Hyper-connected parents in a highly competitive and regulated education market

To make the *China Dream* come true, the current Chinese government emphasizes the role of education, not only as a propaganda tool but also to train an innovative and competitive population. In the 1990s, the Chinese state has promoted the diversification, privatization and liberalization of the education system to improve the quality of the education provided to Chinese children. Like many states the Chinese state is torn between ensuring quality and selectiveness and guaranteeing fairness and equality. Instead of solving this problem with public policy tools, the Chinese state transfers the responsibility to parents so that they are held accountable for taking the right decisions and providing a good education to their children. Building on the growing literature on governmentality in China, this paper contributes to the conceptualization of power relations in an authoritarian context and the role of parents, as subjects configuring and configured by governing practices in China.

This paper explores how parents become political actors as a result of their involvement in their child's schooling. I argue the Chinese authoritarian regime empowers parents in their child's education. So that parents feel responsible for their child's education and life success. I broaden Cruikshank's (1999) argument beyond democratic settings and show that this empowerment "contains the twin possibilities of domination and freedom" (Cruikshank 1999, 3). This process of empowerment participates in a *dispositif* to control the population (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 994; Foucault 2006). In other words, parents act within and are constrained by a regulated education system in a highly competitive context. The interactions between parents, public, and private actors within the education system is at the heart of the Chinese state *dispositif* implemented to govern the Chinese population.

Far from being passive recipients (Chauvière 2008), parents across the world are politically active and directly involved in the implementation of local and national policies (Fillod-Chabaud 2014; Manning 2017; Manning et al. 2015; Lee 2008; Yemini, Ramot, and Sagie 2016). As Lenora Chu (2017) recounts in her recent book comparing the Chinese and the American schooling system, Chinese parents invest a great amount of time, energy and money in their children education (Xin 2017; Wang and Li 2017). They have very high expectations regarding the future job and social position that education should provide to their child. Thus they constantly interact with formal and informal educators from the public and private sectors to make sure their children obtain the best education possible, but also to learn from 'experts' how to best raise a child (Fu Kejun [夏克军] 2005; Jiang Xuelan [姜雪蓝] 2006).

This paper presents the preliminary results of an immersive eight-month fieldwork among the urban middle class in Nanjing. In the next section, I demonstrate how the concept of empowerment is relevant to study the Chinese middle class in an authoritarian context. Then, I detail how the privatization of the education lead to parents' empowerment. Finally, I detail how parents become political in three

dimensions: they produce knowledge and social categories, they conduct some form of policy evaluation, and they use new tools to participate in the implementation of policies.

Conceptualizing agents' empowerment in an authoritarian context

Recent approaches of the state undermine the conception of the state as a monolithic, unitary and centralized power. Studying local bureaucrats and discourses of corruption in India, Gupta shows that the state "is being constructed here in the imagination and everyday practices of ordinary people" (1995, 390). Ferguson and Gupta question the two images usually linked to the state, first as a vertical institution "somehow 'above civil society, community, and family" (2002, 982) and, second as an encompassing institution which encircles the society. They highlight the translocal dimension of the state which transcends a material spatialization. Indeed the state does not have a substantive reality, but rather it is imagined as a unitary ensemble experienced by everyone through everyday interactions with local bureaucrats.

Beyond the deconstruction of the conceptualization and misconceptions of the state, some scholars also highlight that the state itself has changed across time. Foucault (2006) describes the historical evolution of Western states from the personalization of power to the prince's benefits to the 'art of government' a diffuse and pervasive distribution of power which disciplines and controls the population in the context of demographic, financial and agricultural expansion. He theorizes the concept of governmentality as an "ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculation and tactics" (Foucault 2006, 142) which disciplines the population to maintain order and security. Governmentality also designates a tendency to rely on knowledge and expertise to govern. Building on Foucault, Rose (1996) develops the concept of "advanced liberal democracies" meaning that "it is possible to govern without governing *society*, that is to say, to govern through the regulated and accountable choices of autonomous agents – citizens, consumers, parents, employees, managers, investors – and to govern through intensifying and acting upon their allegiance to particular 'communities'" (Rose 1996, 61). Thus it is important to understand the processes, the mechanisms and the practices that make it possible for individuals to imagine the state, while the latter governs from distance by organizing "the 'responsibilization' of subjects who are increasingly 'empowered' to discipline themselves" (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 989). Although the conceptualization of governmentality has largely been applied within analyses of an advanced liberal governmental agenda, it offers important insight for the practices of government in non-democratic contexts as well.

