

Just Merit?

Authoritarian-Caring Parenting Style in China and the Challenge of Inequality and Hierarchy in Late Post-Revolutionary Societies

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The radical transformation of Chinese society in the previous decades has greatly improved the material lives of most people, but has also led to skyrocketing levels of inequality, and has subjected Chinese youths to unprecedented levels of socio-economic competition. Helping them to succeed in this competitive world necessitates both care and control from their families. This is evident in their scholarly education, but also in the pressure they receive to marry early and well. Both the pressure on their education and on their path towards marriage is imposed on them in the name of support. While many analyses of this situation tie it predominantly to a Confucian ethos imbued into Chinese culture, this article suggests an alternative way to analyze this situation: The revolutionary opposition to inherited privilege paradoxically transformed higher education and marriage into ultra-competitive open markets. Rather than imputing a culturally bounded explanation for this phenomenon, I maintain that the authoritarian-caring parenting style observable in present-day China reflects a situation which finds parallels in other late post-revolutionary societies: the intensification of the educational pressure put on the haves in order to distinguish themselves from the have-nots.

Keywords: parenting style, inequality, meritocracy, social hierarchy, elites, post-revolutionary society

Introduction

Is there a relationship between so-called egalitarian revolutions and the way in which social hierarchies and elites are (re)produced? Based on the study of Chinese marriage corners—public spaces where parents assemble to introduce one another to their non-married adult children—, but also incorporating multiple personal and professional experiences reflecting high levels of youth competition in China and beyond, I question below how hierarchy is constructed in societies that deem equality to be one of their

fundamental values. Such societies are those that do not grant specific rights based on descent (as, for example, race, caste, or nobility status), and emphasize personal merit as the way to attain prestigious positions. Chinese society, on which this article mainly focuses, combines both. On the one hand, the Han, a highly diverse “ethnic” group counting for over 90% of the country’s population, are not differentiated by descent. On the other hand, administrative discrimination—a limitation of civil rights based on the family place of origin—exists against rural Han people. In addition to this, ethnic minorities tend to be folklorized and denied political control of their history. In the following, I bracket the situation of ethnic minorities and of rural areas in order to focus on this dominant Han part of China. The context I discuss is urban. It covers most of present-day Chinese society, amounting to hundreds of millions of people. This large population does not register nobles or formal aristocrats, even if it has become common to sarcastically classify the descendants of early revolutionaries who hold most power and capital today as “red princes.” In principle at least, the competition for the best positions in society is based solely on merit. It is not considered possible for elite children to buy their way into elite universities. They must go through the same test as all other students.

While my focus-point is China, I contest the idea that the intense scholarly and marriage competition that I will describe is based on cultural grounds only. I demonstrate this by putting the Chinese case in conversation with the prevailing situation in France and the United States and suggest that parenting techniques and/or education are critical to the issue of inequality and hierarchy in “late post-revolutionary societies.” Through this notion, I invoke not only societies where a major revolution occurred, but where this revolution focused on overturning previously established, descent-based, rights, even if this change did not benefit everyone (e.g., in 1772 USA, there was rebellion against submission to the British crown, but political rights were not granted for enslaved people; in 1789 France, the monarchy and nobility were overturned, but the political rights gained were not extended to women; in 1949 China, there was a revolution against previous land owners but the assertion of certain political rights for the masses did not include cultural

minorities' right to self-determine their polity, etc.)¹ Hence, with the notion of post-revolutionary societies, I refer to societies which view themselves as grounded, highly symbolically, in a violent event which reversed previous inequalities and conferred rights on a basis considered to be more just than the previous order. What counts here is that these nations mythicize the equality amongst their members and use this equality as demonstrative of their advancement and as a feature which distinguishes them from other societies, often by emphasizing social justice and how they reward effort and merit.

