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PERFORMATIVE PARENTING AND PEER PRESSURE

With punch-in culture assuming growing importance in the daily lives of urban Chinese families, we must delve deeper into its socioemotional facets. An especially challenging aspect of punch-in culture is its very publicness that parents must complete their assigned tasks under the glare of peer scrutiny. Whether on edtech platforms or social media parent chat groups, the ability to view other parents' efforts while yours are also open to examination escalates peer influence and peer pressure to an unprecedented level. Since the majority of these parenting behaviours are now visible to teachers and other parents, parents feel increasingly compelled to leave a 'perfect' impression on all these audiences. In highly interactive parent chat groups, careful self-presentation and strategic performativity are therefore tacit, yet stern requirements. Parents have to be cautious about their words and actions and to exercise care over when and how to say what to whom, as well as the use of appropriate tones and emojis in different contexts. Over time, performativity has become an essential parenting skill and part and parcel of everyday life for these parents.

In this chapter, we probe into performative parenting as a key facet of punch-in culture and examine how parents engage in self-presentation and impression management in digital forums. We also probe into peer dynamics, discussing how parents strategically manage their relationships with teachers and other parents, asserting but also experiencing peer influence and even peer pressure.

RULES, NORMS, AND ROLES ON PARENTING'S 'FRONT STAGE'

As discussed in Chapter 2, prior research has focussed on how parents, especially mothers rather than fathers, appropriate various technology platforms

to seek support and share parenting experiences in a bid to manage their own parenting challenges. Such interactions often have a public dimension involving interaction with known acquaintances but also with unknown publics. As parents seek insights into the parenting experiences and cultures of a wide range of online peers, their own parenting practices are simultaneously being observed. Parenting therefore takes on a public dimension and occurs under the spotlight of the 'front stage' (Goffman, 1969), which necessitates the effort of performativity.

Performative parenting is characterised by strategic and appropriate self-presentation and impression management in daily parenting practices. Instead of parenting by instinct, personal inclinations or trial and error, parents choose to follow the 'templates' of good parents. In so doing, they shape their parenting decisions and actions based on the established rules and expectations of the parenting culture they are part of, along with the perceived or imagined judgements of others. Performative parenting is driven by both the symbolic value of gaining recognition and pragmatic purposes of relationship building and information acquisition with teachers and other parents (see also Turkle, 2011; Vitak et al., 2015). With effective performativity, parents can garner attention, earn respect, build relationships, and even attain power and privilege within their communities, ultimately aiming to secure advantage for their children. Conversely, failure to adhere to consensus, rules, and expectations of performative parenting may result in disapproval and alienation, even potentially disadvantaging their children. For Chinese parents enmeshed within the punch-in ecosystem, performative parenting is motivated by the need to build social capital with teachers and other parents and the desire to gather useful knowledge to benefit their children. However, peer dynamics must be carefully managed, and our respondents shed light on the unwritten rules and expectations they strive to adhere to. Indeed, performative parenting in the Chinese context unfolds across diverse venues, ranging from parent–teacher communication via edtech platforms, to parent chat groups in social media platforms.

In exclusive parent–teacher communication such as via WeChat or the private message channel of edtech platforms like DingTalk, parents strive to leave a positive impression on the teacher. Besides remaining vigilant and responsive to notifications and requests which as we previously explained is the minimum expectation, parents use these private communications to build a cordial relationship with the teacher in their child's best interests. For example, our respondents showed us how they would use such communication to personally apologise for their children's underperformance and reiterate to the teacher their efforts to discipline their children. They would also promptly

and actively respond to teachers' feedback and express gratitude for their hard work, guidance, and encouragement.

As we already saw in Chapter 3, it is in the 'public' interactions over Ding-Talk and WeChat[1] that parents are held to the reward–punishment regime for excellent or errant behaviour. In such interactions, the stakes for performative parenting are significantly raised depending on the structure and composition of the chat groups. There are in general three main types of parent chat groups: school-based parent–teacher groups, school-based parent–parent groups, and spontaneous parent groups created to address various parenting needs and aspirations. All these chat groups serve a dual function by enabling parents to stay updated on their children's daily or even hourly school activities, while also facilitating the establishment and enhancement of relationships with teachers and/or fellow parents.