Recent scholarship on China has questioned the conception of strong state facing a weak society by applying the concept of governmentality on the Chinese concept. According to Sigley (2006, 494), Chinese governmentality differs from its western variants not because of the lack of freedom of the citizens but rather because of its higher reliance on technoscientific knowledge and its deterministic discourse regarding the consequences of individual choice. Hoffman (2006) illustrates how the replacement of state job assignments with job market competition has not only made individuals' responsible for their future but also for the future of the nation, thus individuals' "choice and autonomy

are *a part of* the governing and subject formation processes" (2006, 553). She underlines the nationalist dimension as a variation from the western neoliberal governmentality. Young graduates' fulfillment of their professional potential through responsible choices is part of their duty as citizen in order to build a stronger Chinese nation (Hoffman 2006, 563).

To conclude, in spite of the lack of political freedom in China, individuals feel responsible for their choices and their life success. They use their autonomy to govern themselves. This process is applied to parents and the childrearing process. Indeed, parents feel acutely responsible for the future success or failure of their child. This process illustrate how governing practices from a distance discipline the population and configure parents as subjects.

Parenting as empowering and responsibilizing

As sketched in the introduction, parents have become crucial political actors. However, scholars in political science have not yet conceptualized parenthood as a central social category. In the 1990s, Foucault underlines that the shift to the art of government has made the family a "privileged instrument for the government of the population" (2006, 140). However the family as a basic unit of the population has been challenged by numerous legal, social and economic transformations (Neyrand 2011). The responsibility of social cohesion through reproduction is now carried by parents, fathers and/or mothers rather than family.

The family is often presented as the smallest natural collective unit of the population. Traditionally it is constituted around three main bounds: the contractual relation of a heterosexual couple, the biological relations of individuals sharing DNA and the social relations between individuals living in the same house, these social relations are organized by hierarchies, authority, obedience, nurturing and so on (Neyrand 2011; Bourdieu 1993; Ariès 2014). According to these authors, the family is also a social construction. Bourdieu argues that the family "as an objective social category (a structuring structure) is the basis of the family as a subjective social category (a structured structure) which determines thousands of representations and actions (such as weddings) which participate in the reproduction of the objective social category" (1993, 34). Indeed, the daily roles and relations of individuals within the family are determined by subjective social representations. This paper examines social representations of individuals within the family as well as of the family as whole concerning education and schooling.

In the last century the family model experienced many transformations worldwide, due to broader changes – such as modernization, urbanization, industrialization, women entering the labor market – and due to legal and scientific innovations specific to the family model – divorce, adoption, surrogacy, IVF. These shifts undermine the contractual and biological bounds which traditionally organize the family unit, thus shifting scholars' analysis from the family as a holistic unit to the nuclear family and then to the children and the parents as distinct category of actors. The "parent" has now become a discrete social category in its own right (Neyrand 2011).

Parenting was first conceptualized in psychology. In the early 1950s, Baumrind proposed four main ideal-typical of parenting style: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and neglectful. He focused on the influence of parenting style on the socialization and the development of children. This typology laid the ground for numerous studies regarding the impact of parenting style on educational achievement and self-development, with a particular emphasis on cross-cultural survey (Newman et al. 2015; Y. Li, Costanzo, and Putallaz 2010; Steinberg et al. 1992). American scholars were trying to understand why some children would succeed in school according to their ethnic background. Numerous scholars try to understand how so-called Asian values – collectivism, filial piety – influence children impact (Chen, Dong, and Zhou 1997; Newman et al. 2015; Cheung and McBride-Chang 2008; Chen, Liu, and Li 2000). Darling and Steinberg (1993) distinguish parenting style from parenting practices. They define the former as the "emotional climate within which socialization occurs" (1993, 488) whereas the latter describes "goal-directed behaviors through which parents perform their parental duties" (1993, 488). Hoghughi and Long define parenting "as *purposive activities aimed at ensuring the survival and development of children*" (2004, 5). Noteworthy, these definitions do not contain any legal or biological elements, but rather emphasize activities and behaviors. Parenting is not a status but rather a purposive practice. A great variety of individuals in the environment of a child are involved in parenting. However this definition does not incorporate the role that emotions play in parenting and filial ties (Manning 2017). In this research, I define parenting as purposive practices and emotion-work which together enact both an internal relation within the family – the parent-child relation – but also a social role in which an individual embodies the social representation of parent.

Parenting is a gendered issue. During my interviews, I examined how mothers and fathers enact their roles differently regarding their child's school (Hare-Mustin and Hare 1986; Kuan 2011). Mothers play a great role in planning the education of their child. Yang Ke (2018) argues that mothers are like education agents for their child, they compare opportunities, and prices, choose the best 'contracts', keep track of the performances and make sure that all the activities fit in the schedule. Despite the central role of mother, it is noteworthy that without purposefully targeting fathers, a quarter of my interviewees are fathers, it shows their increasing role. Some interviewees describe a balanced or complementary division of tasks regarding their child's education. For instance, the mother playing the role of agent and the father playing the role of a coach, that is doing the homework and revisions at home with the child.

