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Item Type	Journal article
Authors	Beck, Fanni;Nyíri, Pál
DOI	10.1017/S0305741022000169
Publisher	Cambridge University Press
Rights	CC BY 4.0
Download date	2024-10-03 13:28:01
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14018/13807

“It’s All for the Child”: The Discontents of Middle-class Chinese Parenting and Migration to Europe

Fanni Beck* and Pál Nyíri†

Abstract

Middle-class parents in China are increasingly torn between the need to secure their child’s future in an environment where competition starts in kindergarten and parenting ideologies focusing on the child’s individuality, creativity and freedom. Our study, based on ethnographic fieldwork among middle-class Chinese migrants in Budapest, shows that one result of this tension is a new wave of emigration that is justified in terms of securing a relaxed, healthy and free environment for the child. These migrants consciously reject what they see as a materialistic and dehumanizing social environment in China and pursue a “European” lifestyle that they imagine as wholesome and human-centred; yet while they rejoice in the “happiness” of their children, they retain a deep-seated anxiety about their children’s future. Thus, the search for a mentally and physically wholesome environment consonant with China’s discourse of national revitalization becomes decoupled from its original agenda and triggers a new trend in international mobility. This study illustrates how the broader tensions in the relationship between China’s middle class and the state are externalized to the global stage.

Keywords: Hungary; Europe; middle class; international migration; parenting; childhood; China

Evincing China’s changing position within the capitalist world-system, a new trend in emigration has emerged. Recent scholarship assessing contemporary tendencies in Chinese migration points to a particular shift in “upward concentration”: more wealthy and well-educated people, mostly urban middle- and upper-class families, are moving to a select number of the most developed countries in the Global North.¹ The “exodus of the rich”² is characterized by a set of motives that, as indicated by surveys, range from anxiety over children’s

* Central European University, Budapest, Hungary Email: Beck_Fanni@phd.ceu.edu (corresponding author).

† Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Email: p.d.nyiri@vu.nl.

1 Xiang 2016.

2 Liu-Farrer 2016.

well-being in the competitive Chinese education system to concerns over food security and air pollution.³ Standing in sharp contrast to labour migration oriented at economic accumulation, the migration of the wealthy has been interpreted as a form of lifestyle consumption.⁴

Migration studies are generally preoccupied with the economic structures driving migration decision making.⁵ In Weberian terms, migration is seen as overwhelmingly driven by “instrumental rationality.”⁶ This view is amplified in the case of Chinese migration, which is seen as entrepreneurial migration par excellence.⁷ As such, the recent trend of “upward concentration” in emigration from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has been scrutinized mostly as overseas investment,⁸ while the non-economic rationales driving the migration of the wealthy have remained largely unaddressed. Notwithstanding migrants’ own narratives, which suggest that concerns for the well-being of children prevail over concerns “over wealth itself,”⁹ Gracia Liu-Farrer, for example, argues that such non-economic pursuits in fact serve as a disguised strategy for class reproduction, in which an overseas lifestyle is ultimately converted into social status in China.¹⁰ From this perspective, desirable lifestyles and a “happy education”¹¹ in the Anglophone West are just an updated version of “developed country citizenship,”¹² earlier forms of which meant university degrees, jobs and entitlements that also translated into social status back in China.

This picture, however, is nuanced by the increasing migration of the Chinese middle class beyond the Anglophone “developed world.” Following the 2008 recession, several South and East European member states of the European Union (EU) launched residency-for-investment (so-called “golden visa”) programmes. PRC citizens have been the top participants in these schemes, constituting 54 per cent of all participants in Portugal between its launch in 2013 and 2019,¹³ about half in Spain, and over 80 per cent in Hungary.¹⁴ After the suspension of Hungary’s programme in 2017, Greece became the top European destination for Chinese investor migrants, attracting over 70 per cent of the total number of investors in 2019.¹⁵ In total, around 50,000 PRC citizens acquired EU permanent residence through the “golden visa” and similar schemes.

Seen from this broader base, emigration for well-to-do Chinese does not necessarily correspond to a straightforward logic of converting the consumption of

3 Xiang 2015.

4 Liu-Farrer 2016.

5 de Haas 2011.

6 Weber 1947.

7 Ong 1999; Zhou 2010.

8 Ley 2017; Liu-Farrer 2016; Robertson and Rogers 2017; Rogers, Lee and Yan 2015.

9 Xiang 2016.

10 Liu-Farrer 2016.

11 *Ibid.*, 513.

12 Fong 2011.

13 Amante and Rodrigues 2020.

14 Nyíri and Beck 2020.

15 Petrakis 2020.

foreign lifestyles into cultural capital back home. While moving temporarily to London or New York could be interpreted as jumping scale in the global hierarchies of modernity, by the same logic, moving from the world cities of Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou to Budapest, Athens or Lisbon is rather a process of *downscaling*. As we argue elsewhere, this migration is driven by a different logic, namely the pursuit of a relaxed lifestyle in an environmentally green, culturally and historically rich, infrastructurally amenable and racially white urban setting that is seen as an attribute of an imagined authentic “Europe,” in contradistinction to North American and Australian modernity.¹⁶ This downscaling is justified through the needs of the child, which points to the “perennial middle-class preoccupation with the problems of child rearing” central to China’s newly evolving middle classes.¹⁷ The middle-class couples or mothers with young children we describe in this article moved to Budapest, despite its low ranking in the global developmental hierarchy, in the hope of securing a mentally, socially and physically healthier environment for their offspring – and themselves.

