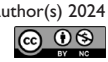
Article

Sociology

Sociology
2024, Vol. 58(5) 1207–1224


Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00380385241234308
journals.sagepub.com/home/soc
Sage

Beyond Conventional Metrics: Alternative Middle-Class Choice among Chinese Homeschooling Families

Trevor Tsz-lok Lee
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

Sociologists have extensively studied the prevalence of intensive parenting among middle-class families as a response to uncertainties about maintaining their privileged class status. Most studies, however, have focused on traditional school systems, which overlooks the full spectrum of middle-class parenting values and practices, particularly those beyond mainstream schooling. To address this gap, this study explores an alternative middle-class choice for raising and educating children through the lens of Chinese homeschooling. Drawing on in-depth interviews with middle-class parents from 30 Chinese families of school-age children being homeschooled in Taipei and Hong Kong, this study investigates the paradoxes and ambiguities that arose as the parents navigated and negotiated competing values for their children. The findings reveal that the parents mobilised their cultural repertoires to seek a coherent narrative that made sense of and justified their homeschooling goals and practices in the Chinese context.

Keywords

Chinese homeschooling, identities, intensive parenting, middle class, socialisation values

Introduction

Contemporary homeschooling is broadly construed as parents taking full responsibility for educating their children instead of sending them to institutional schools (Dwyer and Peters, 2019). The controversy surrounding homeschooling mostly arises from arguments about educational freedom and parental rights on the one hand, and concerns about educational quality and accountability, child welfare and citizenship education on

Corresponding author:
Trevor Tsz-lok Lee, Department of Education Policy and Leadership, The Education University of Hong Kong, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, Hong Kong.
Email: ttllee@eduhk.hk

the other (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020). Despite being controversial, homeschooling has become more socially and legally accepted in many countries (Gaither, 2017). The rise of homeschooling as an alternative, 'non-market' school choice for middle-class families is embedded into the broader neoliberal context of education marketisation (Aurini and Davies, 2005; Averett, 2021; Starnawski and Gawlicz, 2021). In both academic and non-academic studies and reports, homeschooling has often been depicted as 'a predominantly middle-class endeavour' (Bhopal and Myers, 2018: 34), shaped by privileged voices (Myers, 2023). Compared with their working-class counterparts, middle-class parents appear to have greater choice regarding the type of schooling that best fits their children's needs, with options ranging from public and private schools to alternatives such as homeschooling (Averett, 2021; Starnawski and Gawlicz, 2021). Notably, middle-class parents choose schools as a way to signal and strengthen their own identities and values (Cucchiara and Horvat, 2014).

The middle-class choice to opt out of the traditional school system through homeschooling raises questions about the dominant middle-class norms and discourses that are inextricably linked with a traditional school system. For instance, do these middle-class parents fear a loss of educational privilege that they would otherwise have in a traditional school system? Or, conversely, do these parents think that homeschooling is ideally suited for their children, who, if homeschooled, may gain an advantage over their schooled peers? Research reveals that middle-class parental values vary widely, and the intergenerational transmission of middle-class privilege occurs through complex processes (Kremer-Sadlik and Fatigante, 2015; Lareau et al., 2016). As such, the extant literature framing middle-class socialisation as reinforcing only the value of achievement may be missing nuances in intra-middle-class differentiations.

Homeschooling in the Chinese context highlights the nuances of middle-class identities and socialisation values. As an expression of parental choice, Chinese homeschooling epitomises a conspicuous exception to the prevailing parenting discourses and norms in Chinese society where school education is highly valued, and success at school is commonly regarded as the key to upward social mobility. However, homeschooling as an alternative middle-class choice, particularly in the Chinese context, has been under-researched. Thus, the present study aims to unpack alternative conceptions of middle-class identities and socialisation values through the lens of homeschooling in Chinese cities.

Intensive Parenting amid Competing Priorities and Paradoxes

The growth of schooling choices, and homeschooling in particular, has arrived with the prevalence of intensive parenting norms (Lois, 2013). According to Hays (1996), 'intensive mothering' refers to a child-centred parenting mentality mostly undertaken by contemporary middle-class parents, particularly mothers. In a seminal study, Lareau (2003) found that middle-class American parents typically adopted 'concerted cultivation', a highly organised, intensive, child-centred approach to orchestrate their children's leisure activities and daily life. Research in other countries such as Britain (Vincent and Ball, 2007) and Sweden (Karlsson et al., 2013) has suggested that concerted cultivation practices, such as involvement in extensive enrichment activities, represent ideal or morally

correct parenting for middle-class families. Many highly educated women who have chosen to become stay-at-home mothers have strived to reconcile their dual identities as professional elites and mothers by professionalising family life and parenting (Stone, 2007). Similarly, based on her study of American homeschooling families, Stevens (2001: 83) argues, 'Home schooling gives [full-time mothers] the opportunity to transform home work into an extraordinarily elaborate project.' Middle-class parents have adopted such an intensive approach in response to their 'anxiety and sense of responsibility' to avoid having their children fall down the social ladder (Vincent and Ball, 2007: 1062).

