



EMERALDHANDBOOKS

# THE EMERALD HANDBOOK OF CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH IN ASIAN SOCIETIES

GENERATIONS BETWEEN LOCAL AND GLOBAL DYNAMICS

EDITED BY

DORIS **BÜHLER-NIEDERBERGER**

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 OPEN ACCESS  
BOOK



# **The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies**

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# **The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies: Generations Between Local and Global Dynamics**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# Introduction

*Doris Bühler-Niederberger, Xiaorong Gu, Jessica Schwittek and Elena Kim*

## Abstract

In this introduction to our volume on growing up in Asian societies, we define the claim of this collection, explain the approach, and take stock of what it has been possible to achieve empirically and conceptually for the further global study of childhood and youth. Our aim was to understand and present the young generation in its intergenerational relations. The 16 studies, divided into four regional sections, show a broad spectrum of very different conditions in which this young generation lives, of expectations with which they are confronted, and of strategies for action that are open to them. And they show the overriding importance of the commitments and solidarities between different age groups across societies. We propose – in the sense of a theoretical conclusion – three concepts that should be central to the study of childhood and youth experiences: *(inter)generational order*, *existential inequality*, and *voice*. Whereby, the latter concept also has to take into account walls of silence. The three concepts have extended prior work of childhood and youth studies with new analytical power and empirical relevance, based on this most comprehensive collection to date on growing up in Asian societies.

*Keywords:* Intergenerational order; existential inequality; children's voice; young generation; intergenerational obligations; migration

This volume is committed to the empirical analysis and grounded theorization of childhoods and coming of age contextualized in the social, cultural, and economic realities in Asian societies. In this way, we pursue the ambition not only to

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describe the multitude of childhoods and their variegated articulations and changes on a continent where the majority of the world's young people live, but also to question and in this way to elaborate established concepts and analytical frameworks in existing childhood and youth research formulated by researchers predominately based in Northern institutions.

## **Sketching the Project – Asian Childhoods and Youths in Context**

More than half of the world's children grow up in Asia, a continent of rapid economic and social change. Undoubtedly, *there are many differences and enormous inequalities in the conditions of growing up in different countries, regions, and among social groups*. They are conditioned, among other things, by the respective economic situation, particularities of the education system, the varying existence or emergence of welfare state structures, and the different numbers of children born or aspired to have in the families, and a stronger or weaker presence of international organizations. Finally, the countries have aligned their laws and legal practices with international standards – especially those of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – to a different extent. It is precisely the complex interplay of such local and global conditions and private and public actors that is examined in this volume and its effects studied. These effects can offer advantages to the young generation but also impose considerable disadvantages and hurdles.

These childhoods nevertheless have *one important thing in common: it is the way and the extent to which the generations stay or are supposed to stay connected throughout their lives*. A strong obligation to support the parents, with material benefits and services of care and with the normative expectation to pay obedience to them, binds the young generation to the family. It is often referred to as “filial piety,” though different terms apply in different Asian countries and different realities of intergenerational obligations are worked out – collectively and individually. For all these differences, however, strong intergenerational obligations are something that significantly shapes the lives of young people not only at or after the transition to adulthood. Rather, childhood and youth are already characterized by such solidarity between the generations. And time and again, connections to gender can be discerned: different decision-making guidelines, freedoms, requirements, and parental investments for sons and daughters. The descriptions and analyses of growing up in Asian countries that this volume gathers revolve around further aspects, too: global promises and challenges and their impact on hopes for the future; expectations of outstanding success that offspring may face and that children also hold for themselves; the normative linkage of (paternalist) family and nation and children's and young people's obligations to both; and the overwhelming gratitude that young people may express to parents – to name just a few that recur in the studies.

The tradition underlying these childhoods is an aspect that often receives special attention in academic and political discourses on young lives in Asian countries. In the studies in this volume, however, tradition is not of primary

interest and it is not taken as a stable foundation and fixed starting point. Instead, tradition is reflected in its constant reworking and, above all, in the references made by the actors when it comes to the reproduction or modification of childhood patterns. The exploration of childhood and youth in Asia is based on this very *interest in constant change*. In this sense, there is no intellectual juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, but rather the thesis that generational relations are in constant revision, that there is a universal need to rework such relations, to normatively reestablish them in response to economic and political change. It is precisely with such attention to reworking that Asian childhood and adolescence become interesting: *these are countries with – in very different constellations in each case – particularly rapid economic change, with political transformations, and with mass migration*. The latter then opens up the possibility of studying the revisions in emigrant groups, which is also what some of the studies gathered in this volume do. And in doing so, the contributions reveal the most diverse forms of migration: internal migration, migration across borders, migration of parents and thus so-called “left-behind children” but also migration of children, and thus “left-behind parents,” and finally return migration.

When we try in this volume to show some facets and some commonalities of growing up in Asian countries or in the Asian diaspora of different countries, *much space is given to the voices and the contributions of young people*. We consider this an important perspective as the expectations held toward young people from their families but also from public/state actors are tremendous. Their families’ high expectations may deviate from the *young people’s own future prospects* to varying degrees, causing implicit tensions and explicit demarcations that can lead to *conflicts between the generations*. Nevertheless, young people’s success can be considered a “joint venture,” a shared interest of both young and old generations with considerable contributions of everyone involved but also varying degrees of vulnerability. From children to young adults, they have had the opportunity in many of the assembled studies to introduce themselves, to present their current joys and sorrows, their future dreams, and as well their fears of failure.

Having thus staked out the claim and approach of the present volume, we will present in more detail the main concepts that readers will encounter in many of the following contributions. In doing so, we will also elaborate on these concepts theoretically. We will show how these concepts should be reconfigured for further analysis of childhoods and youth in Asian societies and thus what childhood and youth studies can gain by studying growing up in Asian societies.

## **Key Concepts of this Volume**

### ***The Young Generation and (Inter)generational Order***

We address children and youth with the notion of the young generation and we point to the strong connection and obligations between the generations; several chapters also use the term generational or intergenerational order. The term “generation” needs some clarification in regard to the scientific tradition and as

well in regard to the meaning it can have in our research contexts. The term has several connotations, both in everyday life and in science, which Kertzer (1983) has already admonished about. The oldest meaning is the one of kinship descent, either in the sense of parent–child relations or larger kinship relations. In public discourses and social sciences, the term has additional meanings. Most often, it refers to cohorts (individuals being born or confronted with important events in the same time interval) but as well to life stages. Social scientists have often used the term to refer to various meanings simultaneously. And already the classics of sociology are not in agreement on whether a new generation poses a threat to the social order (Durkheim, 1925) or represents a hope for a better future (Mannheim, 1959) or whether this is only about a phase of life to make the transition from family to institutionalized society (Eisenstadt, 1956).

It is probably due to such hope and fear that the term and at least the idea of a somehow uniform young generation are taken up again and again in youth research (Bristow, 2016; Strauss & Howe, 2000; for a critique of the assumption of generational unity: Duffy, 2021). The young generation is then conceptualized and studied as a separable segment of society with certain value orientations and culturally uniform preferences. Such research on youth and young adults as a definable “new” generation also exists for Asian youth. Studies on the “new” generation in Asian countries have often found a largely conservative orientation among youth or young adults, i.e., nationalistic attitudes, a rejection of ethnic minorities, and negative attitudes toward homosexuality; however, time and again, studies report on some groups or youth culture movements that deviate from the mainstream society (e.g., for Southeast Asia: Woodman et al., 2021; for Japan and Taiwan: Tsai & Yi, 2022; for Central Asia: Kirmse, 2013; Rakisheva, 2017; for Arab and Turkish Youth: Schäfer, 2015).

In contrast to such a rather delimitative concept of generation, taken from Western scholarship, especially from Western youth studies, the concept of generation in this volume is a fundamentally relational one. The notion is understood as one that always already refers to the other generations, that always already conceives of generations as parts of a *social fabric of age groups* with mutual obligations, publicly and above all also with regard to family and kinship. Thus, there is no claim in the studies assembled in our volume to draw the contours of a “young generation” sharply and certainly not uniformly. Unlike the sociological classics, in our understanding both euphoric and pessimistic expectations of the next generation but also the understanding of it as a mere transitional phase are inappropriate.

For a relational understanding of the concept of generation, Leena Alanen has made an important preparatory contribution. Alanen and Mayall (2001) introduced the term “generationing” into childhood research and took it to be a key concept for a relational approach to understanding children and childhood, insisting that relations between children and adults are constantly worked on and (re)defined – what makes up the members of the two age categories and what they can expect from each other. Alanen (2009) calls the relationship between the age groups (which is fundamentally asymmetrical in terms of rights and duties) worked out in this way a “generational order” (2009, p. 159). This is done in

deliberate analogy to the concept of “gender order,” since these two social categories, children and adults, would be defined in relation (and in opposition) to each other, just like the categories of feminine and masculine (p. 160).

However, Alanen’s concept of generational order remains limited to a juxtaposition of adults and children and does not yet take into account what is so important for Asian societies, that such an order is worked out not only between children and adults but throughout life and also between already adult children, possibly themselves already parents, and their parents. It is this social fabric between all age and generational groups – with their respective different rights and responsibilities – that binds individuals in Asian societies. [Cole and Durham \(2007\)](#) have made such a notion, with great profit, the guiding principle of their anthology *Generations and Globalization*, in which they address studies from various countries in the Global South. It makes sense when Xiaorong Gu (Section Introduction to East Asia, in this volume) varies the notion of generational order and speaks of *intergenerational order*. This linguistic variation might suggest that the term is to be understood here in terms of a whole *web of obligations* rather than as a binary juxtaposition.

It is impressive how much the anticipation of the relations between the generations, as they will exist throughout life, also influences the relationship between the children (in childhood) and the adults ([Bühler-Niederberger, 2020](#)). For example, in Western countries a “categorical imperative” exists: children must “become themselves” ([de Singly, 2009](#), p. 108), must discover their interests and very special talents ([Lareau, 2003](#); [Schaub, 2015](#); [Vincent & Ball, 2007](#)), and this is especially true for the middle classes. Meanwhile, in the studies presented in this volume the integration of the child in the family and kinship context takes precedence. This integration takes place not only through frequent contact but also through mutual support, and the child is given an active role in this. And likewise, the peer group, which is so central to the Western youth research, takes on a different meaning in the contexts of our studies in which participation in the peer group must be balanced or is limited by strong family involvement, by the pressure to perform that a strong success orientation entails ([Bühler-Niederberger, 2020](#); [Gu, 2021](#)), by the lack of extrafamilial spaces in which adolescents can and are allowed to move, by the influence of parents on central life decisions such as professional career or marriage, by early marriages in some countries, etc. All this shows how much the specific social fabric of age groups, the intergenerational order, shapes the lives of young people.

However, children must not be understood as passive, at the mercy of generational obligations. We have already pointed out that the child is intended to play an active role in the creation of intergenerational relationships. They perform this role and not only in the sense of a mere reproduction. They work on the social relations in which they live; they also criticize them and design their own plans for the future. In some of the presented studies, this is more evident, in others less so, but as far as the voice of children and young people was heard, they did not experience themselves as powerless, and even if they named limits to their scope of action and even if they deplored them, they nevertheless also strove for (partial) change. Yes, these generational commitments have a tradition, and this tradition



is occasionally referred to, but that does not mean that they are not constantly worked on by those involved – and especially by adolescents. In this respect, our notion of an intergenerational order also differs from the concept of collectivist societies (e.g., Triandis, 2001). In the latter concept, the collectivist norms tell the individuals what they have to do, and what their desires have to look like, and the norms direct the program. The intergenerational order, however, must be understood as something that is constantly produced by the participants, which is also varied according to the circumstances and thus always reacts to further social change. Consequently, there are other differences to the earlier notion of collectivist societies to consider. In several of the here assembled studies, for example, the strong success orientation of young people and parents with regard to their offspring stands out. This is something that, according to Triandis' distinction between collectivist and individualist societies, would have to be assigned to the individualist societies. And undoubtedly also surprising is the strong migration orientation, which stems not only from the pure struggle for survival but also from the desire for social advancement. And all in all, it is remarkable how often the young people refer to their own wishes and deal with them and their possible or impossible realization. This insight, which departs from the traditional scholarly assumption about collectivist versus individualist societies, also proves that it is worth listening to the voices of young people.

### ***Existential Inequalities***

The concept of inequality has become a frequently used one in research on growing up and is used above all to address differences in educational success and thus in life chances. In this concept it is quite naturally presumed that the educational systems studied allow everyone to participate in them, even if the inequality complained of consists in the fact that not everyone is equally well equipped to succeed due to students' socioeconomic status differences. The "socio-economic gradient" is said to differ in strength and slope in different societies (OECD, 2019). With such an understanding of inequality, a social structure is suggested as the norm and reality of any society, in which all members in principle have access to the same rights, to the same resources and positions, according to their ability. However – and this is the second assumption in this understanding – socioeconomic disadvantages have crept into this competition as a kind of flaw, disadvantages which are then primarily mediated through the education system. Despite this – as the formulation of a "socioeconomic gradient" suggests – they all move on the same curve, on which distance and slope can be empirically measured.

Whether this picture applies fully to any society is questionable, but, in any case, the majority of the studies included in our volume show that this image of what we might call a "competitive inequality" is even completely inappropriate. For the inequality we find here is not the one that concerns only the probability of attaining the top positions or promotion to the higher strata in a society, i.e., the competition on which, for instance, a debate about the so-called "meritocratic

illusion” focuses (e.g., Littler, 2017). So, we are not talking about competitive inequalities; we are instead talking about *existential inequalities*: the variety of childhoods that appear here – by gender, by ethnicity, by class, by caste, by urban-rural origin, by region, etc. – is of an existential scope that demands a different understanding of the concept of inequality. It is a matter of fundamentally different entitlements of access to resources and participation in the respective societies and hence fundamentally different entitlements to the possible well-being that are meant here. This starts with the different right to be together with the family (for instance, where migration is existentially enforced) and it is significantly mirrored in the conceded participation in an increasingly global education and labor market. These existential inequalities are created by traditional hierarchies to the disadvantage of certain population groups, which were then also created or reinforced in the course of colonization. However, it should be noted that economic conditions and thus the conditions of growing up in most of the countries reported on in this volume have improved significantly in recent decades. But even rising prosperity does not guarantee that inequality will be leveled out. Existential inequalities have also been generated by new opportunities, by economic developments, and by migratory movements that disadvantage the newcomers, deprive them of citizen rights, and place them in extremely vulnerable positions.

Finally, and paradoxically, deliberate attempts to open up new educational chances for the younger generation have created new inequalities at the meantime. One can think here of an international education market to which access can be made possible through international scholarships, but which remains completely inaccessible for large groups of the population; for others, this is associated with enormous efforts and great sacrifices. It is also about a normative pattern of “good childhood” that is spread worldwide and is to be implemented through global and national political (mostly still insufficient) efforts: a pattern of an intensively cared for and supported childhood. In its demanding nature, however, such a pattern cannot be implemented by some groups at all and by others, however, with maximum use of different kinds of capital – and between these two extremes lie the most diverse shades of more or less serious disadvantages. This does not necessarily argue against such attempts to open up new opportunities, but it does call for further care and increased effort in their implementation.

It is reasonable to question whether the concept of inequality – which assesses differences on a common scale – still makes sense in the face of such fundamental differences. We think, however, that children’s rights and globally widespread notions of human and civil rights have in the meantime created a uniform benchmark by which the qualities of childhood are measured and judged. Not least, in some of the studies presented, the children themselves apply such globally mediated yardsticks when, for example, they assess their access to education or when, for all their attachment to their family networks, they express demands for self-determination more or less clearly. When differences are measured against a common yardstick, they become inequity. This justifies the concept of inequality, to which we add an adjective: existential inequality.

### *Voice as an Analytical Concept*

Restoring the agency of children and “hearing the voices” of children have become central commitments of childhood sociologists to rightfully break away from the dominant adult-centrism in the discipline of sociology and social sciences at large. Indeed, as editors and authors of this volume, we share a concerted effort of bringing the voices, perspectives, actions, and reactions of young people in Asian societies and diasporas to the forefront of understanding their family life, intergenerational negotiation, and broader local and global social changes.

And our effort is not merely a positional one. We are aware of the critique that some childhood studies decoratively use “children’s voices” by “just quoting” children for supposed authenticity (Spyrou, 2011), or treat the concept of agency as a normative and naturalized concept rather than an analytical one (Gu, 2022a; Prout, 2002). Instead, we situate our analysis of children’s and young people’s roles, views, subjectivities, and everyday strategies in their diverse and multilayered social, cultural, and political contexts in relation to their positionalities defined by age, gender, the stage of childhood, and so on. In other words, we understand young people’s agency in their ontological positioning and experiences in their respective societies and communities. In our studies, the researchers gave children and youths space and time to address the possibilities and limits of their ability to act. As experts of their life worlds, the young people were able to describe the events in their lives, to articulate and reflect on their own position and that of the other participants. In most studies, they also very clearly addressed the limits of their ability to act and their corresponding coping strategies. They spoke about the hardships and lodged their criticism of the circumstances under which they can or cannot develop agency at all – they did not represent an excessive agency that is not theirs, contrary to the assumptions of a normative definition of agency. In some studies, children and adolescents linked their competences or their striving for developing competencies to contributing socially and economically to the family collective. This contribution is not just “helping out,” nor just carrying out orders. It is an active exploration of the possibilities of support, of which the children are proud and which may enhance their standing; hence, it could be considered a form of agency. In these cases, though children’s and adolescents’ statements may mirror adult societies’ expectations and norms projected upon them, we cannot deny that they are cooperators in the process. In other cases, however, we are exposed to young people’s acts of exercising agency to their best capacities vis-à-vis the “structural forces” in their lives, which is illustrated in queer Kazhak children’s resistance to shaming practices and their claim to be recognized (Levitans, this volume), Thai youths’ political defiance against a paternalistic and authoritarian state, personified in the figure of an unchallengeable royal king, and their powerful agents (Bolotta, this volume), Turkish girls’ negotiation of spatial freedom at home (Türkyilmaz, this volume), and Azerbaijani children’s claiming of their digital “social life” (Sultan, Bühler-Niederberger, & Nasrullayeva, this volume), to name just a few. In other words, they demonstrate a remarkable grasp of the possibilities as well as limitations of their agency in their dealing with family, educational, and societal forces.