This logic departs from “instrumental rationality” both in its distinctly non-economic nature and in its temporality: instead of future material benefits, it is oriented towards the present, affective quality of life. Unlike moving to places associated with global wealth and power,¹⁸ which increasingly defines upward mobility for children¹⁹ and class reproduction for their parents, the choice of peripheral destinations such as Hungary appears to conform to the logic of Weber’s “rationality of value,” reminding us that migration can possess an intrinsic well-being enhancing value and therefore be understood as an *end in itself*. According to Inglehart’s value change theory, as material conditions stabilize, societies’ prevailing values tend to shift from survival to “postmaterial” goals such as a clean environment, self-expression, free speech or gender equality.²⁰ The migration we address in this article attests to the presence of such a value transition in the Chinese context, but it also reveals its ambiguities and inconsistencies through migrant parents’ persistent ambivalence regarding a “happy childhood” versus future material success. We explore how aspirations pivoting around children emerged as a dominant value for the Chinese middle class, how they are linked to international mobility and how they continue to shape migratory pathways.

Our paper draws on ongoing ethnographic research, started in 2015, among approximately 20 families who migrated to Hungary under the “golden visa” scheme between 2013 and 2017. We have been following eight of these families by participating in their leisure and learning activities, communicating with the children’s schools and teachers, and following their social media presence; with another 15 couples and single migrants, we conducted extensive unstructured

16 Nyiri and Beck 2020.

17 Ehrenreich 1990.

18 Liu 1996; Hansen, Anders Sybrandt, and Thøgersen 2015; Kajanus 2015; Xiang and Shen 2009.

19 Woronov 2008.

20 Inglehart 1971.

interviews and subsequently kept in looser touch. The families were selected and approached through two separate snowball samples: one through a network of friends living in Buda's upmarket garden districts and another in the more socially mixed central districts of Pest. These two networks loosely correspond to slightly different economic backgrounds. All of our respondents, indeed all of the Chinese "golden visa" migrants in Hungary we spoke to, had college degrees and had worked as managers or partners at private companies in Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou, except one university professor and one who had worked at a Communist Party research outfit. All had owned property and maintained lifestyles that placed them within the middle class, including regular leisure travel and extracurricular classes for their children.²¹ But while some maintained these lifestyles with relative ease, others were stretched to their financial limits. Some were able to maintain their property and businesses in China after moving to semi-retirement in Hungary; others had sold theirs to finance the move; in yet other cases the husband remained in China to continue providing for the family. After moving to Hungary, the families relied on earlier or continuing income from assets or business activities in China.

With one exception, our interlocutors were parents with young children. They described China as an environment physically (air pollution, food security), socially (extremely competitive society) and mentally (educational stress) unhealthy for child rearing and pointed to the need of their (in most cases only) child for freedom and happiness. They wished to provide these by securing a green and relaxed environment that allowed for undisturbed and wholesome development (*quanmian fazhan* 全面发展). They explicitly rejected the competitive pursuit of wealth and success, manifested in parenting practices they saw as characteristic of contemporary Chinese society, in favour of an ideal "happy childhood" free from social pressure. Yet this commitment coexisted uneasily with a continued anxiety for the child's future. We argue that this contradictory attitude to child rearing provides a fertile entry point to explore a complicated web of ideologies that governs middle-class desire in today's China.²² Reflecting authoritarian China's inconsistent and contradictory incorporation into the neoliberal capitalist world system, the parenting ideologies put forward by the truth regimes of the centralized state and the liberalizing market are deeply fraught with antagonisms, simultaneously promoting an individualist and collectivist ideal of the child who is autonomous, independent and innovative, but nonetheless filial, obedient and submissive.

As our study shows, this ambivalence not only triggers the act of emigration but makes a lasting impact on the ways in which migratory presents are perceived and futures are imagined. This mobility, largely fuelled by disaffection, might point to the globalization of China's new middle classes, whose way of engaging

21 In defining the middle class through lifestyle, consumption and aspirations rather than through quantitative indicators, we follow Zhang 2012.

22 Crabb 2010; Kipnis 2011.

with the world is distinct from other human flows triggered by the globalization of Chinese capital. Mediated through the ideal of childhood, it also presents new complexities in relations with the homeland by introducing a more critical stance towards it than the “cosmopolitan nationalism” characterizing other elite Chinese migrations in the 21st century.²³

How to Raise a Happy but Competitive Child: The Dilemma of Middle-class Child Rearing in China

Parental aspirations in China are related to the discourse on *suzhi* 素质, a notoriously floating signifier that roughly translates to English as “quality.”²⁴ *Suzhi* has emerged as a new form of governmentality in tandem with population planning since 1976.²⁵ The one-child policy (1978–2015), a cornerstone of the PRC’s national modernization project, was based on a logic of “reverse population engineering” aiming at increasing the population’s quality through the reduction of its quantity.²⁶ Whereas higher living standards in developed countries resulted in a decreasing number of births, a controlled reduction of births in China would eventually lead to higher life standards and consequently to modernization.²⁷

At first, raising the *suzhi* of the population was linked to Deng Xiaoping’s 邓小平 goals of better education, better healthcare and higher living standards in general.²⁸ But as reforms intensified throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the notion of *suzhi* took on new meanings as it became omnipresent.²⁹ In an increasingly stratified society, *suzhi* was no longer only a national goal; it resonated with class reproduction and child rearing in newly affluent, upwardly mobile families. Coupled with the transformative forces of China’s deepening marketization and spreading consumer culture, “the project to create the perfect child became a fixation of parents and the wider society alike,”³⁰ generating enormous public interest in what constitutes the good life and how mothers should work towards achieving it for their only children through scientific child-rearing technologies and smart consumer choices.³¹

The emotional valorization of the only child has been accompanied by the increasing monetization and commercialization of children’s lives.³² Market

23 Nyiri, Zhang and Varrall 2010.

24 Kipnis 2006.

25 Meng 2018, 158.

26 Greenhalgh 2008; Kuan 2015.

27 Greenhalgh 2010.

28 Rocca 2013.

29 Anagnost and Comaroff 1997; Kipnis 2006.

30 Greenhalgh 2010, 58.

31 This process bears a remarkable resemblance to the transformation of middle-class family life observed within the US context that took place between the late 18th century and mid-20th century, albeit taking shape in a less subtle and more rapid form. For example, Hays, Ehrenreich and Lasch all draw attention to the “professionalization” of child rearing as part and parcel of middle-class formation in the American context. See Ehrenreich 1990; Hays 1998; Lasch 1977.

