

### 3

## PARENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND PUNCH-IN CULTURE

In view of the avid adoption of digital technologies we described in the previous chapter, along with societal valorisation of academic achievement, our interview findings reveal that Chinese parents are tightly connected to their children's teachers and to other parents, to the point of being accountable to these parties. A veritable assemblage of smartphones, social media apps, and edtech platforms forms the technological backbone of a social phenomenon that we term 'punch-in' (*daka*, literally, 'punch card') culture. As our interviews demonstrate, this punch-in culture is rooted and embedded within today's digitally connected era, coupled with heightened levels of parental investment in children's academic pursuits.

Indeed, in the digital age, parents' interactions with schools and teachers have shifted from random, occasional exchanges to regular and intense engagement pertaining especially to homework and other significant academic tasks. Originally conceived as reminders or contingency plans in case children forget their assigned tasks, parent-teacher interaction has gradually become routinised and normalised for Chinese parents such that whatever tasks their children are assigned are also extended to them. Arguably, parents are held to a higher standard since they are adults whose responsibility for their children is a given. With digital connectivity facilitating parents' ability to demonstrate accountability and teachers' capacity to verify the same, punch-in culture has become especially pronounced among Chinese parents today.

Much like hourly rated workers who must punch-in their timecards to record when they commence and stop work, Chinese parents must punch-in to indicate to teachers (and other parents) that they have performed their parenting tasks within parent-teacher chat groups on messaging apps and edtech platforms. Over time, punch-in culture has become taken for granted

and unquestioned, with parents submitting to these imposed and mandated expectations. In this chapter, we explain how punch-in culture emerged, its characteristics and manifestations, as well as its broader implications for Chinese society.

#### ORIGINS, MANIFESTATIONS, AND NORMS OF PUNCH-IN CULTURE

The term punch-in was originally used to refer to the act of recording the time one commences work, usually in a factory or office, with the purpose of monitoring employees' working hours and attendance using a clock or other timekeeping device. Cambridge Dictionary defines punching-in as to 'use a special clock to record the time you start working' and used in sentences such as 'I punched in at 8:00 am', 'I punched in on the time clock', and 'I've been punching in late all this week'.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of parenting, punch-in takes on a metaphorical meaning, as we use it to capture the emerging parenting obligations in the digital age. Just as hourly rated workers punch their timecards to record their working hours, parents are required to use digital tools to punch-in and mark the commencement and completion of various parenting tasks. Whereas one might consider parenting to be a private affair that is unique and exclusive to family members, this metaphor underscores the expectation for urban Chinese parents to publicly record their involvement in their children's education so as to demonstrate their accountability to schools, teachers, and other parents.

Giving life to this metaphor is an expanding slew of punch-in tasks that parents must perform. The most commonly observed one is submitting evidence of one's child having completed schoolwork or proof of parents themselves fulfilling parenting duties as requested by their children's teachers or schools. These punch-in practices typically occur on parent-teacher communication platforms or within parent chat groups. The litany and variety of punch-in tasks is sizeable but fall under several categories which are seemingly distinct but not always mutually exclusive: assignment submission, notification acknowledgement, survey participation, and home-school communication.

In light of the pressure on children to perform well academically, of all the punch-in tasks, parents tend to undertake the submission of assignments most diligently. This is by no means a straightforward or trivial exercise because the assignments come in a multiplicity of forms and thus demand a range of parental competencies. The assignments our respondents shared covered a wide gamut but were mostly academic with a small minority of extra-curricular activities. Parents were requested to turn in every single page of a written

assignment, audio recordings of their child reciting prescribed texts (Fig. 1(a)), video recordings of their child conducting science experiments (Fig. 1(b)), video recordings of their child completing fitness routines at home (Fig. 1(c)), and screenshots attesting to timely completion of online safety education modules (Fig. 1(d)). To further complicate the task, the assignments were issued, and submissions requested via a diversity of platforms, from home-school conferencing parent–teacher communication platforms to parent chat groups to WeChat mini-programmes. Depending on the platform, each child’s assignment and feedback from the teacher would be viewable by other classmates and parents, making these assignments rather public in nature.