What equality means can obviously vary by context. Yet, I take for granted that these societies all highlight equality among their members as one of their distinctive traits, and that this has effects that can be observed in each of them, even if they rely on a different understanding of what equality is or should be. As Buitron and Steinmüller (2020, p.ii) state, since egalitarianism “implies the existence of shared measurements and common scales of equivalence, ... it appears to be inevitably tied to the promotion of hierarchy.” Below, I address this point by examining how certain trends reinforcing inequality within China are rooted in a system which in principle is based on fair competition and equality. Moreover, the position I defend is that late post-revolutionary societies exhibit traits of a more strained educational competition in the production of their elites than societies that do not put the same level of emphasis on equality and assume a sort of familial continuity in the distribution of social roles and in the (re)production of their elites. Indeed, in modern societies, education is the system through which socio-economic positions are distributed. Yet, this scholarly education can be seen as simply completing familial education, or it can be seen as having the power to reverse family-based inequalities by reshuffling elite positions along a single scale of measure and merit for each generation. Post-revolutionary societies, where merit exists in opposition to descent, symbolically emphasize the revolutionary power of the educational system. Typically, these societies have a clearly established hierarchy of elite universities that confer prestige and status on those able to enter them. The selection process to enter

¹ Which “revolution” counts in the long run is questionable. For China, did the transition that I described start in 1949, 1911, or ten centuries earlier, in the transition from the Tang to the Song, when anonymous national exams were implemented? For the USA, would that be 1772 or rather the civil rights movement of the 1960s? For France, is it 1789 or May 1968? In each case, these transitions can be viewed differently depending on political perspective. The reality and effective character of these events is however less important for my analysis than the symbolical character that these events are attributed.

these universities is transparent and similar for all candidates. In this context, more than economic reward is at stake when it comes to educational competition. As Michael Sandel observes, if the point was “enabling their children to live in affluence,” rich parents could give their children trust funds. Yet, they want “something else—the meritocratic cachet that admission to elite colleges confers” (Sandel, 2020, p.13). In the context of China, Andrew Kipnis observes that “regardless of its actual economic effects, university attendance has become the ultimate symbol of embodied upper-classness. It speaks of intelligence, proper upbringing, moral uprightness, and political power all at once” (Kipnis, 2012b, p.195).

The article begins with a short overview of the historical emphasis put on equality in post-1949 revolutionary China and the transformations which occurred after the Maoist era came to an end more than 40 years ago. Then, I will focus on parenting in China, and specifically on the observable tendencies which scholarly education and mate-choice share. To reach this objective, this essay partly utilizes my ethnography of matchmaking in urban China, which extended from the study of “marriage corners” in which parents of a non-married adult child participate in order to help him or her find an appropriate spouse, to amateur and professional matchmaking services. This showcases the involvement of middle-class parents in their child’s marriage, a topic on which I have published already (see Pettier 2016, 2019, 2020, 2022a, 2022b). In this piece, I introduce elements of this field research demonstrating the authoritarian character of the participation of some parents. I also discuss dimensions of my fieldwork concerning education which were not part of my research *per se*, but which were too proliferate to be ignored. For example, bookstores were rife with best-sellers dedicated to how to lead children and youths to success, and the matter was considered a hot public issue. Putting marriage and education fields, both of which center on family reproduction and are intimately bound with one another, into a greater comparative framework, this essay shows how some children and youths find themselves under heavy handed control framed as care. These two notions are intimately tied in the Chinese language itself, where the word “*guan*” integrates notions of both care and discipline. I examine how this “authoritarian-caring” parenting style may be typical of the exacerbated competition within the elites of late post-revolutionary societies. Interestingly, this form of “authoritarian-care” does not preclude critical reflexive analysis by parents who find the

pressure they put on their own children hard to bear, yet who feel obliged to apply it out of anxiety for the future.

The final part of the essay puts this situation in context with recent research in the US, France, and reflects my own personal transnational and trans-class experience. I conclude by suggesting that something more than survival-of-the-fittest competition is at stake: the moral justification of already-existing and inherited inequalities plays a key role in the intensification of the educational pressure put on the haves in order to distinguish themselves from the have-nots.

Equality and China

Upon visiting contemporary China, one could be tempted to say that Chinese people hardly believe in equality at all. Essentialist views on intelligence prevail, and individual rights seem to find their basis in merit rather than being unconditional and universal. As I wrote elsewhere (Pettier 2018), many of these attitudes can partially be interpreted as a counter-reaction to Maoist times, which emphasized equality and the reversal of social hierarchies to a nightmarish degree. From the physical elimination of capitalist owners in the direct aftermath of the 1949 revolution to the reversal of parental and teachers' authority during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, or to the sending down of "educated youths" (teenagers raised in urban context) to the countryside to be reeducated by peasants, the Maoist regime placed a great deal of emphasis on resetting inequality. However, the failure to provide people with their most basic needs, and the trauma left on many parts of the society had a durable imprint, which can be regarded as the fertile ground for the much more unequal society which later ensued during the Reform Era. In addition, some essentialist views were also dominant during Maoist times, as evinced by the fact that class labels were inherited. Persecutions of people labelled as capitalists because their ancestor had been labelled as such, even though said ancestor had been executed and their family stripped of their possessions before they were even born, were common in Maoist times (Su 2011).