School-based parent–teacher groups are the most formal and organised, and from a pragmatic perspective, the most crucial groups that parents must join. These groups are often structured to resemble a 'mini society' or work-place. Teachers will assume the role of leaders or administrators, while parent committees or parent representatives serve as middle managers connecting teachers and other parents. The latter tends to constitute a silent major-ity of 'rank and file' parents who engage in the chat with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Such groups are typically created by the head teacher (*ban zhuren*) of a class and comprise the parent(s) of every student in the class. The primary purposes of these groups are disseminating notifications, foster-ing parent–teacher connections, conveying tasks and requests, and organising school events, among others. Classes can range in size from a dozen to about 50 students, but chat participants could number 70–80 if both parents in some families choose to join in, thus offering an indication of the volume of messages that can be potentially exchanged if everyone must punch-in. Inter-actions within these groups are typically guided by a series of relatively strin-gent rules and tacit expectations which are set and upheld by teachers, with the support of the parent representatives. For example, parents are required to input their names in the chat according to a strict format, such as Mother/Father of (Name of Child). The sharing of personal experiences, frivolous or irrelevant information, or engaging in casual small talk are generally discour-aged in these groups.

School-based parent–parent groups are formal chat groups comprising parents whose children are in the same class. These are often mandatory and considered essential by many parents. They are either led by the parent com-mittee or parent representatives or run organically in a decentralised man-ner. They serve as platforms for parents to engage in open discussions about

educational or school-related issues, pose questions and concerns, or participate in punch-in tasks without flooding the parent–teacher groups and causing inconvenience to the teachers. Parent representatives usually assume the role of teachers' assistants and manage punch-in tasks by securing parental compliance. These parent–parent groups typically function as auxiliary groups to parent–teacher groups, and parent representatives will forward important notifications and requests from the main groups and convey questions and concerns from parents back to relevant parties. Compared to parent–teacher groups, interactions in parent-only groups tend to be more flexible and casual, with less stringent rules and regulations to follow. Spontaneous parent groups are relatively informal and casual and tend to arise from parents with similar interests, needs, or aspirations gathering volitionally. Parents usually join such groups of their own accord, and the groups are run in a decentralised fashion.

Parent chat groups stand out as one of the most important and closely scrutinised 'front stages' for the enactment of performative parenting. The minimum expectations every parent must fulfil are to remain responsive, acknowledge receipt of notifications in a timely fashion, and respond positively to requests to participate in activities. Beyond that, the basic level of performativity expected of all parents is to be genial and supportive members of the community, helping to forge a convivial *esprit de corps*. Hence, these chats are often peppered with expressions of gratitude and praise for teachers or fellow parents for their assistance and efforts (see Fig. 6(a) for an example of parents expressing gratitude to teachers in a parent group). The positivity also extends to offering congratulations when teachers or other parents share news about children's achievements or other uplifting announcements (see Fig. 6(b) for an example of parents extending congratulations to children who won awards in a parent group). This prosocial atmosphere is further underlined by expressions of contrition such as parents apologising for their children's misbehaviour or their own failure to punch-in. As explained in Chapter 3, the reward–punishment regime does have a humane side. When such apologies are accompanied by reasonable justifications such as health woes, parents will chime in with kind words of support and offers of assistance, thus accentuating the affirming atmosphere. Fig. 6(c) illustrates a scenario where a mother apologised in a parent group for failing to punch-in for a fitness routine assignment due to her child falling sick, followed by other parents in the group expressing empathy and compassion.

In another interesting instance of performativity, a teacher sent a long apology message in the parent group reflecting on the inappropriateness of her behaviour. She had been suspected of inflicting physical punishment on her students and wrote to seek the parents' forgiveness and understanding.

Fig. 6 Performative Parenting in Parent Chat Groups.
(a) Parents in a WeChat parent group express gratitude to the teachers as the semester comes to an end. (b) Parents in a WeChat parent group extend congratulations to two students who won awards in a writing competition. (c) A parent apologises for failing to punch-in for a fitness assignment due to her child falling ill. Other parents in the group express empathy and compassion. (d) After the teacher sends a long apology message in the parent group reflecting on the inappropriateness of her behaviour, parents respond with expressions of moral support.