Acknowledging notifications from teachers was another critical punch-in task even though it was comparatively easy to accomplish. The gravity of this seemingly simple task lies in the premium placed on parents demonstrating responsibility for their children and accountability to the teachers, thereby lubricating the parent–teacher relationship in the child’s best interests. That these notifications are issued via ‘public’ parent–teacher platforms or parent chat groups, all of which are viewable by other parents, ups the ante for all parents to respond in a timely and dutiful manner. For example, after the teacher issues a new study resource for the students, parents



**Fig. 1 Examples of Chinese Parents’ Punch-in for Children’s Assignments.**

Parents uploaded audio recordings of their child reciting texts in the WeChat mini-programme *Xiaodaka*. (b) A parent submitted video recordings of her child conducting a science experiment in a parent chat group on WeChat and received feedback from the teacher. (c) Parents submitted video recordings of their children completing a fitness routine at home on DingTalk and the assignments were rated as ‘excellent’ by the teacher. (d) Parents submitted screenshots attesting to their children’s timely completion of an online safety education module in a parent chat group on WeChat.

have to confirm receipt via the online link, following which the platform automatically summarises and names the parents who have already done so (Fig. 2(a)). Similarly, over parent chat groups, parents were requested to acknowledge the teacher's reminder to attend a lecture on parenting skills in the parent chat group (Fig. 2(b)) or to acknowledge receipt of the teacher's request for parents to correct their children's summer vacation homework (Fig. 2(c)). In the latter situation, parents would publicly express gratitude to the teacher for providing answers to the assignment, reflecting a performative dimension to the interactions where parents feel compelled to constantly remain in the teacher's good graces.

On top of these day-to-day tasks are additional expectations placed on parents to be 'good citizens' by participating in polls and surveys. These polls typically relate to more mundane matters such as seeking parents' preferences on which presents to buy for Teachers' Day and what kinds of social activities they prefer for building camaraderie within the parent group. Polls were often conducted via 文本链 (text chain) and lengthy message threads termed as 'link dragons' (*jie long*), where each parent would reply to the preceding message by copying the entire list of names before adding his or her name at the end, thereby extending the 'dragon' by making the chain of linked names longer with each reply (see Fig. 2(d) for an example of a 'link dragon'). Besides the



**Fig. 2 Examples of Chinese Parents' Punch-in for Acknowledging Notifications and Participating in Polls.**

(a) Parents confirm receipt of a study resource issued by the teacher via the online link on DingTalk. The platform automatically summarises the number and names of parents who have confirmed receipt. (b) Parents acknowledge the teacher's reminder to attend a lecture on parenting skills by replying 'noted' in a WeChat parent chat group. (c) Parents acknowledge receipt of the answers to children's summer vacation homework by replying 'noted with thanks' in a WeChat parent chat group. (d) Parents participate in a poll through a 'link dragon' (*jie long*) to decide on their destination for a picnic in a WeChat parent chat group.

highly public nature of such polling is the sheer quantity of messages that each poll generates, thus adding to the volume of parenting-related tasks and notifications parents must manage. Considering that some parent chat groups could have over 70 or 80 participants, the number of notifications each parent could receive daily is certainly not trivial.

Finally, above and beyond the more public platforms where punch-in tasks are performed in virtual group settings, parents are also required to physically sign a home-school communication book (*jiazhang lianxi ce*). Signed on a daily basis, these books are exclusive to each child and contain information on the daily homework assigned and other important school notifications.