While the practices of intensive parenting have become the dominant middle-class norm, these practices are driven by more than just a focus on achievement goals (Kremer-Sadlik and Fatigante, 2015; Perrier, 2012). Rather, they are legitimised and guided by parents' priorities among a variety of ideals and values for their children, which often compete with one another. Irwin and Elley (2011: 486) revealed that middle-class value orientations in parenting were diverse: in addition to academic success, British middle-class parents valued a sense of fulfilment and 'diverse cultural pursuits as part of a child's development'. In an American qualitative meta-analysis, Debs et al. (2023) contend that not all privileged parents focus solely on their children's competitive academic success above all else; rather, many prioritise their children's happiness, primarily defined as socio-emotional well-being. Perrier (2012) found that British parents are ambivalent about child-centred parenting: they fear the excesses of the middle-class emphasis on education on their children's well-being, while still wanting their children to succeed academically. Similarly, Nelson (2010) uncovered ways in which American middle-class professional parents conduct a distinctive and sometimes inconsistent parenting approach derived from reflections on their past experiences, current contexts and future goals. Warikoo (2020) found that although white and Asian upper-middle-class parents have different approaches to balancing achievement and well-being for their children, both aim to gain status through their parenting. Warner (2010) further posited that even when upper-middle-class parents focus on their children's emotions, they still want them to develop a love of learning to facilitate achievement. Thus, as society experiences shifts in its broader culture, the quest for meritocratic individualism appears no longer uniform for the middle classes. In a study of managerial and professional parents in Norway, Aarseth (2018) found intra-class differentiations in the emotional dynamics of positional and personalised individualism of middle-class subjectivities. Apart from securing positional advantages, some middle-class fractions also focused on their children's sense of self. In his ethnographic study of two elementary schools in the USA, Harvey (2023) unravelled the complex ways in which middle-class students were socialised to develop an inherent sense of specialness, moral worth and personal agency over their futures.

Another paradox often discussed in the intensive parenting literature concerns the nexus between a child's autonomy and a parent's intervention. Weininger and Lareau (2009) found that middle-class parents value their children's self-direction while still subjecting them to micro-management and control. Stefansen and Aarseth (2011: 396) revealed that Norwegian middle-class parents' daily morning routines, such as reading to their children, reflect their seemingly contradictory approach of 'careful[ly] orchestrating . . . the setting within which the child-centredness unfolds'. To explain these

seemingly contradictory values and behaviours, Lizardo (2017: 107) introduced the concept of 'structured dissociation', which falls between declarative and non-declarative modes of cultural transmission in middle-class parenting; parental values, as declarative cultural elements, shape how middle-class parents articulate and evaluate their normative commitments and imagined possible courses of conduct. Martin and Lembo (2020) further argue that middle-class parents employ strategies of depersonalisation and intellectualisation to manipulate abstract concepts, providing meanings and post hoc explanations for their parenting practices that may appear contradictory to their goals and values in childrearing.

Middle-Class Parenting in Chinese Families

Intensive parenting norms among urban Chinese families are embedded in their own distinct socio-cultural landscape. Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese parenting traditionally emphasises *guan*, which denotes parental control and care over children's education (Wu, 2012). Chinese families place a high value on education and make substantial investments in their children's schooling; for instance, they strive to place their children into the best school possible, regardless of their socio-economic background (Li and Xie, 2020). However, studies have consistently revealed a positive correlation between a family's socio-economic status and the level of parental involvement (Du et al., 2023; Du and Li, 2023; Gu, 2021). Additionally, distinct factors, such as parents' emotional attachment to their children (Gu, 2021), political affiliations (Du and Li, 2023) and gender roles (Lan, 2023) intersect with social class to shape intensive parenting practices. Peng (2023), for example, found that concerted cultivation in Chinese families extends beyond parent–child relationships, involving significant 'emotional labour' as mothers navigate spousal disagreements regarding their children's enrichment activities.

Traditional Chinese culture also prioritises family harmony, respect and obedience to authority (Lieber et al., 2000). However, with recent generational shifts in socialisation values, Chinese people now emphasise children's self-direction and hard work more than other-orientedness (Wu et al., 2023). Mainland Chinese parents who have grown up as only-children not only value academic success but also happiness for their children (Kim et al., 2017). Liang (2023) found that the new generation of Chinese parents challenges the conventional idea of what defines 'quality education'. Liang (2023: 295) claimed they believe that 'a happy, high-performing, and well-rounded child is morally superior', which primarily derives from the parent's 'happy socialist childhood'. Lin (2019) found that parental investment in their children's education combines instrumental rationality and emotional expression; children from one-child families receive more attention and affection and tend to have more access to private tutoring or extracurricular activities. In addition, increased global exposure, as an indicator of cultural 'omnivorousness', has emerged as a new stratifying factor in Chinese cultural consumption (Du, 2022; Shih, 2019). In the meantime, to avoid the hypercompetitive local school system, a growing number of globally minded middle-class Chinese are seeking ways to enrol their children in international schools, elite schools or other alternatives to mainstream schooling to provide their children with a more liberal and globally oriented education (Lan, 2018; Wu and Koh, 2022; Xu and Spruyt, 2022).

Akin to intensive parenting trends worldwide, Chinese middle-class families navigate multiple, competing values and ideals, often in ways that involve tensions and dilemmas (Gu, 2021). Bach and Christensen (2021) showed how middle-class parents in Singapore navigate competing views of childhood, good parenting and aspirations when preparing their kindergarten children for primary school. Singaporean parenting practices are also shaped by the government's push for reforms that encourage children's creativity and resilience; however, such expectations cause parents to experience even more uncertainty and guilt (Göransson, 2023). Beck and Nyíri (2022) revealed that Chinese middle-class parents migrating to Budapest face tensions regarding their desire to give their children a relaxing education while still being anxious about their prospects. Lan (2018: 77) showed that middle-class parents in Taiwan who 'connect with the global community of humanistic education' to legitimise 'their choice of an alternative pathway' tend to micro-manage their children's life and education. As Lan (2018: 74) describes, this paradoxical parenting approach represents 'the unnaturalness of orchestrated natural growth'. My own study in Hong Kong (Lee, 2023a) demonstrated that middle-class parents tended to reconcile competing values such as hard work and happiness by helping their children cultivate intrinsic motivation and interests so that they would stay happy and motivated to work diligently in a highly competitive educational culture. Taken together, the major tensions and paradoxes among Chinese middle-class parents throw into sharp relief the competing priorities around child autonomy versus parental intervention, academic achievement versus well-rounded development, and hard work versus happiness.