32 Zelizer 1985.

forces joined state propaganda to produce new reproductive subjects: the sacrificing mother and the quality child. As parental desires to secure offspring's "wholesome development" translated into money, a booming market for goods and services for children emerged, expanding to 4.5 trillion yuan (US\$695 billion) in 2020 according to *Economic Daily*.³³ This market includes the clothing, feeding and entertaining of China's only children, but a significant proportion comprises extracurricular tutorials in sports, arts and languages that aim to enhance the child's *suzhi* and therefore its chances in the educational competition.³⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich argues that unlike in the upper or lower social classes, where membership is inherited, reproduction in the professional middle class is secured only through parenting.³⁵ In the North American context, Annette Lareau identifies "concerted cultivation" as the defining parenting style for the middle class that lays the groundwork for its reproduction.³⁶ In China, turning the individual into a site of investment not only resonates with the profoundly neoliberal idea of concerted cultivation as practised by the North American middle class but also blends with older Chinese traditions of self-cultivation.³⁷ By making "concerted cultivation" (the strategic investment in the child's development) the norm, the discourse on child quality and wholesome development sets the bar for the new normative, middle-class figure of citizenship to which education is paramount.³⁸

By the 2000s, the state's emphasis on rearing "quality" children coalesced with a new parenting ideology that crystallized around an emerging middle-class sense of individuality and focused not only on the child's future success but also, often contradictorily, on its present happiness.³⁹ The agenda to raise happy but nonetheless competitive children proved to be increasingly unfeasible in the social reality of the "billion striving individuals"⁴⁰ competing on a narrow pathway for the limited positions that secure a comfortable living.⁴¹ Under these circumstances, parents simultaneously felt compelled to make more and more efforts to raise "quality" children and increasingly rejected the system that compelled them to do so.

In the 2010s, while incomes rose further and access to higher education expanded, rising graduate unemployment and increasing awareness of declining social mobility increased the pressure on parents by generating further anxiety about surviving in a society widely regarded as both competitive and nepotistic. On the other hand, a growing private education sector offered those parents wealthy enough not to worry about their child's future competitiveness in the job market a "happier" environment as an alternative to competitive education.

33 Huang 2021.

34 Veeck, Flurry and Jiang 2003.

35 Ehrenreich 1990, 83.

36 Lareau 2003.

37 Kipnis 2007.

38 Anagnost 2008.

39 Hansen, Mette, and Svarverud 2010.

40 Yan 2013.

41 Fong 2004; 2011; Fong and Kim 2011; Kuan 2015.

As early as 2007, “70 percent of Beijing parents aged between 35 and 44 said the only purpose of their family savings was to pay for their children’s education, and about 60 percent of Chinese families in major cities now spend one third of their monthly income on it.”⁴² A decade later, “involution” (*neijuan* 内卷) became a buzzword on the Chinese internet, describing a situation where everyone invests more and more in competing for resources just to maintain their current socio-economic status.⁴³ Competition for educational credentials, which begins with getting into the “right” nursery school, is a central element of this.⁴⁴ Study burdens and the costs of extracurricular activities have become such central considerations for parents that, in 2021, the government, fearing that these elements contribute to low birth rates, which are now perceived to be a problem, introduced the “double reduction policy” to restrict the amount of school work that can be imposed on children.⁴⁵

State *suzhi* discourse identified the environment as one of the major factors that shape a child’s *suzhi*.⁴⁶ The pursuit of happiness made concern with the environment more urgent. The middle class increasingly came to see the physical, social and educational environment in the megacities of China, characterized by heavy air pollution,⁴⁷ a lack of food security, the stressful and dehumanizing nature of incessant competition and a rigid, examination-oriented education system,⁴⁸ as detrimental to the wholesome development of the child. In a generation of parents, the *suzhi* discourse fostered higher expectations than the state, which evoked them in the first place, could meet. The search for a mentally, physically, intellectually and emotionally wholesome environment engendered by the discourse of national revitalization⁴⁹ thus became decoupled from its original agenda and emerged as a mental structure in its own right, triggering a new trend in international mobility. We argue that the middle-class lifestyle emigration we see emerging today can be directly linked to the escalation of both the price and pricelessness of children⁵⁰ as a combined effect of the state’s (now abolished) one-child policy and the rise of middle-class sensibilities and desires. On the face of it, middle-class parents who decided to quit the race by leaving the country rejected the Chinese state’s rigid pedagogy, which is aimed at the continuous cultivation of ever higher *suzhi*, stressing instead happiness and self-fulfilment. Yet at a deeper level, their quest, aided by the proliferation of residency-by-investment schemes, shows a determination to secure their child’s *suzhi* precisely by displacing it onto a global stage. As one of our interlocutors put it:

42 “Need to succeed draining children’s energy, parents’ money.” *Xinhua News Agency*, 8 March 2007, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/education/202129.htm>.