Beyond children's formal education and school life, parents are also obliged to fulfil similar punch-in tasks imposed by other institutions where their children attend after-school tuition classes and interest-based enrichment activities. Specifically, parents bear the responsibility of submitting assignments from tuition teachers on platforms adopted by these centres or chat groups created for these classes. As with the academic activities, confirming receipt of teachers' notifications and feedback and interacting actively with teachers are par for the course. Even for interest-based enrichment classes, be it in sports, arts, or other domains, parents are expected to submit their children's work and provide regular updates on their progress by demonstrating certain skills through various parent-teacher communication channels. For teachers in schools and tuition or enrichment centres, parents punching-in is undoubtedly more efficient and reliable compared to that of children, as parents typically remember requirements more precisely and manage deadlines more effectively. Parents may themselves share this view and advocate for punching-in too. Such behaviour is understandable given the formidable stakes at play in educational achievement. For many parents, punch-in culture grants them valuable insights into their children's schoolwork as well as that of their peers. Therefore, they tend to be accepting of these additional parenting obligations, albeit not without concerns about overloaded parental obligations. Mrs Fang, mother of a 9-year-old third-grade primary school student in Hangzhou, discussed the perceived boons and banes of punching-in:

*I don't have an issue with daka (punch-in) tasks. You know, my daughter is still young, and sometimes misses this and that. When the teachers make punch-in requests, I can help her remember. In this way, I can also have a better understanding of what they are learning – what needs to be memorised and mastered. After punch-ins, teachers often assess parents' performance in group chats, praising those who do well, and summarising their general progress and the number of mistakes made on average. Basically, you will*

*know whether your child is performing fine ... However, parents' burdens are quite heavy. Parents must punch-in after finishing any task. It's really difficult if parents are busy with work. For double income parents, it's highly likely that they are still working on punch-in tasks late at night.*

As parental punch-in culture becomes accepted across multiple realms, it is then intensified by teachers as a trusty means to secure parental support and internalised by parents as a necessary yoke they must bear. Once punch-in culture becomes ingrained in a school or parent group, it goes beyond fulfilling mandatory tasks but instead turns into an idealised habit that parents volitionally pursue. Many parents start to practise punch-in parenting of their own accord, going above and beyond what is officially requested or stipulated by teachers and schools. Notably, some parents take the initiative to join online punch-in groups or programmes created for advancing children's learning objectives, be it in reading, writing, or English. In such groups, parents voluntarily punch-in with their children's work in accordance with these groups' norms and regulations with a view towards seeking feedback on their progress. For example, one respondent chose to submit her child's handwriting practice sheets in a WeChat mini-programme named *Xiongmao Lianzi* (Panda Practises Writing).

#### PUNCH-IN CULTURE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, triggering the shift to online learning for schoolgoing children, there was growing demand from schools, teachers, and society at large for parents to take ownership of their children's education (Villano, 2020). In particular, given the common perception that the quality of online learning pales in comparison to in-class learning, parents were expected to closely monitor their children's schoolwork and be highly engaged in their online learning (Zhang, 2021; Zhu et al., 2022). The common trope was that it was parents' prime responsibility to ensure that their children's learning remained on track, and punch-in culture took on a newfound ferocity in the pandemic period.

Comparing our two waves of interviews with Chinese parents in 2019 versus in 2020 when the pandemic had occurred, we could discern a clear intensification of punch-in culture. In 2019, before the pandemic's onset, punch-in practices were not universally mentioned by all respondents. For those who had been involved in punch-in tasks, the remit was narrower and

usually restricted to occasional acknowledging of notifications and submitting assignments for specific disciplines (such as arts and sports) and limited types of homework (such as video recordings of children's recitations and fitness routines). Come 2020, punch-in culture had become significantly more visible and pronounced, adopted by schools of all levels from preschool through to high school as a formal parenting and learning practice. Parental punch-in tasks had also been integrated into almost all aspects of education. Correspondingly, many parents who reported never or only occasionally engaging in punching-in during the 2019 interviews had developed intensive and regular punching-in routines by the time of our follow-up interviews in 2020.