Moreover, we open up new epistemological grounds in childhood and youth studies in Asian societies and in childhood studies in general. We contend that centering children's agency and subjectivity should not only limit to "giving voice" to children but also excavate and make audible "the silences" beyond the utterances and the speech acts of children and youths, the subaltern vis-à-vis the adult world. It is easily forgotten that the idea of "voicing" as representing and empowering a certain constituency is rooted in an ideal type of politics – representative liberal democracy (Vieira, 2020), which is not necessarily a lived reality for the majority of children and youths in the world. To zoom in on Asia, it is fair to say that the majority of young people in this region are still embedded in hierarchical familial, social, and political structures (Gu, 2022a), largely due to gerontocratic cultural traditions which often go together with political authoritarianism in their societies. In such contexts, we argue that a monolithic and monotonic conceptualization of "voice" is insufficient. It is therefore imperative that we, childhood and youth scholars, be empirically and analytically attentive to not only what is said but also to *what is not spoken about and what is tangentially spoken about* in young people's narratives, which often shed light on important social, political, and normative forces that condition the young's discursive and substantive agencies.

In a study of rural migrant children, who often spend a lengthy period of their childhood as "left-behind" children in villages before moving to their migrant parents' cities of work, Gu and Yeung (2020) describe an interview case where an 11-year-old girl Yang sank into a long silence when asked about her relationship with her parents. This long silence is meaningful if we sufficiently contextualize it: as a child who had endured emotional pains being separated from her working parents for years and who still had too little time together with her parents despite living in the same household due to the very long and exhausting working lives of her parents as migrant laborers, she probably felt a sense of alienation or estrangement from the parents. However, she was constrained from a straightforward expression of her real emotions because on the one hand the filial piety norm prohibits open criticism of one's parents, and on the other hand, a discourse about their parents' sacrifice for children's sake (truthful to a good extent) that she was socialized with from early on makes her complaint a less socially acceptable one (Gu, 2022b). In a separate instance (Gu, Chapter 1, this volume), a migrant youth Jian who lived in the host city as a de facto illegal immigrant child since he was six narrated his life history using the education–social–mobility discourse. He talked in a euphemistic way about "multiple constraints and losses of opportunities" in his educational experience and in the end expressed a sense of relief that he and his siblings ending up being highly educated brings the family their overdue respect and dignity. According to him, his parents "could retire with their heads held high." Jian's narrative of moving up social strata via education is in line with the official ideology of meritocracy in China. Underlying Jian's narrative, however, is a hidden discourse of class politics that is heavily censored: in a society where extreme depoliticization of public discourses is the order of the day, education seems to be a culturally legitimate channel (discursively and in real life) of social struggle for recognition and respect for the subaltern who are subjected

to structural injustice and discrimination. Here we see a case of *tangentially speaking* about forbidden topics in illiberal societies.

Last, we remind ourselves and our readers of a methodological reflection toward a fuller analysis and presentation of children's agency and voices. The rich and solid empirical data in the studies covered in this volume are gathered via diverse, ground-up, and reflexivity-informed methodological approaches, including in-depth interviews, ethnography, longitudinal fieldwork, case studies, child-led data collection initiatives and mixed-methods. In other words, it is through embedding children's perspectives and participation in the research designs and processes, and through fully unpacking and interpreting children's actions, narratives, and subjectivities in their contexts that we build a research agenda which differs fundamentally from adult-centric and normative frameworks in child development models. In academic institutions in many Asian contexts, these latter models dominate research and teaching programs which are heavily influenced by American empiricism (e.g., Gu, Section Introduction to East Asia, this volume). What this handbook aims to do is to usher in childhood sociology toward a broader, deeper, and richer engagement in studies of children and youths in Asian societies.

## Structure of the Volume and Gaps

Of course, not all Asian countries are covered by the studies gathered in this volume. However, the two largest countries, China and India, are both represented with three and two contributions, respectively. The selection depends on the existence of social science research on childhood and adolescence in and about the countries in general and on the willingness of the authors to cooperate within the framework of content, concept, and time proposed by us editors. In this sense, the collection reflects the disciplinary orientation and the scientific networks of the editors. Also, the regions are not all covered; for example, we lack contributions on the Arab region. Readers will, however, find in our collection contributions from countries about which they are unlikely to have hitherto ever come across a contribution in international childhood and adolescence research. All authors reflect on growing up within the age-group relations of the contexts they study, and in most contributions children's and young people's perspectives receive attention.

We have organized the contributions along four Asian regions: East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia/Caucasus and Türkiye, and Southeast Asia. These four parts all begin with their own introduction, which presents and contextualizes the following chapters. These four introductions provide background information on the region important for understanding conditions of growing up and basic information in the situation of children and youth. They contain information on the state of social science research on childhood and youth in the region, which is then further elaborated on and differentiated for the respective countries in the respective subsequent chapters.

Although this volume conveys a lot of systematic background knowledge in addition to the individual studies and we were able to collect 16 studies, it is inevitably incomplete. However, we hope that it can provide a basis and encouragement for further childhood and youth studies in Asian countries. And we hope that these studies from Asian countries will also stimulate research on growing up in Western countries, just as research from Western countries has stimulated the analysis of Asian childhoods – for the benefit of global childhood and youth research.

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# Section One – Introduction

## Childhood on a Modern Drive: Growing up in East Asia

*Xiaorong Gu*

### Abstract

In what follows, I first unpack the context of East Asia where fast economic growth, demographic transition, shifting public policies, and historical legacies as well as emerging trends of family norms and practices jointly influence children's and youths' everyday lives and well-being. I show that albeit intra-regional and intrasociety heterogeneities, childhood is part and parcel of the modernization project in this part of the world, which has attracted concerted efforts of intense investment from the state and the family, shaping a trajectory of childhood that is increasingly scholarized. I then sketch the landscape of childhood and youth studies in this region, calling for the intervention of childhood sociology as an approach to bring young people's own perspectives, voices, subjectivities, and actions to the fore. This is followed by an introduction to four compelling contributions that offer rich and nuanced insights into the pains and gains, pressures and perseverance of the growing up experiences of the young in rapidly changing East Asian societies.


*Keywords:* Children and youths; intergenerational relations; East Asia; modernity; mobility; agency

### Unpacking East Asia

Following Benedict [Anderson's \(1983\)](#) pathbreaking redefinition of “nation” as a socially constructed yet empirically (and often politically) useful concept, we could probably have some confidence in the “cultural artifact” or construct of

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East Asia for empirical analysis. Indeed, in either popular parlance or academic discourses, compared to other regions in Asia, East Asia seems to construe a higher level of definitional clarity in terms of its geographic reach (including Japan, the Korean Peninsula, the Greater China Region, and perhaps less visibly, Mongolia), cultural orientation (influenced to varying degrees by Confucian legacies), and economic development (i.e., hosting three of the Four Asian Tigers with impressive economic performance since the 1960s and a rapidly catching-up China after market reform in the late 1970s). As a result, we have witnessed a prosperous academic enterprise across disciplines that aims to unpack the “East Asian” puzzles behind its “success story,” such as a voluminous literature on the developmental state among scholars of political economy (e.g. [Johnson, 1982](#)), and more recently growing research (e.g., [Jerrim, 2015](#)) explaining East Asian students’ scholastic achievement in topping the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, to name just a few.

By various social indicators, children in many East Asian societies indeed fare reasonably well, compared with not only their parents’ and grandparents’ generations but also their peers in the rest of the world. As [Table 1](#) shows, a child born in this region is less likely to suffer from premature death during infancy or early childhood; her chance of suffering from malnutrition that stunts her physical development in early years is significantly lower than the world average level; she will most likely graduate from high school or equivalent, and in some societies such as Hong Kong and Macau, graduate with at least a bachelor’s degree; and she will very likely live a life stretching to her 70s and 80s. It is noteworthy that the female gender pronoun is used here not only to comply with international practices but also to emphasize that the gender gap in child/youth development in many East Asian societies has been largely closed, and in some areas reversed to girls’ favor, particularly in academic achievement (e.g., see [Gu & Yeung, 2021](#) on China; [Akabayashi et al., 2020](#) on Japan and China in comparison; [Luo & Chen, 2018](#) for Taiwan; [Byun et al., 2012](#) on South Korea; [Adiya, 2010](#) for Mongolia). This is remarkable progress considering that one or two generations ago, girls in this region remained severely discriminated at home and in public spheres due to patriarchal norms rooted in Confucianism; girls then were in general fed worse, labored more, received no or little education, and were subject to male dominance throughout their lives. [Table 1](#) also reminds us of pronounced gaps in child development between the more developed economies in the region and the two “laggards” – North Korea and Mongolia, suggesting a link between social and economic development and children’s well-being.

An overarching success frame, however, falls short of capturing the complexity, heterogeneity, and multidimensionality of young people’s experiences in these societies, if we take account of the structural inequalities along the lines of rural-urban differentials, regional disparities, and class distinctions within each society. The case of China, though some may argue for its exceptional status due to its unique political and social trajectory in the past century (but which country is not?), is illustrative in this aspect. After decades of “experimentation” of a socialist planned economy which ended in a catastrophic decade of Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the country has made a U-turn since the late 1970s and over the next decades gradually developed a hybrid system which combines an authoritarian political structure with a (ultra-)capitalist economy, dubbed as the

Table 1. Child Indicators of East Asian Societies.

	<b>Infant Mortality (per 1,000 Live Births) (2019)</b>	<b>Under-Five Mortality (per 1,000 Live Births) (2019)</b>	<b>Proportion Stunted Among 0–5- Year-Olds (2020)</b>	<b>Expected Years of Education</b>	<b>Life Expectancy at Birth (2019)</b>
China (Mainland)	9	11	4.7	14.2 (2021)	76.9
China, Hong Kong SAR	1	2	-	17.6 (2020)	84.9
China, Macau SAR	3	3	-	17.7 (2020)	84.2
Taiwan	4	4	-	-	80.5
North Korea	13	17	18.2	-	72.3
Japan	2	2	5.5	15.2 (2018)	84.6
Mongolia	17	21	7.1	15.6 (2019)	69.9
South Korea	2	2	2.2	16.1 (2019)	83.0
East Asian average	9	10	4.9	14.1 (2019; +Pacific)	78.0
World average	28	38	22	12.4	72.6

Source: United Nations World Mortality Data 2019; World Bank Data; UNICEF Child Nutrition Data 2022.

model of “leftist politics plus rightist economy” in folklore wisdom. Emerging as a rising global power due to its spectacular economic performance, China today is a very unequal society where social cleavages along the rural-urban divide and coast-inland regional lines leave deep imprints on the everyday lives and life chances of ordinary citizens. This has tremendous implications for different social groups who all strive for status and recognition in a pyramid social system, which three contributions on China in this section have incisively delved into, independently and as a collection.

Besides intrasociety heterogeneity, we should also be aware of a set of common social, cultural, demographic challenges confronting this region, which have

considerable implications for the living experiences, as well as future projections and aspirations of children and youth. First, from a demographic perspective, much of the region (except Mongolia; no available data for North Korea) is grappling with ultra-low total fertility rates as well as rapid population aging (see details in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#) in [Chung et al., 2021](#); [Jones & Gu, 2023](#); [Raymo et al., 2015](#)), as a result of rapid economic modernization, a relentless work culture in direct conflict with family responsibilities, the uneven development of gender equity in private and public lives, as well as family planning policies (e.g., China). While policy makers and researchers are increasingly concerned with the macro-level implications of the imminent demographic crisis for East Asia in terms of long-term development and prosperity, less is known from a ground-up perspective about young people's living experiences. For example, what does it mean to be young in an aging society? How does growing up with few or no siblings affect young people's childhood experiences? Second, the public-private dilemma in social support. Traditionally, a stronghold for Confucian social and cultural norms, East Asian societies attach a primordial importance to the family (in its multiple forms, be it nuclear, extended or joint) as the support and social security system for individual members. However, the family as a functional unit has undergone transformation amidst dramatic social, cultural, and economic changes in the past decades. It has become smaller, more nuclear, and more spatially dispersed (due to mass-scale internal and international migrations). This calls into the question of the feasibility of relying on the family alone to solve social reproductive issues such as childcare and elderly care. Indeed, earlier or later, with the imminent demographic crisis in mind, a growing consensus has emerged in many East Asian societies that more public support is needed, leading to more social policies issued by governments of different levels, albeit considerable differences in the level of and the mode of support, and the target group in different contexts ([Chung et al., 2021](#)). Japan, for instance, being the earliest aging society in the region, has made considerable public efforts for decades to support family social reproduction ([de Moll & Inaba, this volume](#)). How different combinations of public-private provision in social support are experienced by children and youth on the ground? How family's class condition intersects with policy contexts in shaping opportunities for different groups of young people? Answers to these questions could provide important insights into not only the life worlds of children and youth but also the nature of social systems and governance in each society.

### **Profiling Childhood Studies in East Asia: Potentials and Pitfalls**

Research on children and youths abounds in East Asian societies, with exceptions being Mongolia which receives less attention probably due to its lower economic prowess in a region of superperformers, and North Korea which is literally a no-go zone for international research activities and exchanges due to its political situation. Emerging from numerous publications on East Asian societies, by scholars affiliated in and beyond Asia, are a few key words that could serve not only as our signposts in understanding young people and social changes in this

region but also as our hints to potential contributions of the East Asian experiences to a broader dialogue on childhood and society, or the disciple of childhood studies.

Not coincidentally, social historians of childhood have documented a similar phenomenon that in a number of East Asian societies in the early 20th century or earlier, the child figure became an important symbol for cultural and political elites to rally for social reform and modernization in order to break away from the “backward” traditional Confucian culture and compete with Western powers (see Platt, 2005 on Japan; Jones, 2002; Gu, 2022b on China; Zur, 2011 on Korea). With almost a fatalistic belief in Social Darwinism, these elites argued against a gerontocratic tendency inherent in Confucianism which upholds a generational hierarchy where younger generations are bound by filial piety norms to unconditionally respect, accept, and comply with the wills of older generations. This, they believed, was the root cause of Asia’s downfall in the world arena vis-à-vis the growing Western powers, hence an advocacy for a new culture where “the child figure has been consistently vested with a social imaginary of rejuvenating an ancient civilization to compete with other global powers” (Gu, 2022b, p. 517). In other words, they argued for a radical renegotiation of *the intergenerational order* toward a more democratic and more age-balanced one in a new nation-building process. It is no exaggeration to say that this message was revolutionary, with tremendous social, cultural, economic, and political implications, and its impact is still felt today. From a vintage point of the 21st century, we could conclude that these early reformers’ agenda is not finished yet, and much negotiation is going on at the societal, family, and interpersonal levels in various East Asian societies.

When putting childhood in the context of nation-building, we probably would not be surprised to see that the child, once again a significant cultural symbol, has become a heavily invested “project” in East Asia since World War II. One particular area of the “project” is children’s education, which has attracted concerted efforts from the state and the family. From the government’s point of view, investing in children’s education increases the human capital of a society, and enhances its economic standing. Indeed a cursory review of education policies in many societies in the region would find a common thread of education expansion, from the institutionalization of compulsory education to massification of higher education. From the family’s perspective, higher attainment of education is perceived as an intrinsically good thing, in line with the Confucian cultural belief that education leads to virtue and self-improvement (Kipnis, 2001). More pragmatically, the *education-social-mobility nexus* (Gu, Chapter 1, this volume), i.e. the pursuit of education by the family as a way of achieving upward social mobility, could be traced back to the Confucian ideology of meritocracy that legitimizes the selection of elites through an imperial examination system (*keju zhidu*), which was practiced in one way or another across East Asian societies in history. In recent decades, with East Asian economies joining the club of success economies in the global capitalism, this *education-social-mobility nexus* has been widely researched with empirical evidence from different societies and subgroups within. The emerging picture shows that parents of different social classes in the

region, but more often of the upper middle class, are actively “curating” the best educational trajectories and opportunities for their children, which increasingly involves dispersing the family unit across regional and national boundaries to maximize family economy and children’s future chances (see Ong, 1999 for Hong Kong’s transnational families; Huang & Yeoh, 2005 for China’s “study mothers” in Singapore; Koo & Lee, 2006 for “wild geese fathers” in South Korea; Lan, 2018 for Taiwanese parents’ global childrearing; Gu, 2022d for China’s internal migrant families; Leung & Waters, 2022 for mainland-Hong Kong cross-border families; Waters, 2015 for a comparative analysis of East Asian societies). These complex and emotionally charged family processes and childrearing practices should be understood in the interplay of local, national and global social, political and economic forces in our world today. Taken as a whole, this body of literature captures prevailing social anxieties in the respective societies (or segments within) over *uncertainties and volatilities of social status attainment/reproduction* for younger generations amidst rapid social changes within short historical spans, a process described by Korean sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup (2010) as “compressed modernity.”

While contextualizing childhood in broader historical and nation-building processes (Gu, 2022a, 2022c) and offering insights into the study of the intensifying trend of scholarization of childhood are important contributions that childhood studies in East Asia could make, I now provide a critical account of (the lack of) *childhood sociology* as a subdiscipline in the academic scene in these societies that prohibits deeper engagements in important topics related to children’s welfare and well-being. Admittedly, across the globe, childhood sociology, the branch of sociological studies that insists on understanding issues related to children from the young’s perspectives, is a fairly young one. It started in the 1980s–1990s when a group of childhood scholars, mainly based in the Global North, began to critique the then prevailing adult-centrism in studies of children/childhood studies and advocate for a “new” paradigm that could overcome the limited conceptualization of children as “human becomings” rather than “human beings” (Qvortrup, 2009) and centers children’s agency and perspectives in social analysis (Prout & James, 1990). Increasingly, it has gained ground in childhood studies across the world. However, childhood sociology, whether as a legitimate branch of social science or as an autonomous subdiscipline at the institutional level, is yet to materialize in East Asia. Below I elaborate on the cases of China and Japan, which this volume has dealt with in detail, to illustrate the situation.