After Mao's death, the 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of political rhetoric which encouraged parts of the country to enrich themselves "first," so that others could follow. This resulted "not only [in] a large-scale reduction in absolute poverty and an overall rise in living standards, but especially since the 1990s [in] rapidly increasing

levels of income inequality and urban–rural disparities” (Alpermann, 2011, p.15). By the end of the 2000s and in the 2010s, the notion of equality resurfaced in political discourse, and statistics showed a slight decrease in the level of income inequality, even if it remained alarmingly high.

Further complicating the picture of equality in China is the fact that Chinese society renders great importance to social networks. Where one is positioned within a web of relationships is very significant. Being close to someone important makes oneself more important. Being close to someone who becomes ostracized is threatening. While this may be the case in other societies, this is a normalized dimension of everyday life in China, where networks of individuals seen as supporting each other carry a great deal of weight in political and business life. This organization of Chinese society is complimented by the traditional rituality of its ancient society, a “pervasively hierarchical ordering ... under its formal or ceremonial aspect,” in Romeyn Taylor’s words (1989, p.490).

Yet, if existing networks and rituality were the fixed determinants of Chinese social life, on which grounds could individual effort play any role at all? In real-life practice, however, both networks and rituality imply margins of flexibility. Rituals imply cultural-role learning before one can master them, and in the Confucian tradition, these rituals rest on the notion of exemplary behavior of the actors who occupy leading roles in society, rather than on preassigned positions. Some fashionable interpretations put forth by the current revival of Confucianism in China justify a very large range of existing social inequalities and hierarchies with a (self-serving) notion of individual “merit” (see for example the works of China’s current polity-supporters like Daniel A. Bell or Zhang Weiwei). In fact, several common public discourses follow this direction to justify the existing inequalities within Chinese society. One public national-level discourse asserts that the “quality” of the Chinese people must be improved and invokes authoritarianism and paternalism in the name of the collective good, rendering “the hierarchical and moral distinction between the high and the low ... a mission of national importance” (Kipnis 2006, p.298). Another complementary ideology of increasing the level of “civilization” within society, reinforces this discourse and forms “a Chinese version of the ideology of equality of opportunity, merit, and the just deserts of market success” (Feuchtwang and Rowlands, 2019, p.180).

Taken together, these discourses describe Chinese social life as predicated on a mitigated form of individual merit and social thinking, according to which superior intelligence is proven by superior action and capacity to win, yet in which individuals embody the qualities of the collectives they belong to (and vice versa). In this paradoxical context, educational competition and competition for the best partners are tightly linked, and become matters of “familial self-interest,” in the prescient words of Andrew Kipnis (2012b, p.199). These two aspects are also highly gendered. Popular discourse emphasizes marrying at a younger age as being optimal for women, and discourages women from pursuing too high of a level of education (You and Nussey 2022). Nevertheless, some women actually also pursue higher education in order to delay the pressure they receive to marry young (Howlett, 2021, p.180-181).

Education and Social Competition

In the 1980s, China’s large population raised concern, and the state implemented a heavy-handed birth-control policy. Being the product of a time of capitalist reforms and of demographic restrictions, sibling-less “post-1980s” Chinese youths became the “only hope” of their families to fare well in this unprecedented situation (Fong, 2004). This implied “tremendous competition, comparison, and stress among parents, teachers, and children, starting from preschool or even earlier, encapsulated in the slogan ‘winning at the starting line’” (Xu, 2017, 51). In the 2000s, the education industry expended enormously, and taking extracurricular classes to keep up in the scholarly competition became normalized. While I was conducting fieldwork, many Western residents that I met were engaged in this industry, offering extra classes to affluent children during the evenings or weekends. Here, the “production of difference and distinction through standardization in a predominantly hierarchical social system” set the stakes (Xu, 2017, p.59). This process of social stratification continues even after entering the most prestigious universities, exposing Chinese youths to remarkable pressure in their higher studies (Bregnbæk, 2016). To reach such levels, children are pushed hard to work through a “rhetoric of filial responsibility toward suffering and loving parents” (Kajanus, 2019, p.74). Many scholars have emphasized how this parental governance is designated by the Chinese term “*guan*,” a positive notion integrating “care with discipline and love with governing” (Wang, 2022, p.14). While this word does encapsulate the dual meaning of

