

Children's Education under the Influence of Neoliberalism

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Abstract: Sociological studies on the West societies have explored the impact of neoliberalism on motherhood and child-rearing. In recent years, sociologists have started to pay attention to whether neoliberal ideology has influenced China and whether neoliberalism even exists in China. But there are still blanks about whether neoliberalism has had an impact on motherhood in China's socioeconomic and cultural context, especially lack of study about the empirical research on neoliberalism and motherhood in China's social and cultural context. This paper discusses the role and practice of mothers in children's education in China under the influence of neoliberalism.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Children's Education, Motherhood

1. Introduction

Studies of parental engagement in the west have explored how changes in families' practises of socialisation, especially through the recent emergence of neoliberalism, have increasingly compelled parents to understand their affective engagement in relation to children's academic success [1]. Research based on large-scale surveys in China show that the degree of participation in education by mothers is significantly greater than the fathers' participation, echoing media reports and studies based on statistics [2]. The time and energy of mothers' investment in childhood are generally, it is fair to say, significantly greater than that of fathers. This underscores the point that 'children's education is linked with motherhood' as well as the 'competition of motherhood' when it comes to children's academic achievement [2]. These studies suggest that it has become a prevalent phenomenon that children's educational achievements in China are perceived as closely linked with mothers' involvement and investment of time and energy. The phenomenon of mothers' high involvement in children's early childhood education and the indication that most work associated with children's education still falls on mothers presents that ideas of gender equality in relation to parental involvement in education are relatively stalled, and there is still widespread acceptance that mothers take on the bulk of responsibilities.

While existing literature suggests that ideas of neoliberalism and intensive mothering have been influential, not only in western countries but also in China, in shaping middle-class parenting cultures, we currently know little about how this finds expression in women's everyday lives. There is also a lack of knowledge about how women's engagement with, and responsibilities for, early childhood education relates to and shapes ideas of what it is to be a good mother for middle-class women in China. Seeking to address these gaps, this paper considers how the mothers in my study are 'intensively' devoted to their children's education, not only in terms of formal academic education, but also in relation to informal education that ultimately aims to shape their children into better human-beings. I argue overall that what counts as a 'good mother' for these women is shaped by ideas of 'intensive mothering' that are intimately bound up with an understanding of the mother's role in relation to education in early childhood in the contemporary Chinese context within both formal and informal education.

2. Appearance of Neoliberalism in Western Societies

Hays [3] has pointed out that the ideas about appropriate mothering came from the competitive pursuit of individual interests. In attempting to deal with the deep uneasiness about self-interest, the unrealistic obligations were imposed on mothering. Giddens' [4] idea on individualisation theory indicated the changes in intimate relationship. Giddens [4] pointed out that modernity has changed intimate life. It created individuals in the increasingly post-traditional nature of society, leading to growing reflexivity

across all aspects of society. This transformation forced individuals to make decisions for themselves about how to behave in society. Therefore, individual has become the new source of agency and responsibility. Mothers in this environment were also pushed to be responsible for themselves as well as for their children [4].

In western societies, the advent of neoliberalism in the late 20th century brought up huge changes through social, economic, and political aspects [5]. First, neoliberalism promoted free-market, which brought up a series of market-oriented reform policies. Public services that previously benefited family and children were increasingly privatized. The privatization also involved with the lived experience of mothers. Mothers were started to be seen as one of the primary producers, consumers, and reproducers of the neoliberal world [6]. As everything become privatized, people are encouraged to take responsibility for themselves, pushing mothers to take responsibility for their own children, and to take on primary role as caregiver [6].

3. Privatization and Neoliberalism in China

As for what neoliberalism looks like in the Chinese context. Due to China's unique political and economic situation, fully free-oriented market does not exist in China as much of the important area are still controlled by the nation [7]. However, we could still see the evidence of influence from neoliberalism. The idea of 'good mothering' has still been naturalised and idealised by the commercialized educational market. Mother's role as caregiver and even the ideal concept of 'super mom' is remaining as the main expectation on mothering. The understanding of motherhood has becoming individualized, and child-rearing became privatized as main responsibility of mothers.