In the case of China, studies on children are often subsumed under the child development section of the psychology department, with a strong tendency to treat children/youth as developmental products-in-the-making. Similarly, topics related to children, a less studied area, in sociological studies are often merged into the dominant paradigm of social stratification research populated by quantitative methodologists trained in the tradition of American positivism. “Children” in this line of research is largely conceptualized as an equivalent of “generation” who are trapped as passive recipients of influences from their parents’ capitals (of various kinds). In this context, the idea of establishing children’s status as subjects and childhood as a parameter of social analysis is radical. For

example, of the 216 issues (each with at least 10 articles) of the Chinese-language journal – *Sociological Studies (shehuixue yanjiu)* – between 1986 and 2021, the top sociology journal in mainland China, only 12 articles were devoted to topics related to children and none used *childhood* as a key concept. At the institutional level, the Chinese Sociological Association has 41 “professional committees” (*zhuanye weiyuanhui*), each dealing with a subdiscipline such as Rural Sociology and Social Policy; no such committee exists for studies of children and childhood. Similarly, *de Moll and Inaba* (this volume) note a lack of strong roots of childhood sociology in Japan. According to them, though historical and cultural research in the context has dealt with representation of children and youth as social actors, rarely have studies on education and care arrangements engaged with young people’s personal experiences and perspectives. In a sense, this section of the handbook constitutes a modest effort by our authors and editors toward bridging a disciplinary gap in East Asia – to make visible childhood sociology as an approach to exploring young people’s life worlds through their eyes, and in their own voices.

### Contextualizing the Contributions in This Section

This section includes four chapters on two East Asian contexts, i.e., mainland China and Japan. The first three chapters focus on the China case, making it the most exhaustively studied case in this handbook, and the last chapter focuses on Japan.

The chapters on China all have explored intergenerational relations and migration in its diverse forms, i.e., internal migration, transnational migration, and diaspora-homeland movements. Interreferencing each other, they jointly ask *what mobility and migration mean for families* constantly on the move, and *how familyhood and intergenerational ties are maintained and negotiated* against spatial and temporal distances. In the chapter on China’s 100 million children in rural migrant families, *Xiaorong Gu* attempts to reorient the scholarship toward a critical interpretative approach after a sharp critique of the dominant research paradigm that unreflexively uses quantitative modeling to test a debatable hypothesis – “parents’ out-migration breaks family and damages children.” Instead, she rephrases Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) famous question into “can subaltern children speak?” and unpacks multiple meanings migrants’ children attach to *mobility* in their childhood experiences, based on life history and longitudinal ethnographic data gathered with three adolescents from migrant families. As divulged in their narratives, the youths are not mere passive recipients of parents’ migration, but rather active participants in their families’ coping mechanisms in maintaining everyday functioning and future projections of social mobility against institutional discrimination and the resultant family “instability.” They derive three interrelated meanings of *mobility* in their lives: first, instead of feeling abandoned, they perceive parents’ migration as a “mobility imperative” to escape poverty and fund their education and living, which is necessitated by decades-long rural underdevelopment. Second, they have a grasp of an intricate relationship

between their families' "unstable" and "flexible" mobility patterns and their parents' aspiration of upward social mobility strategy through their own educational performance, i.e., the *education-social-mobility nexus*. This, as Xiaorong argues, should be understood as a cultural strategy of China's subaltern new working class to struggle for social recognition and respect in an illiberal society without class politics. Last, children actively contribute to the everyday organization of their "mobile" family life through sharing domestic responsibilities and developing routines of communications to keep alive intergenerational exchanges and togetherness. While documenting the strengths and resiliencies of these children in simultaneously "doing family" and "doing class" against formidable barriers, Xiaorong incisively lays bare their emotional baggages, or "emotional labor," where they process their emotions to present socially acceptable selves as filial and behaving children who reciprocate parents' enormous sacrifices. This leads us back to the neoliberal-authoritarian social governance system toward the rural migrant population in contemporary China (Gu, 2022b), which, as this study shows, has profound and detrimental implications for children and youths from migrant families.

The next chapter by *Siqi Tu* turns our attention to the experiences of a group of relatively more privileged youths – only children of China's upper middle class in cosmopolitan cities – who are "parachuted" to the United States for private high schools. Reversing the pattern often seen in the migrant working class as Xiaorong and others studied, these "left-behind parents with migrant children" families also face considerable challenges posed by temporal and spatial distances, albeit in a transnational landscape. Analyzing ethnographic interview data with parents and students, Siqi reveals different forms of intergenerational relationships as these families negotiate their parent-child dynamics distantly: those who formed closer intergenerational ties against physical and temporal distance, children who experienced "accelerated growth" yet questioned the necessity, and those with more delicate parent-child relationships. Her analysis further reveals a host of factors in the picture, including the frequency of communication, duration of spring and winter breaks, and the existence of third-party agents such as for-profit intermediaries (or educational consultants) and host families. The complexity and nuances as skillfully presented by Siqi enrich our understanding of the gains and losses these families experience as a result of a transnational educational strategy, challenging the often one-sided and stereotypical media representation of children of China's nouveau riche class who splurge and indulge themselves overseas. More importantly, through shedding light on the unintended emotional consequences of educational migration that these youths experience which lead to the questioning of the "mobility imperative" by some of them, Siqi fills in a missing piece in the growing literature on the translocal/transnational educational project in many East Asian societies as described in the last section – bringing children/youths' voices and subjectivities back to the picture.

This is followed by *Laura Lamas-Abraira's* equally compelling research of childhood experiences of youths growing up transnationally in Chinese diasporic communities in Europe. Based on data from a multisited ethnography and a survey with 77 adolescents during a "Roots-seeking Journey" summer camp,

Laura explores the experiences of children growing up in Chinese transnational families split between Zhejiang province and their parents' immigration countries in Europe. The survey data reveal tremendous heterogeneity and flexibility of living arrangements and care circulation during their childhood. While the majority were born abroad and current residents overseas, over half had spent episodes of their childhood in China, and many had migratory experiences to and from a third country; seven of the participants were "left-behind" children and 33 were sent-back children (most being sent as satellite babies). In terms of care arrangements, when living in China, children spent portions of their childhood under the care of extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, sometimes great-grandparents; in destination countries, whether the child was born and raised locally or had been sent back from China (as a "satellite baby"), the majority were cared by parents, followed by grandparents who moved along as part of the transnational circulation of care, and less frequently by professional nannies. Such flexibility and fluidity of childhood care and living experiences, which Laura characterizes with the concept of "fluid childhoods," reminds us of similar family childrearing strategies in China's rural-urban migrant working class (Gu, 2022d). From a class perspective, these families with parents working as small business owners or staff in this chapter could fall into the category of a transnational "petite bourgeoisie" class, who when facing challenges in balancing childcare and work turn to a cultural strategy of relying on their extended and transnational family as a support system. Due to data limitation, we are not able to know directly how these youths perceive and react to the family care strategies during their childhood. Laura, however, adds to the picture by showing the continuing transnational ties and communications these adolescents engage in and expand through social media platforms such as WeChat, and through international travels.

We conclude the section with *Frederick de Moll and Akihide Inaba's* panoramic study of the transformation of early childhood in Japan, based on multiple sources and types of data. They start by contextualizing childhood in two major social and demographic trends in this society, i.e., an ultra-low fertility context and women's increasing labor market participation post childbirth. Such trends have implications for early childhood care arrangements at home and on the policy level. On the one hand, as the family structure of an only child in a dual-income family becomes the norm, traditional gendered care (i.e., by full-time mothers) is not sustainable, which leads to an increasing trend of institutionalization of early childhood where children spend significant amounts of time in care and education institutions. On the other hand, low fertility as not only a demographic but also a political issue compels more government policy support of childcare. In terms of education, Frederick and Akihide capture an interesting "disruption" of socialization goals between preschooling years and the formal education stage. According to them, during preschool, family and care institutions tend to maintain traditional childrearing goals that emphasize free play and social skills based on collective morals. However, once into formal education, children's lives are increasingly influenced by intensive parenting and the pursuit of educational success, which resembles the situation faced by children in other



East Asian contexts. This study vividly portrays the transformation of childhood at the intersection of social norms, demographic pressures, and policy interventions in the Japanese society. It enriches our understanding of the increasing institutionalization and scholarization of childhood in East Asia as a region. In particular, how children experience, understand and respond to the rather abrupt transition to new socialization goals and norms could be a direction for future research, which the authors have also noted.

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## Chapter 1

# Can Subaltern Children Speak? What China's Children of Migrants Say About Mobility, Inequality and Agency

*Xiaorong Gu*

### Abstract

In this chapter, rephrasing Spivak's question into 'can subaltern children speak?', I reorient the research on China's gigantic population of children and youths in rural migrant families towards a critical interpretative approach. Based on life history and longitudinal ethnographic interview gathered with three cases, I unpack the multiple meanings migrants' children attach to *mobility* in their childhood experiences. First, despite emotional difficulties, children see their parents' out-migration more as a 'mobility imperative' than their abandonment of parental responsibilities, which should be contextualized in China's long-term urban-biased social policies and the resultant development gaps in rural and urban societies. Second, the seemingly 'unstable' and 'flexible' mobility patterns observed in migrant families should be understood in relation to a long-term family social mobility strategy to promote children's educational achievement and future attainment. The combination of absent class politics in an illiberal society with an enduring ideology of education-based meritocracy in Confucianism makes this strategy a culturally legitimate channel of social struggle for recognition and respect for the subaltern. Last, children in migrant families are active contributors to their families' everyday organization amidst mobilities through sharing care and household responsibilities, and developing temporal and mobility strategies to keep alive intergenerational exchanges and family togetherness. The study uncovers coexisting resilience and vulnerabilities of migrants' children in their 'doing class' in contemporary China. It also contributes insights into our understanding of the diversity of childhoods in Asian societies at the intersection of familyhood, class dynamics and cultural politics.

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*Keywords:* Childhood/youth; migration; China; ‘mobility imperative’; social class; emotional capital

## Introduction: Can Subaltern Children Speak?

In 1988, Gayatri Spivak posed an important question – ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ – to set a post-colonial feminist agenda of restoring and recentring *the voice and subjectivity*, or the ‘subjective sovereignty’, of the woman figure in Indian historiography. In raising this question, Spivak (1988) performed an incisive critique of the epistemic violence imposed by Indian patriarchy and colonial imperialism, represented by their respective scholarly agents in historical writing, in obliterating the role, the voice and hence the agency of women in history. By delving into the politics of representation to the deconstruction of the ‘transparent’ scholar/researcher assumption, she raised an epistemological-methodological question – how to properly study subaltern groups who often ‘cannot speak’ (p. 104) due to their vulnerabilities to epistemic violence by multiple powers? As far as I see it, her solution points to a critical interpretative approach that attempts to unveil ‘the notion of what the work cannot say’ (p. 28). In other words, the academic mission is to unveil the unspeakable, the invisible and the subterranean underlying the spoken words and narratives to unpack ‘hidden’ forces and powers at play in shaping the subaltern’s material as well as subjective worlds.

In this chapter, rephrasing Spivak’s question into ‘can subaltern children speak?’, I reorient the research on China’s gigantic population of children and youths in rural migrant families towards a critical interpretative approach, grounded in the young people’s own narratives and contextualized in the interplay of the broad political economy and intergenerational dynamics within families. As will be elaborated on later, this is a deliberate epistemological-methodological strategy based on a critique of the dominant academic and public discourses. For one thing, the dominant discourse portrays at best a reductionist, and often problematic, picture of the lives and experiences of migrants’ children (the subaltern in this case) in contemporary China. For another, it stops short of a deeper sociological analysis of interweaving structural, ideological and micro-interactional forces at play. In so doing, I advance existing scholarship on two fronts: bringing children/youth’s subjectivity and agency back in and presenting a dynamic and multi-level analytical framework.

In the exercise below, I examine how subaltern children speak through unpacking and deciphering their narratives about their life histories growing up in rural migrant families. In particular, I zoom in on the keyword of *mobility*, with its many endemic expressions in Chinese dialects, which weaves through the personal, the familial and the societal in these children’s lives to explore their engagement with two social orders. The first pertains to the class order of an urbanizing society with the migrant working class at the bottom, jointly produced by a powerful state-capital alliance (Gu, 2022b), which constitutes the political economy of migrants’ family life, and conditions their future aspirations and projections. And the other concerns the patriarchal generational order, which defines normative expectations and rules of behaviour in intergenerational

exchanges and interactions. As such, we gain a fuller picture of these youths' subjectivities and agency, and their manifestations, in their lived-in social and cultural context.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first introduce the research context of mass internal migration in post-reform China and then critically review literature on childhood and migration in this society, highlighting the need to transcend the dominant child-victim frame that insufficiently addresses children's subjectivity and agency. I then briefly describe the research methods and analytical strategy in this study. This is followed by main research findings with regards to the narratives of *mobility* by children of rural migrants, which delves deep into their meaning-making of and agentic responses to the impact of migration and mobilities in their growing up experiences. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and social implications of this study.

## **Research Context: Rural China on the Move**

Traditionally, rural China was a sedentary society. Unless threatened by disasters and absolute poverty that made survival impossible, people were rooted in their ancestor land and observed a patriarchal family system that cultivated mutual support and reliance among the family clan to ensure individual survival (Fei, 1992).

After a cascade of political turmoil, wars, famine and revolutions for a century, the newly founded People's Republic of China (1949), led by the ruling Communist Party (CCP) under the leadership of Mao Zedong, pursued a socialist development strategy modelled after the Soviet Union which prioritized heavy industry in urban settings. This gave rise to a series of policies, including the establishment of a *hukou* system (or household registration system) in 1958 which classified rural and urban populations as different categories subject to different welfare programmes and entitlement (Wang, 2005). These policies jointly segregated the rural from the urban, creating a situation of 'one country, two societies'. The *hukou* system, still in practice today albeit successive reforms, not only defined rural citizens' secondary status in the national social distribution scheme but also in effect demobilized the rural population from 'encroaching' on urban spaces, creating an extreme form of sedentarism in rural areas. For example, in the heyday of Maoism during the Cultural Revolution, to make a trip to neighbouring villages, not to mention cities, one would need a permit (in the form of an 'introduction letter') from cadres of the village where their *hukou* was registered.

However, since 1978, when the pragmatic leadership of Deng Xiaoping initiated the Reform and Opening up policy to liberalize the economy and reengage with the global capitalist system, rural China has entered a hyper-mobile era. Institutionally, the mobility control aspect of the *hukou* system has been relaxed, while its function as a local-level quasi-citizenship mechanism remains robust. This reconfiguration has not completely dismantled its discriminatory policies against rural citizens. Rather, it allows conditions for rural labourers to sell their cheap labour in the expanding market in urban boomtowns while restricting their claims for local social benefits and

services (Wang, 2005). This produces an ever-growing rural–urban migrant population as a cheap source of labour spurring up China’s rapid industrialization. Official records documented around 2 million migrants in 1983, and this number surged to 62 million a decade later (Cai et al., 2009). In 2019, rural migrants living away from their home villages reached 290.8 million (NBS, 2020).

Such unprecedented waves of migration have transformed the everyday life of all demographics in rural communities, especially under-aged children who are increasingly involved in a mobile life (voluntarily or otherwise). The inherently discriminatory migration regime in urban areas based on the *hukou* system generates formidable structural barriers for migrant families, making their productive and reproductive engagements uncompletable in space (Gu, 2022a). As a result, families either resort to flexible householding strategies of separating migrant labour and childrearing across spaces to allow for children’s access to public education in their *hukou* registration places, or keeping their families together in migration destination cities while making do with compromised opportunities in social entitlements for their children (e.g. access to public education) (Gu, under review). According to the 2010 census data, 58 million under-aged children lived in villages with at least one parent absent from home due to labour migration (referred to as ‘left-behind children’); and another 38 million accompanied their parents to cities (referred to as ‘migrant children’) but were systematically discriminated in accessing educational opportunities and other social services (ACWF, 2013).

## **Beyond the Child-Victim Paradigm: A Critique**

Since the early 2000s, the two groups of children in migrant families, i.e. ‘left-behind children’ and ‘migrant children’, have attracted enormous attention from the public and academia (see literature reviews in Chen et al., 2022; Tan, 2011; Zhou & Rong, 2011). Numerically, the corpus of academic literature is huge. According to China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the number of social science publications in Chinese on ‘left-behind children’ broke the threshold of 1000 in 2007 and reached 3101 in 2018 alone, and on ‘rural migrant children’ has been consistently over 350 per year since 2006. Similarly, the ProQuest Social Science Database recorded 1277 publications in English on ‘left-behind children’ and 2663 publications on ‘rural migrant children’ in the decade of 2000–2009, and these numbers have multiplied since. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a detailed review of this large corpus. I instead make a modest effort to sketch broad contours of a dominant research paradigm in this literature and critically examine its underlying ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. This should be contextualized in the dominance of a sociological school in China, heavily influenced by key scholars of Chinese origin based in the US institutions as a result of academic dependency (Alatas, 2003), that is predominantly quantitative in methodological approach, positivism-oriented and adult-centric in its research agenda. I argue that instead of an incremental approach to fill in research gaps in this literature, we need to make a

paradigm shift to break away from the ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak, 1988) inherent in this dominant paradigm.

