerable is not only critical for individual survival and adjustment (Chen et al., 2011; Vandell et al., 2010), but also provides context and space for interpersonal bonds and cultural transmission.

Whereas many empirical studies discuss singular types of care (e.g., focus on childcare only, or elder care only), several theoretical models have been proposed to link care in different contexts. Attachment theory posits that the caregiver’s responsiveness and sensitivity towards the infant’s needs shapes the infant’s perceptions of itself and of others (Bowlby, 1958). Such perceptions, termed as the infant’s “internal working model,” further determines the infant’s competence in forming future intimate relationships and performing parental care towards his/her own children (Hazan & Shaver, 2017). In other words, children’s experiences receiving care from their parents builds their “nurturing capital” and takes them “from the mother’s arm to the lover’s arm” and further to their own parental roles.

The attachment theory, while proposing an influential psychological mechanism of care transmission, tacitly assumes care as a unidirectional process that flows from the parent to the child without considering potential reciprocal care from the child to the parent (Silverstein et al., 2006). The focus on the “downward” care flow might reflect the theory’s grounding in Euro-American cultures, where parental care to children is not repaid in the parents’ lifetime but “relayed” to the children’s own offspring. Such a model differs drastically from the “reciprocal model” followed by Chinese families that

underscores a reciprocal flow from the benevolent, loving parents to the child, and the filial child back to the age parents (Fei, 1983; Stafford, 2000). Specifically, each generation bears the dual responsibilities to care for both their children and their aging parents. Although the “reciprocal” model was challenged, revised, and arguably reverted since the late 19th century, filial care is still inscribed in today’s Chinese family laws, which require adult children to support elderly parents with financial assistance and care (Deutsch, 2006; Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Yan, 2018).

Both the attachment theory and the “relay versus reciprocal” distinction focused on care in close interpersonal relationships (especially those in the family) and on “vertical” care transmission across generations. In contrast, Lynch (2007) proposed a “horizontal”, three-layer taxonomy made up of primary, secondary, and tertiary care, or “love labour”, “general care labour”, and “solidarity work”, respectively. According to Lynch, these “three distinct forms” of care work vary in the relational intimacy, level of responsibility, and depth of engagement involved. The parental care for children, as the prototype of the primary care relationship, demands the highest degree of commitment and emotional involvement, whereas the care for other family relatives, friends, neighbours, and colleagues requires less interdependence, and the care for members of the wider community is even less obligatory. Lynch’s model expands the idea of internal working model in attachment theory and contextualises care relationships into a much wider social network by pointing out the fluid, dynamic nature of care: By employing the idea of “nurturing capital”, Lynch implied that the “emotional resources” of care that one receives from particular relations may transpire into other social spheres. Children who receive the initial “deposit” of emotional resources from their parents could benefit from this mental resource and demonstrate enhanced *propensity* for care in their own primary, secondary, and tertiary care relations, although Lynch did not discuss in detail care skills and practices across these three layers.

Whether and how care (at least the inclination thereof) transpires across layers may vary depending on the sociocultural contexts, as noticed by scholars in psychology, anthropology, historians, and cultural studies. Cross-cultural psychologists argued that people from cultures labelled as collectivistic (such as China) tend to draw a firmer boundary between in-group and out-group members than those from individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1972), thereby making the flow of “nurturing capital”

across layers less smooth. This inference resonates with ethnographic observations which documented the indifference and apathy towards strangers in China (Yan, 2021), although benevolence (仁, ren) is a fundamental virtue in Confucian ethics. Given the various vertical and horizontal models of care flow, how today's Chinese parents think about the care their children should take and give within and beyond the family would be an intriguing question.