The stressing of personal development and people be responsible for their own life also echoes policy of Suzhi Education implemented that expected children to have development in various aspects. Since the 20th century [7], besides the emphasis on nurturing Suzhi children with 'whole development', government policy has also stressed the promotion of Chinese traditional culture. Through processes of globalisation and neoliberalization, China experienced transformation from an agricultural society to industrial society, and from a planned economy to market economy. In contemporary China, the promotion of Chinese traditional culture, such as Confucian ideas of filial piety, are seen by the government as urgently needed to resolve social contradictions and social instability. The need to 'build a harmonious society' was stressed as the goal of China's development [8]. A new kind of Confucian culture that is adapted to the new social and cultural situation is now advocated by the government, social media, and educational institutions, all of which have contributed to the growth of many traditional cultural educational centres for children from an early age, which link traditional culture with moral education and Suzhi education.

Like other region in the post-industrial world, children's lives in China were becoming more regimented to suit the demands of a neoliberal market economy while children's subjectivity are increasingly embedded in the normalizing regimes of modern psychological science [1]. From the 2000s onwards, the concept of a 'good mother' was believed to be one who was rational, who followed experts' advice, and who would consume appropriate commodities and services in relation to childrearing in order to foster the happy child. The discourse of constructing an idealised motherhood transformed from emphasising the State's discourse to one of co-existence in which the State, commodities, experts, and gender all play a role in the idealisation of a 'good mother' [9]. As a consequence, the child-rearing situation the current generation faces entails intensified and diversified requirements in terms of mothers' responsibilities, influenced by today's social and cultural changes. While the idea of 'super mum' [10] which is acknowledged by some mothers with young children today is unrealistic given the lack of social and family support available [10].

4. Empirical Study of Middle-Class Chinese mothers' perspective on Children's Education

There are similarities between parenting cultures in the west and in China, particularly in relation to ideas of the intensification of motherhood. However, this paper will provide original insight into how cultures of 'intensive mothering' find distinctive expression in China in relation to children's education and expectations for children's high educational attainment in relation to early childhood educational activities in which a high percentage of children are signed up for extra-curricular courses. Recent research has shown the active involvement of parents in the education of their children in China, demonstrating that middle-class parents are heavily invested in their children's extracurricular training

in order to accomplish high expectations for their children's future [11]. However, we know relatively little about how this relates to ideas about motherhood or what it means to be a good mother in everyday life.

4.1 Mother's Focus on Children's Academic Success: Formal Education

From previous literatures and interviews I conducted in China; mothers took education really serious as one of the main tasks. Mothers would not only send their children to educational centres or learn more skills like music, computer, language, or sport, they are acting as teachers themselves outside of school as well. Like what Kang said in the interview, she needs to teach her daughter English and math every day after she get off work, and she felt like teaching her daughter and sending her to educational centre is necessary as a mother's responsibility. Providing better educational resource and ensure your children 'would not lose from the starter' is many mothers' belief of what a 'good mother' should do in the interviews.

4.1.1 Pouring Educational Resources on Children

From the interviews, I found that Chinese mothers not only invest intensively in children's formal academic education, but they are also prepared for their children's academic success from a very young age, prior to their entering formal education. The emphasis and investment in educational success is evident from my interviews, showing mothers in China have been spending significant amounts of energy, time, and money in investing in children's early childhood education and that they are signing up their children for activities from age one in order to maximise their children's future educational opportunities.

Amanda [From Beijing, 30 Years Old, Master's, Teacher, One Child]: I have a specific aim of what she should learn. I hope she can keep practising piano and if she can stick to dancing, that would be good as well. But I found out she is not that flexible like other little girls; so, I've practically given up on dancing. I don't know whether I could insist on her playing piano, but I really want her to.

Jing [From Beijing, 38 Years Old, Master, Stay-at-home Mum, One Child]: I send my daughter to English and maths classes every day. Soon she will go to primary school so these classes will prepare her for it, and I think she likes them. She also studies piano and technology class. I think if you have 24 hours a day, you cannot let your child have nothing to do. I do not think it is a tough thing for children to learn stuff, but they need to learn things they are interested in. Her kindergarten has ten classes for them, like music, ballet, street dance, sports, art.