Homeschooling as an Alternative Middle-Class Choice

Intensive parenting norms are similarly placed on homeschooling parents who seek to be good parents by accommodating their children's unique needs while feeling intensely accountable for providing enriching educational opportunities and activities that compensate for the experiences available in traditional schools (Averett, 2021; Lois, 2013). What makes homeschooling parents unique is that they choose to 'have full control . . . [over] shap[ing] their children as they see fit' (Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019: 57). The classic work of Van Galen (1991) categorised homeschooling parents into two groups, namely, 'ideologues' and 'pedagogues' – they either hold a particular set of educational values and beliefs, or pursue specific pedagogical models that work best for their children's learning, respectively.

Yet, studies have demonstrated that homeschooling families and communities are more diverse than this dichotomous description (Averett, 2021; Tan, 2020). Averett (2021) found ideological diversity among homeschooling American parents, particularly in light of their children's gender and sexuality. These parents shared a belief that every child is unique and unfolds themselves from within as they grow. Many parents in countries such as Canada and the USA have chosen homeschooling largely because of their desire to educate their children more intensively for diverse educational goals (Aurini and Davies, 2005; Myers, 2023; Starnawski and Gawlicz, 2021). Green-Hennessy and Mariotti (2023) observed what they called, 'reactive homeschooling practice', which refers to parents opting-out because of their children's physical or mental health problems, or specific negative school experiences such as bullying. Beláňová et al. (2018:

533) found homeschooling in the Czech Republic was a manifestation of intensive parenting where middle-class mothers sacrificed their time to perform 'round-the-clock' homeschooling. The mothers claimed their sacrifice was a way to give their children more time for self-directed learning that was 'uniquely sensitive to their children's needs' (Beláňová et al., 2018: 540). Lois (2013) similarly found that homeschooling parents in the USA had time management challenges, emotional conflicts and role constraints as they tried to navigate what is best for their children. Homeschooling mothers, in particular, felt pressure to prove that they were good mothers in the face of negative stereotypes surrounding their controversial choice.

Against this backdrop, homeschooling in the Chinese context has been growing in recent years (Xu and Spruyt, 2022). Despite its increase, however, very few studies have been conducted on homeschooling in Chinese cities. Homeschooling is not legal in most Chinese societies, including Hong Kong (Erlings, 2019; Sheng, 2020). Sheng (2020) argued that unofficial estimates indicate approximately 25,000 homeschoolers in mainland China, and the diversity of Chinese homeschooling practices reflects intra-middle-class differentiations. Tan (2020) found that Chinese homeschooling parents in Singapore (mainly from the middle class) chose to withdraw from the mainstream school system to pursue their educational goals for their children. Likewise, studies on Hong Kong's and Taiwan's homeschooling families suggest that the main reason for homeschooling is also related to educational preferences (Erlings, 2019; Lee, 2023b; Wilkins, 2022). In line with global trends, Chinese homeschooling parents are facing multiple cultural ideals and values, alongside pressures from intensive parenting norms and diverse educational discourses (Lee, 2023b; Sheng, 2020).

Accordingly, Chinese homeschooling represents a unique case for investigating the nuances regarding how middle-class parents navigate and negotiate competing ideals and values for their children. Given their privileged status and access to diverse cultural repertoires, middle-class parents may be better positioned to resist negative stereotypes and construct an identity that affirms their values and life choices (Lamont, 2019). My research (Lee, 2023a) also found that Chinese middle-class parents in Hong Kong can strategically reconcile competing choices imbued with different values when it comes to raising and educating their children. As members of the middle class, many homeschooling parents, both Chinese and beyond, are likely to have a wealth of cultural resources at their disposal to navigate competing values and to seek a coherent narrative that affirms their unconventional educational choice. What remains unclear is how homeschooling parents (specifically Chinese parents) mobilise their cultural repertoires to orient themselves, justify and make sense of their goals and practices in homeschooling.

The Study

This article is based on data collected from a study conducted on 30 families (30 mothers and 10 fathers) in Taipei (TP) and Hong Kong (HK). The families had at least one school-aged child who was being homeschooled at the time of the two-year data collection period (2021–2022). TP and HK were selected as the research sites for comparison due to their shared cultural traditions and emphasis on education, as well as their different school infrastructures and regulations regarding homeschooling (Lee, 2023b). As major

cities in the Greater China region, TP and HK have complex geopolitical contexts that distinguish them from each other and mainland China. TP, the capital of Taiwan, maintains claims of sovereignty separate from mainland China. HK was a British colony that returned to China under the 'one country, two systems' arrangement. Parenting cultures in TP and HK have adapted Confucian values through their distinctive socio-political trajectories as well as globalisation impact. Parents in both cities carry high expectations for their children's success in a highly competitive education system with an emphasis on high-stakes standardised testing. However, HK homeschoolers are bucking the system because homeschooling has not been legalised under the compulsory education law. Governed by a 'de facto' policy, homeschooling families either hope to remain undetected, or leverage their resources to satisfy Education Officers during regular visits and calls to ensure their children are receiving a sufficient education; they are then often 'left alone' until the next check-in (Erlings, 2019: 315–316). In contrast, homeschooling is legal and regulated in TP, and since 1999, it has been developed within the formal educational system as a non-school-based experimental system (Wilkins, 2022). While expatriate or faith-based homeschooling communities have existed in the two cities, the present study focuses on elective, secular homeschooling as a middle-class educational choice.