Parents are usually considered as passive category of public services' recipients. Parents, as a legal status have progressively been defined as a contractual and emotional bonds to children (Neyrand 2011). This process has led to the increasing number of policies constraining and serving parents. Yet in recent years, parenting has become a strong motive for political involvement across the world. In 2012 in France, when the government wanted to legalize same sex marriage, numerous parents mobilized, some pro and some against. Indeed, the mobilization against the new law did not revolve around marriage or homosexuality but rather around filiation and parenting, as marriage was considered as the first step for parenting and the law itself was enacting the existence of parenting for same sex

couples. The opposing parents called themselves 'Manif pour tous', and were organized around the Catholic Church and the right political parties. Their slogans such as "Mariage = 1 homme + 1 femme" or "1 père + 1 mère, c'est élémentaire" (Borrillo 2014) highlight how the three types of bounds – legal, biological, socio-relational – structuring family ties are intertwined. Parents fought against the new law because they believed it undermines the biological bond between parents and child. Indeed the new law recognizes parenting as first a social relation not necessarily connected to biological bond (Borrillo 2014, 306). What is relevant for this research is how the definition and the practices of parenting become a political issue, but also how individuals use their parenthood to get involved in politics.

Manning (2017) uses the concept of attached advocacy to describe how parenting practices and the enactment of filial ties become political practices. Parents become active actors, whose emotional attachment to their child drives them to get involved in politics. It is important to underline that this political engagement based on parenting intersects with other identities frames such as gender, race and class. In very different contexts, Baldez (2002) in Chile and Skocpol (1995) in the USA demonstrate how motherhood led women to become active involved in politics and how it shaped their advocacy. Indeed, parenting is a motive for individuals to take the state accountable for its actions, discourses and policies. Lee (2008) shows how parenting can be a empowering after the 2008 earthquake in rural Sichuan. Protests of parents who lost their only child in the collapse of poorly built public school has triggered reactions from officials from the local level to Beijing. Lee argues that the importance of parenting in the Chinese culture but also the strict implementation of the one-child policy in the early 1980s in rural areas have increased the impact of parents' protests.

Education system between privatization and state-regulation

Recent scholarship on the education system in China focuses on the political content of the curricula (Vickers 2008; Dello-Iacovo 2009), questioning how education content helps the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to maintain its hegemony. In this research, education policies are analyzed from a fresh angle: the recent renewed focus on regulating the education market, after two decades of liberalization. In this section, I overview the main policies reforms which shaped the Chinese education system since the 1980s in order to contextualize parenting choices.

Education is a public service provided by the Chinese state. Nine-year mandatory education was implemented in 1985 for all children from 6 to 15 years old (People's National Assembly [Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui 全国人民代表大会] 2006). All children can enroll in a public school for free depending on their residence permit *hukou* 户口. The latter registers each Chinese citizen to a specific address and conditions access to most public services – health, education, and retirement and unemployment pensions. Although most residence permits are allocated according to birth place, they can be transferred after a marriage and a divorce or through a complex application process depending on the new residence. For instance it is much harder to transfer one's residence permit from a rural area

to a major city such as Shanghai. One of the first choices made by parents regarding their future child is where to register him or her. This decision will determine the opportunities of the child for its entire life.

Like most countries, Chinese authorities oscillate between two main goals regarding their education system: equal access for all regardless of socio-economic status and geographical origin which intends to foster social mobility and decrease structural inequalities on the one hand, and quality improvement which often implies selectiveness and individuals' responsibilization for success and failure, on the other hand. By This tension is reflected in the historical evolution of education policies (Zhang 2011). In the 1990s, the Chinese government promoted school differentiation (privatization, unequal funding, different curricula etc.) to improve education quality (H. Cheng and DeLany 1999). Following these reforms the overall education quality increased but has been accompanied by highly selective entrance processes and important tuition fees in elite schools as well as the development of an extra-curriculum activities market. Indeed to increase their child's competitiveness, parents register him or her to numerous courses both to supplement courses from the curriculum (English, math, Chinese and so on) and develop new skills (calligraphy, dance, music instruments and so on). A school choice fever *zexiao re* 择校热 grew in urban areas during the 2000s. In 2010, the Ministry of Education published the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* to regulate the school market, and in particular, to regulate entrance processes and tuition fees (Ministry of Education [Jiaoyu bumen 教育部门] 2010).