She concluded her message with her intentions to improve, eliciting encouraging replies from parents such as 'let's strive together' (*yiqi nuli*) (Fig. 6(d)). Indeed, a key ideal of performative parenting in punch-in culture is careful and considerate use of language and expressions. Positive words and pleasant emojis expressing upbeat sentiments such as gratitude and solidarity are the most favoured and widely used. In the formal parent–teacher groups in particular, parents tend to use polite but simple expressions such as 'noted with thanks' (*shoudao, xiexie*) or 'thanks for your hard work' (*xinku le*). Parents would also refrain from using emojis or just include non-descript ones since the parent–teacher groups are reserved for serious matters and must help maintain the sense of gravitas.

With temperance and harmony so heavily prized in such groups, resolving misunderstandings and tensions, avoiding direct confrontations, and engaging in mature conflict resolution were also implicit rules. As Mrs Guo, mother of a fourth-grade boy in Hangzhou, herself a preschool teacher explained that she would set the ground rules for parent–teacher groups during her opening meetings with parents:

> *Parents can quarrel if they choose to, but not in the parent chats.*
> *They can do so over private messages or in person, find a setting*

> *to sit down and work out their differences. If there are issues, just*
> *raise them face to face, right? But for all negative messages, please*
> *don't share them in the parent chat.*

Our findings revealed that indeed, when parents encounter disagreements during online chats, most of them choose to swallow their frustrations and avoid direct confrontations for fear of leaving a bad impression and adversely affecting their children. In such a climate, losing one's temper or being overly emotional were in fact frowned upon.

Apart from these conventions on what not to do, there were clearly other commendable behaviours that parents were encouraged to display, whether at the teachers' behest or from observing other parents' positive response. Notably, participating constructively in group discussions and interactions, actively sharing information and relevant experiences, enthusiastically answering questions and solving problems of other parents, and sensitively offering emotional support were generally well-received acts. Some parents would be especially motivated by such opportunities to demonstrate their value, often in a bid to earn attention, respect, and perhaps 'formal positions' such as the role of parent representative. After all, serving as the 'official' conduit between parents and teachers would allow them to foster a special connection with the latter and such social capital was extremely valuable indeed. As admitted by Mrs Fang, a Hangzhou mother of a 9-year-old daughter in third-grade, her initial motivation to join the parent committee was to 'earn a good impression and get her daughter more attention from the teachers', which is a common perception shared by parents whether or not they were performing the parent representative role.

Yet other parents aspired, whether consciously or unconsciously, to be opinion leaders in the group. While not an 'official' position akin to parent representatives, these parents could wield influence over other parents because their views were seen to carry more weight and tended to receive greater affirmation. The status as opinion leaders is typically gained through active participation in group discussions, extensive sharing of information and experiences, as well as exhibiting responsive and helpful assistance to fellow parents' questions or problems. However, purposeful performativity in pursuit of attention and respect can sometimes gravitate towards over-performance where these parents may overwhelm teachers and their peers with excessive information and enthusiasm. Additionally, the emergence of such opinion leaders can also elevate invisible yet palpable rivalry that heightens perceptions of peer pressure and parental anxieties about 'not doing well enough compared to other parents'. Just as employees in some workplaces compete over who arrives at the office earlier, works longer hours, achieves

higher key performance indicators (KPIs), and receives more praise from the boss, parents in group chats may similarly try to exceed others by responding more swiftly, participating more actively, and being perceived as more helpful, competent, and praiseworthy by the teachers and fellow parents.

Another widely used platform for informal connections among parents and teachers is social media posts via their own social networks (that could include other parents and teachers), and these are independent of school parent chat groups. Many Chinese parents frequently share their parenting experiences on Moments, a feature within WeChat. These posts typically include a mix of text, photos, and videos, covering various aspects of daily life such as their children's school and extracurricular activities, food they have prepared for their kids, and family vacation snapshots. Besides personal anecdotes, parents may also exchange valuable information and engaging stories relating to children, education, and parenthood that they discover online, while regularly checking other parents' Moments to find out what others are doing. Such interactive sharing sees parents and even teachers actively liking and commenting on each other's posts. This ongoing interaction allows them to build and reinforce their relationships through continuous, albeit peripheral, engagement. As Mrs Xue from Hangzhou, mother of a 10-year-old son and a 4-year-old daughter explained, '"Liking" others' posts is a way to maintain relationships'. While this can lead to positive cycles of mutual affirmation and validation, there is also potential for one-upmanship and envy, which may result in feelings of alienation, yet another adverse side effect of performative parenting.