The study participants were initially identified and recruited from homeschool support groups, given homeschooling families' relative invisibility (especially in HK). A snowball sampling technique was then employed to reach more homeschooling families. Despite a potential in-network selection bias, this method likely developed participants' trust in me and other research assistants who were validated through someone they knew. With their informed consent, semi-structured interviews (each lasting one to two hours) were conducted, either face-to-face or virtually through Zoom or Google Meet, with parents from 15 families in HK and 15 families in TP. These parents, themselves or their spouses, had attained a tertiary education and were working as professionals, managers or entrepreneurs. Most of them had homeschooled their children ranging from half a year to nine-and-a-half years. They had one to three children, with a mean age of 8.9 years who were at various stages of education. The significance of a child's developmental stage in shaping parental priorities was taken into account during the data analysis and interpretation phase. While both parents were invited for one-on-one interviews, most respondents were mothers. Many fathers declined interview requests because they did not take on the primary role of childcare and teaching. Studies have indicated that homeschooling requires a large commitment of energy and resources and is typically led by mothers, who either do not work outside the home or have flexible work hours (Lois, 2013; Stevens, 2001).

The interview questions included: (a) hopes and aspirations for children (e.g. what are your hopes for children's success in life?); (b) values and beliefs in childrearing and schooling (e.g. what is the ideal schooling to you?); (c) class origins and social mobility trajectories; (d) decision-making process (e.g. what were the major considerations in your family when the decision to homeschool was made?); (e) homeschool practices (e.g. what do you do to homeschool your child(ren)?); and (f) anxiety and stress (e.g. do you experience any struggle, stress or anxiety about homeschooling, and why?). Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the families reported relying more on digital learning tools

and resources to continue homeschooling amid lockdowns, and voiced concerns for their children's social development with limited opportunities for physical interaction. However, the pandemic context did not significantly detract focus from the interviews, which aimed to capture the families' perspectives and assumptions underlying their commitment to homeschooling.

As the lead researcher, I managed two research teams in TP and HK and engaged in the entire data collection process. The interviews involved at least two researchers of different genders (e.g. a research assistant and me) whenever possible because gender dynamics could influence responses from parent respondents. The researchers shared the cultural backgrounds of the TP-/HK-Chinese families in their respective locations, which helped facilitate rapport. The interviews were conducted in Chinese (Cantonese in HK and Mandarin in TP), audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the respective teams. To report the findings in this article, I translated the interview excerpts from Chinese to English, as accurately as possible. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

The interview data were analysed through open coding and careful reflections of the interviews. To ensure that the respondents' views were accurately reflected, I iteratively reviewed the interview items, the interviewees' responses and the analysis and read between the lines with special attention to both the logic and the emotions expressed. While reading each transcript, I coded for the presence or absence of relevant themes on the main cultural values pertaining to parental roles and their children's education and development in the Chinese context. After coding the transcripts, I then sorted coded entries and grouped them into a number of parental values. I then reread the grouped, coded entries and wrote memos describing the patterns (e.g. how the parents accounted for their value choices), illustrating the patterns with examples and identifying obvious exceptions to the patterns. Next, I refined and classified the codes into new, emerging themes that generated major dimensions along which tensions and dilemmas between competing parental values could be analysed. I also conducted a cross-case analysis to create systematic comparisons of Chinese homeschooling parents and compare their perspectives and practices within and across the two cities.

Findings

Beyond Straight 'A's: Pursuing Excellence through a Well-Rounded Life

Many respondents in both cities expressed their dissatisfaction with spoon-fed, examination-oriented learning approaches in mainstream schools. They shared the view that traditional education focuses on fixed knowledge, impeding the development of essential skills in their children to prepare for future uncertainties. Thus, they took their children out of mainstream schools so that they could devise personalised approaches tailored to their children's unique needs. Fang is a TP mother of two, who owned a public relations company and her spouse was a photographer. Fang comments:

> I once believed higher education meant higher income, but now my experience shows academic performance often diverges from work ability. I value personality traits more in my children: self-confidence, self-affirmation and responsibility gained through real challenges. Many

> college students just study to avoid challenges. They need to find interests, strengths and flaws through experience. With a solid foundation, they'll find their way. Self-affirmation means knowing what you like and pursuing it passionately to excel.

Similarly, many HK respondents questioned the conventional focus of the education system on academic achievement to the detriment of a child's all-round education. For example, Jing, a HK single mother of three working as a freelancer, explained, 'If you homeschool, you want your children to be very confident in themselves. They need to know and understand themselves. Teach them to love themselves for their uniqueness and cultivate their own thoughts instead of following others.' Another HK mother of three, Li, ran her own education centre where she taught classes for her children and others. Her spouse was a high-ranking disciplined-services officer. Li described herself as an elitist parent who homeschooled to offer her children the best education. She and her spouse studied at traditional elite schools in HK and were top scorers in the public university entrance examination. For her, to educate children to be professional elites required a well-rounded approach. She said, 'Those studious nerds [in typical schools] focus only on exams, wasting their time. True elites study efficiently, then pursue diverse interests in their free time. This develops the qualities necessary to become an elite, without the pressure to conform.'

