

## DIGITAL PARENTING BURDENS AND FAMILY WELLBEING

As we write our concluding thoughts long after the pandemic lockdowns have ended, Chinese families' zeal for digitalisation and educational technologies have hardly receded but only intensified. With the advent of alluring innovations such as generative AI, Chinese consumers have seized upon new technological fads (Cheung, 2023; Kaur, 2024). Since ChatGPT broke onto the scene, Chinese students have been quick to utilise it to reduce the time spent on their homework (*Straits Times*, 2023). Despite restrictions within China's 'Great Firewall', students have found ways to access the service by obtaining foreign phone numbers or utilising virtual private networks to circumvent limitations and access the platform, using it to compose essays, tackle science and math problems, and generate computer code (*Straits Times*, 2023).

Relatedly, an AI-powered chatbot in the guise of a red-haired American woman named Annie became an overnight sensation when Chinese parents began to share instructions for turning the chatbot into a substitute English tutor for their children (Shu, 2023). The Call Annie app allows users to converse with the ChatGPT-powered bot via FaceTime, giving the children an opportunity to practise spoken English, its popularity further boosted by the Chinese government's ban on tutoring. The hashtag #CallAnnie garnered over 1.3 million views on *Xiaohongshu* and videos providing advice on leveraging Call Annie for success in the IELTS English language proficiency test have also amassed thousands of likes on the platform (Shu, 2023). The learners, knowing that Annie is a bot, apparently felt more confident and less stressed about making mistakes when speaking English.

As discussed in earlier chapters, urban Chinese families' enthusiasm for technology, especially those which shore up children's educational performance, is avid. Across the suite of digital technologies that have been

embraced, from devices such as smartphones and intelligent lamps to edtech platforms and parent chat groups, parenting practices have incorporated and adapted to them. Our evidence suggests various implications of the digitalisation of family life in urban China and in our concluding chapter, we discuss them with a view towards insights for parenting in other parts of the world that are similarly technologising. We review similar digital parenting challenges in other parts of the world through a comparative lens and reflect on what the Chinese experience portends for digitally connected families around the world. We also reflect on the lessons we can draw for how these increasingly commonplace everyday technologies should be designed, set against the broader ongoing debate on AI ethics and children's digital rights, and concerns about growing digital mediation of interpersonal communication.

#### GROWING DIGITALISATION OF FAMILY LIFE

With smartphones, tablets, computers, and many other devices proliferating in urban Chinese homes linking households across dense digital networks, it is clear that these families' existences are far from isolated or insular. Instead, they are well connected to institutions and other families, engaging in a multitude of online interactions that supplement, complement, and augment their offline lives. Our interviews with parents of schoolgoing children have revealed that their interactions with schools and teachers have evolved from sporadic and occasional exchanges to regular and intensive involvement enabled by these digital connections, principally concerning academic tasks. Originally designed as reminders or contingency plans in case children forget their assignments, parent-teacher interaction has gradually expanded in use, becoming pedestrianised and normalised for Chinese parents. The rising intensity of these digital parenting tasks and the standards and expectations surrounding their completion has culminated in the emergence of punch-in culture and norms of parental accountability.

As digital connections starkly capture parents' (in)ability to demonstrate accountability and teachers' capacity to verify the same, punch-in culture has become oppressive and wearisome by dint of its publicness. The sheer visibility of punching-in or failure to do so in accordance with best practices puts parents under an almost panoptic gaze. The performativity that punch-in culture entails, principally to smoothen strategic relationships with teachers and other parents to accumulate social capital for their children, accentuates the challenge of the endeavour. Since parents are required to complete their assigned tasks under close examination by their peers, the ability to observe other parents' efforts while one's actions are subject to scrutiny amplifies peer

pressure to an unprecedented level. The majority of these parenting behaviours are observable by teachers and other parents, making parents feel increasingly compelled to present a ‘perfect’ image to all these audiences. In highly interactive parent chat groups, careful self-presentation and strategic performativity become implicit yet rigid requirements. The digitally connected parent, observing how their peers showcase their children’s achievements and endear themselves to teachers, must thus engage in substantial emotion work. Parents must be mindful of their words and actions, exercising caution regarding when and how to convey information, as well as which tones and emojis to use in what contexts, further compounding their stress and sense of burden.