43 Wang and Ge 2020.

44 Xu 2017.

45 “Roundup from our portfolios.” *China Policy*, 26 June 2021, <https://mailchi.mp/policycn/observer-2753808?e=ce041fa648>.

46 Kipnis 2006.

47 Li and Tilt 2018.

48 Hansen, Mette 2018; Mok 2005.

49 Greenhalgh 2010.

50 Zelizer 1985.

Chinese mothers think very plainly: it's all for the child (*zhi yao weilie haizi* 只要为了孩子). You have to sacrifice everything for your child ... But actually, our expectations are quite simple: a good-enough life in a good-enough environment, where the kid can be happy. However simple this sounds; we could not realize that in China.⁵¹

But how do theories of child rearing translate into practice, and how does practice translate back to theory? The remaining part of this article presents an ethnographic account that suggests that the “free” and “happy” environment parents aim to secure for their children by removing them from the racetrack in fact induces anxieties. Even though parents adopted migration as a self-conscious strategy for opting out of the competition, they remain haunted by the fear of losing out: the anxiety they hoped to leave behind in China begins to resurface.

“A Good-enough Life in a Good-enough Environment”: How Children Continue to Shape Migratory Pathways

Renouncing competitive education does not mean that concerns over the educational future of the child are discarded altogether. Instead of attempting to compete by conforming to the prescribed models of achievement and trajectories for social mobility, the families in our study utilize the capital they have already accumulated to opt out of that competition early on and open up new opportunities in the transnational sphere, thereby creating “a room for manoeuvring, and for altering the trajectories that were seemingly laid out at birth.”⁵² By choosing Hungary, parents reject an involutionary competition ideally leading to the world's top-ranking universities, but often wind up in new, less intense forms of competition. As parents discover that they are, after all, concerned with their offspring's future material well-being, many make plans to shepherd them into higher education in Germany. This track offers a pathway towards educational credentials that are perceived to be more valuable than Hungarian credentials, less cramped than the testing field for the top-ranking universities of either the Anglophone world or China, and free of charge to EU residents. Others continue stressing the importance of self-expression. In this narrative, the relaxed pace of Hungarian public education allows children to spend more time and energy on nurturing their individual capabilities. The parents' purpose of buying residency in Hungary is to *buy time*, through which they hope to enable their children to develop strengths in which they not only excel but which they also truly enjoy, giving them a rail to hold onto in their future – regardless of academic achievement. These two approaches represent alternative attitudes both to the present and the future, but they are not mutually exclusive; some parents alternate between both.

The migrants we interviewed unequivocally motivated their decision to move to Hungary with their child's needs for happiness, autonomy and creativity.

51 Interview with Meng, a 46-year-old mother from Shanghai, Pest, 19 November 2018.

52 Orellana et al. 2001, 587.

They portrayed their move as an escape from the social and educational competition in China, an exit taken so that their child can break free from a soul-numbing system of education that turns children into “study machines.” Our informants shared an almost uniformly negative opinion about the Chinese education system, describing it as corrupt, merciless, extremely stressful and, in the long run, ultimately pointless. The summary provided by one of our interlocutors resonates with the overall attitude, and was accompanied by nods of consent from other mothers present:

In the Chinese education [system], children are treated as robots who have to work all day; there is not one tiny bit of playing around, or happiness, not a bit of freedom. Studying from morning to dawn, I think that’s not healthy.⁵³

In trying to meet the ever-increasing standards of “concerted cultivation” by enrolling their child in both the prescribed and tacitly expected extracurricular classes (*buke* 补课), many parents faced financial difficulties and felt their child was losing out on his or her childhood. As one of the mothers put it:

In China, expectations are very high, you have to paint, you have to swim, you have to play the piano, and speak English of course ... Our salaries are not enough to pay for all the classes ... And I don’t think like that, I think the kid should have one thing he likes, be good at it, and that’s it.⁵⁴

The incessant requirements put some of the parents under constant pressure not only psychologically but also financially, causing them to struggle to maintain their middle-class status through appropriate child rearing, even as they were simultaneously told by popular experts feeding on US literature that they should attend to their children’s psychological selves and nurture them to be well rounded, creative and autonomous persons.⁵⁵ Realizing the incongruity of trying to reconcile these contradictory aspirations, they turned to migration, which provided them with a new environment free from pressure and thus the space to reimagine their priorities.

Hungary, exactly because of its peripheral status in relation to the centres of global modernity, allows for a more relaxed way of living and offers a refuge from the pressure of incessant competition. This spatial downscaling – with Budapest sometimes jokingly referred to as “a village” (*nongcun* 农村) – suggests a renunciation of the norms and values of material hypermodernity, while temporally it points to the emergence of the *present* as the decisive temporality for migration decision making. These migrants dropped out of the parenting race in China not for the potential rewards of educational choices abroad but for an environment that seemed to be best for their child in the present.

None of the migrants specifically intended to migrate to Hungary. Rather, the speed, the relative affordability and simplicity of the Hungarian immigration scheme – it was the second cheapest and least complicated of

53 Interview with Bella, a 42-year-old mother from Beijing, Pest, 4 November 2018.

54 Interview, Meng, 19 November 2018.

55 Kuan 2015.

residency-for-investment schemes offered within the EU⁵⁶ – attracted them *after* they had decided to leave China. Hungary’s “golden visa” immigration scheme, which ran between 2013 and 2017, provided a quick, cheap and easy way out, which made the country an attractive destination despite its peripheral status in global imaginaries. Budapest was marketed as a value-for-money destination that offered “European lifestyle at a discount,” emphasizing the affordability of the city that nonetheless stood for an imaginary European lifestyle (see Figure 1).