this process, it is doubtful that the phenomenon that this notion describes is culturally bound and specifically *Chinese*.

Indeed, the study of increasing competition for the reproduction of elites in late post-revolutionary societies through very selective scholarly institutions, has been quite proliferate in recent years. In the USA, research reveals how higher institutions are not becoming less but more and more self-reproductive (Schultz and Stansbury, 2022). Michael Sandel observes “Measures of merit are hard to disentangle from economic advantage. Standardized tests ... purport to measure merit on its own, so that students from modest backgrounds can demonstrate intellectual promise. In practice, however, ... The richer a student’s family, the higher the score he or she is likely to receive” (Sandel, 2021, p.8). Daniel Markovits (2019) described this as a “meritocracy trap” which fails both ends of the educational spectrum by excluding the middle class from fair chances, and at the same time pushing the elites to self-exploitation in order to maintain their status.

Similar research carried out in France in the tradition of Bourdieu and Passeron’s classical work on *Inheritors* demonstrate repeatedly how elite institutions continue to select children with better backgrounds. In China, entrance to universities is organized through a national exam (the *gaokao*), and the hierarchy of universities is very clearly established and widely known. “The importance of this exam within Chinese society results from a crucial sort of political compromise in which there is not democracy but there is opportunity for social mobility through exam-centric meritocracy” (Kipnis, 2012b, p.197). This does not mean that this entrance exam is completely neutral. Quotas and “bonus points” (*jiafen*) protect certain categories of candidates, typically those from local areas and national minorities. In China, these “bonus points” are a hot-button issue, one leading to protests by people who criticize them as discriminatory towards their own children. Consequently, this complex university selection system was repeatedly amended over the years. While determining whether the *gaokao* is fair is not my issue (see Howlett, 2021 for a discussion of the topic), what interests me is that this selection system reflects efforts to produce one universal system which regulates differences in a just way, with the notion of what is just depending on a variety of potentially incompatible perspectives.

As is the case elsewhere, in China this “meritocratic” ideology has major consequences. On one hand, “the Gaokao selection induced lower social groups, such as

the working class and peasants who lost their previous social security and welfare during the reform, to believe that they are scholastically inferior in the competition for higher education opportunities” (Liu, 2013, p.884). On the other hand, it pushes families who would like their child to be successful to endlessly increase their level of engagement, propelling both parents and children towards exhaustion. Eventually, this process renders the successful overcoming of cultural and social disadvantages even more out of reach for lower-class children and results in the densification of children’s schedule from a very young age, through private tutorships and additional classes held in the evenings and on any available time slot during the week. Echoing what happens in the elite-American context (Markovits, 2019, p.15), it also pushes middle-class Chinese mothers to sacrifice their own careers in order to become fully devoted “agents” of their child, so that he or she scores highly on future exams (Yang, 2018). When mothers cannot successfully do so, they are stricken with feelings of guilt. Overall, this intensification of education, “results in more forceful regimes of homogenization and normalization” (Kipnis, 2012a, p.10). Discussing this process, Xiang Biao observes that it results in “nondifferentiation: Everyone is focused on and living for the same goals” (Wang & Ge, 2020). Certainly, some Chinese people resist these tendencies. Yet, this means taking risks that not everyone believes they can afford.

In 2021, the Chinese government tackled the problem of extracurricular classes by legally forbidding them. While it is still impossible to assess what effects these policies will have, initial anecdotes leave the impression that only extracurricular classes are really prevented, while more discreet private tuition for the already most advantaged continue (see Liu, 2022). Only the future will tell if this policy indeed modified the level of competition for the prestige and rewards associated with elite education.