However, there was a striking difference between the two cities in terms of the respondents' relationships with mainstream schools. The TP participants registered with local school authorities, and some of them took note of the mainstream schools' benchmarks and continually considered whether to keep homeschooling their children or send them to a regular school. A TP mother of three, Min, is a legislator, and her spouse, Wen, is an information technology executive. Min explained, 'I hope that my daughter doesn't fall behind to the point where returning to a mainstream school would be too difficult.' Many TP parents like Min let their children take school exams regularly to monitor their children's academic standard. Thus, they had a clear vision about how to prepare their children for university admission through official channels.

In contrast, the HK respondents separated themselves from mainstream schools and authorities once they removed their children from formal schooling (these cases would be categorised as truancy, if officially detected). They mostly procured curriculum and instructional materials and diverse educational programmes from private educational services. However, they wanted their children to attend university in the future, although most firmly said that they would not push their children to do so if they did not want to. For example, as a HK full-time mother of three whose spouse was a physicist working at a university, Yan regarded taking the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exam in England as an alternative pathway to enter university. She said, 'We hope our kids figure out what they want over time. At 18, they should take the GCSE exam. I don't care when they pass it, but they must take the exam one day.' While most HK students enter university through a centralised system based on their public examination scores, a small number of students not enrolled in a school can apply to universities through alternative admission routes, such as the option described by Yan, taking non-local public exams as private candidates like the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the GCSE, or by studying abroad.

The Paradox of 'Letting Go': Orchestrating Learning Environments for Autonomy

Despite teaching using a broad spectrum from tightly to loosely structured pedagogical approaches, the parents in both cities said they respected their children's autonomy in learning and tried to democratise the learning process. In a TP family with two children, Xiu is a full-time mother who holds a degree in early childhood education. Xiu explained how they downplayed their parental authority on deciding learning materials and methods:

> Initially, homeschooling limited our children's choices but we expanded them over time. As my son got older, he could choose from 10, then 100 options. Homeschooling is a process of cultivating children to choose, and parents learning how to let go of their children.

The father Cheng, who is a photographer, also expressed his satisfaction with their current democratic, friendship-based approach: 'Ideal parenting is treating children like friends, freely sharing ideas. My wife knows how to teach our children. I'm happy seeing their progress. I once wanted them back in school but now I'm sure homeschooling provides something better.'

However, although the TP and HK parents promoted their children's autonomy and made decisions together with them regarding their learning, their actual approach to teaching involved a deliberate and thorough planning of the learning environment, activities and resources to cultivate conditions for their children to thrive. For example, Hua, a TP mother of two, working as a private English teacher, explained how her family tried to customise learning resources and activities to address their children's unique needs:

> There's a difference in how we treat our eldest and youngest. The eldest relied on us more. When she wanted to learn something, we helped her find resources online, bought books or went to museums. We don't do the same for our son now. He mainly watches Peppa Pig to learn.

The father Ming, an engineer, shared the same view: 'My core idea is adaptive development. We satisfy the child's interests and abilities, providing sufficient resources for development.' Many parents like Hua and Ming attempted to foster their children's innate curiosity to learn and nurtured self-directed learning by giving their children freedom and loosely guided play and activities.

Nevertheless, this practice created a dilemma. Parents had to decide whether to intervene in their children's learning with structured and systematic approaches that could reduce their independence, or prioritise their children's happiness by allowing them full autonomy in learning, which in turn could jeopardise their academic achievement and future success. Some TP respondents who adopted a freer approach worried whether their children were really learning or whether they were wasting time. Xiang is a TP full-time mother of three and her spouse is a metal industry owner. Xiang described her frustrations about her son's lack of learning motivation:

> I told him to do homework but he didn't do it. When he just sat around, I wanted to give up on homeschooling. I told him to study, and not sit doing nothing. He should always learn something by himself.

Like Xiang, many parents stressed that their children could experience personal growth and success in life only through hard work.

Many HK respondents also noted the discrepancy between their rhetoric of valuing their children's autonomy and their day-to-day practices of meticulously orchestrating the learning environment. Mei is a HK mother of three and a makeup artist, and her spouse is a photographer. She described how they worked together with their children on the learning journey:

> We spent a lot of time sitting down to discuss his learning. We feel learning comes from experience, with no right or wrong. Everything that is done and everything that happens along the way is conducive to a child's growth. So we spend our days exploring our own journey.

HK respondents intensively planned a variety of activities to broaden their children's experience. Chun is a HK mother, working as a 'slasher' (i.e. pursuing multiple careers), and her spouse is a senior social worker. She said, 'My son leads his own learning. We don't teach deliberately, but rather, help him when he asks.' However, when Chun explained in detail what they did to support their son's learning, she said, 'We keep a keen eye on our son – his reactions, moods and state. We constantly adjust how we support him. We deliberately arrange various learning and social activities for him. This support must be intentional.' Owing to a lack of legal protection and policy support, many HK respondents like Chun intensively studied educational information and sought optimal learning environments. Chun and her husband strived to better equip themselves with knowledge about education to provide more options for their children's learning. Beyond the binary of hands-on versus hands-off approaches, these parents carefully considered the conditions to ensure their children would flourish.