PEER PRESSURE: PERCEIVED, EXPERIENCED, AND IMPOSED

Indeed, when every parent is engaging in impression management and putting forward their best selves in these public forums, the overall picture is one of extreme parental involvement and high parenting efficacy. Nevertheless, the grim reality is that not all parents will be equally competent in parenting, or performative parenting for that matter, and some will invariably come across as being far more adept at orchestrating successful outcomes for their children. These are the parents who are the most avid in punching-in, whose children are constantly lauded by teachers, and who seem to have enrolled their children in the most highly touted tuition centres or enrichment programmes. Such parents appear to raise the bar on parenting, stoking admiration at best and envy and resentment at worst. Inevitably, as punch-in culture intensifies, parents are exposed to a constant barrage of parenting-related information that may give rise to peer pressure through daily online interactions.

Before the advent of such digital connections and online visibility, parents would experience peer pressure through more occasional, direct encounters such as when they attended children's parent–teacher meetings or by interacting with fellow parents in their respective neighbourhoods and workplaces. But with constant exposure to other parents via edtech and parent–teacher communication platforms and parent chat groups, parents now have a ceaseless flood of reminders revealing how (well) their peers are performing. For example, on platforms like DingTalk, the systematic reminders for punch-in tasks and notifications of how many parents have not punched-in might translate into peer pressure for parents who are falling behind and constantly deluged with pending tasks. With performative parenting in action, peer pressure is further heightened by the increasing visibility of other children's academic performance, such as through teachers' public naming of the most improved versus underachieving students, examples of excellent homework showcased by teachers in parent chat groups, or Moments posts of other parents sharing children's educational progress and achievements. Indeed, some expressed concern that the intensification of peer comparisons and peer pressure on public platforms makes educational challenges increasingly daunting. Social media thus offers parents unprecedented insights into the activities of other parents. They therefore face not only peer pressure from their close family and friends, and their children's classmates' parents, but also contend with a proliferation of online content from across and beyond China on what constitutes 'good parenting'.

In this regard, technologically mediated punch-in culture and the performative parenting that grows out of it have also transformed the normative standards and expectations of 'good parenting'. Parental obligations have expanded far beyond the traditional parenting role of caregiving in the domestic sphere to include complicated education and relationship management in both offline and online realms. Parents are now pressured to practise transcendent parenting, where they must constantly transcend the physical distance between them and their children, strategically navigate myriad parental apps and groups, and make connections with all the relevant people and resources that might benefit their children's education and development (Lim, 2020). This new 'good parenting' norm is significantly more unforgiving, where even minor parenting oversights such as inappropriate speech in a parent chat group or overlooking alerts from a child's teacher may be taken against parents and diminish their standing in others' eyes. The bar has also been raised on which parents are considered to be going the extra mile for their children. Parenting practices once considered admirable are now fundamental obligations for every parent. For instance, a parent who checks a

child's homework daily was once seen as responsible while parents with no idea of what the child was learning at school were deemed uninvolved. Today, the former is a basic expectation of every parent (by at least one parent per household), while the latter is criticised as highly irresponsible and negligent.

This bar for 'good parenting' is being raised yet further with new trends that emerge. One anxiety-inducing development for Chinese parents is that of 'advanced learning' (*chaoqian xuexi*), where children are pushed to learn academic subjects ahead of the formal school education schedule, and to pursue extra learning objectives beyond the standard curriculum of China's education system. For instance, it is common for urban Chinese children to attend tuition classes designed for students who are one, two, or even more grades higher than theirs, especially for subjects like English where school programmes tend to be disparaged as being 'too easy'. There is also a growing prevalence of children being hothoused with content beyond their standard curricula, such as preparing for international tests like the Cambridge Preliminary English Test or American SAT or attending tuition classes offering the curricula of other countries such as the United States and Singapore. In the case of Mrs Liu from Beijing who had a daughter in primary school, she had learnt from her parent chat group that many of her child's classmates were engaging in advanced learning. Feeling highly inadequate in comparison, she decided to place greater pressure on herself and her daughter to avoid 'being left behind'. She subsequently enrolled her daughter, who was in the second grade at the time of our fieldwork, in an English class designed for fourth- or fifth-grade students. She also planned to register for more advanced maths classes for her daughter, feeling that the maths taught at school was also too basic. Peer pressure had had a clear influence on her parenting choices.