Selecting a child’s partner

Education is not the end of the role of a parent in China, which extends until the continuity of the family line is assured through the birth of a (grand-)child. Tradition and law make this impossible to do without going through the institution of marriage. The emphasis people place on legal or traditional marriage depends on social milieu and has changed over time. Today’s youths often consider legal marriage as sufficient to cohabit (if at all necessary). Conversely, their parents’ generation often considered legal marriage as

lacking cultural significance, and waited until traditional marriage to move together. In any case, virtually everyone will go through legal marriage if they want to have a child without paying the rather high “social compensation fee (*shehui fuyang fei*)” that many provinces apply to births out of wedlock.² As a result, the pressure youths receive to marry early and well, and reproduce in order to continue the family line, is very high (see Pettier 2020, 2022a). This collective social pressure has led to an omnipresent practice of matchmaking and family-framing of mate-search and mate-choice (Pettier 2019). Rather than being blind dates, these arranged meetings could be seen as prescient dates, with every tiny potentially favorable or unfavorable detail carefully pondered. Parents and children will discuss and negotiate the criteria and qualities they consider to be most important in a life partner. Worries about economic difficulties in the future play a major role in this selection process.

The urban marriage corners where I carried out fieldwork developed as a result of this anxious situation. In public parks, parents of non-married youths assemble to introduce each other’s children, in the hopes of aiding their busy child in finding the one (see Pettier 2020 for a history and description of this practice). While these corners are known to facilitate very few unions, they orient the new generations towards marriage and push them to integrate the views of their parents into their choice of partner. However, this system puts individuals under so much pressure with the potentially devastating consequences of their choices that it hinders sincere affective exchanges.

In previous publications, I mostly focused on the perspective of parents carrying out research for a marriage partner in name of their child in the context of the so-called “marriage corners.” I only gave limited accounts of the difficult experiences which were recounted to me by the youths I met (see however Pettier, 2022c). Most children of marriage corner participants knew that their parents were taking part in matchmaking gatherings in their names. However, not all of them were informed, and many were not happy that their parents were doing this. Indeed, with few exceptions, marriage decisions are collective affairs but are negotiated in a consensual manner. Nevertheless, as the concerned youths age, the pressure to marry increases and sometimes reaches a point

² In February 2023, the province of Sichuan dropped the requirement of being married for the registration of children. Only the future will tell if this change will serve as a pilot for a broader policy at the national level.

where exchanges with parents become unbearable. Anecdotes describing this situation are ordinary: the situation of an unmarried Chinese youth over 25 years of age who starts to worry about the relentless pressure their parents give them is commonplace.

It must be noted that this pressure is applied in the name of parental love. It is made in name of the child's well-being as much as in the name of the future of the whole family. However, this also leads many youths to feel like failures when they cannot fulfill their parents' expectations. Attending marriage corners lead some parents to realize that the difficulties experienced by their child are not exceptional. Yet, these very involved parents are also those who feel most anxious about the issue and hence who exercise the most pressure, leading to situations which can be affectively very tense (see Pettier 2016). In some cases, the pressure exerted over the new generations' lives can be extreme, obscuring the line between care and abuse. This is particularly obvious in cases concerning adult women. For example, a 29-year-old Beijing woman with a high salary whose mother I met at a marriage market, told me that she had opposed her mother's participation in marriage corners, but that her mother ignored this, and she was forced to come to terms with it. Her parents, with whom she co-resided, also requested her to hand over eighty percent of her monthly income to them in order to prevent her from "wasting it," and to save it for her future. However, it was clear that they lived at her expense and that she was tired of having her parents constantly evaluating her way of life. She sometimes thought of living independently and discussed this prospect with them, but they vociferously opposed it, citing fear for her safety and preempting further discussion of the matter. However, she felt that if she had the freedom to make her own decisions, her situation would improve.

One other example involves a 22-year-old medical student and faithful Christian that I met at a public swimming pool in the city of Chengdu. After she initiated the conversation, she suddenly told me that she had to resume swimming because her mother was watching. I did not suspect that she was being monitored and was surprised to learn from her that she could not simply go out on her own: her family was always around. She then recounted that, on the day she had her first period at twelve years of age, her father threatened to beat her and kick her out of the house if she ever slept with a man before marriage. She immediately added that this was fine because she was "clear with her own [conservative] values." In another interview, which she managed to arrange a few weeks

later, she framed her father's threat as a way to protect her from the hurt others could inflict upon her. Still, this memory remained vivid ten years later, and she indeed was doing as well as she could in her academic pursuits and waiting to finish her studies before finding a husband, whom she hoped to meet among the medical staff of the hospital where she worked.