Likewise, HK parents tended to actively monitor and reflect on their own role and approach. A HK mother, Qing, works in the private education sector, and her spouse is a homeopathist. Qing avoided imposing her own views on her son's learning. She explained, 'My son is independent, deciding things for himself. He knows how to choose. I don't impose my views on his learning. I am just there with him to learn as he develops naturally. My role is to accompany him.' Another HK mother, Li, also lamented her youth during which her parents indoctrinated her with their beliefs. Li said, 'I want my children to consider what's good for them, not to blindly obey me. When I was young, I did whatever my mother said. I don't want that for my children.' Similarly, the HK mother, Mei said, 'When my child misses out on school learning activities, I'm a little unhappy. I really blame myself and feel guilty.' To reduce uncertainty, most parents in both cities tended to continually assess the effects of their learning activities on their children's cognitive development and socio-emotional well-being. However, as reported above, they did not play down the importance of hard work and long-term endeavours for their children to realise their learning goals.

Journeying Past the Rat Race: Envisioning Alternative Futures

The parents in both cities expressed moral concerns and struggled over whether they were making the right choices for their children's future through homeschooling. As TP mother Fang explained:

> People used to ask me [before I began homeschooling my child], 'Why did your children change schools many times?' This gave me much pressure. I also questioned myself, 'Will my choices hurt my child?' Invisible pressures built up. I also worried about finances and finding resources. But the main thing is you stand up for your child's future, bearing the weight of your decisions. You don't know if you made the right choice.

The HK mother, Chun, described the uncertainty and pressure she faced, 'Whether I'm doing the right thing worries me most. This is my only worry along the way. I struggle constantly, so I discuss with my husband, reflect and observe my child closely.'

In response, the parents constructed alternative visions for their children that focused on being happy and healthy, finding passions and discovering their selves. When the parents in both cities were asked what they hoped for their children's futures, the common response was to grow up into happy and healthy people. Few respondents, in TP or HK, mentioned the word 'achievement'. Instead, for example, the TP mother, Min, said, 'Our hope is that at the age of 18, my child can live independently and support himself in the future.' The father, Wen, echoed, 'I don't have high expectations for my child. As long as he is healthy, he will be able to support himself when he becomes an adult.' HK respondents shared similar views. Dan is a HK mother of two working as a slasher and her spouse is a pâtissier. Dan said, 'Just be yourself and be healthy. Do what you like. The only thing we can do is help build their [children's] mentality.' These responses suggest that they prioritised internal fulfilment over external markers of success.

Many respondents in both cities explained that their children's happy and healthy futures hinged on whether they would be able to find work that they genuinely enjoy. Xiao is a TP mother of two running a creative art studio with her spouse Peng. They stressed that the pursuit of passions in learning, work or life in general was an opportunity to discover one's self. Xiao said, 'Find what you like and develop it into a career. Use your interests to balance your work and life instead of complaining about jobs you dislike.' Peng further explained how learning or working with passion would lead to happiness:

> People should live with passion. When you love what you do, you're enthusiastic, learning and working endless hours to pursue your goals. When I'm passionate, I'm motivated. Passion strengthens self-study and problem-solving abilities. Then you can consider many perspectives to find answers. When you play full out, you gain happiness.

Many TP respondents emphasised not only well-being and passion, but also self-reliance. A TP father of two, Hao, owns an international trading company and his spouse is self-employed. Hao explained:

> It's good for children to grow up healthily, have clear logic, know what they want and want to learn. They should know their own minds, care for their bodies and build stress resistance. Society is increasingly competitive and changing rapidly. These abilities may not ensure success, but lead to a better life. Be responsible for yourself and not dependent on others.

Comparatively, HK parents focused on building their children's sense of being and belief in their self-worth more than TP parents. Xuan is a HK full-time mother of two and her spouse is a highly paid information technology officer. She wanted her daughters to feel happy and affirm their own worth through simple, everyday accomplishments related to their special interests and talent. HK parents also claimed that following passions and interests is primary for leading a high-quality life. As Xuan explained, 'When children set goals, even if they can't achieve them, they will clearly know what they want. Doing what they're passionate about is enough. I don't worry if they're changing goals. I worry if they have no goals.' Another HK father of two, Chen, is a senior programme architect whose spouse was a full-time mother. He defined 'success' more broadly as making an impact in one's own way:

> My hope is my children grow up healthy and happy. They may just travel with a backpack, surviving on just enough. They don't need a path. As long as they survive, the most important thing is they have a positive impact on the world, no matter how small.

A HK mother of two, Yue, also emphasised self-reliance over external judgements. She is a part-time primary school teacher and her spouse works as a teacher trainer. She explained:

> If you have ability and passion, you'll make ends meet no matter what. Parents hope for their children to have a quality life in the future. Doing meaningful work gives a sense of success. Taking care of yourself is key. Your goal is just to survive.

Many HK parents like Yue prioritised their children's well-being, happiness and sense of self, rather than conventional success.

Discussion: From Contradiction to Coherence

This study offers a non-western perspective for understanding the middle-class subjectivities of homeschooling parents in the Chinese context, highlighting the alternative pathways they envisioned for their children. The findings show that the parents' goals for homeschooling extended beyond academic performance. Many respondents in both cities chose to homeschool their children to provide a more personalised and holistic education focused on developing the whole child, rather than providing exam-oriented learning. Although intensive parenting led to anxiety and exhausting obligations, they valued their children's autonomy in principle, and took a deliberate approach to create environments for their children in which they would work hard. They narrated alternative visions of success for their children focused on well-being, following passions, having an impact in one's own way and being able to take care of oneself. Rather than

defining achievement relative to external standards, they shifted the focus to internal achievement and identity formation. Although TP and HK respondents shared many value-laden ideals and goals in homeschooling, subtle differences between the two cities suggest that policy environments shape homeschooling experiences; for instance, TP had a more established regulatory framework in which parents were steered towards alignment with schools.