Most of the interlocutors who came through the programme claimed that upon arrival they knew close to nothing about the country, which, at first sight, seemed to be “in the middle of nowhere.” While the choice to move to Hungary was likely driven by pragmatism, they emphasized that it was the quality of life in Budapest that attracted them. As one of our informants told us, many of her friends asked why she wanted to move to “such a poor country.” She told them that she wanted to have a simpler life, with fewer complications than a life in China or other West European countries offers. She regarded Hungary as:

A great decision for now. Because the buildings might be run down, and it can be poor compared to other countries, but I still think the quality (*suzhi*) is here. It was under European influence for centuries. It might look poor and broken, but the people’s quality is very good. And even though it’s such a small country, its music and its art are excellent, recognized throughout the world.⁵⁷

This distinction between surface and content, between looks and inherent value, and especially the ability to assess their relative importance was a recurring theme in our discussions, serving as a salient basis for identity formation. Unambiguously attributing significance to inherent value and meaning against superficial judgement emerged as an essential norm among our interlocutors, marking them in their own telling as distinct from both the wealthy who migrate to the “First World” and those who stay at home, as well as from the older Chinese immigrants to Hungary, who had moved to make money. As one informant pointed out, one of the attractive things about moving to Hungary was that the Chinese who ended up there were close to each other in terms of values: they were neither very rich nor ambitious, but instead wanted a quiet life. As the nuanced intra-ethnic division mapped onto space and time below reveals, there is a growing sense of distinction based on class, which is narrated through *suzhi*:

In the US and Canada, there are many wealthy Chinese already, but not here. Here, the old migrants are very different from us, they left China because they were poor ... They are different from us. We have more education, university and above; they don’t. But since they are here for such a long time, they slowly improve. But we are different, we represent a different culture in general. So, the wealthiest went to Canada and so on, the poorest came here earlier and, now, we represent the middle class.⁵⁸

56 Sumption and Hooper 2014.

57 Interview with Yunxia, 48-year-old mother from Beijing, Pest, 19 September 2019.

58 Interview, Meng, 19 November 2018.

Figure 1: Advertisement for the Hungarian Residency Bond Programme

Among immigration program in European Schengen countries

- The only program**
 clearly stated that there is no special requirement to apply for permanent residency permit.
- The only program**
 clearly stated that there is no landing requirement to apply for permanent residency permit.
- Invest in government, safe and easy.**
- Government support, no stay in Hungary is required.**

Exchange Rates
 1 EUR=308.5532 HUF
 1 CNY=¥¥¥¥! HUF

Recommended website
 安居乐业匈牙利

Links
 Immigration Hungary
 Hungary Embassy in Beijing
 Hungary Embassy in Shanghai
 Hungary Embassy in Chongqing

Hungary State Special Debt immigration
 Official Weixin
 Official Weibo

Source:
<http://immigration-hungary.com/EN/>

The migrants’ criticism of Chinese society was also framed in terms of an explicit postmaterialist value orientation: “[In China] they don’t look at any other [values], just how much money you have. That society is not healthy.”⁵⁹ In contrast, Hungary is perceived as a society in which children can acquire healthier values. Bella, a 42-year-old former businesswoman from Beijing, for example, explained that she was very careful to teach her 10-year-old daughter the right mindset. She “rescued” her from a Beijing elementary school, where she was performing poorly and the family felt disgraced because they did not have the money to buy presents for teachers in order to secure leniency. Consequently, the daughter was repeatedly scolded and humiliated in front of her class. The teachers told her that if she did not improve, she would end up in a lowly job, destined to live at the bottom of society.

My opinion is that this shouldn’t be a teacher’s concern. What I do for a living is my personal choice. I think the kid should do what she likes and live happily. Studying is not for everybody. And that’s a big difference between the two countries. Because, I think, if you are a worker here, it doesn’t matter that your job is dirty and exhausting, when you finish working, you can still have your life ... I don’t want the kid to grow up with this idea that because of his/her job, someone is less of a person than someone who is a lawyer for example.⁶⁰

59 Interview, Bella, 4 November 2018.

60 Ibid.

In this imaginary, Hungary is seen as a utopian place where people are equal and free to do whatever they like, where it is only inner values rather than material possessions that determine status.

Such a postmaterialist orientation is also reflected in migrants' views on parenting and is quite visible in educational choices. Instead of enrolling their children in prestigious private English-language "international schools" as a pathway to a university degree and a job in an English-speaking Western country – in other words, "developed country citizenship" – as earlier Chinese migrants to Hungary tended to do,⁶¹ "golden visa" migrants often send their children to state schools, even as the Hungarian middle class increasingly shuns state schools in preference for private and confessional ones.⁶² Recent immigrants are considerably wealthier and far more willing to spend on their children than were earlier migrants, who made their living importing and selling consumer goods. However, they still opt for public schools that are neither particularly welcoming towards nor equipped to handle the needs of non-Hungarian speaking pupils.⁶³ Confessional and private schools, on the other hand, are more child-centred, less focused on content delivery and more on creativity, and offer better international connections – precisely what Chinese migrant parents say they seek. It would seem that the old-fashioned content-oriented, disciplinarian teaching that state schools engage in would remind parents of schooling in China, which they claim they want to avoid, rather than the "happy education" they pursue. Why are their expectations towards Hungary's public education system so positive?