To promote equal access to education, the central government tries to control school choice by defining school enrolment zones (X. Cheng 2002). In January 2014, Chinese authorities started implementing strict district-based school enrolment in primary and junior high schools. In 2017, this school districting was implemented in nineteen major cities. In spite of state regulations, many public schools continue to charge extra fees to register new pupils. Those fees are usually not labeled as tuition fees but rather as book fees, meal fees or renovation fees (Fu Xiaohua [符小花] 2011). Some public schools offer to bypass school districting if parents donate money for school renovations or projects (X. Wu 2008, 2012, 2013). Finally some public schools offer private tutoring or are affiliated with a tutoring company. Children enrolled in these extra-curriculum courses have a greater chance to enter in the affiliated public school. These processes highlight the tension between on the one hand the central government's interests who looks for more legitimacy by reinforcing school districting policies as a fairer access to education for all, and on the other hand the interests of local school bureaucrats who are eager to obtain funds to increase the quality of education provided by their school because their promotion depends on the school results. I argue that this tension gives more power to parents to negotiate with local bureaucracies the implementation of education policies.

The most common strategy used by wealthy-enough parents to select their child's school is to buy an apartment nearby their dream school, which implies this objective constrains the familial budget for any financial decision. Real-estates prices mirror this strategy, as housing prices skyrocket close to

allegedly good schools (Zhou Xunyao [朱迅垚] 2017; W. Li 2012). Reflecting on this situation, I have been told to look at real-estates prices in order to identify the best schools of a city. A new good category appeared in the real-estate market, the apartment-for-education *xuequfang* 学区房 (Laurent 2015), which enable parents to easily identify condos close to a good school. These apartments are usually located downtown. Real-estate companies also use it as a selling point. Wu et al. (2016) have identified a process of '*jiaoyufication'* - contraction of *jiaoyu*, 教育 i.e. education in Chinese and gentrification - when parents buy apartment-for-education without living in but only to enroll their child in the nearest school. Parents thus participate in price increases without improving the quality of the neighborhood or consuming in the neighborhood. Some children live with their grand-parents in the apartment-for-education during the weekdays, and join their parents on weekends in a bigger house located in the suburbs.

After the restrictions on the private sectors lifted in the 1990s, the education markets expanded rapidly (Kwong 1997; Pepper 1990; Zhang 2011). Numerous private schools have been established in urban areas such as Shanghai to accommodate both poor and rich migrants from other provinces who cannot access the local public schools (D. Wu 2009). Considering the amount of money parents invest in their child's education, tutoring and extra-curriculum activities have become a highly profitable market in China (KPMG 2010). The shadow education market encompass all the extra-curriculum learning centers, as well as one-on-one tutoring. They can provide a great diversity of services, here are some examples: pre-school (to prepare children to enter in kindergartens) [in Chinese 早教 *zaojiao*], pre-primary school [幼小衔接 *youxiao xianjie*], interest courses (painting, dance, chess, etc.) [兴趣班 *xingquban*], revision courses (to prepare pupils for exams within the scope of the official curriculum) [复习班 *fuxiban*], complementary courses (to learn beyond the official curriculum) [补习班 *buxiban*]. There are great variety of modalities, such as: one-on-one, group class, online courses and so on. The fastest growing market is probably the one of English courses and online courses. I have been able to identify the two main companies prevalent on the market in Nanjing X*ueersi* [学而思] and *Shuren* [书人]. The former is an international company listed on the NYSE stock exchange as TAL (Tomorrow Advancing Life). It owns an online platform that many parents mentioned as a main resources to obtain information on education. The latter is affiliated to the company *Xueda*. However there are a myriad of smaller learning-center. It is noteworthy that some teachers from the best schools resign from their position to open private group-lessons. I have encountered two other marketed-services very important for parents: media conveying informations and agents helping to prepare children to study abroad. To guarantee a fairer education system, the state is trying to regulate this highly profitable sector (Nguyen Tri 2001).

Parents' empowerment in the Chinese context

As shown by scholars in the expanding field of governmentality studies applied to the Chinese context (Jeffreys 2009; Bray and Jeffreys 2016; Greenhalgh 2010; Dutton 1988; Audin 2008; Doyon 2012) the current Chinese state is successfully implementing a neoliberal agenda to govern its population. Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) explain how neoliberalism emphasizes the role of individual decisions in order to maintain social order within a very competitive environment. The state governs both from a distance by empowering individuals' into disciplining themselves (Rose 1996, 2005) and by incentivizing local bureaucrats in maintaining social order.