Furthermore, the portrayal of parenting trends on social media significantly shapes parents’ self-perceptions, their interactions with their children, and societal norms regarding effective parenting. With each post and message, these public digital platforms gradually establish norms surrounding ‘ideal parenting’, setting benchmarks for what is perceived as exemplary parenting. The scope of basic and essential parenting duties has also been widened with digitalisation as online learning allows parents to take classes together with their children and deepens their involvement in the children’s academic endeavours. Most of the parents we interviewed expressed the desire to be fully and resolutely dedicated to moulding their children into competent and successful individuals through helping them achieve academic excellence. And yet parental involvement – escalated by the use of edtech and social media platforms – has notable implications both for children’s development and for parent–child relationships. In the digital age, ceaseless connectivity extends parental involvement surveillance and control, potentially resulting in over-involvement in children’s lives (Lim, 2020; Nelson, 2010). Persistent interventions may, over time, restrict children’s autonomy and hinder personal growth, consequently adversely affecting both their development and relationships with their parents (Lim, 2020). We must also consider how a heavily parent-centric educational environment can exacerbate disparities in children’s academic performance and make the quest for upward mobility a more uneven playing field than it already is. As prior research has shown, socioeconomic differences can manifest in diverse parenting practices and stratified outcomes (Clark, 2013; Lareau, 2003; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Schisms are likely to arise between children whose parents invest significant energy and resources to support their education and those whose parents are unable or unwilling to do so. In a demanding landscape of punch-in culture and performative parenting, parents who are adept at task and time management, savvy about impression management and proficient in academic subjects will undoubtedly give their children a significant leg-up in the educational rat race.

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON DIGITAL PARENTING

But by no means is digital parenting and its intensification uniquely Chinese. Indeed, as digital technologies increasingly take centre stage in home routines and family life around the world, every society is grappling with the digitalisation of family life. In many respects, parenting across different countries is a universalising experience, bound more by similarities than differences. Middle-class families across the globe share a multitude of wants, wishes, and worries that are specific to their respective contexts (Heiman et al., 2012). Parents' desire to give their child every advantage for a bright future, especially through academic achievement, is a common middle-class aspiration. The rising deployment and indispensability of digital technology in everyday life is yet another commonality among urban middle-class families worldwide. This confluence of trends is what makes the Chinese experience of digital parenting an invaluable one to examine and ponder over.

Indeed, especially within Asia, the valorisation of academic success appears more heightened than ever within the region's burgeoning urban middle class, as the thriving market for tuition and enrichment classes clearly shows (Bray & Lykins, 2012). Just as in China, schools in Asian metropolises are increasingly adopting various digital communication platforms to facilitate learning and home-school conferencing. In India, for example, a growing number of schools are embracing locally developed apps like Teno to expedite home-school conferencing in response to parents' demands (EdTechReview, 2016). Mirroring the Chinese situation, Indian parents exert pressure on their children due to the intense competition for admission to reputable institutions (Ghatol, 2017). The prevailing unemployment situation in India further contributes to parental insistence on improved performance from their children. Furthermore, some parents seek to fulfil their own unrealised aspirations through their children, creating additional stress for adolescents who must navigate the demands of both school and private tutors. A significant number of parents engage three to four or more private tutors for their children, and even on days without academic tuition, there are additional commitments such as art or music lessons (Ghatol, 2017). At the same time, parents take to social media platforms to showcase their children's accomplishments in ways that severely amplify peer pressure. This involves sharing images of their children's high-score report cards, contributing to the establishment of a culture characterised by continuous comparisons (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). Similarly, a comparative study of mothers in Singapore and the United States found that mothers who subscribe to intensive parenting norms are especially motivated to seek educational

information in order to give their children an edge (Chae, 2022). However, the information provides fodder for social comparison which induces in them a disquieting sense of competitiveness.

Korea's equivalent of pushy parents, known as the Gangnam Mums, named after the most developed metropolitan area in Seoul, are renowned for their micromanagement of their children's academic success because of the country's highly competitive academic environment (Park et al., 2015). Just like in China, once the child enters school, a substantial portion of parental care shifts towards their academic achievements, driving up demand for a wealth of education-related information. Online instant messengers such as WhatsApp and Kakao Talk serve as platforms for personal individual or group contacts, facilitating the sharing of information about extracurricular lessons, their nature, experiences with schooling children, and arrangements for offline meetups (Park et al., 2015). This proliferation of academic resources breeds an intense educational atmosphere, placing a significant burden on mothers to select the right information to guide their children for academic success. Again, peer pressure is an inevitable and unfortunate side effect.