The findings also indicate that navigating competing values led to paradoxes and ambivalences among the parents. To resolve conflicting priorities, the parents forged alternative pathways and visions for their children's future. They were able to make strategic compromises and reframe seemingly contradictory values into a coherent narrative (at least from their own perspective) to make sense of and justify their goals and practices in homeschooling. The findings resonate with my previous research (Lee, 2023a), which revealed that through a process of what I term 'value coupling', Chinese middle-class parents can make their value-laden choices more cohesive by strategically reconciling tensions between competing priorities in raising and educating their children. The present study expands upon this line of inquiry by further illuminating how Chinese middle-class parents exercised agency in navigating competing values while reimagining diverse values and pathways for their children's futures.

By examining the narratives and sense-making of Chinese homeschooling parents, the findings reveal new insights into the uncertain transmission of middle-class advantage across generations. Particularly important here is how Chinese middle-class parents, through homeschooling, seek to cultivate diverse values for their children's identity development that carries significant implications for maintaining status and distinction. As the evaluative systems of schools and workplaces are changing, how children are socialised and the criteria used to evaluate them no longer emphasise meritocratic achievement only (Harvey, 2023). For example, workplace values are increasingly emphasising passion. A recent study of 200 million US job postings found the percentage mentioning passion rose from 2% in 2007 to 16% in 2019 (Jachimowicz and Weisman, 2022). The respondents in the present study also stressed the value of passion, among other non-traditional values such as wellness and a sense of self. As Harvey (2023) argues, the ability to articulate one's identity has itself become a marker of distinction that confers social advantages in schools and workplaces. In contrast, diversifying value orientations and conceptualising what education and success really mean may risk further marginalising the working class and poor who have no access to anything but conventional metrics of achievement in mainstream schools. In this connection, future research should explore the mechanisms and consequences of these strategic identity-building efforts of the middle class, particularly how it can potentially translate into an advantage for them while perpetuating social inequality.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to sincerely thank the research assistants in Hong Kong and Taipei, including Kris Chu, Tiffany Tsang, Trini Tsai, Wei Ying, Stin and Natalie Lin, for their invaluable assistance for this study. Special appreciation is also extended to Tim Chen for facilitating the fieldwork in Taipei. The author is deeply grateful to all the generous research participants who dedicated their time and made this work possible.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: this work was supported by the Research Grant Council (Grant No. ECS 28604120).

ORCID iD


Trevor Tsz-lok Lee https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8081-720X

References

Aarseth H (2018) Fear of falling – fear of fading: The emotional dynamics of positional and personalised individualism. *Sociology* 52(5): 1087–1102.

Aurini J and Davies S (2005) Choice without markets: Homeschooling in the context of private education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 26(4): 461–474.

Averett KH (2021) *The Homeschool Choice: Parents and the Privatization of Education*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Bach D and Christensen S (2021) Middle-class cultivation out of tune? Challenges to intensive parenting in Singapore. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42(4): 475–489.

Beck F and Nyíri P (2022) 'It's all for the child': The discontents of middle-class Chinese parenting and migration to Europe. *The China Quarterly* 251: 913–934.

Beláňová A, Machovcová K, Kostelecká Y, et al. (2018) Justifying homeschooling in Czech Republic: How 'good parents' and their children use time. *Childhood* 25(4): 530–543.

Bhopal K and Myers M (2018) *Home Schooling and Home Education: Race, Class and Inequality*. London: Routledge.

Cucchiara MB and Horvat EM (2014) Choosing selves: The salience of parental identity in the school choice process. *Journal of Education Policy* 29(4): 486–509.

Debs M, Kafka J, Makris MV, et al. (2023) Happiness-oriented parents: An alternative perspective on privilege and choosing schools. *American Journal of Education* 129(2): 145–176.

Doepke M and Zilibotti F (2019) *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Du F, Wang W and Dong X (2023) Education equity in light of families' time investment in childcare. In: Du F, Wang W and Dong X (eds) *Chinese People's Time Use and Their Quality of Life*. Springer: Singapore, 123–144.

Du S (2022) Global exposure: An alternative pathway to understanding cultural omnivorousness in East Asian societies. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 9(1): 1–20.

Du S and Li Y (2023) Unequal parenting in China: A study of socio-cultural and political effects. *The Sociological Review*. Epub ahead of print 21 September 2023. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261231198329.

Dwyer JG and Peters SF (2019) *Homeschooling: The History and Philosophy of a Controversial Practice*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Erlings E (2019) Don't ask, do(n't) tell: Homeschooling in Hong Kong. *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 6(2): 307–319.

Gaither M (2017) *The Wiley Handbook of Home Education*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Göransson K (2023) Play with a purpose: Intensive parenting, educational desires and shifting notions of childhood and learning in twenty-first century Singapore. *Childhood* 30(1): 24–39.

Green-Hennessy S and Mariotti EC (2023) The decision to homeschool: Potential factors influencing reactive homeschooling practice. *Educational Review* 75(4): 617–636.