Cai [From Beijing, 40 Years Old, Master's, Online English Teacher, One Child]: my daughter goes to art, drawing and piano class, and the kindergarten she attends is specialised in teaching piano lessons. She also goes to English classes. All the children I know attend English classes.

From these women's words, we see that aside from participants whose child is under one year old, these mothers, like my other participants, send their children to at least two to three early years classes, including early classes that stress the importance of maths and English to prepare their children for primary school. They also sign their children up for other early years classes such as piano, dancing, and drawing, trying to cultivate their children to know at least one or two extra-curricular skills. This phenomenon of sending children to various early years educational courses was described as a very common situation, especially in urban contexts, by the mothers I interviewed. Parents regard the means of promoting the child's education as a means of promoting the success of the child in the future, and social class status is enhanced through the accumulation of cultural capital. As children's education becomes invested as a symbol of hope for the future of the family, fully investing time, energy, and money has become an intensified responsibility for mothers. I saw many mothers waiting outside the classroom for hours for their children to finish their classes and they would watch their children's behaviour during class through the window. The price of these classes is typically high compared to the local average income, and the mothers waiting outside would usually spend their whole weekends with their children at these kinds of educational centres. Mothers take children's education seriously, and the decisions they make in relation to their children's education are not only influenced by the commercialisation of children's education and the growth of these early childhood educational centres, but also because of their sense that giving their children these kinds of advantages will enable them to have access to better schools as they grow up.

4.1.2 Educational Expectation on Children's Academic Performance

Through the interviews, these mothers' significant investment in children's education in terms of time and resources was evident, and they described the rise of these early childhood educational centres and

their emphasis on pouring educational resources onto their children as a means of enabling their access to 'better' schools. Many schools have high entrance requirements asking children to not only have basic knowledge in traditional curriculum subjects such as English and maths, but also prefer children with specialist skills in music, sports, and other areas:

Kang [From Beijing, 41 Years Old, Master's Degree, Insurance, One Child]: Now China has these kinds of classes for preschool children, and children stay there from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. They also provide lunch and dinner; teaching and training your children from pre-school. It's like putting your children in prison, but your children improve quickly, so many parents are willing to spend a fortune on this. Many parents who care about grades will prefer this, but many Chaoyang (District in Beijing) parents will prefer various extracurricular classes, such as skating, figure skating, and hockey. Many parents send their children to the US to study hockey. And in my company, there is one colleague who let her daughter learn the French horn. Playing the French horn is a lot of effort. I heard it is very difficult, but you are basically the chief if you make it. The school she went to is considered to be very good. In Chaoyang there are different types of classes. If you want to go to a good class, you need to have some skills, but everyone can play piano and violin, so you need to have something special. This is the education situation right now.

From Kang's words, we see how children are being exposed to a range of educational resources. Due to fierce competition for access to the 'best' schools and the broader situation of middle-class children attending many kinds of early educational curricula, mothers not only feel responsible for sending their children to many different types of classes, but also try to help their children master at least one skill that is in some way special or more impressive than the more commonly taken courses such as piano or violin. As Kang elaborated further on these themes, we gain further insight into how mothers consider their responsibilities to provide for their children academically. From Kang's description of the types of skills and qualifications she felt a child should have, based on her own mothering experience and the story of others she knew, we see how she articulates a sense that under conditions of fierce educational competition in China, parents feel that their children need to develop not only multiple skills in music and sports, but should also take courses related to logical thinking and brain training. As these expectations on children intensify, as in the case of one boy who started to learn instruments from age three, the expectation on mothers to provide their children with as many educational resources as possible is also intensified. The 'good mother' therefore becomes one who fulfils these responsibilities. Kang as a 'good mother', focused most of her energy on to her children's education. She even changed jobs just to have more flexible time to be with her children, which is a huge sacrifice for her. Seeing her says that: 'I haven't been staying outside for this long after I have my daughter! This is the first time I have some me time after work!' I sensed the intensified requirements on mothers' devotion in children's education and to the whole child-rearing process, and Kang's huge sacrifice after she became a mother.