The cultural emphasis on the necessity of preserving a woman's reputation reflects a circumstance broader than the conservative milieu of that young woman. It is another instance where care and authority seem very thinly tied. Chinese parents of various social class backgrounds unanimously set strict limits on the independence they want their daughters to have when it comes to sexual matters. They consider that their daughters may suffer high costs in terms of value and desirability on the marriage market if they are known to have experienced pre-marital sex (Fong et al., 2012, p.97-99). These views are commonly shared by parents who also insist that they want their daughters to be independent, explaining the contrast between the professional and private dimensions of the lives of young women with high-profile careers but who have extremely limited, if any, courtship experience. While these conservative views could appear far removed from the emphasis put on equality and the ideological grounding of a post-revolutionary society, the justifications given for these attitudes knit them tightly together. In the urban marriage corners, parents of daughters often complain explicitly about candidates they label disparagingly as "outsider women," the latter being women with rural backgrounds who are younger than their daughters and who they consider to be unfair competitors with their child. In a theoretically open market, it is important to these parents that their daughters are clearly distinguished from these lower class competitors.

There are, obviously, examples of cases running counter to this trend. One such example is a successful Chengdu woman with a rural background who was able to reject the unsolicited attempts of her family to introduce her potential partners immediately after her decision to split with her self-chosen previous partner. However, she later began to regret that no one was introducing her to anyone anymore. Another case is another young Chengdu woman who was happy with the support her mother provided in the search for a spouse, but a few years later, still unsuccessful and having passed the symbolic age-barrier of thirty, lamented to me that she was never gifted with love.

What to make of this diversity of cases? One important point is how demanding and exhausting these practices appear to be for everyone. This is true for the parents, who run from one marriage corner to the next and sometimes appear extraordinarily distressed by the situation. It is also true for their monitored children, some of whom have parents who do not seemingly allow them to fail, and thus cannot develop their own views and experiences. The Chinese sociologist Shen Yifei observed that these parents keep a “lecturing-right” on every dimension of their child’s life (Shen, 2019, p.241). The exhausting character of these practices does not only come from active participation but also from being on the passive side of such interactions. Everyone is both evaluating other candidates and being evaluated themselves, engendering a situation fraught with reciprocal suspicion, and leading to frequent tensions and conflicts. It is not rare to hear people evaluating other participants as being of too “low quality,” a label others apply to themselves too. The fear of being deceived, in addition to being regularly negatively appraised and rejected by others, are painful tasks for many of the participants.

Some authors have discussed the notion of a “Confucian authoritarianism” (Tu, 1998, p.129-133; Slote, 1998, p.37-50) and many rely on the notion of “filial piety” and its transformations to interpret these phenomena. As Wang and Billioud (2022, p.4) observe, however, “‘Confucianism’ is not a clearly defined and unanimously shared body of thought and practices but rather a broad reservoir of references in which activists cherry-pick elements they find inspiring for their own projects.” Although they certainly emphasize authority and hierarchy, Confucian traditions also encourage benevolence, self-improvement and a form of good governance based on example rather than punishment. Authoritarianism is certainly one possible way of interpreting Confucian principles, but it cannot explain the scope of the present-day phenomenon. Many authors have also relied on the notions of patriarchy and post-patriarchy to examine present-day families. In the context of China, patriarchy generally implies the unequal distribution of power both between genders and between generations (see Santos and Harrell, 2017). Nevertheless, understandings of what a patriarchal society is and how to evaluate it also diverge significantly from one another. Some authors (Yi 2019, Yan 2021) see present-day China as a “post-patriarchal” society, by which they mean that the locus of power has switched from the older to the younger generation. Conversely, other authors see “a resurgence of Confucian patriarchal tradition” (Ji, 2017), which implies the reassertion

of traditional masculine dominance. In parallel, contemporary emergence of queer cultures, the decline in marriages, and discourses rejecting the ethics of hard work, are all sites of resistance to conservative and normative pressures. The sentimentalization of family power in the last few decades even further complicates the issue. Yet, the authoritarian and caring sides of these modes of rearing children until they become parents themselves work hand in hand. The anxiousness experienced by parents for their children concerning their future (both professional and matrimonial), is very real. Caring for youths has become a full-time job implying a lot of (self-) discipline from all sides of middle-class families, but also generates resentment and resistance.