This study

The present paper builds on interviews with parents of 133 families in Nanjing, China, conducted between August 2011 and April 2012 as part of a larger project on father-child interactions in contemporary China. Situated in the affluent Yangtze Delta area in southeast China and several times China's national capital, Nanjing is a socially and culturally vibrant area (GDP per capita 2011 = 15,761.88 US dollars, versus a national average of 5,614 US dollars). At the time of data collection, Nanjing had 6.36 million inhabitants (98% Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese), of whom 4.39 million lived in densely populated central urban areas and the rest in peripheral rural and semi-rural areas with average monthly incomes of 2683 RMB (439 US dollars) and 1092 RMB (178 US dollars), respectively. As the One-Child Policy was still in effect, single-child families were the prevailing norm. While Nanjing had enjoyed rapid development over the decades prior to the data collection, it was not as immersed in the global trade or cultural exchanges as Shanghai, the nearby metropolitan and China's economic centre and financial hub. A significant proportion of Nanjing's economy was contributed by agricultural production and state-own industrial corporates which constituted 47.6% of the regional GDP in 2011 (Nanjing Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

The informants were recruited through primary schools across urban and rural Nanjing which helped distribute invitations to third-to-fifth graders who then passed them on to parents for their consent. With a purposeful design, the final sample was evenly split by their rural/urban origin and by the sex of the child (51.9% with daughters). While most of my participants live "conventional" (two married, biological, co-resident parents), one-child households, they varied considerably in socioeconomic status and residential patterns, ranging from farmers in self-built two-storey houses with co-residential paternal grandparents, to working-class nuclear families living in work unit-

provided residential blocks, to college-educated white collar couples who had recently moved into commercial apartments with grandparents back in their rural homes. Apart from very few exceptions, most families have children attending public schools.

I collected all data during a two-to-three-hour home visit to each participating family. The father, mother, and child of each family filled in a survey with a demographic questionnaire and a battery of psychological measures on parent-child interactions; fathers and children also completed a brief structured observational task. Each respondent was interviewed individually, in private as much as possible, when they could elaborate on parental involvement, parenting practices, and parent-child relationship with a focus on the father's behaviours. The interviews were semi-structured, following the same outline with probing questions based on participants' responses. These conversations were recorded, transcribed, and repeatedly read to observe recurrent expressions and phrases, of which care-related remarks constitute one theme.

The researcher's personal identities such as age, gender, and socioeconomic background may shape the researcher-participant dynamic (Reich, 2021). Indeed, my identity as an unmarried (i.e., younger and less experienced than the interviewed parents) female graduate student completing dissertation research (vs. being an established expert) made me appear non-threatening and trustworthy to participants. I also introduced myself as a Nanjing local and used a mixture of standard Mandarin and dialect as I spoke, to highlight our shared origin and keep the tone of the conversation light and casual. My characteristics and strategies helped the participants confide in me comfortably and candidly about their parental beliefs and practices.

While both mothers and fathers were interviewed, the focus of the larger project on father-child interactions resulted in a higher proportion of conversations on fathers' beliefs and practices than mothers'. Although this is atypical in parenting and parenthood research, there is little evidence so far that indicates significant discrepancies between fathers' and mothers' parenting goals. Therefore, findings of this paper could be understood as relevant to Chinese parents of both sexes.

Findings

The competence to care for oneself and others emerged frequently in conversations with parents and children from participating families as a central socialisation goal. Through carefully orchestrated everyday caregiving to their children, parents deliberately fostered their children's skills for self-care and instilled the awareness of care for others within and beyond the family, with the hope of building children's independence and motivating concurrent and future filial care. Unexpectedly, parents also encouraged their children's care for non-familial others. These emerging trends shape how care is transmitted across generations and transpire the private-public boundary in contemporary China.

Centering parental care

Although grade schoolers were no longer as vulnerable and demanding as infants or young children, parents believed that their 10-year-olds' ongoing physical development (還在長身體, *háizài zhǎng shēntǐ*) still requires close attention from caregivers. For example, many respondents mentioned how they were mindful of the nutritional value of their daily family meals (e.g., to include protein). Several others remarked how they or their spouse would frequently monitor their children's eating behaviour, because children at this age do not yet have the best judgment in healthy eating. In addition, one father referred to children's emotional needs as he explained that his nine-year-old son sometimes preferred to sleep in the parents' bedroom. "Because he still needs some protection, as a child... He still needs the parents around sometimes to feel safe. ... [To sleep with the parents] is one of those needs, a psychological gratification." As such, many parents continued to invest considerable time and effort to cater for their children's everyday needs, while trying to add academic support, behavioural monitoring, and moral guidance to fit children's expanding social and academic lives. One father estimated that he would spend four hours per day helping his son with morning and bedtime routine, cooking dinner, and helping with homework, although he still doubted whether he offered good-enough care.