4.2 Children's Paths to Becoming a 'Good Human-being': Informal Education

As well as responsibilities for securing their children's academic excellence, Chinese mothers are also responsible for helping children to develop a sense of self and endorsing cultural values. Confucianism remains an important influence on expectations of what it is to be a good child, and the understanding of the self that the mother is expected to help develop is always linked with the social and cultural surroundings. Let us look at how mothers understand their role as mothers in relation to these more informal pedagogical ideas.

4.2.1 Consciously Passing on Confucian Ideas of the 'Well-behaved Human-being'

We have considered above how mothers are trying to devote as many educational resources to their children as possible, and that seeking to enable their children's academic accomplishments is considered as an important aspect of their responsibility as mothers. Yet regardless of their children's actual achievements in formal education, most mothers stress the importance of their pedagogical role as mothers in terms of shaping their children's good moral character and behaviour according to social and Confucian cultural rules. Supporting their children's capacity for following moral rules and good behaviour are taken seriously by mothers in relation to their understanding of what it is to be a 'good mother'. Lorna's emphasis on national identity below, shows her sense of distinctively Chinese cultural values when she discusses her role as an educator of her children, stressing importance of teaching her children traditional Chinese Confucian values, such as a sense of respect for older generations:

Lorna [From Beijing, 34 Years Old, Master's, Bank Clerk, Two Children]: You should understand that we are Chinese, so when we educate our children, there's certain rules like you need to respect people

older than you.

As well as emphasising the importance of inculcating these moral ‘rules’, mothers also sent their children to educational institutions to learn these cultural values. There are many educational institutions in China aimed at pre-school children which seek to enable them to experience and learn Chinese traditional culture, such as cultural norms of respect for older generations and Chinese traditional arts, such as calligraphy. These kinds of institutions take Confucian cultural values and Chinese traditional culture and civilisation as their key educational focus and emphasise the value of children learning from Chinese traditional culture, for example, learning manners and developing good behaviours through engaging with ancient stories and poetry. This kind of emphasis is also widespread in early childhood education institutions.

Summer [From Beijing, 46 Years Old, Master, Child Education, Two Children]: I paid a lot of attention to rules like respecting the elderly. From the age of four years old, every Saturday and Sunday, my two daughters have gone to a Confucius Institute, teaching Chinese traditional culture. With more pressure on children to gain more skills and higher grades, it is easy to neglect children’s moral development. We have to focus on quality education, guide children’s mental health, and teach them how to be a good human being first.

Mothers believe that there are valuable aspects of traditional Chinese culture which should not be neglected. Besides the study of Chinese traditional arts, such as Guzheng or Erhu, this form of education focuses on the child becoming a ‘good human-being’ with basic moral traits. When comparing the anxiety and confusion associated with various scientific child-rearing advice with the government’s promotion on Chinese traditional culture as an essential aspect of child rearing, several of my participants expressed their doubts or feelings of inadequacy in relation to advice from experts and mass media. However, few expressed doubts in relation to their sense of duty to raise a ‘morally correct’ child, understood in terms of ideas of what it means to be a ‘good human-being’ in traditional Chinese culture.

4.2.2 Emphasis on Interpersonal Relationships

Although these ideas have changed over time, ideas about how parents should be raising their children are still shaped by Confucian values [12]. Thus, children in China are expected to become competent adults who understand social norms and are able to exercise self-restraint and develop good interpersonal relationships [12]. This was something that several of my participants emphasised. Yang, for example, described this as follows:

Yang [From Xining, 40 Years Old, PhD, Professor, Two Children]: I think the most important thing for child-rearing is not good grades, but good physical and mental health. And you need to teach your child the basic skills to live independently and to deal with things and relationships with others.