In study after study, scholars reiterated their motivation to understand how parental migration, hence absence, as a ‘non-normative’, or ‘problematic’ family structure might lead to children’s developmental problems as manifested in their educational underachievement, psychological fragility and social isolation (see reviews in Chen et al., 2022; Tan, 2011; Zhou & Rong, 2011). In other words, this research boom is sustained by a prevailing concern of a ‘family crisis’ in rural families, where children are regarded damaged products as a result of parental migration. Such a theoretical framing, in combination with a dominant methodological approach which I would characterize as ‘the tyranny of statistics’, gives rise to a research paradigm that essentializes children of migrants as victims, or as ‘social problems’ to be addressed (Gu, 2022b). Many studies in Chinese in an earlier period (prior to 2007), often based on poorly designed survey research without proper sampling processes, produced sensational, and exaggerated, data that portrayed these children in homogenous and reductionist negative stereotypes. In a review article, Tan Shen (2011) has noted the negative impact of such framing in the field: ‘because the “problem” frame was too entrenched and sensational, it set the tone for a period of time that left-behind children were “problem children”, even misleading later research and public opinion’ (p. 140).

This paradigm retains its dominance even in the higher end of the academic hierarchy. For instance, in a recent special issue published in a leading English-language sociology journal on Chinese society – *Chinese Sociological Review* – the guest-editors (two sociologists affiliated with reputable institutions in the United States and China, respectively) reiterated their concern of a family structure crisis among migrant families as a motivation for the project. They, therefore, put together six quantitative (and none qualitative!) studies that modelled the effects of parental migration on a range of child outcomes, including psychological and cognitive development, depression, victimhood to school bullying and behaviour problems (see the introduction in Liang & Li, 2021). One contribution in particular set out to estimate the impact of childhood left-behind experiences on youths’ behavioural patterns, measured by two indicators: (1) their likelihood to work overtime and (2) how much they spend on internet surfing. Based on Attachment Theory, the authors hypothesized that ‘childhood left-behind experiences would lead to unwillingness and inability to build social ties in adulthood through psychological and biological influences’ (Liu & Zhou, 2020, p. 444). Their methodologically advanced modelling (e.g. Propensity Score Matching) indeed revealed some significant correlation between the left-behind measures and the two outcomes. However, there were no measures of parent–child relational dynamics or respondents’ social skills in the models that could remotely link the theoretical assumptions to the empirical evidence! I add a caveat here: as a scholar advocating for methodological pluralism, I do not take a militant position against quantitative research and appreciate good quantitative studies that portray general trends of social phenomena under study. What I am critiquing here is the uncritical and unreflective use of statistics that gives credence to questionable theoretical assumptions.



Now a dissection of the underlying assumptions in the above paradigm is in order. I outline the following. First, the inherent assumption of parental migration as a family structure deficiency or ‘problem’ is empirically debatable. Several recent studies based on nationally representative data from China Family Panel Studies find weak support for a causal relationship between parents’ migration and children’s underachievement or emotional well-being (Ren & Treiman, 2016; Xu & Xie, 2015; Yeung & Gu, 2016), which challenges the assumption that parental migration equals to their abandonment of parenting duties. This assumption is also theoretically questionable. For one thing, the equation of parental migration to a complete cut-off of parent–child relations is a flawed position derived from a ‘deficit thinking’ (Bühler-Niederberger, 2016), as ample research on internal or transnational migration documents various ways migrant families stay connected despite spatial and temporal challenges (see Chen et al., 2022). For another, it reveals an implicit bias towards the nuclear family as the only legitimate family structure for childrearing, ignoring a long history and the prevalence of alternative arrangements such as grandparents’ (co-)guardianship and multi-generational co-residence in China (Chen et al., 2011). This has an effect of othering or stigmatizing the childhood experiences of those in ‘non-normative’ families. Such a framing may also feed into a flawed public discourse based on a neoliberal logic that assigns blames to the family, especially the migrant mothers, for failing their parenting duties, while keeping the unjust social governance system shaping the political economic context of migrants’ family life under-scrutinized (Gu, 2022b).

Second, this paradigm builds on a conception of children as passive receptors of ‘problematic’ family structures, leaving their agency and subjectivities unaccounted for. This oversight is partly related to ‘the tyranny of statistics’ in the dominant paradigm where the survey data (either family based or school based) are mostly gathered from adults, rather than children themselves. In other words, such a methodological approach produces knowledge *about* children, rather than *of* children. From an institutional perspective, the lack of an established and autonomous subdiscipline of childhood sociology in the academic scene makes the idea of *children as subjects* a radical position. To redress these epistemological-methodological flaws, I advocate for a research agenda that recentres children’s subjectivity and agency in the picture, and adopts diverse methodological approaches that allow for insights into the complexities and dynamics of lived experiences, tensions, strategies and expectations of children under study.

## A Life History Approach

As described above, underlying the dominant research paradigm on China’s children in migrant families is a set of debatable, yet uncritically accepted, and morally charged assumptions about *how migration might break family and damage children*. Ironically, children’s voices and subjectivities are largely absent. In this study, to bring back children’s voices and subjectivities, I examine the narratives

of childhood and youth experiences by three youths from migrant families to understand *what migration means for them*, situated in their negotiation of mobility, inequality and agency as children of China's subaltern migrant working class.

The strengths of life history analysis lie in the rich and nuanced information about individuals' lived experiences as captured in personal accounts of human agency vis-à-vis structural and historical contexts (Wengraf et al., 2002). It thus provides a compelling tool to unleash the analytical reach into children's subjectivities, meaning-making, emotions and agency in this study. I draw data from a larger longitudinal qualitative study about migration and children's lives in China. In 2014–2015 and 2018, respectively, I conducted two rounds of ethnographic interview research on migration, education and family life in Hunan (a migrant-sending province in central China) and Shenzhen (a major migrant-receiving destination city along the southern coast, also China's first Special Economic Zone). The original sample included 38 adolescents, specifically 15 left-behind children from a rural school in Hunan, eight migrants in a county town in Hunan and 15 migrants from a migrant school in Shenzhen. All were registered under the agriculture-*hukou*, with at least one parent being defined administratively as a migrant in line with policies in host cities. In 2014–2015, their mean age was 13 years and their gender distribution was even, 18 girls and 17 boys, due to the purposive sampling strategy I used. Most families were dual-income families with parents working in factories, construction crew, service industry and self-employment (e.g. running food stalls). In 2018, I followed up with 16 of them in a new round of fieldwork to understand their transition to post-middle-school life (see Fieldwork and Data Section in Gu, 2022a for details). The research was approved each time by the Institutional Ethics Review board at the National University of Singapore to protect youths' well-being during fieldwork. In all publications including this one, pseudonyms are also used to protect the youths' privacy.

## **Analysis**

In this analysis, I focus on three youths who have participated in both rounds of fieldwork. They are selected following a 'diverse case' strategy (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) which aims to achieve maximum variance along relevant dimensions (i.e. gender, life history and migration trajectory). While the selection of the cases does not follow the logic of representativeness in a statistical sense, narratives in the cases resonate with many other cases in the larger sample. Data of each case included narrative interviews with the focal adolescent, supplemented by formal or informal conversations with at least one of their adult guardians. Also included are ethnographic observation data to add contextual information for each case, which were gathered during my home and school visits, and my involvement in the focal adolescents' social activities and social media exchanges. The data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I first performed open coding by reading line by line all of the interview

transcripts to allow major themes to emerge from the data, while making constant comparisons between cases to uncover the similarities and differences. I then identified a code ‘mobility’ in the interview data, in various local expressions associated with movements of positions (physical or social) such as ‘*chuqu*’ ‘*chulu*’ ‘*waichu*’ ‘*liudong*’. This code prompted me to conduct a further in-depth analysis on the life histories of each case. By cross-reading the interviews with each informant while keeping in mind Spivak’s (1988) insightful admonition of penetrating the ‘unspeakable’ in narratives, I unpack three profound and interrelated meanings attached to ‘mobility’ by children of migrants in telling their stories of growing up as children of migrants in post-reform China.

### *The ‘Mobility Imperative’*

I first met Liu Jia in 2014. A 14-year-old 6th Grader in a migrant school in Shenzhen, she was shy and tall, designated the class monitor by homeroom teacher Tang. The eldest of three children at home, Jia was about 2 years older than most of her classmates, because her parents waited until her younger sister reached school age (6) to bring both along to Shenzhen, and the youngest brother two years later. Prior to their moves to Shenzhen, the siblings lived in their home village in Hunan under the care of their widowed paternal grandmother. When Jia was four, her mother became officially the first migrant in the family who started ‘going out’ (*waichu*) to a big city as a shoe shiner in front of shopping malls, while her father took on odd jobs in construction sites in the county during non-agricultural seasons. In the years leading to their joint work in running a fish stall in a wet market in Shenzhen, they had moved in between boom towns in coastal Guangdong, wherever available jobs took them. Jia recalled tearful memories in her early childhood as a ‘left-behind child’, especially when she received her mother’s phone calls or letters. However, these tough episodes did not translate into hard feelings about their absent parents: “*I did not think too much about mother’s going out, since many families were like that in our village. They had to earn money and pay for our living*”. Since young, Jia always had a clear sense of her family’s financial stress: money was always short for a big rural family. Though the parents’ migration labour did not pay well and was unstable, it provided a more predictable source of income than farming alone which villagers regard as a risky livelihood of ‘eating depending on the heaven’s whims’ (*kan tian chifan*).

Jia’s life history points to the importance of the political economic context in understanding migrant families’ productive and reproductive arrangements. What

emerges from her narrative about her parents' migration, and hence family 'instability', is a sense of 'mobility imperative' which encourages or mandates mobility as an inevitable pathway to modernity or 'a better life' (Farrugia, 2016). This should be contextualized in the decades-long urban-biased social policies in contemporary China: during the Mao era, the socialist command economy was pursued to prioritize heavy industry in selected urban sites, and concomitantly the welfare of urban residents; and after 1978, the informalization of rural migrant labour has been adopted to facilitate China's expedient, and cost-effective, urbanization (Gu, 2017, pp. 22–28; Gu, 2020). The result of such sustained urban-biased development is the formation of a two-tiered society with the rural at the bottom, which is empirically supported by ample sociological research. For example, after comparing a range of social indicators (education, occupational position, earnings, family income, material well-being and life satisfaction) between rural and urban citizens in China, Treiman (2012) concludes that 'China built an urban welfare state on the backs of the peasants' (p. 33). In this sense, the unprecedented rural–urban migration since the 1980s could be regarded as peasants' 'voting with their foot' to escape poverty and improve their family prospects; subsistence agriculture, traditionally the main livelihood in rural areas, is no longer regarded a viable choice. In this context, the urban becomes the aspirational space for a better and more 'modern' life, despite steep institutional and socioeconomic hurdles against rural people. Jia's narrative tells us that children in rural families know well that their parents have out-migrated (or been/gone 'out') not out of selfish reasons, but the contrary, 'to earn money and pay for our living'. The family income from the parents' toiling labour in the cities, meagre by urban standards, is indispensable to pay for daily expenses, children's education and her grandmother's medicine.

Jia also tells us that her childhood with absent parents is nothing but normal in her village community. In other words, migration seems to be such a prevalent and naturalized part of life in rural areas that children tend to normalize it, as Jia put it, 'I did not think too much about mother's going out, since many families were like that in our village'. While cultural and political elites are ready to project their sympathies towards and anxieties over the 'pitiful left-behind children' (see an analysis of such discourses in Gu, 2022b), children consider their own classmates, playmates and neighbours in their local communities as reference groups where migration and mobility become normal aspects of everyday life that one copes with. In other words, for the large population of rural children, a 'stable' and nuclear family structure, a normative ideal in Western societies and urban China, does not define a childhood.

Nonetheless, we should also recognize that this childhood is a demanding one that asks children to perform 'emotional labour' to manage their multitudes of emotions and needs in the absence of one or both parents. In Jia's case, she described 'tearful memories' in early years, but tried to downplay the challenges. Instead, by normalizing parental absence and linking parents' absence to their provision of family finance, she basically reframed the meaning of parents' out-migration as a form of intergenerational support characterized by *parents'*

*sacrifice and children's indebtedness*, which was explored in an earlier article of mine (Gu, 2022a).

### ***Education and Social Mobility as Discourse***

Although mobility has become an 'imperative' that motivates rural families' search for a living beyond their villages, there exists a hierarchy of mobilities, as Jian's story below will illustrate.

Jian was a 15-year-old high-schooler in 2014. He showed a genuine interest in my research project on the migrant population and their childrearing behaviours/strategies and agreed to participate after an introduction by his former teacher who worked in the school where I conducted fieldwork. He believed that his story could count as a 'representative case' of migrant children who experienced 'multiple constraints and losses of opportunities' in Shenzhen where he had lived since 6 years old. His family's migration history could trace back to the parents' early adulthood. Like many other migrants, Jian's parents took on various jobs over the years, factory assembly lines, construction, plumbing, street vending, before opening a grocery store in 2004 in a migrant enclave in western Shenzhen. Once settled, they began to move their four children (aged 3–10) along, together with their paternal grandmother to assist housework, which was motivated largely by their concern for children's education.

"My mom only attended Primary 3 before dropping out, since her parents were too poor to support her. She wants us to have the opportunities she never had in education. Our village school was not good enough for her. She hopes for university education for us, that for her means a carefree and stable life ahead (laugh)!"

As the 'smart kid' in the family, Jian knew the family held high expectations for him to achieve. However, due to his non-local hukou status, his educational experience in Shenzhen was riddled with hurdles: his parents had to pay hefty 'sponsor fees (*zanzhufei*)<sup>1</sup> all the way up', usually two-to-three-folds of the tuition fees for local students; he was stripped of the chance to test into resourceful

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<sup>1</sup>Up until the recent decade, the general attitude towards migrant children's education in cities was exclusionary. In indigenous terms, migrants and their children were subject to 'strict prevention and steadfast defence' (*yanfang sishou*) against their 'encroaching' on urban benefits. For migrant children to be admitted in public schools, various types of extra fees were charged, including 'borrowed placement' fees (*jiedu fei*), and 'school sponsor' fees (*zexiao fei*), which were exorbitant compared with the household income in migrant families.

and well-facilitated key schools when transitioning to junior middle school; he could not get admitted to his ideal high school which had a higher standard in test scores (by roughly 10% of the full mark) for non-local students.

When I followed Jian up in 2018, he was a university sophomore in Guangzhou, an accounting major. He showed some ambivalence towards his educational experience. On the one hand, he felt that he had failed his parents' expectations, because he only got admitted to a 2nd-tier university, 'not good!' He felt guilty that he slacked off in the last year of high school. On the other hand, he expressed a sense of relief in being the first university student in the family clan, because '*you know, education is the biggest factor for moving up social strata (jieceng liudong)*!' With all four siblings on the track of receiving or graduating tertiary education, Jian believed that his parents could retire with their heads held high after decades of hard labour in Shenzhen.

Though Jian's family is an exceptional 'success story' in terms of children's educational achievement, the narrative of children's education being pursued as a family social mobility project resonates in many families in my study (Gu & Yeung, 2020; Gu, 2022a) and others (Hu, 2019). There are several messages to unpack here. First, with China's increasing integration into the global capitalist economy in the past four decades, the modernization of childhood in the country (especially in urban centres) converges with a global middle-class parenting ideology that heavily invests in 'children as an accumulation strategy' (Katz, 2008) against insecurities and anxieties about the future. Empirical evidence suggests that Chinese parents of different backgrounds unanimously value a child figure who is 'emotionally priceless and educationally achieving' (Gu, 2021, p. 555), though resourceful urban parents are more likely to be directly involved in choreographing, monitoring and controlling their only child's everyday activities towards academic excellence (Liu, 2022).

Second, such relentless pursuit of children's educational achievement among the migrant working class is further motivated by a built-in mechanism of using education as a criterion for discrimination in the evolving urban migration regime. Up until the 2000s, China's bifurcated urban governance regime defined transience/permanence based on migrants' education categories, with highly educated professionals being categorized as 'talents' to be integrated as locals (Fan, 2002). More recently, the education-based discrimination retains, despite that a more fine-tuned point-system has been widely practiced to link one's 'human capital' to their social entitlements (Zhang, 2012). As Jian recalled, his mother has been keenly aware of her status as the low educated, hence less 'deserving', migrant in Shenzhen, which she determines to change in her children's generation. Indeed, policy changes in the past decade make it easier for Jian to convert his *hukou* to Shenzhen upon university graduation and become a local citizen after living in the city throughout his childhood and adolescence as an

'illegal' child deprived of equal opportunities. Local informants told me that university graduates or higher degree holders, described as 'high-level talents' in policy documents, face little barrier in converting their *hukou* since the early 2010s.

Last, we should interpret Jian's narrative in the broader socio-political context in China today, where ironically the discourse on class disappears when the country has seen the most blatant forms of class exploitation by a powerful state-capital alliance. Tracing the history of the discourse on class, Wang (2017) noted that the over-generalized and over-politicized usage of class as an ideological tool in political movements during the Mao era made the term tainted and politically scarred in official discourse afterwards, leading to a conscientious effort by the authority to suppress the term. In its stead, the term 'social strata' (*shehui jieceng*), a more gradational rather than categorical concept, is used to describe different socioeconomic groups. The past decade has seen an escalating suppression of any healthy public debates on redistributive justice and social policies and the authoritarian state's mastery of technologies for censorship, which makes any rhetoric about class politics extremely difficult. It's worth noting that Jian described his early educational experience full of 'constraints and losses of opportunities' with a shrug and a smile of resignation. Yet he was able to tap on the discourse on education and 'moving up the *social strata*' in describing his family's struggle to win back their over-due dignity and social respect. The discursive legitimacy of education as a means of achieving social mobility has a long history in Confucianism, which has been kept alive despite the political vicissitudes in the twentieth century China. Well into the second decade of the twenty-first century when class politics became a 'dangerous' topic again, sub-altern youths such as Jian resort to the education-mobility discourse as a tool to talk about inequality, discrimination and struggle for social justice.

### ***'Doing Family' on the Move***

Now I turn the attention to children's role and strategies in maintaining mobile relationships across spatial and temporal distances, which the case of Duan Xiang below illustrates.