Indeed, in the throes of the pandemic and its accompanying turn towards online learning as described in Chapter 2, virtual approaches became the only viable means of teaching and parent-teacher communication, and parents' punch-in support became essential to sustaining some routines of school life. This transition understandably contributed to a boom in punch-in culture. As traditional offline interactions became impossible and punching-in increasingly formalised, normalised, and routinised, parents found themselves shouldering additional and more onerous punch-in duties. In the first place, most of the typical punch-in tasks we introduced earlier, including assignment submission, notification acknowledgements, and participation in polls continued and, in fact, intensified. To make up for reduced teacher-student communication, parents were encouraged and, in some cases, mandated to share extensive details about their children's home learning progress with teachers. Parents had to therefore contend with more homework punch-in tasks, encompassing multiple disciplines and diverse assignment genres. Figs. 3(a) and 3(b) illustrate examples of a list of assignments posted by teachers on DingTalk during online learning and parents' page-by-page submissions of their child's homework, respectively.

Their responsibilities also broadened beyond the mere submission of children's assignments to include correcting these assignments before submission and guiding their children through personal, hands-on teaching. New punch-in tasks were also created in the extraordinary pandemic circumstances with one crucial task being the health punch-in (*jiankang daka*), where parents had to report their children's body temperature and health status daily (see Fig. 3(c) for an example of health punch-in). Yet another punch-in task that assumed great importance during the pandemic was attendance taking for children's online classes (see Fig. 3(d) for an example of notifications for online classes attendance taking). Whereas older



**Fig. 3** Examples of Chinese Parents' Punch-in Tasks During Children's Pandemic Online Learning.

(a) A list of the day's assignments for children on DingTalk, encompassing multiple disciplines, with each having multiple items to complete. (b) Parents submitted every page of their child's written assignments and the teacher provided corrections and feedback on the photos of these assignments on DingTalk. (c) The health punch-in form for parents to report their children's body temperature and health status on DingTalk. (d) A notice reminding parents to take attendance for children's online classes in the afternoon.

children could independently record their attendance before online classes on livestreaming platforms, parents frequently mentioned having to record attendance on their younger children's behalf. Even ceremonial events that migrated online took on a punch-in dimension. Mrs Guan, mother of a 15-year-old third-grade junior high school student in Hangzhou, reported having to submit a video recording of her daughter for the online 'Oath Taking Ceremony for the *Zhongkao* (*Senior High School Entrance Examination*)' to share in the parents' group as it was required of every student. As highlighted by Mrs Guan, special punch-in activities like this ceremony were intended to preserve the traditions of school life despite the disruptive changes brought about by the pandemic, thereby 'maintaining the sense of ritual and morale in this challenging environment'.

Evolving in tandem with the proliferating parental punch-in tasks were the tools designed for facilitating them. As the pandemic wore on, a multitude of parent-teacher communication platforms and functionalities emerged that were specifically designed to meet the demands for more systematic, professional, and automated punch-in practices. These parent-teacher communication platforms, including DingTalk, QQ Class, *Banji Youhua Dashi*, and *Hangzhou Jiaoyu*, generally offer a wide and comprehensive range of functions tailored to online classes and punch-in practices including livestreamed



classes, homework submission and feedback viewing, notifications, attendance taking, chat groups, and so on.

DingTalk was undoubtedly the most widely used platform for punching-in, adopted by almost all the parents we interviewed in Hangzhou and more than half of those in Beijing. Many parents considered DingTalk a ‘lifesaving’ tool that helped them survive the surge in punch-in tasks during the online learning period. Compared to ‘manual’ punch-in within parent chat groups, DingTalk provides many automated, convenient, and user-friendly functions for parents to more easily manage pending punch-in tasks and complete these tasks with only a few clicks. For example, for assignment submissions, DingTalk offers a clear list of assignments for all classes. Each assignment includes submission or re-submission buttons, submission status (submitted or pending), review status (whether the teachers have reviewed it or not), and feedback from teachers. It also provides auto-reminders for pending tasks and displays the number of submissions from others.