Population policing is a crucial issue for the Chinese state (Dutton 1988; Greenhalgh 2010; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). In 2003, a task group appointed by the Central Committee on Education and Human Resources in China published a book titled *From a Country with a Large Population to a Country with Strong Human Resources* (Zhang 2011). This book highlights the importance of increasing the quality of the population for the sake of the nation. The government asserts that the quality of human capital – the population – is crucial for the country economic development and its modernization (Yan 2003). The concept of quality *suzhi* has a long intellectual history in China. According to Yan Fu (cited in Kipnis 2006, 302) "the quality of the people is the basis of saving the nation while the visibility of new institutions is merely an external sign of the nation's health." Kipnis (2006) offers a clear account of the evolution of the concept of quality in China, traces its origin in a form of social Darwinism. More recently Zhou (2014) while studying schooling for children of internal migrant workers highlighted how teachers distinguish parents "of quality" 有素质的人 *yousuzhide ren* or "lacking quality" 没有素质的人 *meiyousuzhide ren*. According to Kipnis (2006, 295) "[the] reference to *suzhi* justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts, with those of 'high' quality gaining more income, power and status than 'low'." Anagnost (2004) shows how 'high quality' is embodied by the middle class child attending numerous extra-curriculum activities and fed with food supplements whereas 'low quality' is represented by the child of rural migrant workers. The internal definition of quality remains ambiguous. It encompasses various characteristics innate and acquired. Parents and teachers emphasize the importance of schooling to improve the quality of the population and by extension to maintain the nation's competitiveness.

Thus parents' engagement and decisions become the root of the trajectory of their child's life. Despite structural inequalities at the national and local level, parents are held responsible of the successes and the failures of their children. In China, an growing number of experts, in particular in psychology, are committed to help individuals make the best decisions at every steps of their life (Bodet 2017). A Chinese psychologist provides recommendation to parents in order to maintain their children competitiveness on the labor market until 20 years old (Zhang Kan 2017). He implied if a young person in its twenties is unemployed it is due to the wrong parenting choices made by his.her parents during childhood. It stresses the role of family education but also how parents' earliest choices are crucial in for their children future life. I argue that parent advocacy work is an indication of the success of a

neoliberal agenda which emphasizes individual responsibility over collective responsibility. It is this shift from collective to individual responsibility in Chinese governance, I argue, that partly explains the resilience of the regime.

Policing the population has become a new profitable market in which street-level bureaucrats and private companies compete to train and advise parents in making the 'right' decisions for their child. Family planning policies have always entailed parenting advice, from when and how to procreate (Evans 1995) to schools for parents (Meredith 1991), to teaching parents how to raise a child. An increasing emphasis on both parental responsibility and the global competition that a child will face has attracted private companies in the parenting market. Public and private schools offer classes for parents to learn how to raise their child. Because school districting has a direct impact of real-estate prices (W. Li 2012; Zhou Xunyao [朱迅垚] 2017), real-estate companies have also started to explain education policies to parents and to provide advice to parents regarding their choices for their child's education (Laurent 2015).

Eight months in the shoes of parents from Nanjing

This paper summarizes the preliminary results of an eight-month immersive fieldwork conducted in Nanjing, in Jiangsu province. This city was chosen for few reasons. First, economically Nanjing is one of the major Chinese cities, capital of the richest province (Jiangsu) and, thus it has a well-developed middle class. Second, in terms of policy implementation, the government chose major cities to experiment policies, it has been the case recently for the Nearest School Enrolment policy – *jiujin ruxue* 就近入学 – first implemented in 19 cities, among them Nanjing. Third, as assessed by scholars (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988), politics in China depend in part on geography, the closer to Beijing the stricter is the enforcement of policies. Nanjing is a middle ground. Fourth, as first capital of the Ming Dynasty in 1368, Nanjing has a long cultural history and very old education infrastructure.

During this immersive fieldwork, I tried to put myself in the position of a parent from the middle class living in Nanjing and trying to choose not only the kindergarten and primary school for his.her child but also the extracurricular activities. I have started my fieldwork in early September, by meeting parents whose child were enrolled in a local learning center (兴趣班 *xingquban*) called *The Sea*[1], which provides daycare for children from 2 to 3 years old as well as extra-curriculum courses in writing, painting and English for children from 3 to 6 years old. I qualify this 'learning center' as a local one, because it is not affiliated to a larger company, most of the children live in the neighborhood. Invited by the director, I was coming every day at *The Sea* during three weeks. I helped the director set up an evening English course for children between 3 to 6 years old. I interviewed the director, who is also a mother. I was introduced in the online chat (on the Chinese phone application *wechat*) and thus I followed the interactions among parents and between parents and the director and the professors. I discussed with the professors and I observed the interactions when the adults come to pick up the

[1] The real name of the learning center has been modified.