Lena, a 35-year-old single mother from Wuhan who headed a translating agency, decided to leave China before her son reached school age. She mapped the primary schools of Budapest through exhaustive desk research, interrogation of other Chinese parents via social media groups, and finally securing interviews with principals. She told us that her most important criterion was whether her son, a racially visible immigrant child, would feel welcome. She came to choose a low-ranking public school in a relatively low-income central Budapest district. The school advertised itself as bilingual – i.e. with enhanced English education – but, for this mother, the most important consideration was that her son was happy there, despite the run-down facilities. She was content with the school because unlike the general Chinese experience, "teachers here are nice, they don't yell at children, don't humiliate them, but simply *love* them."⁶⁴

Although at first there were few Chinese pupils in the school, their number began to grow as more immigrant parents transferred their children. The mother believed that the parents who transferred their children were close to her in terms of values: they did not mind that the environment was a bit rough-and-ready and they did not care about the school's appearance; they only cared about the

61 Nyíri 2014.

62 Since 2010, when the current Hungarian government took office, the number of pupils in confessional schools has grown by 80%. Gera 2018.

63 Szilassy and Árendás 2007.

64 Skype interview with Lena, a 35-year-old mother from Wuhan, 15 April 2020.

happiness of their children, just like her. Instead of using her son’s education as a means to convey status for herself at the present and secure future mobility for him, this mother dismissed concerns over class and prestige altogether and stressed the goal of inculcating her son with the values she prioritized: to be kind-hearted and to treat everyone equally.

Jake, a 32-year-old stay-at-home father from Beijing who had previously worked in telecommunications, explained that younger generation parents, who are themselves singleton children, can afford to be so carefree concerning their only child’s education because the child can rely not only on the resources of his or her parents but also on the resources of four grandparents. Jake said he would be happy if his son did well in school, but it was not imperative: his son could fail and everything would still be okay. This idea was a comfort to him and allowed him to enjoy his son’s untroubled childhood and let go of the “fear of not getting ahead.”⁶⁵

In the narratives evoked by many parents, childhood happiness and a “happy education” were associated with freedom in general and democracy in particular, pointing to the absence of democracy in the PRC as a major reason behind their decision to leave. Coming from a rigid authoritarian regime, the idea of having *choice* in Hungary – notwithstanding the steady decline of democracy in the country since 2010 – was an important theme in the narration of decision making. As one of our interlocutors said, “I wanted my children to grow up in a democracy, even if they have no idea what it means. In Hungary, there is democracy, freedom. In China, there is none, you don’t have any rights.”⁶⁶ According to this perspective, a lack of democracy and rights in general is directly related to children’s lack of choice and denial of agency. Radically overburdened by mandatory obligations, children have neither the time nor the energy to nurture their individual inclinations. In sharp contrast to the traditional ideal of the obedient child corresponding to the norm of filial piety, a growing number of Chinese parents have begun to embrace the idea of their child as a coequal, autonomous individual capable of making decisions for and on his or her own.⁶⁷ In this context, Budapest offers an environment in which experimenting with and fostering individual propensities becomes affordable in terms of financing, time and personal energy.

In describing her expectations regarding her son’s physical recreation, Meng, an interlocutor who also claimed that democracy and freedom had been among her most important concerns in leaving China and choosing Hungary, added:

We just go down to the park together, jogging, playing football, playing around. I don’t want him to make it professional, like in China, where everything has to be professional. I think what is most important is to be healthy and have fun, the rest is not important.⁶⁸

65 Crabb 2010.

66 Interview, Yunxia, 7 September 2018.

67 Kuan 2015.

68 Interview, Meng, 19 November 2018.

Her son's freedoms in choosing his own activities included not learning to play a musical instrument and, in theory, extended not only to choosing where he wanted to study but also where he wanted to live. Yet, in practice, choice has its limits: "He likes programming and I think programming is good, and he is quite good at it, but now he has to get prepared for the high school exam, so I don't let him do that now."⁶⁹

The following example of the changing technologies of child rearing illustrates how the idea of choice becomes a central concern. When we asked Lena, one of our informants, what kind of measures she took in order to detach her eight-year-old son from the screens he was addicted to, she explained that instead of simply commanding him, she would *provide him with choice*, employing choice as a governing technique:

Instead of dragging him outside and ordering him to just play and be happy, [laughs] I consult him a little bit, because I would like to make him happy. He has his own list of favourite places, we made a list from which he can choose, just like from a menu.⁷⁰

By replacing direct commands with multiple choice, Lena hoped to evoke a feeling akin to what she conceived as the joy of consumption – implied by the term "menu" – hoping to mask the fact that one option, the one her son probably prefers the most, was not on offer. As another mother explained, "you have to make sure the child's goals are aligned with the parents' [goals]," making it clear, however, that it is the parents who set the goals and must ensure that the child agrees.

The same dissonance accompanied Shaohua's way of thinking and practices. Shaohua, a 43-year-old mother told us she had brought her then eight-year-old daughter, Lily, from Kunming to Hungary because, unlike in China, teachers there were encouraging and helpful in realizing children's individual potential, helping them to grow up as independent and autonomous thinkers. Yet, in practice, she forced Lily to pursue competitive table tennis, which Lily detested. Lily, standing up for herself, challenged this duty, asking why she had to go training every day if she hated ping pong. Her mother responded that it was important, because it taught her persistence, arguing she could not give up on something she had started. Lily, testifying to the skills she had acquired in critical thinking, quickly retorted that she did not want to play ping pong in the first place. Her mother cut the discussion short with a glare and a puzzled laugh, and everything carried on the same way. Similarly, many other Chinese parents among the recent immigrant cohort encourage their children to continue with the competitive sports they had begun in China, resulting in an overrepresentation of Chinese contestants not just in national table tennis but also in fencing and other children's championships, from maths to drawing, music and recitation.