Several respondents also felt that they were caught in a vicious cycle where punch-in culture impels them to be more involved and performative, but the heightened peer pressure simultaneously stressed them and made them less confident of their own abilities. Specifically, they confided that extensive information shared by teachers, fellow parents, and educational institutions tends to trigger a sense of panic, leading them to be consumed by guilt, self-doubt, and inadequacy. Their self-esteem then suffers as they view themselves as 'irresponsible', 'incompetent', and 'not as good as other parents'. This cycle of panic can be self-reinforcing, as every parent is under the same impression, or illusion, that 'others are doing better than I am'. Consequently, they tend to punch-in more actively and engage in greater performative parenting, striving to prove to themselves and others that they are exerting their best efforts. Paradoxically, such effort further induces panic among their peers. When parents realise or believe that other parents and children are performing better than

them, they try to catch up by adopting even more ambitious *jixue* ('chicken blood'/intensive parenting) practices. As their achievements are spotlighted to other parents via digitally mediated performative parenting, they in turn crank up peer pressure for others, further perpetuating the vicious cycle. At the same time, it is likely that peer pressure among parents will have knock-on effects on teachers as well. Research conducted by the Beijing Academy of Educational Sciences indicates that parents who perceive deficiencies in their own ability to support their children's studies tend to reach out to teachers more frequently (White Night Workshop, 2023).

Peer pressure and the anxieties it sets off can also have adverse implications for children and parent–child relationships but different parents experience and evaluate punch-in culture differently. Some parents complained about additional burdens of punch-in culture, while others appreciate the opportunity to manage their children's education and (potentially) derive benefits. Parents who fall sway to intensive peer pressure admit to being in awe of successful 'kids of other families' (*bierenjia de haizi*) and consciously or unconsciously compare their children to these imagined role models. This inevitably affects parental perceptions of their own children's performance, thus provoking stress and frustration, marring parent–child relationships and damaging the children's self-esteem. Some parents, recognising that peer pressure is stress-inducing, consciously develop coping strategies to manage their children's emotional welfare as well as their own. Other parents go one step further to rationalise the value and benefits of peer pressure. For these parents, extensive exposure to 'ideal parents' as role models of desirable parenting practices provides opportunities for them to learn from their peers, encourage and motivate themselves, as well as acquire useful information and support. As Ms Li articulated, she had initially experienced feelings of stress but got used to the pressure over time and would instead use content shared in these groups to motivate herself and her child:

> For those jiwa ('chicken blood kid'/children of pushy parents) parent chat groups, I treat them as a driving force to motivate myself. I do feel that the pressure is tremendous but living under a certain degree of pressure may conversely be better. Otherwise, once we relax, it will be very difficult to catch up. Even if I don't perform as well as those jixue jiazhang ('chicken blood parents'/pushy parents), at least I know what their calibre is and have some insights.

While such attempts at self-consolation may help some parents make sense of the challenges of peer pressure, they also lay bare the detriments of the

hyper-competitive nature of punch-in culture and performative parenting. Indeed, ambitious *jixue* parents (chicken blood/pushy parents) admit to being grateful for punch-in culture (especially during online learning), which allows them to better understand their children's academic progresses and school life. They then build on these knowledge and insights to boost their children's potential with more targeted and concerted support. In contrast, for parents who do not want to involve themselves so extensively in their children's academic lives, punch-in culture undoubtedly introduces extra burdens, anxiety, and self-doubt.