Many parents expressed a preference for DingTalk over WeChat groups because they found it more convenient and better customised for managing punch-ins. As Mrs Zhou from Hangzhou, mother of an 11-year-old daughter in the fifth grade, explained, assignment submission via WeChat was very messy because the chain of messages from other parents’ submissions and acknowledgements would run very long, and it was a hassle to retrieve or check on one’s own submission thereafter. By contrast, DingTalk had dedicated features for managing each assignment submission. However, the popularity of edtech platforms such as DingTalk did not signify the decline of parent chat groups, typically on WeChat or QQ, in sustaining the punch-in culture. As we will elaborate in later sections of this chapter, parent chat groups continued to play a significant role, especially in issuing reminders for punch-in tasks and for dynamic parent–teacher interactions.

Towards the conclusion of our fieldwork in 2020, many schools and other educational institutions in both Beijing and Hangzhou had reverted to conventional face-to-face classes. Nevertheless, the pervasive punch-in culture and associated habits that emerged during the pandemic persisted and extended into post-pandemic parenting lives of Chinese parents. For instance, heightened parental engagement in children’s education and extensive requests for parental punch-in continued, albeit not as intensively as during the lockdown. But there were definite signs that punch-in culture had entrenched itself. Post-pandemic, edtech platforms such as DingTalk continued to be the predominant punch-in channel, employed for punch-in functionalities and general parent–teacher communication.

## PUNCH-IN CULTURE ECOSYSTEM AND ITS REWARD–PUNISHMENT REGIME

As punching-in intensified during the pandemic, a veritable media ecology had emerged to undergird this parenting culture, comprising both integrated and disparate platforms. In this sociotechnical ecosystem, the fulfilment of each punch-in task usually involves a main platform for punching-in and several auxiliary platforms for sharing additional information and materials, providing reminders, and facilitating parent–teacher interactions. For example, edtech platforms such as DingTalk and QQ Classroom were designed for home-school conferencing and equipped with bespoke punch-in functionalities and compartmentalised services. Auxiliary platforms, most typically WeChat parent groups, often served as a backup system to ensure that important messages are conspicuous to parents and that official information is not easily overlooked.

For instance, when a teacher assigns homework, s/he posts it on DingTalk, triggering automatic notifications to parents. Meanwhile, the teacher disseminates the same homework information in the relevant WeChat group(s) as a formal teacher–parent notification in case some parents overlook automated DingTalk alerts [Figs. 4\(a\)](#) and [4\(b\)](#) illustrate a typical case in which a teacher posted the day’s assignments on *Banji youhua dashi*, followed by sharing the same homework information and requesting parents to monitor children’s assignment correction in a WeChat parent group. Parent representatives may subsequently share this information in other informal parent groups. As the assignment deadline approaches or passes, if there are missing or late submissions, the teacher and parent class representatives issue reminders, specifying the number of parents yet to punch-in. In cases where reminders fail to work, the teacher or parents may either privately contact the parents who have not punched-in or publicly list their children’s names or student numbers in chat groups to exert additional pressure for submission or explanation. [Fig. 4\(c\)](#) provides an example of a teacher publicly listing the names of students who had not submitted their maths homework on time in a WeChat parent group.

In this complex punch-in ecosystem, parents are effectively subjected to a tacit reward–punishment regime. Just as employees receive salary bonuses for good attendance and deductions for multiple absences when punching timecards, parents receive praise from teachers and other parents for excellent fulfilment of punch-in tasks. Correspondingly though, they must endure reprimands for underperformance. By the unwritten rules of punch-in culture, parents must, at the barest minimum, punch-in on time as instructed, such as by uploading children’s completed assignments before their deadlines.