Continued comparisons with peers who remain in China aggravate this anxiety. During a summer vacation, Yunxia went back to China with her younger

69 Ibid.

70 Skype interview, Lena, 15 April 2020.

child. Jade, her 12-year-old daughter, refused to go and managed to convince her mother to allow her to stay with a Hungarian host family instead. Yunxia did not interfere with how Jade spent her time during the summer, but her experience in China witnessing the incessant school preparations carried out by her friends’ children amplified her anxiety about her children falling behind by “wasting time.” Through the social media app WeChat, she ordered Jade to spend her evenings making notes about European history and culture from a book about the British Museum. In theory, she supported the idea of a carefree childhood; putting it into practice, however, was unbearably stressful for her: “Chinese mothers just love their children too much to treat them like this” – by which she did not mean scolding and beating, but rather the lack of it. Upon returning from China, Yunxia confessed to becoming more nervous about how her younger child, who was about to begin school, also spent his free time. “Back there, they keep taking classes, and here they just play in the sandbox!”⁷¹

Children, on the other hand, enjoyed their new freedoms. Many exploited their parents’ inability to assess their studies (because of language barriers) to shirk homework. When mothers complained that they could not help their child, since they “can’t understand a single sentence in the textbook” and lamented the lack of communication with teachers, children happily took charge of their own education. Conversely, at school, they sometimes avoided tasks by claiming that they did not understand them. When asked which schooling they preferred, all the children voted for Hungary, as they have much more free time.

The parents, suspecting that this is the case, were all the more anxious for it:

The teacher always says Jade is very smart, and I’m tired of that. What can I do with that? Every kid is smart. I also know that I never see her studying at all. In China, I saw her studying all the time, and it just worries me sick that I feel like she is not doing anything.⁷²

The Ambivalence of Opting Out

The ambivalent feelings of Lena, Meng, Shaohua and Yunxia regarding their children’s choices show that the migrant parents are not quite prepared for what they perceive as a “happy education.” The irony is that Hungary’s state education system does not, in fact, provide a “happy education,” as imagined by the parents. After hesitant steps towards a more creativity-focused curriculum in the 2000s, it has recently shifted back to a book-and-discipline-based curriculum as part of the rightward lurch in Hungarian politics.⁷³ Furthermore, since 2015, the Hungarian government has made opposition to immigration a central element of its rhetoric. Although in reality it has adopted a more liberal immigration policy, its ideological position has meant that none of the services provided by the state acknowledge the presence of immigrants. Thus, there are no institutionalized policies – such as the provision of lessons in Hungarian as

71 Interview, Yunxia, 19 September 2019.

72 Interview, Yunxia, 3 February 2020.

73 Radó 2019.

a second language – to assist non-Hungarian-speaking children at school. What happens to immigrant children is completely up to individual institutions and teachers, who deal with them according to their own inclinations and abilities. Typically, instead of extra help, they are put down one or two school years in order to give them time to learn the language.⁷⁴

Since Margit Feischmidt and Pál Nyíri's 2006 study, the negative stereotyping of Chinese pupils by teachers and children has taken a more positive shift. Our conversations at primary and secondary schools reveal that they are not only seen as hardworking and diligent pupils by their teachers but also as “cool” by their Hungarian peers, who are fascinated by the Chinese pupils' high-tech electronic gadgets and fashionable outfits. Yet, as that study found, it is still the schools already receptive to disadvantaged children that are more inclusive towards the Chinese. However, precisely because disadvantaged children such as Roma or migrant children of other origins are overrepresented at these institutions, they have a negative reputation among local parents and little in common with the standards of a “happy education” imagined by the middle-class Chinese parents. Upon familiarizing themselves with the local vernacular of racism, Chinese parents quickly begin to speak it fluently. Schools are left and chosen because of the presence or absence of Roma children, “who cheat and steal each other's stuff. It might be a small thing, but the child learns quickly that she can take whatever she wants. I don't want her to grow up in such an environment,” as one of our informants put it to us.⁷⁵

Parents' anxiety about school prestige suggests that they are still haunted by the social competition they wanted to escape through migration. Meanwhile, other Chinese parents keenly consult Hungarian school rankings and buy flats in catchment areas of “good” schools, often Hungarian–English or Hungarian–German bilingual state schools in Budapest's central districts, or else try to find contacts that facilitate their child's admission. Such schools, however, often maintain informal caps on the number of Chinese pupils and are less welcoming towards new applicants. Both scenarios contribute to the tendency that for all the talk about reducing pressure on children, many Chinese parents sign their children up for a growing number of extracurricular classes, from music through sports to language, reflecting the parents' ambivalence about how they should raise their child. The fact that Chinese parents who have chosen to live in the garden suburbs of Budapest or surrounding villages and send their children to local schools also tend to enrol them in extracurricular language, sports and music classes suggests that doubts about the adequacy of school offerings are not limited to situations in which the school setting is perceived as either inadequate or unwelcoming. Some of them have started organizing extracurricular English and mathematics classes via WeChat. One such group, the “Home

74 Feischmidt and Nyíri 2006.

75 Interview, Bella, 4 November 2018.

Education Sharing Salon,” also serves as a platform for discussing anxieties about education and has 300 members.

Although parents consciously set out to be more relaxed about their children’s education and to reduce the pressure on them, anxiety about competition leads mothers to engage in a form of “teacher-collecting” activity: if someone finds a good piano, English, German, tennis, or any other teacher or coach, peer mothers are quick to send their child to the same teacher, worrying that another child who enjoys more extra tutoring will outshine their own child. The all-pervasive imaginary of competition that the migrants sought to leave behind thus keeps haunting them.