EMOTION WORK AND CONTEXT COLLAPSE

Above all, what makes performative parenting and peer pressure even more overwhelming is the emotion work it entails and the complexities of punch-in culture they must navigate. In practising performative parenting, parents must assume different ideal personas depending on the context. Be it parent–teacher platforms, parents-only chat groups, or social media, each context imposes different rules and expectations for performative parenting. Parents must nimbly and adaptably take on multiple roles, convey different images, and craft messages using language catering to diverse contexts. Performative parenting is not merely a symbolic exercise but necessitates practical effort in the form of having to be constantly connected, highly responsive at all times and prepared to dedicate substantial time and energy to craft a well-groomed image for one's networked audiences. As described by Mrs Zheng, a Beijing mother of an 8-year-old son, parenting is 'another full-time job, with endless overtime and the obligation to please everyone except ourselves'. Moreover, as other parents openly brandish their children's accomplishments on these platforms and seek to gain favour with teachers for special treatment, digitally connected parents find themselves involved in significant emotional labour.

In this highly interactive, densely networked environment therefore, even while Chinese parents may benefit from more extensive and varied connections, they also face the perpetual stress of appropriate self-presentation and strategic image management in a state of constant publicness. Since posts on social media are publicly visible to large networks of teachers, parents, as well as other acquaintances and even strangers, they usually feel obliged to share high-quality, carefully curated content that presents a positive, well-groomed, and competent image to these audiences. For instance, before sharing photos on social media, many parents spend a lot of time selecting the best-looking photos and embellishing them with editing software. Similarly, parents are

also careful to avoid potentially controversial topics and disclosure of overly negative emotions in social media posts. In such circumstances, when parents' inner emotions and feelings do not align with these rules, they are obliged to bottle up their negative feelings to maintain a perfect image for teachers and other parents.

Mrs Jing from Hangzhou, mother of a 9-year-old boy in the third grade, explained how participating in these chats can be an emotional minefield. In the earlier case of the teacher who had apologised for her inappropriate behaviour, one parent had suggested via the parents-only chat group to demand that the school appoint a new teacher. However, most other parents recommended giving the teacher a second chance as they felt that she was generally pleasant and considerate, did well in most areas, and could be excused for an occasional lapse of judgement. The dissatisfied mother argued for her stance over several messages, but Mrs Jing felt that she probably suppressed her own feelings and gave in. This eventual compromise was likely driven by her desire to follow the broader consensus and not stoke conflict to avoid being singled out for being 'odd, picky and small minded'.

Such fraught scenarios involve the burden of 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983) where individuals must conceal or consciously negotiate their true feelings to 'please others' so as to maintain harmonious relationships within the group. Given the public nature of punch-in culture and the child's interests riding on performative parenting, our respondents tried their best to maintain cordial relations even if it went against their natural instincts. As Mrs Zhu from Hangzhou, mother of an 11-year-old daughter in the fifth grade and a 2-year-old boy lamented:

> I really can't bear it anymore. I said why is there so much homework? Other parents agreed with me. Even though the teacher is working hard (on the platform), we parents are also exhausted. When the teacher openly criticises our children, we feel ashamed because it is our problem, and we worry about what our children's poor performance means for their future. The teachers often do this. They name and shame the children …. But this teacher is responsible … And even if you have been criticised by the teacher, you still have to say, 'Thank you for your hard work'. I don't know whether other parents actually mean that sincerely. Anyway, in the parent chat, everyone says such things.

Furthermore, as earlier mentioned, different contexts have different rules and expectations for performative parenting. When parents must simultaneously juggle multiple platforms each with its own unique norms,

performative parenting becomes more complicated. Hence, parents feel duty bound to develop a sharpened awareness of different audiences, preferred topics, and interaction styles on different platforms and tactically adjust their online activity to project their best selves (Wang & Lim, 2021). Parents may further experience 'context collapse' (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) when they fail to share the 'right' content on the 'right' platform, which could undermine their reputation in certain contexts and even wreak misunderstanding and conflicts. For example, one parent had the awkward experience of sharing a video in the parent chat group before being promptly admonished by a parent representative that such content was not welcome. The parent had to apologise and explain that she had sent the message by mistake. Parents therefore need to diligently, vigilantly, and creatively take on different roles in different platforms and contexts, construct different images of themselves, as well as craft messages using different languages across diverse contexts.

NOTE

1. Among our sample of respondents, neither *Douyin* nor *Xiaohongshu* was extensively used for parenting. Participants generally perceived Douyin as a digital platform primarily for leisure and entertainment, while *Xiaohongshu* is more commonly used by expectant or young mothers with infant children rather than those whose children are of schoolgoing age.