children. I spent several evenings in the waiting room discussing informally with parents about their child, sometimes I conducted formal interviews with parents who wanted to discuss their perspectives. Noteworthy, because I am a foreigner and I am studying for a PhD, I was highly regarded and several parents expected me to give them advice, praise or critic on the way the way they were raisins their child. Through these discussions I also accumulated numerous online resources that parents use to gather information about schools, extra-curricular activities and childrearing in general. After few weeks, I was introduced in a network of parents called 'Nanjing Foreign Language School Parents' Helper'. This network was created in 2015 by a mother whose daughter attended Nanjing Foreign Language Senior High School (NFLS). This school is considered as the best high school in Nanjing. Most of the pupils enrolled in this high schools attend university abroad. I interviewed two employees working for this network. They define the network as a 'self-media' (自媒体 *zimeiti*). It is an official account on the platform Wechat on which the two employees post articles advising parents regarding schools, extra-curricular activities and childrearing in general. It does not target only parents from NFLS but also parents from all over Nanjing. Since 2017, once every two weeks, the 'self-media' organizes events called 'Classroom for good parents' (好家长课堂) during which a 'model parent' is invited to share her.his story. More than sixty of such event occurred and I have collected the articles published after each event. These articles are sent on the media after the event. I have attended three of these events to observe the interactions among parents. Model parents are recruited based on the school performance and successes of their child. Sometime the whole family comes to share their story. According to the employees, this network starts to be known across China and they have parents from other cities coming.

During this fieldwork, I conducted formal interviews with more than 30 parents, from the middle-class. Each interview lasted between 50min and 1h30. Here is a quantitative description of the interviewees:

Households	Persons	Fathers	Mothers	Grandmothers	Grandfathers	2 Child-households
32	34	8	24	2	0	5

Due to the one-child policy most households have only one child. Here is a quantitative description of the children of my interviewees. However, I have not conducted interviews with the children themselves:

Children	Boys	Girls	Age 0 - 6 (K-)	Age 6 - 11 (PS)	Age 11 - 15 (JHS)	Age 15 - 18 (SHS)
37	17	20	17	10	8	2

K = Kindergarten; PS = Primary School; JHS = Junior High School; SHS = Senior High School

All the parents that I have interviewed belong to the middle-class, in the way they can afford to enroll their child in extra-curriculum courses but nearly all of them mentioned how education spending weight in their budget. My interviews were structured in five sections. First I asked parents to describe and explain their child schooling history (school and extra-curriculum activities). Parents were also asked to evaluate the quality of the schools they chose. Second, parents described their interactions with the schools, in particular their use or lack thereof of phone applications and groups. Third, we discussed the involvement of the different members of the family in the education of the child. Fourth, I traced

back the residential history of the family and how it was influence by the child's schooling. Finally, we had a discussion about education policies and state's discourse about education. These steps were not followed in a specific order, as I wanted for the parent to share their own perspective. Several expressions used by the state such as 'Quality Education'; 'Happy Education'; 'Reducing the burden'; 'suppression of schools rankings' were some brought up by the interviewees themselves. The interview ended by a discussion on a recent newspaper article reporting on the consequences of the shutdown of a school for migrant workers' children by the education bureau of a nearby city. The migrant workers' children were transferred to an elite primary school, in which outraged middle-class parents complained. Consequently the school's principal decided to build a wall to separate local pupils from migrant workers' children.

In the remaining of the paper, I elaborate how parents' involvement in their child education demonstrate both their empowerment and their political role. I explore three dimensions in which parents act as political actors: first parents produce knowledge and social categories, second parents evaluate education policies and third parents use new tools to participate in the implementation of education policies.

Production of knowledge and social categories

Based on the preliminary analysis of my interviews, I identify two instances in which parents produce social categories and definitions that I could not find in the scholarship or in official documents. First, according to some parents, the term 'school choice' lead to a division of parents into two categories: the 'school-choosing parents' and the 'non-school-choosing parents'. Indeed, to recruit parents, I produced a short material to present my research which I entitled 'Parents' school choice strategies' (家长的择校战略 *jiazhang de zexiao zhanlüe*). During informal discussions, two parents refused to participate in a formal interview because they considered that 'school choice' in general does not exist in China. According to them, the district-based school enrollment policies hinder any form of choice during school enrolment. At another occasion, some parents expressed their reluctance in participating in a formal interview because they asserted they are not 'school-choice parents'. During the informal discussion which followed they explained that, according to them, the term 'school choice' is not just an action that any parent accomplish when enrolling their children to school. The expression designates more specifically a category of parents who mobilize resources and develop a strategy to actively select a school and enroll their children in that school. Often these 'school-choice parents' have either bought an apartment to access a good public school or choose to enroll their child in a private school. In other words, parents are categorized by their involvement in school choice. I have not found this categorization theorized in any Chinese, English or French scholarship. Thus this categorization is self-determined by the social actors.