Duan Xiang was a round-faced girl with a friendly smile when we met in 2014 in her middle school in rural Hunan. She looked more mature than her age (13 then), as the 'sister boss' of five children in a skip-generation household, which comprised of her maternal grandparents, her two younger siblings, and two cousins (her uncle's children). She bore the responsibilities of caring for and disciplining the younger ones when her grandparents were busy, and sometimes felt burdened by these responsibilities. She spent the first two years in her father's hometown in a neighbouring county, when her parents were trying to make a living locally: the father worked as a truck driver transporting construction material

across townships, the mother farmed fruits and crops in their allotted land as a supplementary source of income, and Grandma took care of housework and childcare. This changed as the paternal grandmother got seriously ill and then her mother gave birth to a younger sister. The young couple decided that migration was a necessity and arranged for the children to live with their maternal grandparents with a monthly monetary compensation at ¥1,500 (about €210). Over the years, Xiang's parents moved around a few places, but each maintained a steady job profile: her mother serving customers in Hong Kong style diners (or 'tea restaurants') and her father remaining a truck driver across cities. The family kept a phone-call routine: the mother would call the family after dinner on Saturday when all children would stay at home and her shift ended earlier than the rest of the week. Conversations were often curt and predictable, mostly about children's performance at home and in school, checking the remittance account and telling the children to behave with grandparents. As a child of migrants, Xiang stuck to the rule of communication that she had learnt by heart from young: selectively reporting good over bad news (*baoxi bubaoyou*) so as not to add to her parents' burdens.

In the summer of 2018 when we met again, Xiang was in her last year of vocational school in Shenzhen. To reunite with her, the mother found a job in a 'tea restaurant' in the city and the father relocated as well, renting a small room in a migrant enclave. Every weekend, Xiang took the subway for two hours across the megacity to her parents' place and helped cooking and doing laundry, enjoying a day together. While many of her peers at school spent the weekend on 'modern' social activities in commercial spaces, she stayed with her parents to compensate for the lost time in childhood. For her, all the travels, plans, added labour were worth it, 'after all, family is family!'

Xiang's case illuminates several aspects of children's role in maintaining distant and mobile family relationships. First, rather than being 'the enfranchised individualists and vulnerable dependants' often described in the Global North (Gu, 2022c) and assumed in the dominant paradigm as critiqued before, China's children of migrants are active contributors to their family's everyday organization amidst mobilities. Their responsibilities are defined in relation to their gender and birth order. When being 'left-behind' as the eldest sister in their skip-generation household, Xiang shared caring responsibilities towards younger kids. As a migrant student in Shenzhen, she paid weekly visit to her parents, cooked meals and did housework to care for her working parents, i.e. playing her role as a filial daughter. Second, together with migrant parents, children develop routine and rhythmic communications to keep their family together. For example,



when separated in different locations, Xiang's parents and the siblings kept a regular routine of telephone communications, a 'temporal strategy' (Acedera & Yeoh, 2019), to update each other about recent happenings. Whenever possible, families also resorted to what I call 'mobility strategies' to create opportunities of staying together, such as short visits and reunion trips. Prior to the pandemic, for several times, I found myself in a carriage of the high-speed train full of young children on their way to visit or return from their migrant parents in Guangdong during summer vacations. Xiang's weekly subway travel to her parents' rental room also counted as such a mobility strategy. Despite the extra efforts involved, she felt a sense of satisfaction for making her family work in this otherwise daunting megacity.

However, I caution against an overly optimistic narrative of the 'mobile' relationships between parents and their children in these families. Communicative barriers could arise due to lengthy separation in children's early years; even when reunited, family members find it challenging to spend quality time together due to disjunctions in their respective working and school schedules (Gu & Yeung, 2020; Gu, *under review*). Moreover, the generational hierarchy rooted in the filial piety norms, together with the 'emotional rule' that encourages children's appreciation of parental sacrifices (Gu, 2022a), serves as disincentives for children to fully disclose information and share their life with their parents, hence developing intimacy. Like many adolescents in migrant families, Xiang followed a policy of 'selective reporting' in communications with her parents to preserve a façade of 'everything goes well and no need to worry'. Deep down she was very anxious about her future career – a few months of a meaningless, tedious and repetitive internship with a factory assigned by her vocational school dampened her spirit for her career prospect. However, she was convinced that sharing such a negative side of her life could not help, but may increase her parents' psychological burdens considering the already generous investment they made to support her vocational education.

## Conclusion

Hidden behind a grand narrative of China's post-reform 'economic miracle' is a large population of children of rural–urban labour migrants, as many as 100 million in 2010, who have attracted enormous attention from the public and the academia as vulnerable groups for policy intervention. As such, a voluminous body of literature since the early 2000s, in Chinese and in English, has been produced to understand the implications of parental migration on child well-being. The dominant paradigm, i.e. the child-victim paradigm as critiqued earlier, often frames the challenges these children face as a family structure problem. Several major flaws are inherent in this paradigm that prohibits critical and in-depth reflections on the topic: first, the inadequate attention to children's role and agency in negotiating opportunities and challenges in their everyday lives. This constitutes a major epistemic flaw in existing paradigms in social sciences which are often adult-centric, as childhood sociologists have rightfully

pointed out (Alanen, 1988; Thorne, 1987). In the case of Chinese academia which will be elaborated on in the section Introduction Chapter (Gu, this volume), the fact that childhood/youth studies have yet to achieve an autonomous status reinforces adult-centrism in the discipline of sociology. Second, there is a need to recognize the diversity and complexity of childhood experiences in specific context, without privileging one over another. Last, ‘the tyranny of statistics’, i.e. the excessive and non-reflective use of quantitative techniques, often leads to rather reductionist knowledge production and restricts deeper engagement in the topics. These combined, I argue, constitute epistemic flaws in the numerically impressive existing literature.

To redress the flaws, I advocate for a new research agenda that brings children’s voices and agency back in the picture and uses methodological approaches conducive to insights into children’s lived experiences, meaning-making and everyday practices in context. As an illustration, I have analyzed the life histories of three young people from rural migrant families to understand *what migration mobility means for them*. I show that despite emotional difficulties, children see their parents’ out-migration more as a ‘mobility imperative’ which is necessitated by the country’s long-term underdevelopment of rural areas and deprived opportunities in these regions, rather than their abandonment of parental responsibilities. In addition, the seemingly ‘unstable’ and ‘flexible’ mobility patterns observed in migrant families should be understood as a long-term family social mobility strategy to advance children’s educational achievement and opportunities. The combination of absent class politics in an illiberal society with an enduring ideology of education-based meritocracy in Confucianism makes this strategy a culturally legitimate, and almost glorified, channel of social struggle for recognition and respect for the subaltern. In everyday lives, children in these families act upon their roles in accordance with social expectations related to their age, gender and birth order to maintain ‘mobile’ family relationships, such as sharing care duties and developing temporal and mobility strategies to keep alive intergenerational exchanges and togetherness.

The study bears multiple implications for childhood studies in non-Western contexts. First, the three cases point to the enormous strengths and agency of migrants’ children in responding to structural challenges that make their childhood life less stable and sheltered. They instead rise up to the challenge by shouldering responsibilities as carers for younger siblings, as filial children to reciprocate parental care and provision and as diligent students to climb up the educational ladder. As the cases show, their agency and its manifestation in each case are shaped by a host of factors, including their gender, birth order and generational position vis-à-vis their migrant parents. And their agency is without ramifications. As is described here and elsewhere (Gu, 2022a), to exercise their agency to cope with challenges with strengths, many have to perform additional ‘emotional labor’, which is likely to have long-term consequences for their psychological well-being. Second, the experiences of the three cases in this chapter illustrate the diversity of childhood experiences beyond the Northern norm characterized by economic security, social enfranchisement and emotional vulnerability (Gu, 2022c). In a sense, this study enriches our understanding of the

diversity of childhoods in a hyper-mobile society at the intersection of familyhood, class dynamics and cultural politics. The findings could also help illuminate situations of children in transnational migrant families in sending countries in Southeast Asia such as the Philippines and Indonesia.

While recognizing the resilience of children and their migrant families at large in constructing their everyday coping mechanisms and long-term strategic plans to overcome structural challenges, I do not invite overly romantic interpretations of the findings in this study, as noted elsewhere (Gu, 2022a). Instead, I attend to the often ‘invisible’ and ‘unspeakable’ dimensions of informants’ narratives as advised by Gayatri Spivak (1988), which reveals bigger questions about China’s future development and the general well-being of youths in rural families. The findings suggest that migrants’ children carry tremendous emotional baggage and often silently endure hardships in their experiences growing up in the margin of society: they perform ‘emotional labor’ in order to discipline themselves into naturalizing their parents’ absence, exert cruel educational effort to live up to their parents’ social mobility aspirations, and selectively withhold negative issues for their personal processing to avoid burdening their parents. I argue that all these ‘unspeakable’ tactics and strategies constitute their practices of ‘doing class’ in an increasingly stratified, and illiberal, society. By laying bare the coexisting resilience and vulnerabilities of migrants’ children in their ‘doing class’ in contemporary China, I uncover the inequalities and injustices current social policies produce, and reproduce, and call for concerted efforts by the government and the general society to address structural issues such as rural–urban inequalities and social exclusion and provide equal opportunities for the migrant working class to realize their long pent-up social mobility aspirations.

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## Chapter 2

# Emotional Dimensions of Transnational Education: Parent–Child Relationships of the Chinese “Parachute Generation” in the United States


*Siqi Tu*

### Abstract

This paper describes the parent–child relationships of upper-middle-class Chinese parents and their adolescent children who were “parachuted” to the United States for private high schools. With parents remaining in China and children in the United States, thousands of miles away, such a transnational educational arrangement complicates the already volatile parent–child relationships during the adolescent years. Through ethnographic interviews of 41 students and 33 parents, I demonstrate different forms of child–parent relationships in a transnational education setting: those who found that the further physical and temporal distance has brought the parent–child relationship closer through frequent communications, children who experienced “accelerated growth” yet questioned the necessity, and delicate parent–child relationships due to increasing transnational cross-cultural or intergenerational differences. These types of parent–child relationships are not comprehensive of all the lived experiences of the “parachute generation,” yet they shed new light on transnational education and the unintended emotional dimensions of educational migration. In a transnational context for an economically well-off group, parental absence or separation of children and parents is no longer a clear-cut concept and has different layers of meanings, taking into account the frequency of communication, duration of spring and winter breaks and the existence of third-party agents such as for-profit intermediaries (or educational

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consultants) and host families. The diverse patterns of parent–child relations reveal the heterogeneity and complexities of “doing family” across geographic spaces and global educational hierarchies, as well as the roles of communication technologies, the tempo of mobilities and educational intermediaries.

*Keywords:* Parent–child relationships; transnational families; transnational young people; educational migration; migration left-behind; Chinese upper-middle class

I have already sent my son away. It is no longer possible to protect every aspect of his life like a mother hen. I can't even protect him now that he's in another system and has left his home country. Even if I have great capacity, I cannot help him anymore. He will have to protect himself (interview with Ying, mother of a 17-year-old boy, Shanghai, June 20, 2016).

Scholars of migration in the past decades have paid increasing attention to the rising phenomenon of transnational childhoods and gradually started to bring transnational young people's perspectives into the spotlight (Gardner, 2012; Mazzucato & Geel, 2022; Orellana et al., 2001). Young people experience the effect of migration in different ways, whether they are the ones who migrate, get left behind, or were born as children of immigrants. In Asian societies, much research work on transnational childhood has focused on the “left behind” children (Beazley & Ball, 2022; Graham et al., 2012; Hoang et al., 2015; Parreñas, 2005; Parreñas et al., 2022) and educational migrants (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Waters, 2008). This research builds on the “migration-left behind nexus” (Toyota et al., 2007) to discuss the parent–child relations of Chinese “parachute students” in the United States. Bringing accounts of both the parents who are left behind and the children who take the lead in educational migration, this chapter focuses on the parent–child relationships and moves beyond the educational purpose of the educational project, revealing the heterogeneity and complexities of “doing family” across geographic spaces and global educational hierarchies.

The “parachute generation” of mainland China emerged with the rising number of upper-middle-class households in urban China. From 2005 to 2015, the number of Chinese students attending American secondary institutions grew more than 70-fold, from 637 to 46,125. Chinese students make up half of the international students seeking secondary education in 2015, and they were only 2.4% of that population in 2005 (data compiled by the author from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services). Early studies labeled these students as “parachute kids,” “unaccompanied minors,” “unaccompanied sojourners,” “visa students,” “early study abroad students,” or “pre-college students” (Chiang-Hom, 2004; Kim, 2014; Kuo & Roysircar, 2006; Pe-Pua et al., 1998; Zhou, 1998). They joined a previous wave of Korean and Taiwanese students from Asia, but in considerably larger numbers. Mostly the only child of their family and mainly from megacities of China, these students are sent on their own by their urban

upper-middle-class Chinese parents to the United States as early as 14 in pursuit of an American private high school diploma, with the expectation of continuing to American universities.

Their parents are the beneficiaries of China's economic reform in 1978 and accumulated their wealth through a combination of education, hard work and investment in the stock market and property. The shared feature of this group is the amount of wealth that they have accumulated over the years, which allows them to fund their children's education abroad. The occupation of this group is heterogeneous. Most of them consider themselves "middle-class," even though their ability to spend an average of over \$50,000 a year on their children's US education reveals that they belong to the top income bracket in urban China. Most of these families own more than one property in the city where they reside; hence, it is common for these parents to think of their investment in children's education (including 4 years of high school, 4 years of college and 2 years of an advanced degree) in exchange for a property they owned. An average 1000-square-foot apartment in Shanghai or Beijing usually costs more than half a million US dollars. The wealth and class position of the families are important in the description of this chapter because they distinguished their transnational arrangements and struggles with parent-child separation and parental absence from their less wealthy counterparts, who experience mobility as an imperative (Farrugia, 2016). Based on in-depth interviews with 33 parents and 41 students in several Chinese mega-cities, this chapter will discuss how such an economically well-off group is "doing family" in a transnational context and how these practices and strategies propagate different forms of parent-child relationships.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

I situate the case within three theoretical perspectives that intersect education, migration and transnational families: the perspectives on educational migration of East Asian families, transnational "family-ing," and the "migration-left behind nexus." This chapter not only provides a unique case to engage with these theoretical perspectives but also further complicates our current understanding of parent-child relationships during the process of educational migration in a transnational context. I call for more focus on centering children's voices and considering the unintended consequences of educational migration and the emotional dimension of such an educational choice.

### ***Perspectives on Educational Migration of East Asian Families***

There is ample research in migration literature that discusses the relationship between education and migration for East Asian families. Waters (2015) summarizes the important drivers underpinning educational migration as such: the acquisition of cultural and linguistic capital and the notion of children as "accumulation strategies." She points out that for relatively affluent families, an overwhelming concern is the intergenerational reproduction of social status and economic success. Others' research (Fong, 2004; Lan, 2018; Waters, 2008) also



highlights that for the economically well-off classes, children (in the Chinese case, often the only child at home) migrate to get an education to become globally competitive and socially upward-mobile talents.

For those of working-class backgrounds, children often get left behind at home and are told that their parents migrate internally or transnationally to fund their education (Gu, 2022a; Hoang et al., 2015). Although both routes aim to create better educational resources for the children, the class variation of the families makes the educational and lived experiences drastically different for the children. Yet children's voices are largely ignored when examining these "family projects."

Another reference group for educational migration of East Asian families is second- or 1.5-generation immigrants from East Asia in host countries such as the United States. The educational achievement of Asian Americans, frequently portrayed as better than children of immigrants of other ethnic backgrounds, contrary to an essentialist cultural explanation, is a result of combined immigrant selectivity and particular sets of parenting strategies (Lan, 2018; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Thus, it is important to move beyond a cultural framework and document the variegated parent-child relationships for a better understanding of their experiences.

For families of different socioeconomic backgrounds in Asian societies, the "educational project" of children plays a salient role in shaping how families make decisions about and participate in the migration process. In the case of the "parachute generation," Chinese upper-middle-class families, just like their counterparts in other East Asian families, send their children abroad for education and consider it "the best option" (Tu, 2022). Those families make such a transnational educational choice as a silent exit from the anxiety-ridden Chinese education system. Although teenage children are involved in the decision-making process, parents take the lead and choose to exit due to a broad spectrum of reasons, ranging from overall dissatisfaction with the political narrative of the Chinese state to the educational aspiration of a "well-rounded" education and resistance against the test-oriented pedagogical practices at school (Tu, 2022). Like other East Asian parents, they want to convert the family's economic capital into children's institutional, cultural and social capital. Yet, as I will reveal later in the chapter, by including their children's voices, such decisions of educational migration are no longer considered by all, especially the children, as a *necessity*. Children's reflection on the "educational project" will prompt scholars to consider not only educational aspiration but also other aspects of educational migration of transnational families, such as the emotional costs of separation and the growth of teenagers beyond academic development.

### ***Transnational Families and Childhoods***

Another stream of literature has explored the emotional costs of "doing family" for transnational families of different class profiles (Lan, 2018; Ong, 1999; Parreñas, 2005; Waters, 2005). Parreñas (2005), for example, depicts the emotional insecurity of Filipino female-headed transnational households in which

mothers go abroad as domestic workers to achieve financial security but struggle to “mother from a distance” in order to conform to the traditional gender ideologies. Ong (1999) documents the “flexible family system” that well-off male entrepreneurs continue to do business in Hong Kong while sending their wives and children to North America. She argues that the flexible logic of global capital accumulation deprives children of both parents and disciplines family members to make do with very little emotional support. Transnational arrangements of “doing family” challenge the traditional understanding of how families work, yet also in many ways reinforce existing gender norms, especially when it comes to the gendered division of labor in parenting. In the case of the Chinese “parachute generation” in the United States, most mothers still take the main responsibility for maintaining parent–child relationships. Yet it is not static. In this research, I also document fathers’ participation in such relationships. One particular case demonstrates how the father mediates the relationship between the mother and the child of the family. Such a case did not serve as a getaway to generalization, but as a window to look into diverse forms of parent–child relationships.