Standing at the "rush hour" of their lives (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Frissen, 1999) and torn between major commitments, the interviewed parents described how taking good care of their children came at the sacrifice of their professional, personal, socializing, and leisure time. Nevertheless, parents insisted on keeping this taxing

obligation in their own hands as much as possible, expecting little external assistance. At the time of the interviews, China had neither parental leave nor systematic, publicly sponsored after-school care, and the poorly regulated domestic service market did not provide reliable, trustworthy, affordable alternatives. Only three out of all the families I visited mentioned the use of paid after-school care. While grandparental assistance was commonplace and desirable among families with preschoolers (Goh, 2011; Xiao, 2016), almost all parents I interviewed had reclaimed the caregiving responsibility when their children began school. Many parents stressed, with visible pride, that they had never or only occasionally relied on grandparental support, and that their children “have never been parted” from them. One mother and factory technician with a fourth-grader told me, “We are not like the others who send the child to the grandparents then take it back later – the two of us took turns to take care of him since he was born.” A father candidly expressed his despise for parents who “care about their own comfort and hire nannies to do all this [childcare].” One mother said that her daughter “has never had breakfast outside, not even once”, as she insisted on preparing all meals herself. The failure to invest as much as one wants in childcare induces tremendous guilt and self-blame, as with the Zhang family described at the beginning of this paper.

Fostering Self-Care Skills

As parents went to great lengths to make life comfortable for their children, however, there was a strong shared concern that excessive care (*bāobàn*, 包辦) may “spoil” their children, a topic brought up spontaneously by many respondents. My informants, who had been raising their singleton children in socioeconomically fast-advancing China, unanimously agreed that today’s children were much better taken care of than previous generations. “When we were ten, we would wake up ourselves in the morning, look for a bite ourselves, and walk to school,” said one father as he recalled his own childhood, “our parents had so many children that they had no time to take care of each one.” Watching their children receiving round-the-clock care from adults, my interviewees feared that these children would ultimately fall short in age-appropriate self-care skills (*zìlǐ*, 自理). One rural father frowned upon his son’s dependence, “My son comes to the dinner table when the meal is ready and leaves the dirty dishes there when he finishes. He is now ten years old, and his mother still helps him get dressed every morning!” A

mother, who was otherwise proud of her artistically talented daughter, also voiced her worry: “Her father and I are both quite confused why she still fails to do what we expect her to do — keeping track of her own textbooks, remembering to bring her homework to school and such. She does fear the consequences of not being able to turn in her homework, but she still forgets!”

Although concerns over children’s dependency are commonplace across societies under the globalised intensive parenthood culture (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020), Chinese parents’ anxiety was exacerbated by their children’s status as singletons. Over the nearly four-decade implementation of China’s One-Child Policy (1979-2015), the Chinese and global academia and media have not stopped warning the public about “symptoms” of the singleton generation (Cameron et al., 2013; Greenhalgh, 2008; Wang & Fong, 2009). Although such a pathologised view of only children had received little empirical support (Falbo, 2012; Liu, et al., 2010), only children were stereotypically portrayed as selfish “little emperors” incapable of basic, non-academic tasks, let alone caring for other people (Deutsch, 2006; Fong, 2004; Zhang et al., 2001). In the words of one informant, who self-identified as an open-minded modern parent, “some children can master the C++ (programming language) in primary school but still need help from the adult for basic everyday life. I doubt this is a good thing!”

The perception of inherently incapable and uncaring singleton children was particularly worrisome to the parents, who were highly aware that their children eventually would have to survive in China’s fiercely competitive market economy with little social welfare, no sibling assistance, and possibly away from parental help. “You have to be realistic: you will not be able to follow the child all her life.” said a mother. “You cannot expect anyone else to take care of you once you step into the society. That would be impossible!” one father remarked, “And you cannot learn [to take care of yourself] only then. You must start way in advance.” Another father poignantly pointed out how self-care skills not only ensure survival but also relate to other desirable qualities in the labour market, such as self-confidence and initiative. In his words, “Only when the child is really independent will she feel confident about herself.”