Conflicts also occur in these chats, often mirroring underlying issues within the school environment as one study of parent chats in Moscow, Russia, revealed (Bylieva et al., 2023). Moreover, school-related events and holidays that demand parental involvement, particularly those involving challenging or unclear tasks, occasionally serve as triggers for heightened anxieties and discord. Relatedly, a study of WhatsApp parent chat groups in Chile also uncovered instances of the emotion work involved in conflict resolution (Moyano Dávila et al., 2023). In these conflicts, one frequently employed tool is the use of 'laughter', often expressed as 'haha'. Laughter is typically utilised as a means of apologising for misunderstandings or not comprehending specific instructions conveyed through the chat. Parents strategically use emoticons to convey feelings and emotions that help to swiftly defuse potential conflicts. There was also an instance of teachers imposing pressure on parents who had not responded to a poll, resonating with the Chinese experience of punching-in. The study also found that 'to be a good parent means being aware of and complying with the established deadlines and the formats of the tasks entrusted to them' (Moyano Dávila et al., 2023, p. 560). The challenge of navigating parent chat dynamics in WhatsApp has also been the subject of debate in Australia. As one educator found from her survey of parents and teachers who follow her Instagram account, 77% agreed that the advantages of such WhatsApp groups are outweighed by their drawbacks (Milledge, 2023). In parallel with the Chinese parents who were subjected to a reward-punishment

regime and peer pressure in their WeChat groups, some Australian parents had suffered eviction or abuse from groups because they defended the school or teacher or when they resisted unreasonable group expectations (Milledge, 2023).

The intensification of communication between parents and teachers and parental over-involvement has also been flagged as a concern elsewhere. British parents are reportedly inundated with notifications relating to their children including school newsletters, school apps, WhatsApp groups, ClassDojo accounts, school websites, and apps for tracking children's development, as well as hardcopy letters (Henderson, 2018). However, teachers also suffer from the flood of messages and feel like they are 'under surveillance' and caving under late-night emails from anxious parents that swell their workloads (Jacobs, 2019). Notably, British parents have been known to use closed messaging features in apps such as Bambizo, ClassDoJo, and Edmodo to contact teachers over concerns large and small (Budden, 2018). These range from more trivial tasks such as asking teachers to relay messages to their children, to demanding that teachers justify the low scores they gave their children. All these instances of parental over-involvement further erode children's independence and autonomy. In the afore-mentioned Australian report, teachers lamented of parent chats: 'They have been a cause of great angst for myself and my colleagues' and 'Parents have told me that the WhatsApp is "hopping" about a decision I've made. It's definitely contributed to work anxiety as a teacher'. In another column by an Australian mother about the toxicity she had witnessed on parents' WhatsApp groups in their behaviour towards teachers, she observed that they had become a 'digital, interactive, mobile version of Regina George's Burn Book from the film *Mean Girls*' (Hendley, 2023). In Ireland, principals have also had to take action against parents who publicly victimise teachers over social media platforms (Horgan, 2021). A study of Israeli teachers also found that they were aggrieved at how parents were very disrespectful towards them in parent-teacher chats (Wasserman & Zwebner, 2017). This undermined their positions of authority and hampered their ability to control the group.

In summary, the shared experiences across various countries are increasingly characterised by the dense weaving of digital connections into everyday life, reflecting growing challenges and uncertainties parents face while raising their children in a rapidly evolving world. This assertion is supported by mounting evidence indicating the emergence of digital parenting burdens globally, driven by significant shifts in home-school conferencing from elementary to university levels in response to heightened connectivity.

## WELLBEING THROUGH POLICY AND DESIGN

There are many lessons we can distil from the Chinese experience but perhaps the most significant one relates to the wellbeing of both parents and children. Understanding the socioemotional dimensions of parental wellbeing is crucial because the welfare of parents not only affects them individually but also has implications for child development, fertility, and the overall health of society (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Hardships of parenting, characterised by difficulties and conflicts within the parental role, along with low parental wellbeing, can have notable effects on children's developmental outcomes (Mackler et al., 2015). Additionally, a decrease in subjective wellbeing following birth of the first child reduces the likelihood of having more children (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015). Therefore, examining societal trends in how parenthood and parenting impact adults' wellbeing is crucial for scaffolding parenting journeys.