Apart from the variances within transnational family arrangements and the complexity of the parent–child relationship, a growing number of researchers recognize the general tendency toward “adultism” in telling the stories of transnational migration and call for more work to pay attention to the role of children and young people in transnational families (Dobson, 2009; Dreby, 2007; Orellana et al., 2001; Tu & Lutz, 2022; White et al., 2011). Children were previously treated as “luggage” and a “source of anxiety” (Dobson, 2009), which neglected their agency and also overlooked the impact of migration on their lives and emotional well-being. Along with many scholars, this research calls for more focus on children as active agents and the bearers of the consequences of a family’s migration decisions. This chapter will further demonstrate the case of upper-middle-class Chinese families’ emerging patterns of “doing family” with abundant economic resources, while also facing challenges in a transnational context.

### ***Migration Left-behind Nexus When Children Take the Lead***

Previous work on internal migration and children in China and international labor migration in Asia has focused much on the “left-behind children” (Ge et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2012; Toyota et al., 2007). The often-loaded term “left-behind children” has negative connotations of parental negligence and insufficient care among lay people as well as in public discourses (Gu, 2022b). Toyota et al. (2007) call for bringing the “left-behind” into view in Asia and understanding the consequences of migration through a framework of “migration left-behind nexus.” Previous work on the “left-behind children” examines intimate family relationships through the lens of transnational care arrangements. With a similar focus on parent–child separation as a result of migration, this chapter shifts the perspective from “left-behind children” to “left-behind parents.” When children take the lead in a case of educational migration, this research

intends to highlight how relative economic abundance can shift the narratives of how families negotiate their transnational relationships.

## Data and Method

The empirical basis of this chapter comes from a larger research project on the Chinese “parachute students” in the United States and their upper-middle-class urban families. For the larger project, I conducted sequential interviews in both China and the United States to trace: (1) parents who sent their children to US high schools ( $N = 33$ ); (2) adolescents who have studied or are currently enrolled in US private high schools ( $N = 41$ ); (3) consultants at Chinese educational consulting agencies ( $N = 17$ ) – among them, one was previously an admissions officer of an elite American high school. The parents’ occupations vary. Among them, there are doctors, university professors, medium-sized business owners, county-level government officials, software developers, managers and bankers at multinational firms. Many of them have an associate’s or college degree. Twenty-seven out of 33 parents are mothers, and the rest are fathers. This corresponds to the focus of previous research (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Jeong et al., 2014; Kang, 2012) on transnational mothering, as mothers still do the heavy lifting in this process. The students I talked to consist of 29 girls and 12 boys.<sup>1</sup> They were at different stages of their educational journey. At the time of the interview, six of them have finished college (aged 22–32 years), four were attending universities (aged 18–22 years) and the rest were still in American high schools (aged 14–18 years). Twenty-seven of them have attended or are attending boarding high schools, and the rest chose day schools and have stayed or are still staying with host families. The analyses in this chapter are more focused on teenagers who were still enrolled in American high schools.

In sequential interviewing, as proposed by Mario Small (2009), each case provides an increasingly accurate understanding of the research question (Yin, 2013). This method treats each interview as a case and adjusts interview questions based on the previous case. I brought the expanded knowledge and context I learned from the previous interviewees to the interviews that followed. Sometimes, I asked the interviewees about their take on the previous interviewees’ opinions. I stopped collecting new interviews once I reached the theoretical saturation point, that is, when I kept hearing repetitive and familiar accounts on the same sets of questions. I discussed with parents their motivations for sending children to American private high schools, their main concerns about such an educational option, and their children’s educational path in general. I learned from the children regarding their motivation for choosing or following this educational option, their actual lived experiences at the schools, including

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<sup>1</sup>I actively sought out male students but had little success. It could be that female students are more likely to open up to a female researcher, but there is no clear and definite explanation for this discrepancy. There is no official number for the gender ratio of the number of “parachute” Chinese students in the United States.

schoolwork, interaction with host families (if any), teachers and classmates, as well as their educational and career aspirations. This chapter mainly focuses on the accounts of parents and adolescents and centers on their narratives around parent–child relationships. Out of the 74 parents and children I talked to, seven pairs of them come from the same household.

Most of the interviews with parents and students (47 out of 74) were conducted in mega-cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, where the urban upper-middle-class families are mainly situated, during three consecutive summer breaks from 2015 to 2017 and the winter break in January of 2017. Each interview ranges from an hour to six hours, with an average of an hour and a half. I talked to several key informants more than once when they were available. The time I chose to visit China resonates with the students' academic school year schedule. During the break, international students were more likely to go back to China to spend time with families, and most of the high school and college recruitment events and workshops organized by educational consulting companies occurred around that time. I conducted 10 interviews with “parachute students” in New York City and one interview with a parent who happened to visit her child in the city. None of them were attending NYC-based private high schools. I scheduled meetings in advance with them during their trips to the city. Since the “parachute students” were very spread out geographically in the United States, I experimented with interviewing them via video chat (such as Skype or WeChat video) and ended up interviewing 10 students this way (I also interviewed four parents via audio chat when it was hard to figure out a face-to-face meeting time that worked for all of us). The students tended to share very intimate experiences with me that they claimed they had never shared with their parents or friends. This was especially common when I conducted interviews with them via video chat. The sense of anonymity and distance probably made them treat me as a therapist rather than a researcher. The intention of the research is not to check their educational achievement and school performances, but to understand their lived experiences through their accounts. I found video chatting a valid way to proceed with my research. All names that appear in this chapter are pseudonyms I created based on their real names. I audio-recorded all the interviews, transcribed them verbatim and used grounded theory analyses with the help of MAXQDA. The topic of transnational parent–child relationships is a pattern that emerged from such analyses.

### **From “Left-behind Children” to “Left-behind Parents”: Diverse Forms of Parent–Child Relationships**

The educational decisions of Chinese upper-middle-class families to send their teenage children to US private high schools are different from the previous generation of South Korean (Byun, 2010) or Taiwanese families (Sun, 2014) who let the children take the lead to move the whole family to the United States for the long term. Most Chinese parents consider it mainly an educational decision and most children told me that they will return to China after getting an advanced

degree. The children's accounts have much to do with growing up in a rapidly developing China and their discontent with isolated high school life in the United States. The teenage students are born around the turn of the century and have always experienced China as a prosperous nation that is still "on the rise" from their class position and the urban setting that they grew up with. Such educational decisions nonetheless changed the way these families maintain parent-child relationships and arrange their transnational family lives.

Teenage students enter an unfamiliar school environment and develop different practices regarding how they interact with their parents. On the one hand, parents become the ones who are "left behind" and wait for their children to contact them, visit them over the break and decide what to share with them. On the other hand, they still pay for all the costs of their children and, therefore, at least maintain the financial authority to "supervise" their children.

The forms of the parent-child relationship differ greatly given the frequency and quality of communication. Some at least communicate once a day, whereas some barely talk to one another once a month, even with the convenience of WeChat and other telecommunication tools. Some parents track their children's daily movements through instant notifications of credit card payments. The duration of spring and winter breaks also makes a huge difference as some children spend at least a quarter of the year in China and do not lose touch with their home country whereas others spend more time with classmates and host families. Those who go back to China during all breaks get to spend more quality time with their parents compared to the Chinese students who attend public schools in China and have to spend the majority of their breaks preparing for the College Entrance Exam.

The existence of for-profit intermediaries complicates the relationship, as some consultants offer "accompanied growth" (*pei ban shi cheng zhang* 陪伴式成长) service for their clients. In such cases, parents almost outsource their parenting to these intermediaries. Such intermediaries will advise students on how to choose courses at American high schools, handle potential conflicts between the student and their classmates, provide suggestions on arrangements and activities over the breaks and deal with any problems that emerge in the process of the educational migration. They are in direct contact with school teachers, parents and children themselves. If necessary, they help parents hire extra professional assistance, for example, if the child is involved in any legal disputes, they will hire local lawyers to take care of such emergencies. The cost of such a service is around \$10,000 per year. The educational consultants provide monthly reports to parents. Such service alleviates the anxiety of some parents who fear that they lack knowledge of the American private secondary educational system, while sometimes also further removing their parental involvement in their children's transnational schooling experiences.

Apart from these identifiable variables that impact parent-child relationships – the frequency of communication, the arrangement of the breaks and the utility of intermediaries' service – three shared narratives emerge from both parents' and children's perceptions of their relationships. I will explain these three narratives in the following section. It is worth noticing that such narratives are not exhaustive

of the diverse forms of parent–child relationships, nor are they mutually exclusive. One set of parent–child relationships may fit into multiple narratives. These are not an attempt at categorization but an attempt to capture the complexities of “doing family” in such a specific transnational context.

***“Distance Brings Us Closer”: Maintaining an Intimate Relationship in a Time-Space Compression***

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have made communication between family members convenient. With the prevalence of video calls through social networking sites, the costs of such communication are also minimal. With the removal of the technical and financial barriers to communicating seamlessly, the parent–child intimate relationship seems to be easy to maintain in a time-space compression in this globalized world. However, plenty of thought was put into whether to initiate the calls from both the children and the parents.

Some students talk about how studying abroad brings them closer to their parents as they start to miss them while being isolated in American boarding schools and can empathize more with their parents’ concerns. This does not necessarily bring about more communication between the children and their parents. For example, as Lingli, a 16-year-old girl from Guangzhou, mentioned,

[My] parents worry about disturbing me, so they don’t call me very often. . . . Sometimes I texted my mum at 3 am or 4 am her time, and she replied immediately. I thought that I had woken her up. Then I don’t dare to text her around that time anymore. . . . In the end, we have a call every two or three weeks, or even once a month. I only called them when I was really unhappy. That’s not good.

Although Lingli only talks to her parents when she is unhappy, she starts to appreciate her parents’ unconditional love for her, especially when she has a hard time making close friends at the American school and does not like the teachers she encounters. She went on to share her shifting attitudes toward her parents and their improved relationship when she gets to go back home,

I used to fight with my parents a lot. Now, I cherish my time with my parents [when I’m back in China]. I am with them all the time. They will allow me to eat anything. Our tastes are quite close. They won’t bother me too much. It’s better to stay with my parents [than spend time with classmates or teachers at the U.S. boarding school].

From the parents’ side, they also tend to think twice before calling their children. As Ying, a mother of a 17-year-old boy from Shanghai, demonstrates,

We Skype almost every day. I do not initiate the call. The teachers suggest that we would better not call them [to disturb their everyday activity] . . . Sometimes, my son leaves me a WeChat message, saying that he was busy that day and didn't have much to report. . . We have established a habit of having some contact every day. I told him that it would not take too much time. I just want to listen to your voice and know that you are physically and mentally well. I can then rest my heart. . . [Tearing up] I have sent him away, and I cannot protect him in every aspect anymore. . . He has to protect himself."

Many parents express similar feelings as Ying. They make themselves available all the time, even in the middle of the night. Their mobile phone is always on, and they are always prepared to pick up a call from the other end of the world to wake them up from sleep. Both the physical and temporal distances do not stop them from providing distant caregiving and creating a sense of "distant co-presence" (Baldassar, 2016). Fanghua, a mother from Hangzhou of a girl who has graduated from an American boarding school, demonstrates this form of caregiving quite precisely,

I want my daughter to know that, as long as you need me, I will show up next to you. If you want to talk to me, I am always there for you. If you want to keep it to yourself, I will give you the space you need and respect you as well.

Her daughter is now in her thirties, and she is among the early wave of "parachute students" who went to American private high schools when there were not many other Chinese students on campus. During her daughter's decade-long study in the United States, Fanghua, who occupies a high-level managerial position in a private company, always lived up to her promise to "be there" for her daughter.

Aria, a 17-year-old girl from Beijing, told me that she did not always share her negative emotions with her father because she knew he would have booked a flight if he had known about her situation. With abundant economic resources, many Chinese upper-middle-class parents can provide instant care for their children, by picking up their calls, sending agents to take care of their needs, or even directly flying for more than 12 hours to meet their children. Children also appreciate both the financial and emotional investment of their parents.

Due to the routinized school hours that children have to keep, the children's schedule dictates the rhythm and frequency of communication more than their parents. Acedera and Yeoh (2019) demonstrate through the case of Singapore-based Filipino migrants and their left-behind husbands that the rhythm and frequency of transnational communication reflect the temporal priority while "doing family." In this case of "parachute students," both children and parents understand that education is the priority in such an arrangement. Parents do not want to "disturb" their children, and children do not want to share their negative

experiences while parents are far away. The temporal and physical distance between these family members, in some cases, makes them develop a deeper mutual understanding. They get to avoid some of the conflicts that might exist when they live together and only see the good sides of one another. At the same time, it is inevitable that, in some cases, the lack of communication due to such distance also pulls them away from one another.

***“Accelerated Growth / Ripening”: Questioning the Mobility Imperative***

Although students generally gain ample understanding of the importance of the educational project, some of them still question whether such pains of separation and growing up somewhat on their own are necessary. The students who attend boarding schools have the typical experience of being in a “total institution” (Goffman, 1961) and are taken care of by teachers and staff of the schools, whereas those who attend day schools stay with host families. Some host families have a long-time collaboration with the day schools, and the “host parents” tend to be schoolteachers or parents of current students or alumni of the schools, while other host families are facilitated by third-party agencies to specifically fulfill the needs of international secondary school students. The host families are paid monthly and are supposed to provide room and board as well as pick up the students from school and extra-curriculum activities. From the students’ account of this study, each host family has a different understanding of the degree of involvement that they should have in the students’ lives. Some consider themselves surrogate parents and may scold the students for spending too much time on video games and not doing household work, or they will take the students out and introduce them to various family weekend activities, such as fishing, or bring the student with them to Sunday church service, while others do the bare minimum and treat the student as a tenant of the house rather than a family member. Although the families can select and change host families in the process, the children are the bearers of such uncertainty, whether it turns out to be an overly positive or negative experience.

Wei, a 16-year-old girl from Beijing, had a very painful experience with her host family. She spent most of her time at home with a “host father” who did not trust anything she said. She complained about the absurdity of spending her adolescent years with “a middle-aged male who is not [her] dad.” She also had a hard time in a conservative Christian private day school when she realized that her bisexuality is not even allowed at school. To deal with all these incidents, she forced herself to grow up. She shared with me that,

My family has witnessed my change from a spoiled girl to what I turned out now. Back then, even if I wanted to drink water, my grandmother would bring it to me. Now I become a very considerate person and know how to take care of our family members. They [my family] think it’s quite nice. They talk about how grown-up I am. I usually answer that with a smiley face. Yet,



deep down inside, I am soaked in blood and tears. The huge cost...it's not necessary.

Many students share her sentiment of “reporting only what is good while concealing what is unpleasant” (*bao xi bu bao you* 报喜不报忧), a Chinese phrase with which many students identify: they do not want their parents to worry from thousands of miles away, so they force themselves to become more mature and deal with challenges.

Nea, an 18-year-old girl from Beijing, echoed that when I told her about Wei's account and said,

I agree with her. Becoming more independent and more mature is not necessary at this stage. I might be more at ease facing this when I grow up. A child does not need to become so independent as a “parachute student” during the ages of 14 to 18. It could be the last time in my life that I experience unconditional help. Why is the parent-child relationship cut off so early? It's utterly unnecessary.

Being “parachuted” into a private high school in an unfamiliar society comes with a high level of risk and uncertainty. For many students, it accelerates their growth or even forces them to become mature as teenagers. Different from the “left-behind children” in South-East Asia (and those in rural China) who see the separation as inevitable and accept the “mobility imperative,” “parachute students” have more choices and consequently, they have the capacity to question the necessity of such a school choice and educational migration decision. This capacity is similar to what Appadurai (2004) called “the capacity to aspire,” a navigational capacity that is more likely to be acquired by the more privileged to “explore the future more frequently and more realistically and to share this knowledge more routinely with one another than their poorer and weaker neighbors” (p. 69). The capacity to question makes the main difference between the “parachute students” and their less-resourced counterparts. They do not consider educational migration and separation from their parents to be their only options because they can imagine alternative paths that are not taken, such as attending a boarding and international school in China or remaining in a domestic Chinese school and taking the college entrance exams. Yet they mostly still become understanding toward the family's educational choice (in some cases, they were the initiators of such choice) and bear the consequences of such “accelerated growth.”

### ***“Handle With Care”: Negotiating a Delicate Parent–Child Relationship***

Parents are not completely unaware of their children's discontent. Several parents find maintaining parent-child relationships in such a transnational context “delicate.” Some of them even attribute it to the cultural differences in individuality in the Chinese and US contexts.

Hongyuan, the father of an 18-year-old boy from Shanghai shared with me his son's dissatisfaction with a forced smile,

It is hard for me to decide whether it was the right decision to send my son abroad. Sometimes I truly regretted it. My son even asked me, "why did you send me here to eat bitterness (*chi ku* 吃苦)?" I said you consented back then. I did not force you to do so... I hope that he can be more independent, law-abiding, safe, and self-disciplined. I do not care much about his degrees and credentials.

He went on and explained that he struggled to maneuver between his son and his wife. His wife visited their son in the United States, decided to rent an apartment and stayed with him for a while. They had massive fights over personal boundaries. Hongyuan told me about one of the incidents between the mother and the son,

My wife would contact my son's classmates to know more about him [when she visited the U.S.]. My son found that ridiculous and grew apart from her. He does not talk to her at all. I now have to handle it with great care. I treat him delicately and carefully and try to maintain his relationship with his mom. Currently, the mother and the son each occupy a room and do not talk to each other. They have reached an impasse. Cultural and conceptual differences are hard to deal with. There is no such thing as right or wrong. It's hard to say.

In Hongyuan's family's case, the son has already embraced the so-called "American" understanding of individuality and expects his parents to respect his personal boundaries whereas his mother still demonstrates her care the old way by asking anyone who knows her son to collect more information about him. This is not necessarily a cross-cultural or even transnational conflict, as it is also common for teenagers and parents to understand personal boundaries differently. However, with the added layer of transnational family-making, the negotiation is more difficult, and conflicts can escalate easily.