Gu X (2021) Parenting for success: The value of children and intensive parenting in post-reform China. *Child Indicators Research* 14(2): 555–581.
Harvey PF (2023) 'Everyone thinks they're special': How schools teach children their social station. *American Sociological Review* 88(3): 493–521.
Hays S (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Irwin S and Elley S (2011) Concerted cultivation? Parenting values, education and class diversity. *Sociology* 45(3): 480–495.
Jachimowicz JM and Weisman H (2022) Divergence between employer and employee understandings of passion: Theory and implications for future research. *Research in Organizational Behavior* 42: 100–167.
Karlsson M, Löfdahl A and Prieto HP (2013) Morality in parents' stories of preschool choice: Narrating identity positions of good parenting. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34(2): 208–224.
Kim SW, Brown KE and Fong VL (2017) Chinese individualisms: Childrearing aspirations for the next generation of middle-class Chinese citizens. *Ethos* 45(3): 342–366.
Kremer-Sadlik T and Fatigante M (2015) Investing in children's future: Cross-cultural perspectives and ideologies on parental involvement in education. *Childhood* 22(1): 67–84.
Kunzman R and Gaither M (2020) Homeschooling: An updated comprehensive survey of the research. *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternative* 9(1): 253–336.
Lamont M (2019) From 'having' to 'being': Self-worth and the current crisis of American society. *The British Journal of Sociology* 70(3): 660–707.
Lan PC (2018) *Raising Global Families: Parenting, Immigration, and Class in Taiwan and the US*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Lan PC (2023) Navigating childrearing, fatherhood, and mobilities: A transnational relational analysis. *The Sociological Review* 71(1): 3–26.
Lareau A (2003) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Lareau A, Evans SA and Yee A (2016) The rules of the game and the uncertain transmission of advantage: Middle-class parents' search for an urban kindergarten. *Sociology of Education* 89(4): 279–299.
Lee TT (2023a) Social class, intensive parenting norms and parental values for children. *Current Sociology* 71(6): 964–981.
Lee TT (2023b) Homeschooling in Chinese cities: Educational implications for post-pandemic schools. *Educational Review*. Epub ahead of print 21 July 2023. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2234662.
Li W and Xie Y (2020) The influence of family background on educational expectations: A comparative study. *Chinese Sociological Review* 52(3): 269–294.
Liang L (2023) 'Our childhood was happier': Retrospective moment in elite Chinese childrearing. *Qualitative Sociology* 46(2): 279–298.
Lieber E, Yang KS and Lin YC (2000) An external orientation to the study of causal beliefs: Applications to Chinese populations and comparative research. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 31(2): 160–186.
Lin X (2019) 'Purchasing hope': The consumption of children's education in urban China. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 6(1): 1–26.
Lizardo O (2017) Improving cultural analysis: Considering personal culture in its declarative and nondeclarative modes. *American Sociological Review* 82(1): 88–115.
Lois J (2013) *Home is Where the School is: The Logic of Homeschooling and the Emotional Labor of Mothering*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Martin JL and Lembo A (2020) On the other side of values. *American Journal of Sociology* 126(1): 52–98.

Myers M (2023) The unhomely of homeschooling. *Sociology* 57(5): 1101–1117.

Nelson MK (2010) *Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Peng Y (2023) Gendered parenting and conjugal negotiation over children's organised extracurricular activities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. Epub ahead of print 17 October 2023. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2023.2267769.

Perrier M (2012) Middle-class mothers' moralities and 'concerted cultivation': Class others, ambivalence and excess. *Sociology* 47(4): 655–670.

Sheng X (2020) *Home Schooling in China: Culture, Religion, Politics, and Gender*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Shih YP (2019) Social class and cosmopolitan parenting in Taiwanese families. *Journal of Family Issues* 40(14): 1963–1988.

Starnawski M and Gawlicz K (2021) Parental choice, collective identity and neoliberalism in alternative education: New free democratic schools in Poland. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42(8): 1172–1191.

Stefansen K and Aarseth H (2011) Enriching intimacy: The role of the emotional in the 'resourcing' of middle-class children. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32(3): 389–405.

Stevens ML (2001) *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stone P (2007) *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Tan MH (2020) Homeschooling in Singaporean Chinese families: Beyond pedagogues and ideologues. *Educational Studies* 46(2): 135–153.

Van Galen J (1991) Ideologues and pedagogues: Parents who teach their children at home. In: Van Galen J and Pitman MA (eds) *Home Schooling: Political, Historical, and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 63–76.

Vincent C and Ball SJ (2007) 'Making up' the middle-class child: Families, activities and class dispositions. *Sociology* 41(6): 1061–1077.

Warikoo N (2020) Addressing emotional health while protecting status: Asian American and white parents in suburban America. *American Journal of Sociology* 126(3): 545–576.

Warner CH (2010) Emotional safeguarding: Exploring the nature of middle-class parents' school involvement. *Sociological Forum* 25(4): 703–724.

Weininger EB and Lareau A (2009) Paradoxical pathways: An ethnographic extension of Kohn's findings on class and childrearing. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71(3): 680–695.

Wilkins J (2022) *The Experience of Homeschooled High School Graduates Who are Transitioning to College in Taiwan*. Doctoral Dissertation, Northeastern University, Boston, MA.

Wu M (2012) The concept of guan in the Chinese parent–child relationship. In: Yi C-C (ed.) *The Psychological Well-Being of East Asian Youth*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 29–49.

Wu W and Koh A (2022) Being 'international' differently: A comparative study of transnational approaches to international schooling in China. *Educational Review* 74(1): 57–75.

Wu Y, Xiao H and Wang Y (2023) Changing socialization values for children in China,1990–2012. *Chinese Sociological Review* 55(3): 323–349.

Xu W and Spruyt B (2022) 'The road less travelled': Towards a typology of alternative education in China. *Comparative Education* 58(4): 434–450.

Trevor Tsz-lok Lee is a sociologist working in the field of education, particularly inequality and stratification, parenting and policy.

Date submitted July 2023
Date accepted February 2024