Parenting is a complex experience encompassing both edifying and challenging aspects (Musick et al., 2016). While parenting brings joy, meaning, and fulfilment, it also involves significant trials and onerous caregiving responsibilities as we observed in our Chinese respondents, as well as in parents elsewhere as evidenced by research from other countries. Scholars emphasise that the balance between the demands and rewards of parenting vary across social statuses and life stages, with parenting challenges and resources distributed unevenly (Musick et al., 2016; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). According to the Stress Process Model (SPM), stress can be regarded as a process, the core components of which are stressors, resources, and stress outcomes, and it is valuable to understand differences in the nature and intensity of parenting stress (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Pearlin, 1989).

Stressors are rooted in major life events or chronic problems and may stem from social roles like parenting strain, marital strain, or work strain. Resources encompass coping strategies, social support, and personal resources such as mastery – the perception of one's efficacy in meeting demands. Since resources help to mitigate the adverse impact of stressors on wellbeing, the availability and utilisation of resources determine the effects on wellbeing. Besides individual resources such as personal time and intellectual and financial wherewithal, institutional resources offered by governments, workplaces, or other organisations can also help alleviate stress. Stress outcomes encompass mental, physical, and subjective wellbeing. The SPM emphasises the interconnectedness of stressors, as they can bleed into other life domains, leading to financial strain, time constraints, and conflicts with partners. These additional

stressors can further undermine health and subjective wellbeing among parents. Furthermore, the SPM underscores that social statuses, including social class, gender, sexuality, marital status, race/ethnicity, and immigration status, influence every component of the stress process. Bearing in mind these dimensions of stress can facilitate a more productive analysis of sources of parenting stress and create inroads for possible ameliorative measures.

For parents in particular, SPM identified chronic stressors relating to the parenting role: role overload, interpersonal conflict, role captivity, and interrole conflict (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Role overload refers to perceptions of feeling swamped by childcare needs that far exceed one's ability while interpersonal conflict relates to parent-child and spousal conflicts. Role captivity is feeling entrapped and unable to extricate oneself from parenting duties while interrole conflict arises from the inability to reconcile one's work and parenting duties. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2020, p. 202) emphasise that 'Besides the conventional forms of stressors, research has advanced through examining unique stressors that parents experience today' and that '(f)uture research that addresses new types of parenting strain that emerge in changing social and cultural contexts is needed'. Our findings show that punch-in culture and performative parenting that arise from intense digital connectivity in an academically competitive environment constitutes an emergent form of parenting strain. Societies must therefore tackle such sources of strain because if we choose to ignore them, efforts to foster societies with fulfilled parents, independent children, and resilient families will be severely hamstrung. For the Chinese parents we interviewed, role overload, role captivity, and interrole conflict appeared to be the most salient and gruelling stressors. There was also evidence of interpersonal conflict between parents and children as the latter see the parents' reminders about schoolwork as tiresome and unwelcome. Although our study did not uncover spousal tensions, most of our respondents were in fact women, reflecting that mothers likely shoulder the bulk of parenting duties as research in other countries has echoed (see Lim, 2020; Wang & Lim, 2020). Gendered norms around parenting obligations have cultural or even religious roots as reflected in a study of parent chats of an Islamic school in Indonesia where only mothers participated (Mayangsari & Aprianti, 2017). Prior research has also found an uneven distribution of digital responsibilities within urban Chinese households, with mothers predominantly shouldering the digital parenting workload (Peng, 2022). The study further noted that this contemporary division of domestic digital labour between spouses is restrictive and exploitative towards women and needs to be better addressed. Fundamentally, when viewed through the lens of stress,



our study shows that digital parenting burdens exact socioemotional costs on familial harmony, spousal parity, work–life balance, children’s positive maturation, and, fundamentally, individual and collective wellbeing.