The urge to build children’s self-care skills and the diverging opinions and failed attempts to do so were a common source of family conflicts and self-blame. Intergenerational differences in childrearing in Chinese families have been widely

documented (Goh, 2011; Jing, 2000; Naftali, 2014; Xiao, 2016), and the allegedly “doting” grandparents were frequently cited by my interviewees as the root of their children’s over-dependence. In fact, the internalised fear for raising a child who “opens his mouth to be fed and stretches his arms to be dressed” (*fàn láizhāngkǒu, yī lái shēnshǒu*, 飯來張口, 衣來伸手) was one main reason for the parents to decline grandparental assistance beyond their children’s infancy and early childhood. One father complained that his parents-in-law had taken care of his son too much when they were living together: “When [the child] needed something, all he had to do was asking!” Another father was happy that his son finally learned to bathe himself after they moved away from the grandparents. Parents also expressed disagreement, even distain towards their spoiling (*guàn, 慣*) spouse. A factory worker was annoyed by his wife, who would ask their son’s food preference. “I think his mother spoils him too much...I told her not to ask for his opinion at all and just let him eat whatever he is given.” A cleaning lady told me that when her son had to stay up late for homework, she would rather go to bed herself, whereas her husband would constantly bother her to get out of bed and check on the child. Furthermore, parents were deeply ambivalent about the consequences of their *own* caring acts, such as this high school teacher, “Perhaps *we* have done too much; [my daughter] is not the one to blame...As parents you tend to see her as a baby and want to do as much for her as you can.... We should have realised that we need to let her do what she can and help her in those she is not capable of.” One mother with a daughter said, “We cared for her so intensively (*tài xì, tài xì*) when she was younger; we just wanted to protect her by putting her in a bubble...now her father and I are gradually making changes.”

This mother was certainly not the only one: Several Chinese parents described how they were taking small yet conscious steps to build their singleton children’s self-care skills while ensuring safety and basic comfort, such as by letting their children go to and from school or familiar locations (i.e., local shops; grandparents’ home) alone. One father told me how he trained his son in everyday social interactions: “When I take him to McDonald now, I do not buy the food and bring it to the table. I will ask him to queue up and do the talking himself, while I stand close next to the queue and watch him.” Many others deliberately send their children to residential summer camps, or even the army, to “tough them up” (*duàn liàn, duàn liàn*). Admittedly, it is not always easy to shift to the hands-off (*fàng yǎng, fàng yǎng*) strategy. “We know all the benefits about letting go and stuff, but

we — myself included — have no courage to really put it into action,” said one father. However, by gradually withdrawing previously granted care, and by creating safe, supervised self-care scenarios, Chinese parents were preparing their children for an entrance into an atomised society with little care support.

Extending Self-Care to the Care for Others

Notably, whereas the Chinese parents I interviewed shared the similar socialisation goals of independence with parents elsewhere, they spoke of their children’s self-care propensity and skills with an additional moral undertone. Although Chinese parents have been influenced by the psychologised discourse of child development, they did not map their children’s self-care (or the lack thereof) onto development milestones, but rather framed it as a form of implicit yet deliberate filial care from loving children to reduce their parents’ burden. In fact, *zìlǐ*, the expression commonly used by parents to refer to their children’s self-care capacity, carries an implicit reference to potential care relationships, unlike words such as *independence* which describes an individual trait. “[My daughter] takes very good care of herself on most things now,” said one busy working-class mother married to a taxi-driver, “When I work the all-night shift and can only return home at 8:30 in the morning, she is all on her own. She would do her own hair, wash her face, get herself breakfast with the change I leave her, and go [to school] by herself.” Another mother also described her self-reliant daughter as “trouble-saving” (*shěngxīn*, 省心). Remarkably, even a ten-year-old girl said, “Now I am different from when I was smaller... Now I am able to control myself; also when I encounter some psychological difficulties, I can think of ways myself to work on it instead of having my parents worried about it (*cāoxīn*, 操心).”