Compared with western parenting expectations to rear children with the capacity to be independent, my participants articulated a greater emphasis on parenting in the context of China in terms of their role in developing their children’s responsibility for their surroundings. The mothers spoke about how they used their authority in order to develop children’s ability to live well in society as interdependent human beings, rather than being an independent individual. They also stressed how they sought to enable their children to achieve better interpersonal relationships as part of their understanding of what it meant to be a good parent. Kang, for example, said:

Kang: When you grow up, the ability to deal with interpersonal relationships is very necessary as this is your emotional intelligence that can protect you and help you succeed in social life. If you do not have a good personality, you will not have friends. We are Chinese, and interpersonal relationships are very important when you grow up and enter society.

We could see that different from the previous study of Chinese education’s focus on children’s academic performance, some mothers even believe being a ‘good human being’ is much more important than grades in school. To be a well-behaved human being and a person would have the capacity of dealing with interpersonal relationship is seen by mothers as a necessary skills mother must teach their children in order to survive in the future. From another angle, the burden falls on mothers also increased due to this change of focus in children’s education. Mothers would have to concern about not only children’s formal education, but also their informal education so that they could have a better chance to ‘survive and have a better life in the future’.

5. Discussion

The notion of the ‘malleable infant’ resonates with Confucian culture shared by Chinese praise education and the belief that social achievement comes from continuous endeavour and good education and can lead to upward social mobility [13]. The mothers I spoke with expressed their belief in the idea of the ‘malleable baby’, and they therefore devoted much energy to their children’s early education and to stimulating their children’s intelligence and cognitive capacities from an early age. From stories shared by my participants we could also see that Chinese parents generally choose to encourage their children to work harder on academic achievements and are willing to make effort and sacrifice with regard to children's education.

In relation to children’s informal education, my participants’ narratives suggest that they consider teaching their children to Zuo Ren (Be a Good Human Being) is the most important aspect of their pedagogical role as a mother. For most Chinese mothers in the interviews, the basic goal they have is to establish their child to be a good human being who has a good moral character and ability to communicate and socialise with other people. These parenting ideas are consistent with the idea of the self in Chinese social and cultural context, in which people are seen as fundamentally interconnected and living interdependently. Raising children who know how to be a human being with good moral traits and ability to develop good interpersonal relationships was thus a common goal for the mothers I spoke to.

In modern-day Chinese consumer society, as in western societies, parenting is influenced by the experts through market forces [14]. The birth and rearing of children are separated into smaller activities and commercialised by scientific experts. An ideal ‘good mother’ is constructed with more and more responsibilities and requirements, from a child’s physical care to their education and emotional response; all necessitating products or services that need to be learnt and purchased [14]. The cultural transformation brought by consumerism and neoliberalism has intensified mothers’ responsibilities from various aspects both at home and at work, and the idea of a ‘good mother’ has become naturalised and beautified by the commercialised culture. An ideal ‘good mother’ is labelled with more and more responsibilities and requirements, from the physical care to educational and emotional, and all include products or services that need to be learnt and purchased. The cultural transformation brought by consumerism and neoliberalism has intensified mothers’ responsibilities from various aspects, both from family and work, and the idea of ‘good mothering’ has been naturalised and idealised by commercialised culture. [7]

6. Conclusion

Due to the uneven distribution of education resources and educational opportunities, competition to invest in children's education is constantly intensifying, and there are standard expectations and hopes to produce high quality children. Furthermore, commercial forces also shape consumption values and promote these extracurricular activities as not only complementing school, but more importantly, delivering excellence, which in turn, influence wider ideals that children should be attending more courses than above the expected standard. From the empirical study of Chinese mothers’ everyday practise of motherhood towards children’s education, it was sure that neoliberalism has its influence in perspective of motherhood and the conceptualization of children and childhood. The commercialization of children’s education market, the highly involvement of mothers in children’s education and the expectation of raising ‘fully developed’ ‘Suzhi’ children all presents the influence of neoliberalism in middle-class motherhood practise in China. Furthermore, as the education market continues to expand and stimulate demand, anxieties surrounding education are constantly being created for mothers to achieve their responsibility as ‘good mothers’ in response to these social and cultural changes.

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