Hongyuan's wife's initial decision to spend extended time with her son is also worth noticing. Although this is not a common choice, many mothers in my research have spent considerable time in the United States, usually a month or two, out of concern for their teenage children. Ailin, a mother of an 18-year-old daughter from Beijing, decided to quit her job for such month-long stays. She said,

I did that after the first six months of her study. Somehow, I felt like I owed her a lot. I was too busy back then, and I cannot ask for a month-long leave from my work. She was just thirteen or fourteen years old. I found her so young, yet she did not need me

to stay longer. Therefore, I usually come here [the U.S.] for a month or two, just to see how she's doing, and then I'll leave. . . We communicate a lot. But I do not want to act like a Chinese parent, like those who just guard their children. It's not good for the kid. I appreciate her host family in Florida. They are very American. It was a very free household and they let her understand the U.S. better.

Many parents explore the “American” way of parenting through their children’s schooling experience. The gendered perspective of the parent–child relationship is slightly different from the previous relevant work on “study mothers” in Singapore (Huang & Yeoh, 2005) or the gendered expectation of “mothering from a distance” (Parreñas, 2001). Mothers still play an important role in maintaining parent–child relationships and sometimes sacrifice their careers voluntarily in exchange for a more flexible schedule. Yet most of them had a highly paid career before and still do private practice or project-based work even after quitting the job. Although they made the decision to quit their job to travel to the United States and spend more time with their children to compensate for their physical absence in general, compared to the labor migrants who have to “mother from a distance,” they have the family financial security to support their choice to be more physically involved from time to time to show their presence in this transnational family-ing process.

## **Discussion and Conclusion: More Than “Educational” Migration in Transnational Family-Making**

In this chapter, I analyze the case of Chinese upper-middle-class families who send their children to the United States for private high schools and focus on the diverse forms of parent–child relationships that emerged in this educational migration process. It extends previous work on transnational families, the “migration-left behind nexus,” and educational migration. When children from well-off families take the lead, transnational family-making seems more fluid, owing to the relative ease of family members moving between two countries. Previous research on the educational migration of East Asian families has heavily emphasized the educational imperative, focusing on the educational consequences of the migration, such as children’s various forms of capital accumulation and the potential for class reproduction in such a process. This research still engages with those aspects but also invites the readers to keep an eye on other consequences of educational migration beyond its original educational purpose, specifically the changing parent–child relationships that emerge, for better or worse, from such an educational migration choice. Such changes are part of the process and the lived experiences of transnational families that choose such an educational migration route, but they are usually not taken into consideration in the decision-making process, thus being unintended consequences of educational migration. Ngan and Chan (2022) argue in their work on parachute kids-turned-parents from Hong

Kong that research into transnational migration benefits from a life-course perspective and more explicit attention to the emotional dimensions of migration. This chapter not only echoes their argument but also provides a rich account of the emotional consequences of educational migration in transnational family-making. I also plan to follow these cases and will thus provide a full analysis of the long-term impact of educational migration on these families.

Moreover, this chapter starts to center the voices of teenagers more to compensate for the previous research's tendency toward "adulthood" (White et al., 2011). In addition to that, although not the main focus of this chapter, this research introduces the role of various intermediaries, including educational consultants and host families, in cocreating the transnational care of the "parachute students." The involvement of third-party agencies is part of the infrastructure of educational migration and is still relatively understudied. The rising demand from economically well-off families that lack the cultural and social capital of the country of destination makes this migration industry for the wealthy increasingly diversified.

Moving from "left-behind children" in the traditional sense to "left-behind parents," the children, in this case, are the ones who have heterogeneous lived experiences in a society that they are not familiar with and need to actively deal with challenges, and the "left-behind" parents become the respondents to their children's situation if they share with them and seek help. I described three emerging directions of parent-child relationships: physical and temporal distances become the incentive for further mutual understanding; children's accelerated growth and its emotional toll make them question the necessity of the transnational educational choice, and parents compensate for the decision to "parachute" their children abroad for education with extra delicate care. The gendered division of labor within transnational parenting is a theme that future research can explore. This chapter shows some fathers' involvement in the care arrangements. Potential new forms of transnational fathering are another potential theme to elaborate on, which may be different from the "goose fathers" (*gireogi appa*) (Jeong et al., 2014), who mainly provide financial means for their children's educational migration and let the mothers accompany the children.

Relative financial security gives these families more capacity to choose, reflect and change their strategies for doing family in a transnational context but does not necessarily make this process easier. The huge initial time and money invested in realizing this school choice make it harder for these families to abandon this educational migration choice altogether. Yet the parents get to hire intermediaries to intervene, change host families if the situation comes to that, or travel across the Pacific to be with their children. The children also get to reflect on the transnational care arrangement and question the necessity of such a choice. Social scientists and policy makers inevitably are curious about class production or reproduction through this transnational educational option. It is still too early to conclude whether a "global middle class," or globally minded affluent class from previously less developed countries, can be produced through educational migration and transnational family-making. With increasingly uncertain geopolitical dynamics and the lingering impact of the pandemic, the fluidity and

freedom of movement that was previously enjoyed by these families are fading away. Yet educational migration remains a viable choice for families to achieve transnational capital and fulfill their global aspirations. Understanding the emotional costs and complexities of transnational family-making is important not only for scholars of migration but also for these actors who are deeply entangled in this process.

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## Chapter 3

# Fluid Childhoods: Chinese Migrants' Descendants Growing Up Transnationally

*Laura Lamas-Abraira*

### Abstract

In transnational families worldwide, different family members have varying degrees of mobility, as well as different physical and emotional experiences with relatives and places throughout their lives. For this reason, in recent decades, increasing attention has been placed upon the experiences of migrants' descendants growing up across borders.

Based on data from a multi-sited ethnography and a survey, this chapter explores the experiences of children growing up in Chinese transnational families split between Zhejiang province and their parents' immigration countries, located mainly in Europe. First, it introduces the migration context and methods, presenting the profiles and basic information of the 77 Chinese migrants' descendants who participated in a 'Roots-seeking Journey' summer camp held in their family area of origin in China, in 2018. Second, it explores their heterogeneous early childhood paths and conditions, paying particular attention to mobility, care strategies, inter-generational relations and transnational ties. Finally, this chapter introduces the concept of fluid childhoods, and reflects on the key role of care-related mobility and communication technologies in shaping their early life paths and experiences as well as further transnational engagement.

*Keywords:* Migration; Chinese families; migrants' descendants; fluid childhoods; mobility; care

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## Introduction: Migration Context

The Chinese diaspora is one of the largest globally. Historically, the largest flows had Southeast Asia as their main destination, where approximately 75% of Chinese people living outside of China remain today (Chee-Beng, 2013; Li & Li, 2013). However, in addition to the labour migration flows originating at the end of the nineteenth century – which had America, Australia and, to a lesser extent, Western Europe as their main destination – in the last few decades, migration flows have also expanded to Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as Africa (Chee-Beng, 2013; Li & Li, 2013).

Although nowadays Chinese migrants' socio-demographic profiles and areas of origin are increasingly heterogeneous, with big cities in China playing a key role, the *qiaoxiang* or hometowns/areas of international migration are the key reference points when discussing Chinese international migration. In particular, different localities in the Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, both located on the south-eastern coast of China, are important migration-sending areas. Traditionally, Zhejiangese/Fujianese migrants to Europe were primarily low-skilled rural migrants who were looking for economic opportunities within ethnic enclaves (Beltrán Antolín, 2003; Thunø & Li, 2020). It was after the Second World War, and particularly since China's Opening and Reform era (1978), that male-led temporary migration shifted to family-based migration and long-term settlement projects. These were linked to the development of an entrepreneurial project through entry into the catering sector and later on diversifying into trading and textile manufacturing (Beltrán Antolín, 2006; Thunø & Li, 2020).

Here we will focus on southern Zhejiang province, where the research presented in this chapter was conducted. Although it has started to diversify in the last few years, Qingtian county and the neighbouring city of Wenzhou are the main migration origin areas for Chinese people living in Spain, Italy and Portugal (Beltrán Antolín, 2003; Chang, 2012; Sáiz López, 2005, 2012), thereby becoming quantitatively important from the 1980s onward. In fact, in the last few decades, the influence of transnational links and social remittances has transformed Qingtian's physical, institutional and social landscape (Masdeu Torruella, 2014). To a lesser extent, people from Qingtian and Wenzhou are present in France, where most of the Chinese people who have settled in the country come from the Rui'an district, which is also in Zhejiang province (Guerassimoff, 2003). Additionally, until the mid-1990s, Wenzhou and the neighbouring city of Lishui – where Qingtian county is located – were the areas of origin for most irregular Chinese migration to Germany (Giese, 2003). In the last few decades, Chinese migration from these areas has also arrived in Eastern Europe. Wenxi village in the Wenzhou area has become a sending migration area to Hungary, where, like in Romania, the Zhejiangese are the second largest Chinese group in the country, after the Fujianese (Nyíri, 2003).

## Research Context and Methodology

The data presented in this chapter form part of a wider ethnography which explores the circulation of care within Chinese families located between Europe (mainly Spain) and Zhejiang province (Lamas-Abraira, 2021). The fieldwork was conducted

between 2016 and 2018, with a total of 12 months in China and 6 months in Spain. It draws on Baldassar and Merlas' notion of Care Circulation (2014) as both a conceptual framework and methodological tool. The Care Circulation framework incorporates the notion of family network – beyond the hegemonic notion of nuclear family – and it includes both those who migrate and those who stay behind. Similarly, it conceives of care as multidimensional (hands on, practical, emotional, financial and accommodating), and depending on the dimension it may be exchanged through proximate caring practices, proxy caring practices or at-a-distance care (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Overall, it aims to capture how care circulates among different family members, across distance and over time. In this chapter, the generational focus and the scope are different, comprising those migrants' descendants – from different countries – who participated in a 'Roots-seeking Journey' summer camp in southern Zhejiang province in 2018. However, the circulation of care remains as the conducting thread, using an inductive-iterative approach to data analysis (O'Reilly, 2012).

The 'Roots-seeking Journeys' (寻根之旅 *Xungen zhi li*), organized or sponsored by local governments and/or the Overseas Chinese Affairs Offices (OCAO), are summer camps targeted at Chinese migrants' descendants. These are focused on giving children who live abroad an idea of China and Chinese culture, incorporating activities such as Chinese calligraphy, Tai-Ji Quan and trips to tourist attractions, among many others. These types of camps are available in different cities and towns on the Lishui-Qingtian-Wenzhou axis. They are also common in other areas of Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, as well as in big cities in China. It is worth mentioning that, aside from this type of summer camps, the *qiaoxiang* receive a large influx of children and young people during summertime.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the 'Roots-seeking Journey' summer camp. I found information about three summer camps scheduled in the area through the internet, and I contacted them. One of them gave a positive response and welcomed me. To make sure of confidentiality and preserve the participants' privacy, the name of the locality and camp and its specific location will not be mentioned. During one day, I attended several programmed activities, and I had the opportunity to conduct participant observation, engage in informal talks with participants and the camp's staff and distribute a questionnaire. As the summer camp data protection policy prevented me from having access to the contacts of parents – most of whom remained out of China – informed consent was sought through summer camp administration officers. All of the children but two participated in the survey, which collected 77 responses.

The questionnaire was distributed in Chinese, using grammar and vocabulary that were as simple as possible to make sure that all of the participants could understand every question. In addition, four camp monitors, myself and an assistant that I hired for the occasion were available to resolve any queries that they had. The questionnaires consisted of 36 questions regarding their life paths, transnational experiences and ties as well as their family relationships and configuration (see Annex). These were completely anonymous and did not collect any personal data.

The participants included 38 females, 38 males and one participant who did not identify with this binary gender conception. They were aged between 10 and 19 years, with 80% of them aged between 12 and 16 years. In most cases, their parents were the first generation to migrate, but for eight of the respondents, their

grandparents were the first to move. In line with the history of migration flows to Europe, four of them had migrated to Germany, where an early settlement of Chinese migrants has been documented. Additional information on the countries of birth and residence will be provided in the following sections.

## Results

### *Heterogeneous Mobile Childhoods*

Among the 77 adolescents participating in the 2018 ‘Roots-seeking Journey’ summer camp, there were 12 different countries of birth, nine different countries of residence at the moment of the survey research and, additionally, two more countries where participants’ parents lived although they did not (see [Table 1](#)). Most of these were European countries and, surprisingly, France was not present. The country where the largest percentage of participants were born and lived was Spain, followed by Germany and Italy, which together represented more than 72% of the total. However, it is worth mentioning that the number of children born in these countries and the number of participants living in these countries at the moment of conducting the survey did not match. This means that some of them experienced international mobility during their childhoods. In the case of Spain, in addition to the 22 Chinese migrants’ descendants born there, three moved from China to Spain and two moved from Italy to Spain during their childhood. But additionally, one moved from Spain to Germany, where 19 Chinese migrants’ descendants were born and 20 lived. In the case of Italy, although 15 participants were born there and 15 participants lived there, as just mentioned, two of them moved from Italy to Spain during their childhood and one moved from China and Portugal, respectively, to Italy. That is why six participants were born in Portugal, but only five lived there.

It is also worth noting that seven children were born in China and five of them moved to another country, but at the moment of the survey, six participants lived in China. Of those, two were born in Serbia, one in Luxembourg and one in the United States, and they moved to China during their childhood. Two more did not live abroad, but their parents lived in Romania and Equatorial Guinea, respectively. Additionally, other countries of birth and residence are present in the sample, such as Greece, Brazil, Hungary and Ukraine.

Summing up the information in [Table 1](#), from a mobility perspective, we can conclude that transnational mobility during their childhoods was quite widespread. At the moment of conducting the survey, 13 out of 77 participants lived in a different country to that where they were born. Furthermore, seven of them experienced internal migration within their country of residence, changing the city/town where they lived. In this sense, it is worth remembering that it is common for different members within an extended family to be spread over different European countries and to move within them, seeking to maximize their economic opportunities and minimize their risks ([Beltrán Antolín, 2003](#); [Ceccagno, 2003](#)). Moreover, responses to the questionnaire indicate that 43 of the respondents spent part of their childhood – at least one year – in China.

Table 1. Countries of Birth and Residence and Incoming and Outgoing Flows.

Country	Live in	Birth	Incoming Flows (+)	Outgoing Flows (-)	Childhood in China
Spain	26	22	2 Italy to Spain 3 China to Spain	1 Spain to Germany	12
Germany	20	19	1 Spain to Germany	–	5
Italy	15	15	1 Portugal to Italy 1 China to Italy	2 Italy to Spain	11
China	6	7	1 Luxembourg to China 2 Serbia to China 1 USA to China	3 China to Spain 1 China to Italy 1 China to Brazil	11 <sup>a</sup>
Portugal	5	6	–	1 Portugal to Italy	2
Serbia	0	2	–	2 Serbia to China	–
Greece	1	1	–	–	1
Luxembourg	0	1	–	1 Luxem. to China	–
Brazil	2	1	–	1 China to Brazil	1
Hungary	1	1	–	–	0
USA	0	1	–	1 USA to China	–
Ukraine	1	1	–	–	0
Total	77	77			43

<sup>a</sup>Two of them were born in China and remain there nowadays.

This means that in addition to the seven people born in China, 36 more were born abroad and then sent to China to be partially raised there, as will be further detailed below. Finally, Table 1 also shows how new migration flows are arriving in Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, Africa.

From a family-care perspective, we can translate the information contained in Table 1 into the adoption of different transnational care strategies (see Table 2). As mentioned earlier, the history of Chinese migration to Europe and their

Table 2. Care Sequences, Strategies and Main Caregivers.

Care strategy	Care sequence <sup>a</sup> and main caregivers <sup>b</sup>			Number of people (77)																							
	Caregiver China	Mobility	Caregiver abroad	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
<b>Satellite babies (36)</b> Born Abroad → Sent to China	Mother	Move abroad →	Parents	1																							
	Grandparents		Parents																								24
	Grandparents		Grandparents			3																					
	Grandparents		Nanny			3																					
	Nanny		Nanny		1																						
	Grandparents	Still in China				4																					
<b>Left behind (7)</b> born in China and partially raised there	Mother	Move abroad →	Parents	1																							
	Grandparents		Grandparents			3																					
	Nanny		Nanny		1																						
	Grandparents	Still in China		2																							
<b>Born and raised up abroad</b> (migration country) (34)			Parents																							16	
			Grandparents																							14	
			Nanny			4																					

<sup>a</sup>On some occasions the respondents indicated several main caregivers. Reflecting all combinations possible in the Table isn't operational. Therefore, only one category per case has been reflected, using the three more habitual (parents/grandparents/nanny). Furthermore, the prioritisation of one or another when overlapping is based on their relevance on broader ethnography data: (1) Nanny => (2) grandparents=> (3) parents. Therefore, if the category 'nanny' was chosen in the questionnaire, then it will always appear in the table, but there may be cases where both parents and nanny appear as caregivers. This implies some limitations, as the table (and the survey itself) doesn't capture further temporal dimension beyond those directly linked to transnational movements.

<sup>b</sup>Cohabitation with different members of the extended family is habitual in China. When grandparents are marked as the main caregivers, there are also three cases where great-grandparents and in seven cases aunts/uncles appear to share this role.

long-term settlement is intimately linked to their entrepreneurial activity, with an initial entry into the catering sector and further diversification (Beltrán Antolín, 2006; Thunø & Li, 2020). In line with this information, the responses reveal that approximately 50% of respondents' parents were shop owners and 20% of them were restaurant owners, while only 13% worked as staff in one of these businesses. In addition, approximately 10% of them ran a business and 7% worked as waged workers<sup>1</sup> in other sectors, although specific sectors have not been documented. Running their own business involves intensive workloads and often Chinese migrant couples must choose between contracting or transnationalizing childcare, as they cannot reconcile productive and reproductive demands (Sáiz López, 2012). It is within this context that transnational care practices become meaningful.