Beyond the family unit, a key institution in the lives of these families is clearly schools. In the face of growing evidence of the adverse effects of punch-in culture and performative parenting on parents, children, and of course teachers as well, schools can play a critical role in advancing a more salubrious state of being. They can seek to maintain the cohesion of these chat groups while preserving the numerous advantages of increased parent–parent and parent–teacher connectivity. They should introduce codes of conduct or pledges for teachers and parents in their use of these edtech platforms and parent chat groups. This code or pledge should outline the acceptable and unacceptable behaviours within such groups, encouraging parents to engage in respectful interactions and cultivate an atmosphere of mutual support. By making parents and teachers take a pledge, perhaps after reading a pithy infographic or taking a short online course on appropriate conduct on such platforms, they will be sensitised to how they should use them, as well as behaviours to avoid. There must be a collective effort to prevent these digital platforms from intensifying parental accountability for children’s academic endeavours and letting phenomena like punch-in culture entrench itself. Furthermore, to avoid compounding the gendered distribution of digital parenting labours, schools’ communication with families must be addressed to both fathers and mothers to ensure that they are equally involved and well apprised of their children’s progress. In addition, public naming and shaming of parents and students and the showcasing of excellent or poor assignments should be rethought and families polled for their preferences and comfort levels. School policies must strive to be more humane and cognisant of the strains that teachers and families are experiencing in light of the growing use of these digital communication platforms. Failing which, digital parenting burdens will only become weightier with greater digital connectivity and loftier familial aspirations for children’s academic achievements.

Beyond policies, the very design of these platforms, be it edtech or social media, must seek to vest in users greater agency over their actions, online visibility, and digital footprints. As Davis (2022) argues in her study of the role of technology in children’s different developmental stages, the design and production of their digital experiences should grant them agency and facilitate meaningful interaction with their significant others. She stresses that a child-centred design approach should cater to children across the spectrum of cognitive and physical abilities, meet the needs of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and involve key members of their community

such as their parents, teachers, and paediatricians. This argument could well be extended to the design of digital platforms and services for parents as well. In view of them being so immersed in their children's lives, the emergence of trends such as punch-in culture and its adverse effects on parental wellbeing and child development strongly suggests that the design of parents' digital experiences also needs to be examined and reimaged. The logics and features of edtech and home-school conferencing platforms must take into account the affective load involved in parenting and give users the option of determining their online visibility in more granular ways. Privacy settings should not assume a blanket 'all or nothing' approach but should allow parents to set their preferred levels of visibility, perhaps only to teachers and parent representatives but not to all parents. This will help to ease the burdens of punch-in culture and peer pressure while also respecting the privacy of parents and children. The automated notifications issued about punch-in tasks should also be sent out at reasonable times and not round the clock to avoid elevating parents' and children's anxieties. They should also be phrased in more moderate tones to make these parenting duties less stress inducing. Technology companies should also be more conscious of the potentially adverse impact of their products and services and engage in more sustained consumer research to refine their products and canvas the views of teachers as well as families across the socioeconomic spectrum. They should not focus only on highly educated and well-resourced parents who can ably and comprehensively support their children's educational endeavours.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Ultimately, the emergence and intensification of phenomena like punch-in culture and performative parenting should give us pause because of the emotional toll and stress they have been shown to impose on families. Furthermore, we should guard against such trends being accepted as ineluctable as societies technologise. Strains and stressors in parenting, whatever their source, should not be accepted as part and parcel of everyday life but should be mitigated in the interest of happy and resilient parents and children. We must also take on board the cautionary warnings against 'techno-social creep' (Frischmann & Selinger, 2018) and anticipate future consequences of prevailing techno-social engineering practices. In other words, engineering practices that shape specific norms and conventions in one realm can bleed into others in unexpected and undesirable ways. Will punch-in culture and online visibility extend into student groups, workplaces, or into personal health and even relationship

management apps and programmes? Will the unquestioned tracking and quantification of our behaviours and our exposure to peer surveillance be considered par for the course in digital networks? If these are potential scenarios that we cannot bear to countenance, we need to resist such emerging logics to avert complacency and habituation.

The Chinese experience has been illuminating for grasping how an especially intense and highly public form of digital parenting can have positive but also deleterious implications for parental wellbeing. In examining digital parenting with Chinese characteristics, we have seen how these families exhibit a strong interest in technology, particularly those tools that contribute to their children's educational success. We have been able to appreciate how the adoption of various digital technologies, including smartphones, intelligent devices, edtech platforms, and parent chat groups, has become integral to parenting practices. Importantly too, we have seen these digital transformations of family life on an experiential level – from the perspective of parents – and the attendant burdens they must bear. Rather than yield to these seemingly inexorable and inescapable shifts in the digitalisation of family life, we must seek to manage unsalutary trends and practices that could undermine the wellbeing of parents, children, and families. Despite the limitations of our study, our research is a modest effort in that direction. We invite our academic colleagues, policymakers, educators, and technologists to join us in this critical undertaking.