Chinese parents’ spontaneous interpretation of their children’s self-care as indirect filial care may reveal their other looming concern: their own care at the old age. Filial care was traditionally expected and endorsed as a virtue for individuals of all ages, including children. The widely circulated Confucian classics *24 Paragons of Filial Piety* included several stories of young children caring for their parents at their own sacrifice, such as one about the nine-year-old Huang Xiang who would warm his father’s bed in winter with his own body and cool his pillow in the summer. Whereas childcare had been collectivised during China’s socialist era then somewhat marketised during the Reform

era, eldercare by adult children remains the legally and policy-encoded norm. In 2011, the Chinese central government proposed a plan for building a long-term eldercare system where home-based, informal filial care, as the foundation for eldercare, was expected to cover 90% of the elderly (Hu, 2018). Whereas the urbanites could receive a meagre pension to partially cover their living and medical expenses after retirement, the rural elderly are further disadvantaged in both financial support and (public or private) care options. Given a vacuum of elder care resources, adult children practically shoulder the potential responsibility of their parents' future caregiving. As a rural high school teacher said, "If we raise an unfilial child who is ungrateful of the parents, who do we live on later?"

Like parents in Fong's (2004) research on urban families in northeast China, parents in this study were keen to enhance their grade-school children's awareness and skills for filial care. Whilst the absolute parental authority has diminished in most families I interviewed, many parents listed filial piety (*xiàojìng* 孝敬, or *filial respect*; *xiàoshùn* 孝順, or *filial obedience*; *xiàoxīn* 孝心, or *filial heart*, meaning the sincerity of filial care. These terms were used by the interviewees largely as synonyms to refer to the spirit of filial piety.) as one of their major parenting goals. A working-class father put it vividly: "I do not know how well my daughter would fare later, but I would be satisfied as long as my daughter would pour me some water when I am too old to do that myself. Then all my effort would be repaid." A mother with a 11-year-old son told me that she hopes the boy would learn from his father, who is caring towards the grandparents, and "become a real man." An urban father went so far as to enrol his son in a course studying *Standards for being a Good Pupil and Child* (*Dìziguī*, 《弟子規》), a traditional Chinese text that teaches filial spirits and behaviours.

But many parents I interviewed appeared doubtful whether their sons and daughters would actually be able to perform filial care, possibly due to the lingering myth (and sometimes, their own observation) of the egocentric singleton children. Therefore, in addition to cultivating filial piety as a moral *mindset*, Chinese parents also employed various strategies to teach their children elder care skills and behaviours. Some – often half-jokingly – demanded concurrent and future care from their children. A smiling, chubby girl told me how her father would come home "complaining" how tired he had been at work and "order" a back massage from her. Some parents chose to model such

behaviour through their own actions towards the grandparents. A steel factory worker who took his daughter to his own parents every Sunday, explained, “Of course I wish I could stay at home and have a lie-down on Sundays... But I *must* take [my daughter] to visit the grandparents, to cultivate the habit of visiting the grandparents every weekend.” A rural father with a cheerful ten-year-old daughter took a more subtle approach: “Sometimes – without her asking – I will bring some of her favourite snacks when I go to the supermarket...to show her that I remember what she likes. In so doing, I guide her to pay attention to what *we* like, to remember *our* favourite food ...and make her care about *us*.” Likewise, the rural high school teacher, who was apprehensive about raising an “unfilial” and “ungrateful” child, said that he would ask his daughter where her new clothes and stationery had come from, and request her to reflect on her parents’ provision to her everyday life.

Much of the parents’ effort was well appreciated by the children, who vividly recalled how their parents would cook their favourite dishes without asking, sit at their bedside when they are ill, or give up their own leisure time to help them with homework, and would see the affection behind such care acts. Moreover, many parents told me, with pride and sometimes with tears, how they were touched when their children cared for them (*guānxīn* 關心, *xīnténg* 心疼). “When I have too much to drink, she will support me as I walk, like a little adult (*xiǎodàren*, 小大人),” said a salesman who was impressed by his daughter’s “sensibility” (*dǒngshì*, 懂事), an expression often used by parents to describe children who are able to understand and empathise with their parents and willingly offer help and care. A rural mother fondly recounted how her daughter, an independent eleven-year-old, would always remind her to take keys and purse when she went out. Apart from physical care and instrumental help, parents also mentioned the emotional care they received from their children. “It was as if she would think for me, put her in my shoes, and proactively think about things that I might need,” an urban father described his daughter, who not only played piano for him but would also specifically pick the pieces that he (without music education) would appreciate. Another father who had been struggling to find work for a while remembered how his daughter would be very understanding of his situation and would ask him every day how he felt and whether he had eaten, “It was very comforting to hear that.”