**Fig. 4 Examples of the Punch-in Ecosystem and the Reward-Punishment Regime.**

(a) The teacher posted the day's assignment on *Banji youhua dashi* for students or their parents to submit. (b) The teacher shared the same homework information as in (a) in the WeChat parent group, along with the assignment answers for parents to check their children's corrections. (c) The teacher publicly listed the names of students who had not submitted their maths homework on time in a WeChat parent group. (d) The teacher posted two lists with names of well and poorly performing students, respectively, with the former list labelled as 'Improvement Billboard' (*Jinbu Bang*) and the latter list labelled as 'Little Black Hut' (*Xiao Hei Wu*).

Parents who fail to meet baseline expectations are likely to face peer pressure and public shaming as punishment for violating punch-in rules. Even when parents successfully complete punch-in tasks on time, they can still face adverse consequences if the teachers deem their submissions unsatisfactory. Parents who surpass expectations by achieving additional outcomes, such as ensuring that their children turn in high-quality assignments or participating actively in optional punch-in tasks, earn commendation from teachers and fellow parents for themselves and their children. For example, over DingTalk, teachers would select and highlight excellent homework with lavish praise which could be viewed by all students and parents. Teachers would also, via WeChat parent groups, post names of students who had shown improvement in their homework, but at the same time publicly list students whose performance was lagging. One teacher labelled the list of better performing students as 'Improvement Billboard' (*Jinbu Bang*) and conversely the list of underperformers as 'Little Black Hut' (*Xiao Hei Wu*), a term used to describe a solitary confinement room where one should engage in self-reflection (Fig. 4(d)).

Nevertheless, the reward-punishment regime was not completely unyielding since as mentioned earlier, parents typically received notifications for completing punch-in tasks through multiple channels and several rounds of reminders. Parents were thus granted many opportunities to make up

for occasional lapses or errors, failing which, they had to bear the brunt of symbolic punishment from teachers or fellow parents. These typically included being publicly named in parenting communities or being openly and pointedly criticised. For example, if a parent forgets to punch-in for their child's homework, teachers or fellow parents responsible for tracking submissions may tag or specifically mention such parents in the chat group using an '@', prompting them to complete the task as soon as possible. Indeed, respondents noted that some of these vigilant parents tracked non-submissions volitionally and undertook the task with utmost seriousness. Parents called out for their failure to punch-in would then feel obliged to publicly apologise to the teacher and/or fellow parents, underlining the pressure of accountability that they perceived. Such public apologies were laden with the emotional labour of 'performative parenting' that we will discuss in the next chapter.

But punch-in culture is not forged, experienced, and navigated by parents alone. Teachers are a key pillar of the ecosystem and play a significant role in shaping punch-in culture, also bearing the weight of rules and expectations and engaging in complicated interactions with parents on a daily basis. As teachers assign punch-in tasks to parents and oversee parental compliance, they too participate actively in and shoulder the burdens of these tasks. As the main initiators and regulators of punch-in tasks, teachers have to ensure that the tasks are duly and satisfactorily executed. In particular, they are obliged to constantly track the progress of any overdue or perfunctorily completed tasks, as failure to do so would be regarded as irresponsibility or incompetence on their part. Therefore, it is not uncommon to witness teachers facing significant pressures as they consistently 'chase' parents through various approaches, often repeatedly, with the aim of meeting punch-in expectations. Indeed, according to a research article released in 2022 by the *Journal of Xinjiang Normal University*, which surveyed schools in 13 provinces across China, the principal sources of stress for homeroom teachers are workload and class management (White Night Workshop, 2023). This finding resonates with prior research on Chinese parent chat groups which found that teachers increasingly feel the need to maintain work-life boundaries through tactics such as creating a WeChat account specifically for school issues, muting the chat group or only checking messages from these chats at specific times (Gong et al., 2021).