Post-Revolutionary Societies and Inequality

Both the importance of education (see Hizi et al., forthcoming) and the rites of marriage are classic topics in the anthropology of China. Hence, one could see the aforementioned phenomena as the continuation of a timeless culture. I, however, would like to rather emphasize the scope of its novelty. Yes, the Chinese did develop competitive and anonymous imperial examinations a millennium ago under the Song dynasty. How demanding this was for the families preparing one child to pass them, is infamous. Yet, this process never encompassed the entirety of society, whereby the schedules of an entire generation of urban children have been saturated from preschool onward. Also, Chinese parents have indeed historically held power over the selection and choice of their adult child's partner. Yet, this did not equate to attending public markets in a frenetic and in many cases almost desperate manner—a new phenomenon that appeared only in the early 2000s. So, what is this all about? In both cases, the issue does have a connection with the long history of Chinese culture. Yet in both cases, it also reflects something entirely new. I maintain that the new element is the following: both higher education and marriage are now part of an open market, rather than a closed one. In the context of a post-revolutionary egalitarian society, except for setting the meritocratic stakes higher, there is no other barrier to entrance. Reaching prestige on this competitive ground implies garnering successes starting at a very young age. Yet, in the context of a *late* post-revolutionary society, a new elite class already exists, and they are compelled to maintain their positions within the equalitarian ideological horizon of the revolution which allowed their initial ascension to power.

Gaokao competition and marriage corners have the same aim: securing a favorable position on an open market where there is a perceived risk that the best positions are secured by competitors, and where a failure ultimately applies additional competitive pressure on the entire family. If competition was less open, it would also be less frantic. It is the opening of the market in a theoretically egalitarian way which inflates and accelerates its competitive character in present times. It is the fact that anyone with enough money can and will send their children to additional classes for them to fare well in the *gaokao* competition that constrains these parents to become the de facto agent of their child. It is the fact that there is an explicit open competition for the best partners (See Pettier, 2022b, p.34), too, that turns what is normally only a market in theoretical terms into a real-life one.

I carried out research in China most intensively from the years 2006 to 2010 and since then, have only spent irregular, shorter stays in the country while my academic career took me to different countries. Over the course of these years, I analyzed the parental strategies and family organization that I had observed there, and kept up to date on how these practices were evolving. In this past decade, the phenomena that I had observed in their infancy have continued to develop and have become increasingly normalized and mainstream. Yet, throughout these same years, two experiences led me to significantly reconsider the meaning of these practices. The first is that, since I myself hail from a modest socio-economic background in the context of rural France, I only later became aware that the French elite also attempt to arrange how their children meet potential partners. Bourgeois families invite all of the teenagers of the good families of their neighborhood to events called “rallies” in order to make them socialize together. The expectation is that all invitees will host a party of a similar caliber when their turn comes, a practice decidedly exclusionary to families like my own, who would not have been able to return the favor in any comparable way. As one can expect, this results in homogamous marriages, but also with professional networks and business opportunities. The second event that decidedly changed the course of my thinking occurred when I taught a summer class at a well-known public university in America. One of the attendees was a very kind, retired senior executive who out of a personal curiosity, took my summer class on Chinese society. When I discussed the intensified forms of parenting observable in China, and the number of additional classes that young Chinese pupils were subjected

to, he recalled how he had himself educated his children by paying for extra-curricular classes for them, even paying a PhD candidate in biology to accompany them on a nature vacation, in order for the children to learn about their natural surroundings while on holiday.

The frenzied competition of upper-class Americans to send their children to elite universities is a well-known phenomenon (Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2021). The same is true in the French system, within which I personally had failed to pass the entrance exams for elite schools. It is only on the day of the exam that I had understood that most participants had signed up for specialized training programs to prepare themselves. Back then, at eighteen years of age, it had not even crossed my mind that such classes existed. Yet, I also quickly realized that my ignorance reflected my socio-cultural background, as many of the other exam-takers queuing with me told me that they had taken such classes, designating the rank of these expensive schools according to the success rates of their previous years' cohorts.