Second, many parents underlined the differences between public and private schools. In a previous research, in which I analyzed policy documents related to education, I found that there is no

strict and clear definition of private school distinct from public schools. For their part, parents clearly distinguish the two types of schools. Public school are expected to be more compliant with education policies. However because these policies often contradict each other, parents paint a much more complex picture. Interview X sent her daughter to a public primary school and then enrolled her a private junior high school. She describes public schools as more focused on grades and examinations, thus stricter and more stressful for both parents and children. Whereas private schools are more keen on implementing policies such as 'Quality Education' or 'Happy Education' because they are less dependent on examinations to attract new students. Despite the formal ban on school ranking, rankings are published regularly and public schools seems to care more about their rankings than private schools, which can afford to advertise on alternative education methods. In other words, public schools have greater disregard for recent and innovative education policies, because these policies are in contradiction with the highly selective process of the entrance examination. Another paradox highlighted by parents is the enrollment process in public school. It is sometimes cheaper to enroll a child in a good private school than in the best public schools, because the high tuitions fees of the good private schools are still lower than buying an apartment nearby the best public schools.

Policy evaluation

Local regulations are constantly evolving. Thus parents need to stay on top of the latest news. During my short stay numerous local regulations changed, among others the rules regarding school management for public schools, publication of the results of education-related competition (such as Maths Olympic), advertisements for education companies, the content allowed on online-school groups. This constant evolution of regulations is partially due to the dynamism of the education market, where new companies, new services and new practices emerge constantly. The general trend for the local and central state is to attempt to find a balance between reducing school stress and maintaining competition to select the best students. During my interviews many parents asserted that education policies lead to an increasing stress for parents, they shift the responsibility onto the parents. They assert that the policies that intend to reduce the burden on children in school increase the burden on parents. They point at the absence of reforms of the entrance exams (in high school and in university). Thus if a school fails to sufficiently prepare children to these exams, the responsibility falls onto the parents to ensure their child success. Parents are very skeptical regarding policies such as 'Quality Education' or 'Happy Education'[2]. According to interview X "the government treats the symptoms without treating the disease (…) The government does not solve the problem, they just adopt a policy to adopt a policy, and it is often

[2]Here 'Quality Education' broadly refers to policies which broaden the scope of school subjects and renew teaching methods. In China, it is usually opposed to an 'Exam-Oriented Education' which focuses on three subjects (Chinese, English, and Mathematics). 'Happy Education' refers to policies aiming at reducing the school burden of children, for instance there is officially a nationwide ban on homework in Primary School.

dogmatic."[3] This mother is very cynical and critical regarding the state's actions to regulate the education market. Later she explains that the problem is that money is becoming central in the education system; she relates the issues encountered in the education market to broader value of fairness and access to education resources. Some interviewees assert that Chinese parents have developed a real expertise in sorting out information. According to them, parents are more knowledgeable and 'wiser' than few years ago. Most parents said they were stressed both by the long-term planning and the daily school burden. They say that the competition too great in China mainly because of the size of the population. They assert that there is no other way to deal with the problem in China. Parents aim at giving as many opportunities as possible to their child to succeed.

To conclude, the current education system in China gives more choices to parents which increase their responsibility and lead them to gather more information, monitor public policies and evaluate the efficiency of these policies. To make themselves heard, parents also develop new tools and media.

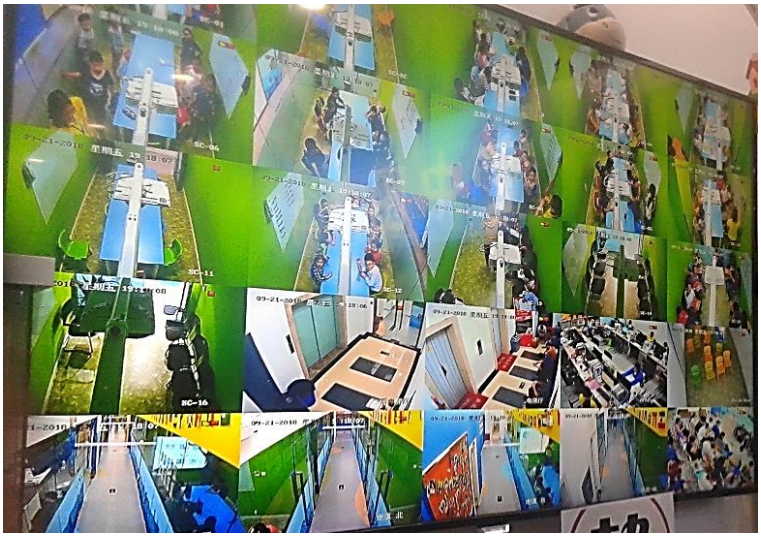
Participative tools and spaces

In this section, I focus on two media used by parents which enable parents to come as collective group: parents-school groups on platforms like Wechat and QQ, and parents' network such as the 'Nanjing Foreign Language School Parents' Helper', later called the NFLS Helper. In this fiercely competitive and constantly evolving environment, parents' networks seem a crucial tool for parents to strategize and implement an education plan for their child. All of my interviewees mentioned how word-of-mouth and connections allowed them to access the most appropriate education resources for them. They underline how social capital is the only way to access most good public kindergartens. Despite the Chinese governments' (local and national) constant attempts to regulate the education market and formalize the procedures, it seems that informal ties remain the central resource for parents' regarding school choice. A really awareness of the common problems faced by parents emerge through these ties, these networks and these platforms.