Teacher burnout is real and concerning. For instance, during the pandemic, urging parents to complete the health punch-in for their children was one of the most challenging experiences for teachers because this was heavily policed by the authorities. Some schools ruled that children could not attend classes without first reporting their health status. Head teachers, along with other

relevant staff members, were held responsible for any consequences arising from a student's failure to report. As one respondent shared, a Hangzhou school required that the head teacher for each class report their students' health conditions by 7:30 a.m. every day. As the deadline approached and there were still parents who had not completed the health punch-in, the teacher made over 10 phone calls even as he was driving to work to ensure that these parents punched-in.

Besides such tedious administrative tasks, teachers are also expected to actively respond and provide feedback on tasks completed by parents and be readily available to address any questions and concerns parents raised. Furthermore, much like the expectation for parents to report their children's learning experiences at home to teachers, teachers are increasingly expected to reciprocate by sharing insights on the children's school life with their parents. Therefore, teachers also feel the need to regularly punch-in to highlight their personal competence and responsibility. Figs. 5(a) and 5(b) illustrate an example of a teacher intensively sharing class content, photos of students in class, excellent class notes of students, and more with parents in the WeChat group. In addition, one respondent shared that her child's head teacher created and personally ran a public WeChat account to update parents on her students' daily performance, share feedback, and assign homework (Figs. 5(c) and 5(d)).



**Fig. 5 Examples of Chinese Teachers' Punch-in Practices.**

(a) The teacher shared photos of children attending a Chinese class in a WeChat parent group. (b) The teacher shared and commended students' notes taken in the class in a WeChat parent group. (c) A head teacher of a class ran a public WeChat account to update parents on her students' daily school activities and performance. (d) The teacher as in (c) updated the day's homework and items to pack for the next day in the public account.

The practices of parents and teachers thus mutually reinforce each other, engendering parent–teacher reciprocity that reinforces and amplifies the mutual sense of accountability underpinning punch-in culture. In providing support and assistance to facilitate parents’ fulfilment of their punch-in tasks, be it through constant reminders or extensive sharing, teachers anticipate higher engagement and improved performance from parents. By the same token, as parents diligently fulfil punch-in tasks, they expect teachers to provide more helpful feedback and better teaching outcomes in return. Both parties consequently hold each other to lofty standards and tough expectations.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF PUNCH-IN CULTURE FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

The prevalence of punch-in culture in urban China signifies a trend towards heightened parental accountability for children’s education. As parents become more deeply involved in their children’s schoolwork through the swelling panoply and rising intensity of punch-in tasks, they inevitably feel like they are shouldering disproportionate responsibility for their children’s academic endeavours. With pressures of punch-in culture mounting, parenting feels like a digitally connected and multi-sited, 24/7 job where edtech platforms and parent chat groups are tantamount to workplaces and punch-in tasks are their key performance indicators. In this demanding role, parents have to be constantly connected and unfailingly responsive. They are obliged to spring into action once they receive punch-in requests and must ensure timely and effective completion of all tasks anytime and anywhere, be they working, on vacation, or about to retire to bed.

As Mrs Weng, mother of a 14-year-old daughter in the second grade of junior high school shared, she could silence work-related WeChat notifications from colleagues but could not afford to do likewise for the parent chat groups for fear of missing key notifications. Hence, she always set her phone to receive instant notifications from these parent chat groups. As vigilant as she was to parenting requests, there were still occasions when she was not as responsive to punch-in notifications or reminders as expected. She recalled at least two instances when she was in a meeting or working on the computer without her smartphone, and she was mentioned by the teacher in the parent chat group because either her daughter was late for an online class or she had failed to punch-in an assignment on time. She found such experiences anxiety inducing. With the pandemic and online learning further drawing parents into various realms of children’s academic endeavours, Mrs Weng, like many other

Chinese parents, described parenting as an endless, exhausting job that made them feel like they ‘start owing debts the moment they open their eyes every day’ (*meitian zhengyan jiu qianzai*).