One important point, thus, is to remember that practices of authoritarian-caring parenting do not concern society in its entirety, but rather a portion of the population which needs to raise their children in a distinctive way in order to transfer their privileges *within* the meritocratic system. In contrast to Chinese, US, or French middle-class families, my parents lacked the capacity to provide material support and supervision; they could not advise me on the very unusual professional career path which I discovered and chose almost by accident. This situation also meant, however, that I had virtually unlimited freedom, and encountered little to no opposition to my project on the part of my family, even though it certainly did not seem like a very pragmatic choice to them. I was only concretely limited in my choice by the paths my imagination could foresee, and by the limits of the free public universities of the French academic system. Similarly, my parents would not have been in the capacity to assist me in choosing a partner. I would have perceived an intervention from them in that arena as a disgrace.

These personal details are only worth mentioning if they can help to put in perspective what I have described earlier. Instead of reading *gaokao* competition and marriage corners as symptoms of something exotic and unique to China, it is useful to observe that comparable phenomena exist in other places. Certainly, one could reasonably render these experiences as incommensurable with each other: the supplementary classes

that middle- and upper-class American, Chinese and French children attend have, for example, differing focuses, depending on what specifically distinguishes oneself in the context of the local culture and market. Yet, in all three cases, the emphasis put on equality in the selection of elites through standardized exams has the effect of determining one's future socioeconomic class at a very young age. Although a simple split between post-revolutionary societies and non-revolutionary ones is arguably simplistic—competition is also to be found in not-so-revolutionary societies—the emphasis put by the former on the notion of equality may result in intensified competitive behavior among elites who now must prove their worth and justify their positions. Certainly, any society has its own form of meritocracy. Yet, the latter is not necessarily imagined as egalitarian, or handled in an authoritarian-caring way. In the case of Germany, where I have resided for ten years, social stratification is configured in a highly different way. While typical elites in France, the USA and China make outsized efforts to improve their children's chances of entering prestigious educational institutions, German public elites attempt to distinguish themselves by producing doctorates. Regular proceedings against major politicians accused of having plagiarized their dissertation, or the fact that some suspend their career to re-establish their honor by verily writing one after having been condemned to renounce their academic title, demonstrate the importance attributed to this degree by Germans. A doctorate, however, is completed at an older age than entering an elite university, and requires much more time and financial support. Thus, this system does not have the facade of something that could theoretically be reached by anyone. In addition, the German school system is known to stratify pupils early on between those who attend classical high school—the *Gymnasium*, which is prestigious independently from where it is taken—, and those who attend more professionalizing alternatives. Working class children happen to find themselves massively pushed towards the latter, which makes it hard for them to attend university, or indeed to finish a doctorate later. The form of this system makes the German meritocracy more aristocratic than egalitarian. But the effect of this seems paradoxical. It may indeed in the end be *because* their status is less challenged and the competition less frantic for their children, that German elites have—at least statistically—comparably less pronounced economic advantages than the elites of China, France, or the USA.

To return to the case of authoritarian care in late post-revolutionary societies, while some elites may still profess beliefs which attribute their individual status to a familial, biological or racial destiny, meritocratic prestige acquired through frantic competition to enter prestigious scholarly institutions has become necessary to hold the most visibly dominant positions. At a time when inheritance plays a major role in the transfer of economic means, as demonstrated by Thomas Piketty's work, and thus where it has a major impact on individual health, life chances and opportunities, it seems that elites should be able to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle without enduring this level of competition. Yet, symbolically, this does not seem sufficient in societies which ground themselves in opposition to inherited privilege. Meritocratic prestige framed as egalitarian may indeed be a major incentive for ultra-competitive parental politics, pushing authoritarian-caring education methods forward, thereby encouraging self and familial self-exploitation, and leading in turn to even deeper social inequalities. That is to say that these attempts to promote social mobility through meritocratic access to prestigious positions share the characteristics that these systems' structural conditions increase the level of pressure on child-rearing while favoring those who can afford to invest the most resources into education. This situation, I argue, should lead to a reevaluation of how inequality can and should be addressed, with which aims, and through which means. It interrogates the normative and standardizing tendencies inherent to egalitarianism, and begs the question of how to achieve these goals in a better way.

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