All my interviewees mentioned the existence of groups on phone applications – Wechat or QQ – to discuss with their child's professors. Usually in the beginning of the year, the professor of the class creates a group on one of the application and all the parents of the class children should join in. According to my interviewees it is usually only the mother who join in, sometimes the two parents or one grandparent join in. There a great variety of practices regarding what information and who intervene on these groups. The most common feature is that professors inform parents of the homework that child has to do and the books or clothes that the child should bring to school. It decreases the responsibility of the child and increases the one of the parents. Parents also help each other and by sharing information on good resources and addresses. Parents sometimes ask question to the professor or complain a specific

[3]Translation by the author of the article "像政府的这样一个教育政策的改进和推进，中国有一句俗话叫头痛医头脚痛医脚，哪个方面我做得不好了，我就在哪一个方面进行修正，但是他这种修正，并不是出于大家关注的问题的真正的推动，只是出了一些政策，相对来说比较生硬，也比较的教条…"

issue. In kindergartens, parents expect to receive photos and videos of the everyday activities of their children. One of my interviewee is both a mother and a kindergarten professor, she explained to me how stressful these groups can be for a professor. She has to be available not only to the 40 to 50 children in her classroom but also the 40 to 100 parents of these children. In November 2018, the Ministry of Education published regulations to limit the use of these groups in terms of content and time pressure. Officially, it is now banned to share individual information about one student on these groups, for instance individual students ranking should not exist and even less published on these online groups. I was invited to join in the group of *The Sea*, the local learning center where I started my fieldwork. Discussing with the professor from the learning center and reading the group posts, I observed first hand, the pressure parents' can apply on the professor. Every the professor has to post videos and pictures of all the activities organized for the children. Parent easily complaining about how some activities were organized based on live pictures. For instance, the mother of a three-year child complaining that her daughter was eating with her hand at lunch. In extra-curricular learning center, the pressure on the professor is even higher because it is a client-service provider relationship. The monitoring of activities can reach impressive levels. As I visited a brand-new learning center for teaching English to 3 to 12 years old with a mother, I observed the presence of cameras in every classroom. These cameras are screened directly in the waiting room, where parents and grandparents wait for their children during class. Thus parents and grandparents can monitor what is happening in the classroom live. The picture below shows the screen from the waiting room screening classrooms, offices and corridors around the learning center.



Parents act as clients and exercise pressure on the education service providers public and private. They can constantly monitor what their child is doing, which is both a form of empowerment, and an increased responsibility. In most news stories, the state regulates and sanctions unlawful practices after parents complained and voices their discontent. Parents' monitoring becomes the warrantee that education policies are enforced at the local level.

Finally, the NFLS Helper is a network of parents, created by a mother who used to work as a journalist for a local newspaper. She initially created the self-media with her to share information about studying abroad for future graduate of the Nanjing Foreign Language School. She discovered that there was real expectations from parents not only to get their child to go study abroad but also to improve their parenting practices. Thus this mother starting events with 'model parents'. There are now three types of events: 'classroom for good parents', 'study abroad early' and 'from kindergartens to primary school'. The NFLS Helper employs now two employees to organize the events, take the minutes and manage the self-media itself. They are posting three to four articles per day, which provide advice to parents on a great variety of topic: school choice, homework, healthy food and so on. When attending the events, I observed the emergence of a real awareness from parents about their common challenges and successes. Model parents are selected based on their child's successes in school and certificates obtained through extra-curricular learning center. Events are usually free and held in an apartment transformed into an unofficial coffee shop. During each event, the model parent.s share their story, their childrearing philosophy and explain the choices they made. Then parents in the audience can ask questions. It is a very friendly and informal environment.

To conclude, several tools and spaces emerge in which parents' voices are central. This process participates in the politicization of parenting practices. Indeed parents use these spaces to assess the education practices of other actors. There is also a greater awareness of their collectiveness.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that the diversification of school choice and the flourishing private education market in China both empower parents and put a lot of responsibilities on their shoulders. The state and experts underline the determinant dimension of parents' decisions for their child's future life and career. This empowerment is very stressful for parents, thus a form of solidarity emerges. Parents meet, discuss, and share information and knowledge. In this process they also produce new knowledge and social categories. Moreover, parents progressively come out in the public sphere to defend their rights and evaluate education policies. New spaces emerge where parents express their critics, praises and suggestions. Several scholars have argued that the Chinese state does not necessarily censor or repress all discourses or actions against the state but that it focuses more on the risk of collective actions(King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). However, in the case of middle class parents, online groups and collective events organized by self-media are not censored or repressed. Parents as political actors could have a great influence on public policies.

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