Parents also admitted to feeling overwhelmed by the profusion of diverse punch-in tasks and notifications given the need to juggle multiple parenting platforms daily and manage punch-in requests with varied requirements. Some parents described this hectic and exhausting parenting life as *piyu benming* (fatigue and rush) and resorted to using checklists or calendar apps to cope. Working parents in particular found the parenting burden especially hefty and decried their loss of work–life balance. Indeed, respondents who were working parents lamented that they were often distracted from work by notifications from parenting platforms and chat groups, necessitating that they suspend work to attend to parenting duties. Consequently, respondents noted that some parents quit their jobs entirely to focus exclusively on managing their children’s schooling.

Fundamentally, punch-in culture exacerbates the notion of parental determinism and imposes on Chinese parents a sense of absolute responsibility for their children’s success and failure. Furthermore, the toll of navigating the complexities of parental punch-in culture – relentless anxiety over uncompleted tasks, self-doubt when punished by teachers or peers, self-recrimination when children underperform and are publicly shamed – makes parenting an emotionally fraught endeavour, dulling any residual joys that remain. It also behoves us to consider how socioeconomic inequalities play out in punch-in culture since parents’ access to resources and skills can have significant implications for how competently they punch-in and help their children punch above their weight. With the rise of parentocracy in urban China (Meng, 2020), set against the increasingly frenzied punch-in culture we have observed, gaps are likely to emerge between children whose parents devote considerable time, energy, and resources to support their children’s education, and those whose parents are unable or unwilling to do so.

As our respondents recounted, such gaps were especially apparent during the pandemic when parents had to play a role in teaching their children and grading their work, for which some parents were simply better equipped to be surrogate teachers. A typical scenario was when teachers sent both assignments and answers to parents and instructed them to monitor their children’s learning and correct their assignments before punching-in. In such situations, children’s learning outcomes virtually became examinations for parents. Responsible parents actively supervised their children’s home study and would dutifully teach or guide them in areas where they needed to improve. In contrast, less motivated or competent parents allowed their children to simply copy the answers, resulting in them ‘learning nothing at all’.

And what of the implications for children themselves? As punch-in culture elevates parental involvement in children's education, children inevitably become marginalised and to varying degrees, lose autonomy and control over their own academic pursuits. Punch-in culture has allowed children to legitimately rely on parents for learning such that they no longer take independent ownership in terms of planning schedules, noting down homework, and reflecting on why they have made certain mistakes. All of these are essential learning skills and capabilities that children need to develop over time. With parents held accountable to teachers for homework submissions and other tasks, children will instinctively relegate these responsibilities to parents while their sense of autonomy and self-regulation gradually atrophy. As Mrs Wei from Hangzhou, mother of a 15-year-old daughter in junior high recounted, her daughter had failed to punch-in despite having completed her homework and the teacher had messaged Mrs Wei via DingTalk to alert her. After this incident, she resolved to guide her daughter to take greater responsibility for her own studies. Some respondents also shared that their children found their parents' constant reminders annoying and even disruptive to their own learning rhythms, thus introducing tensions that strained the parent-child relationship.

Yet another adverse implication of punch-in culture for children is their loss of privacy and loss of face. The publicness and information richness of parent-teacher communication and edtech platforms and parent chat groups have seemingly accepted norms of open commendation and public shaming. These permit children little reprieve from public scrutiny of their academic efforts. Previously, children could conceal aspects of their academic lives that they preferred not to share with their parents but with punch-in culture, everything is visible to everyone. Moreover, parents' intimate knowledge of minute details about their schoolwork, such as the specific mistakes they had made and feedback from their teachers, could lead to children experiencing shame and guilt for disappointing their parents.

#### NOTE

1. The definition of 'punch-in' in the Cambridge Dictionary can be accessed at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/punch-in>.