Interestingly, Chinese parents encouraged the caring acts of their children not just to ensure their own welfare, but also to secure and accumulate “nurturing capital” for their children in the long run. Unlike the Chinese parents who would trade their children’s friendship for academic competitiveness (Zhao, 2015), my informants were aware that the socioemotional competence to establish and maintain long-lasting extrafamilial bonds as a reservoir of support are crucial skills for their singleton children. “I am sure you would agree that today’s singleton children can be egoistic and lonely,” said one father as he explained why he made effort to nurture his son’s mental health instead of pressuring him to always study. In this sense, “it never harms to have one more friend,” as an urban father neatly summarised. Many Chinese parents made conscious effort to cultivate their children’s proactive caring behaviour, which they believed is the key to build a reliable support network. “I told my boy that when you have friends over, you should share your snacks with them and not keep everything to yourself,” a rural man said. Two other fathers gave similar examples of how they and their spouses worked hard to teach their children to share. “I taught my daughter to yield to her friend,” said another father, “I would tell her when she has friends over that these are the friends you have known for years, and you should remain friends when you enter the society.”

While helping one’s friends may not be purely altruistic, my respondents also emphasised the need to cultivate their children’s genuine compassion for anonymous strangers, like the Chinese parents and early educators who promoted prosociality in children in Jing Xu’s (2017) work. Many parents listed the respect and care for (typically unrelated) others as a fundamental socialisation goal (often together with filial piety) that takes priority over academic or professional achievements. One rural couple proudly spoke of their daughter’s “loving heart” (*yǒu àixīn*, 有愛心), “Every time we go to the farmer’s market, she would give some change to whichever beggar that she sees,” said the mother, “She would always donate when there is an occasion to do so. During the Sichuan earthquake [in 2008] she cried a lot and donated... I am really happy even this means that she spends money!” Such a sentiment was expressed by several parents who noticed their children’s willingness to support those in need. A working-class father who described himself as uneducated explained to me the “good thoughts” that he tried to put in his son’s mind, “At the very least, a child should know well enough to give up his bus seat to pregnant ladies!” He went on to describe how he would “always make sure that I

yield my seats to those in need” when he took his child out on buses and “pay extra attention to pedestrians” when he drove with his child in the car.

Discussion and conclusion

The interviews with Chinese fathers and mothers of school-age children revealed contemporary Chinese parents’ eagerness to build their children’s care capacity, through their own intensive participation in childcare and explicit fostering of self-care and other-care skills. Built on existing conceptualisations of care, these findings enrich the extant literature on Chinese parents’ socialisation goals on socioemotional development and filial piety (Fong 2002; Way et al 2013), and introduces the novel dimension of extrafamilial other-care which bridges parental socialisation goals in the private sphere to the broader “moral landscape” of today’s China (Yan, 2021)

My interviewees’ accounts of their own care-related beliefs and practices showed a nuclearised imagination of childcare, in which even grandparents were positioned to be peripheral and less ideal caregivers. This view reflected the “scientific” discourse of childrearing that underscores the vulnerability of children and assumes the centrality of a few key caregivers – typically the parents, if not only the mother – in determining children’s developmental outcomes (Faircloth, 2014; Xiao, 2016). Chinese parents’ heightened emphasis on direct *parental* care may also have to do with parental motivation to develop, rebuild, or strengthen emotional bonds with children, which were believed to both benefit children’s socioemotional development and (perhaps more implicitly) provide a lasting relational foundation for future filial care (Fong, 2004). Yet the popularised, psychologised narrative of childhood had yet to provide an authoritative voice on children’s self-care competence across developmental stages. This vacuum left many Chinese parents torn between the competing ideals of intensive parenthood and the need to build children’s independence for their future survival, much like their middle-class American counterparts (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009), and suffering from family conflicts over childrearing practices.