What we observed through our longitudinal ethnographic research is that after opting out of competitive education in China, some Chinese parents became increasingly uncertain about the salutary nature of what they perceived as a Hungarian “happy education” and sought to mitigate their doubts by adding extracurricular classes – in other words, reigniting a competition, yet on unfamiliar terms in a system they did not understand.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The move to Budapest, a self-conscious downscaling, suggests a renunciation of the norms and values of China’s material modernity and points to the foregrounding of the present as a significant temporality of migratory decision making. Rather than calculating future (economic or symbolic) benefits, our interlocutors opt out of the parenting race in China not for the potential rewards of educational choices abroad but for an environment that appears to be best for their child at present. However, Chinese parents who hope to secure what they think of as a European-style “happy education” for their school-age children are confronted with the reality of an education system that is ill-prepared to deal with migrant pupils, does not match their ideas of a relaxed and caring environment and does not deliver anywhere near the amount of learning pupils would receive in China. As a result, the anxiety of losing out in the competition for education, which parents seek to escape, begins to resurface. Beneath the rejection of the Chinese state’s rigid *suzhi* pedagogy, a “*suzhi* anxiety” becomes increasingly apparent.

Our longitudinal ethnographic research reveals how a continued idealization of a happy, free and creative childhood comes to coexist ambivalently with a renewed attention to competition, yet this time in a setting in which the meaning and value of resources are opaque. As the émigré parents constantly watch for rival parenting strategies, children’s schedules begin to resemble those of their over-crammed peers back in China – with extra classes in music, sports,

76 In his research on middle-class Chinese immigrants in Poland, Kardaszewicz interprets his strikingly similar findings as a simultaneous struggle to resist and to comply with the educational norms and values of a state-sponsored model of achievement. Kardaszewicz 2019, 355.

languages and other skills – a situation they sought to leave behind. This ambivalence between rejecting competitive pressure in the name of freedom and gaining an advantage in the competition speaks to the anxieties, uncertainties and ambiguities of being a middle-class parent in contemporary China, which are inescapable, even by those who leave the country. More broadly, the parenting struggles of middle-class migrants, who vote with their feet against China’s education system in pursuit of raising happy but nonetheless competitive children, reflect on how the shifting ideals of parenting confound the ambivalent position of the middle class caught in the crossfire of China’s liberalizing markets and tightening autocracy. The ambivalence they express towards what they perceive as their child’s “freedom” mirrors the ambivalence with which they reject the Chinese state’s paternalistic control by moving beyond its purview, only to embrace the “order” offered by Hungary’s own increasingly autocratic government.

The shift in the global middle classes’ centre of mass away from the West is creating a new global migration dynamic, as emigrating not for economic gain but for a better – that is, more leisurely, healthier, freer – life becomes a real option for millions. In China’s case, as the new middle classes turn away from a simple pursuit of economic improvement, they project their disappointment with the developmental state and its form of capitalism onto a “Europe” they imagine to be more pristine and less commodified. Unlike economic migrants in the 1990s and 2000s, who associated the process of raising their *suzhi* with embracing and expanding China’s developmental project worldwide,⁷⁷ these migrants wish to raise the *suzhi* of their children by removing them from that project. Yet their ability to do so hinges upon China’s continued pursuit of state-led economic growth. This tension underlies a more complex relation to China than the surging nationalism of many Chinese migrants that researchers have noted over the past decades.⁷⁸ Against earlier expectations that greater exposure to the world outside China would make young, well-to-do Chinese question the received wisdom of official nationalism, these scholars find the opposite. Gone are the facile assumptions of the 1990s that people who pay smugglers and risk everything to leave China are escaping a repressive state. Yet, as we find, such motivations, although in a modified form, are what drive a new wave of middle-class emigration.

Acknowledgements

We presented earlier versions of this paper at workshops organized by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and the Re-Worlding Chinese Transnationalisms Symposium (Melbourne, 26 August 2021). We are grateful for the comments of participants, particularly to Fran Martin, as well as to the reviewers of *The China Quarterly*.

77 Nyíri 2006.

78 Barabantseva 2011; Louie 2000; Nyíri 2001; Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall 2010; Sun and Sinclair 2016.

Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical notes

Fanni BECK is a PhD student in the department of sociology and social anthropology at the CEU (Central European University) and a visiting lecturer at ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University) in Asian anthropology. Her doctoral research focuses on the emerging patterns of middle-class outmigration as they reflect China’s restructuring as a market economy, and its subsequent repositioning within the global hierarchy. Recent publications include, with Pál Nyíri, “Europe’s new Bildungsbürger? Chinese migrants in search of a pure land,” *Diaspora*, 21 February 2020.

Pál NYÍRI is professor of global history from an anthropological perspective at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. His research focuses on the international mobility of contemporary Chinese elites. His recent books include *Reporting for China: How Chinese Journalists Work with the World* and *Chinese Encounters in Southeast Asia: How Money, Ideas, and People from China Are Changing a Region*.

摘要: 中国的中产阶级父母不断体验着撕裂——一方面，他们需要确保孩子在竞争环境下的未来，这种竞争从幼儿园即开始；另一方面，他们又追求以孩子个性、创造力和自由发展为核心的教育理念。通过对布达佩斯的中国中产阶级移民的民族志调查，本研究指出，这一矛盾的结果之一是以确保孩子身心健康为由而移民海外。在匈牙利的中国新移民认为当下中国大陆社会环境过度商业化并缺少人文价值；因此，他们追求他们想象中的正宗的、以人为中心的“欧洲生活方式”。但是，在为孩子的“快乐”欢乐的同时，父母们保持着对其未来的根深蒂固的焦虑。寻求身心健康的环境符合关于“人口素质”的中国国家话语，但在这里，它已变成个人追求，并使其出国。本研究反映了中国的中产阶级与国家的矛盾出口到全球舞台的现象。

关键词: 匈牙利; 欧洲; 中产阶级; 国际移民; 育儿; 中国

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