The parents’ view of themselves as the most obligatory and (relatively better) “qualified” caregivers to their children should also be understood in the context of their repeated foregrounding of the family as a key site for actual and envisioned care. Corroborating Yan Yunxiang’s (2018) argument about neofamilism in China, my

respondents insisted on taking care of their children themselves as they showed little faith in extrafamilial care resources for their children in the future. Moreover, these parents saw their children as the only viable option for their own elder care, consistent with other studies which found that filial piety remains a prized parental socialisation goal (Chen, 2020; Luo et al. 2013). Such a “familialised” view of care is perhaps adaptive in a society where both the policy and the market assume individual families as the bearer of care work (Li & Eklund, 2022). However, the Chinese parents also realised that the filial care for aging parents is no longer a strong moral imperative and were suspicious whether the spoilt, self-centred singleton generation would be capable of reciprocating the care they receive. Seeing no alternatives, Chinese parents today used strategies such as making explicit demands and role-modelling old-age care to prepare their children cognitively and emotionally for future filial care.

Surprisingly, although Chinese parents harboured a pessimistic outlook on extrafamilial care resources for their children and themselves, they eagerly encouraged their children to care for others beyond the family boundary. Admittedly, some other-care may have self-serving motives, such as building a good reputation or “reserving” future help, but many parents put effort in cultivating their children’s “loving heart” even towards strangers. So far, few studies have documented how the idea and skills of caring for nonfamilial others are presented to Chinese children and youth in daily settings (see Xu, 2017; Zou, et al. 2022 for exceptions). The paradoxical finding of this study could be a response to the state’s effort to promote the charitable spirit and to build a “civil” (wénmíng, 文明) society with caring, high-quality citizens (Zhan, 2021). Other-care, though without direct return, might constitute a virtue that the parents would like their children to possess as a citizen of an up-and-coming civil society. It is also possible that parental effort of instilling other-care in their children was a reaction against the perceived moral deficit in China and an attempt to proactively build a caring society for the next generation that differs from the current, apathic one.

Chinese parents’ simultaneous emphasis on parental care towards children, children’s self-care skills, and expectation for child’s filial care and other-care provides a fascinating case of comparison with Lynch’s (2007) three-tier model of care. Chinese parents’ provision of parental care, expectation of filial care, and instilling of non-familial other care in their children all acknowledge interpersonal dependency and empathy

among individuals, which lie at the heart of Lynch's concentric model. At the same time, Chinese parents' urgency to cultivate self-care and filial care skills in their children may be a compromise strategy to deal with the tension between their wish for a care-rich society and their realistic estimation of their own and their children's foreseeable future.

It is relevant to point out that the data for this study were collected before the end of the One-Child Policy in late 2015, hence much of the parents' framing of their own parental care and their children's self-care and other-care skills was grounded in the policy context. The parents' views may have shifted following China's turn towards "pronatalist" fertility policies. Now that the children are more likely to have siblings, parents could be less anxious about their children's care for non-familial others and more motivated to cultivate their children's filial care given the increased childrearing investment and the stagnated state provision of eldercare. Secondly, although the spontaneity of parental remarks about care analysed in this paper highlights the salience of care in the mind of today's Chinese parents, more consistent, specific questioning on various forms of care and their interrelations would have allowed for more systematic examinations of how parents' care-related beliefs vary by gender, social class, and individual or family characteristics. Finally, parents in the present study all had preadolescent children who were still somewhat removed from social competition. Therefore, altruistic, other-caring inclinations and behaviours at this stage would probably not threaten individual survival or success, unlike in late adolescence or early adulthood when one's peers are also their competitors, as documented by Zhao (2014).

Despite these remaining questions, rural and urban Chinese parents' wish for their children to become competent self- and other-caregivers enriches our understanding of parenting goals in China beyond individual achievements and gains. These findings call for future research to multiple forms of care and on family socialisation of relationship and prosociality, both in China and beyond. Whereas Chinese parents' family-centred vision of care demonstrate how everyday family socialisation could be shaped by sociocultural realities (such as the lack of welfare provision), parents' budding attempts to promote their children's care for strangers show how the private affair of childrearing may interplay with the broader "moral landscape." Finally, future research could explore how children mentally process received care, and how the care received in late childhood relate to self- and other-caring attitudes and actions later across the lifespan.

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