Following the categories used in the literature on migration (that will be further explained), we can say that seven of the participants within the sample were left-behind children and 36 were sent-back children (32 already reunited with their families, and four who remain in China). Most of them were sent as satellite babies.

The 'left-behind' concept refers to children born in the family's homeland who stay there while their parents migrate. Within the sample, only two of them remained in China at the time of conducting the survey, while their parents lived in Romania and Equatorial Guinea, respectively. The parents of one migrated over 10 years ago, and the parents of the other between five and 10 years ago. In both cases, they remain in China at an age of 12 or more, contradicting the traditional patterns of early family reunification. Similarly, within the broader fieldwork, an emerging trend of adolescent migrants' descendants staying in China was documented, although these are still a minority. However, it is worth mentioning that these minors' narratives challenge the 'left-behind' discourse<sup>2</sup>, as they do not aim to join their families abroad and highly value their socially and economically privileged status in the local context as a result of their parents' migration (Lamas-Abraira, 2021).

The term 'sent-back children' refers to those children who, despite being born in their parents' migration destination country, are sent to their family's homeland, where they are cared for by extended family members, while their parents remain working abroad. Consistent with patterns seen in other Chinese transnational families worldwide, most of them were sent as satellite babies<sup>3</sup>: babies born into Chinese migrant families, who at a very young age are sent to China to be partially raised there (Bohr & Tse, 2009; Bohr & Whitfield, 2011; Wong, 2015),

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<sup>1</sup>Most of these being males working in Italy.

<sup>2</sup>This discourse is imbued with negative connotations, as it tends to focus on – and generalizes – the undesirable consequences of the children's physical and emotional conditions, presenting the children in these circumstances as quasi-abandoned, without further questioning the circumstances and context.

<sup>3</sup>Although the year of arrival to China is not reflected in the questionnaire, the satellite babies' practices was a theme prompted during the fieldwork. In most cases, they were being sent aged 2 years old or less.

and some years later move back to live with their parents. Within the sample, they spent an average of 5.2 years in China, generally being reunited with their parents when below 12 years of age.

In line with the motives expressed by migrant families worldwide for deploying sent-back strategies, this emerging trend may respond to the desire of families to enable their children to make a connection with their homeland (Soto, 1989), or to provide them with transnational discipline or care (Foner, 2009; Orellana et al., 2001). The homeland is perceived as a safer, stricter and disciplined context (Soto, 1989; Thorne et al., 2001). But often these practices are linked to the social and economic context and conditions (Orellana et al., 2001), particularly the difficulties experienced by parents in the migration destination country in coping with work in the labour market and childcare (Bohr & Tse, 2009; Inglis & Manderson, 1984; Lamas-Abraira, 2021).

Finally, it is worth understanding some of these practices in their own context, and accounting for the strategies that seek to maximize the children's future opportunities and current resources, such as giving birth in the United States (Wang, 2017) where birth right citizenship exists. This may be the case for one of the respondents, who was born in the United States and was then sent to China, living there until the moment of conducting the survey. Similar cases have been documented beyond the survey, within the broader ethnography (Lamas-Abraira, 2021). In contrast, in countries such as Spain, nationality is determined by the *nationality* of one or both parents. Therefore, reuniting the minor with their family in Spain at an early age is advisable to make sure of their rights in the future. In this sense, the circulation of care (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) cannot be isolated from its context. As Kilkey and Merla (2014) emphasize through the concept of 'situated transnationalism', institutional contexts affect the capability of the different members of transnational families to participate in the circulation of care.

Regarding care arrangements while living in China during their childhood – either as left-behind or sent-back children – the respondents cohabitated with different extended family members and, much less often (two cases), also with the mother. The maternal and paternal grandmothers were the most common caregivers, with a very slight prevalence of the former. Cohabitation with aunts and uncles was also common and, less frequently, with cousins. Note that three participants also reported having been cared for by the great-grandparents, highlighting the older family generations' active role in family care (Lamas-Abraira, 2019). In only two cases did the family hire a child caregiver.

Beyond sending children to China, the survey revealed another type of transnational childcare strategy through which extended family members experienced care-related mobility. For 17 out of the 77 of the respondents, both grandparents or one of them – generally the grandmother – were the main caregivers in the parents' immigration country, which implies care-related mobility. However, the questionnaire did not document the length of the stay. Cases of transnational grandparenting have been documented in transnational families worldwide, often constrained by institutional contexts (Kilkey & Merla, 2014). However, beyond institutional constraints, Chinese grandparents appear to

be particularly ‘flexible, mobile caregivers’ (Zhou, 2013, p. 292). In addition, the other three informants were cared for by the grandparents, who already lived abroad – although not necessarily in the same city – as they were the first generation to migrate. Less frequently (in three cases), other extended family members (such as aunts or uncles) also shared the caregiving role.

Nine of the respondents were also cared for by a hired caregiver in the parents’ immigration country, and two of them also in China. Therefore, the childcare was subcontracted, entailing proxy caring practices. In three of the families, they opted for a non-Chinese caregiver, and the other six hired an ethnically Chinese caregiver. Although the reasons for choosing one or another were not considered in the survey, ethnicity is an essential factor when choosing a caregiver in migrant families (Song & Parker, 1997b; Sourolová, 2015). Within the broader research on which this study is framed, the results suggest that whether there is a shortage of Chinese caregivers (in small towns) or a short/long migration history in the country (emphasizing destination country socialization or Chinese socialization, respectively) are key factors in choosing either a Chinese or a non-Chinese caregiver.

In summary, this survey confirms that different care strategies may be adopted by Chinese transnational families at different times. And that this is done in such a way that using a family childcare strategy during early childhood (e.g. grandparenting in China) did not prevent families from using another one later on (e.g. hiring a caregiver in Spain). For example, one respondent was born in Spain, then sent to China where she was cared for by her maternal grandparents, and once back in Spain she was cared for by a Chinese nanny, which implies proxy caring practices. Another example is a girl also born in Spain who was sent to China where she lived with both her maternal and paternal grandparents. When she moved back to Spain, her maternal grandmother also did, which implies care-related mobility. Therefore, strategies within the family network and beyond may overlap or occur sequentially, which implies different and flexible care sequences (Radziwinowiczówna et al., 2020). Finally, 34 out of the 77 children were born and raised in their parents’ immigration countries. 14 of them had their grandparents as their main caregivers, 4 of them had a nanny and for the 16 remaining, their parents retained the main caregiver role. In turn, for the latter they did not use any long-term alternative care strategies. However, as will be addressed in the next section, summertime stays also imply transnational mobility and cohabitation with extended family.

## Transnational Ties, Experiences and Preferences

To visit China in the summer of 2018, some travelled there with their mothers. This happened for 23 out of the 77 respondents. Less often, the fathers also accompanied them, as was the case for 13 adolescents. Within this practice, it is common for them to cohabit with their siblings and members of the extended family. With a couple of exceptions, all of them cohabited with at least one member of the grandparents’ generation during that summer. The presence of



both maternal and paternal grandparents was balanced. Moreover, 10 participants also cohabited with their cousins, and, in one case, the adolescent also shared the living space with her Spanish caregiver, who travelled with the family to China. Although hiring Spanish caregivers in Chinese families in Spain is not unusual, travelling together to China is an exceptional case. After raising her hand while filling out the questionnaire that I had distributed to the participants in the summer camp, this person told me that she did not know which option she should tick, as none of the available options reflected her situation. That was when she explained to me that, despite the fact that her mother and her father were 100% ethnically Chinese, one of her grandmothers – who was her caregiver during her childhood – was Spanish. Therefore, although care was initially sub-contracted to someone outside of the family, the care relationship and relatedness<sup>4</sup> (Carsten, 2000) led to a process of ‘kinning’<sup>5</sup> (Howell, 2006) between them.

Regarding at-a-distance communication with their parents, when they did not travel with the participants, it was mainly reported to take place with the mother on a daily basis, or at least several times per week. With fathers, the frequency of communication was more irregular: in most cases they were in contact several times per week (39%), followed by daily communication (32%), once per week (15%) and every two weeks (8%) or less. Therefore, in this case the transnational context did not serve to rework gendered roles linked to care and intimacy (Kang, 2012). The most common means of communication was sending WeChat messages – the most popular app in China – followed by video calls and voice calls.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the gendered pattern of transnational communication was consistent with their assessment of the relationship with their mothers and fathers. Most of the respondents rated their relationship with their mothers as good or very good, while the quality of relationship with the fathers was reported to be less good, although only 5% reported having a bad or very bad relationship. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that three people thought that their fathers did not care about them. Yet that was not related to mothers, who were also perceived as being more affectionate and understanding than fathers. However, both fathers and mothers were described as strict and controlling.

Study participants reported a high degree of interaction across borders not only with their families but also with their friends. Although not contemplated in

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<sup>4</sup>Carsten (2000) understands kinship as context-specific moving ‘away from the pre-given analytic opposition between the biological and the social on which much anthropological study of kinship has rested’ (p. 4), by emphasizing the small, everyday actions that create ties among people.

<sup>5</sup>Howell (2006) defines ‘kinning’ as ‘the process by which a foetus or new-born child is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people, and the connection is expressed in a conventional kin idiom’ (2006, p. 8), emphasizing the importance of social ties and de-emphasizing biological ones.

<sup>6</sup>In all cases, they spoke in Chinese with their parents (only in two cases did they also speak in the official language of the country where they lived), with Mandarin prevailing over any dialect. Among siblings, 54% of them spoke in the official language of the country where they lived.

the questionnaire, this was a theme that emerged during the summer camp activities and broader fieldwork. This co-presence at-a-distance enables continuity in their relationships. Back in the countries where they lived, keeping-in-touch with the friends that they met in the summer camp at-a-distance was not likely to be a problem either, as they created different WeChat groups while there to exchange pictures and confidences. In fact, some of the participants in the 2018 summer camp were connected to other people that they had met in previous summer experiences, meeting again on their trips to China. 85% of the respondents also reported to want to go back to China the next summer. Meeting other adolescents living in the same country may serve to expand their own proximate network there, where a significant percentage<sup>7</sup> of their friends are actually reported to be Chinese migrants' descendants. However, through this type of summer camp experience and further keeping-in-touch, their transnational networks beyond China and the country where they live may expand too, thereby taking in third countries. This further keeping-in-touch is enabled through direct communication or through posts on WeChat and other social networks, such as Instagram, which allow for ambient co-presence or peripheral awareness of their lives (Madianou, 2016). In doing so, they create their own links with their family's hometown and beyond, entailing a different but interconnected experience to that of the migrant generation (Levitt, 2009; Levitt & Waters, 2002).

That summer of 2018 was the first time travelling to China for only seven of the respondents. Six of them had travelled twice, and 64 of them had travelled three or more times. This information reveals a high degree of transnational mobility for the participants. In line with findings in other contexts, trips are deemed to be essential for developing migrants' descendants' own connections in their family's home country (Gardner & Mand, 2012; Haikkola, 2011). When asked which country they wanted to live in during their next life stage, most of them (70%) wanted to study and/or to work in the country they lived in or, less frequently, in a third country, such as Australia, Canada, United States, Japan or South Korea. Similarly, most of them (all but 21) wanted to continue their adult lives outside of China. Among the 21 who wanted to live in China, this included five out of the six who lived in China at the time of the survey, while the sixth preferred to go back to Luxembourg where he was born. Of the remaining 16, only three – two females and one male – had not lived in China before, as they had always lived in Germany and Ukraine, respectively. However, two of them had spent three or more summers in China, and only for one of them the summer of 2018 was their first experience in China. Therefore, albeit not with exceptions, responses to the questionnaires revealed that the minors who lived in China during their childhood or that have visited China frequently are more likely to want to live in China in the future.

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<sup>7</sup>For 30% of respondents to the questionnaire, most of their friends were Chinese migrants' descendants, for 28% some of them were and for 38% a small proportion of them were.

## Concluding Remarks

Transnational families are often seen as ‘here and there, multiply routed between and rooted in the fabric of two or more social fields’ (Huang et al., 2008, p. 7). Living in a transnational social field implies sustaining social relations across borders in which migrants, the people who remain in the origin country and those who are born in the immigration country (migrants’ descendants) all take part (Glick Schiller & Fouron, 1999), albeit to different and changing degrees. In this chapter, we have seen how mobility is embedded in the life paths of Zhejiangese transnational families and migrants’ descendants, with suitcases having constituted a familiar element since early childhood. Beyond the initial migratory movement, transnational mobility is crucial for enabling the care circulation (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) in these families, and it involves different family members and family generations. In particular, the caregiving role of the grandparents’ generation – either in China or abroad – is essential in lessening the expenditure of social reproduction. Furthermore, gender is explanatory when talking about care circulation, with mothers, grandmothers and nannies having a key role as hands-on caregivers, and also as at-a-distance caregivers, with mothers channelling communication with children across borders.

Moreover, mobility and flexibility are key concepts in understanding both the care circulation (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) in Zhejiangese transnational families and these migrants’ descendants’ childhoods. The latter depends on the former. In addition, I posit that the childhoods of these migrants’ descendants who grow up transnationally are fluid. Fluid is defined as a substance that flows easily, or the situations, ideas or plans which are ‘not fixed and are likely to change, often repeatedly and unexpectedly’ but which may be also ‘smooth and continuous’.<sup>8</sup> Fluidity in these Zhejiangese migrants’ descendants’ childhoods is made up of flexibility and mobility. This fluidity is articulated through multiple dimensions.

First, spatially: By engaging transnational mobility from a very early life stage, their childhoods challenge the hegemonic notion of childhood linked to statism and stability (Fass, 2005). Moving across space also entails moving along time and altering relations with people. This shapes their paces of life (Amit & Salazar, 2020), which simultaneously are highly dependent on changing available resources (including social capital) and care needs.

Second, socially: when considering the pool of caregivers, their childhoods are also fluid. Indeed, they are particularly fluid in contrast with most – albeit not all – countries where they live, where a Global-North tailored normative nuclear family model prevails. Therefore, parents, and most specifically mothers, are deemed to be the children’s co-present caregivers, favouring the bourgeois ideal (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). In this line, still prevalent multigenerational arrangements in China are beginning to be perceived as increasingly undesirable, with government and mass media promoting hegemonic childhood ideals (Binah-Pollak, 2014). However, based on the data presented in this chapter, it is

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<sup>8</sup>Definition of Fluid. Cambridge online dictionary [accessed 11/11/2022]. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fluid>.

important to recover here the notions of family network and care as a multidimensional resource that may be exchanged through proximate caring practices, proxy caring practices or at-a-distance care (Baldassar & Merla, 2014), thereby enabling this fluidity in childcare arrangements. In doing so, it incorporates not only a broad range of caregivers in China (such as great-grandparents or aunts) but also ‘flexible, mobile caregivers’ (Zhou, 2013, p. 292) such as the family (flying) grandparents. As the fieldwork shows, through relatedness (Carsten, 2000) even non-blood related Spanish caregivers may be incorporated into the migrants’ descendant’s family (as a third grandmother).

Third, and finally, is the transnational engagement dimension: New media and modes to relate at-a-distance (Madianou, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2012) appear to be essential in enabling a fluid interconnected social experience across countries, for example, by enabling daily contact with their mothers and friends while in China. In addition, beyond this dual frame, flowing to third countries and enabling the sustaining of the relations initiated in the summer camps, either through direct interaction (messages, calls, etc.) or through ambient co-presence or peripheral awareness about their lives (Madianou, 2016).

In summary, this chapter unveils the fluid nature of the childhoods of Zhejiangese migrants’ descendants, underlining the key role of flexibility and mobility in those – both physical and virtual. However, although the research data have revealed this fluid condition, due to length restrictions, the role of children’s agency as well as that of structural and material constraints and cultural patterns in shaping the flows couldn’t be addressed in depth in this chapter. This further consideration had been explored elsewhere (Lamas-Abraira, 2021) in a method wherein the minor’s agency is vindicated, thereby going beyond the children as objects approach (Dobson, 2009).

## Notes

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### Appendix: Questionnaire (English Translation)

Sex: Female. .... Male .....

Year of birth: .....

Family size (no of members): .....

1. Place of birth: .....
  2. Place of residence: .....
  3. Who do you live with? (Mark all that apply)
  4. Did you live in China during your childhood?
    - Yes..... how many years? .....
    - No
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Father               | <input type="checkbox"/> Father               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mother               | <input type="checkbox"/> Mother               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Older brother        | <input type="checkbox"/> Older brother        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Younger brother      | <input type="checkbox"/> Younger brother      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Older sister         | <input type="checkbox"/> Older sister         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Younger sister       | <input type="checkbox"/> Younger sister       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandfather | <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandfather |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandmother | <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandmother |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandfather | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandfather |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandmother | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandmother |

5. Who was your main caregiver during your childhood? (Mark all that

<b>Family Member</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>Abroad</b>
Father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older brother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older sister	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal great grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal great grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal great grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal great grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal uncle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal aunt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal uncle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal aunt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cousins	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Foreign hired caregiver	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chinese hired caregiver	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

apply)

6. Nowadays (summertime) in China, who do you live with?
7. How many times have you visited China in summertime?
- This is my first time
  - Two times
  - Three or more times
8. Would you like to come back to China next summer?
- Yes
  - No
9. Would you like to live in China?
- Yes
  - No
10. In your family, who was the first to migrate?



- Parents' generation
  - Grandparents' generation
11. Do you have siblings living in China?

- Yes
- No

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Father               | <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal uncle             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mother               | <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal aunt              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Older brother        | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal uncle             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Younger brother      | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal aunt              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Older sister         | <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal great grandfather |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Younger sister       | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal great grandmother |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandfather | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal great grandfather |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandmother | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal great grandmother |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandfather | <input type="checkbox"/> Cousins                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandmother | <input type="checkbox"/> Hired caregiver            |

12. In which country live your parents? .....
13. How many years have they lived abroad?
14. How many siblings do you have?

Older brothers:  
Older sisters:

Father:  
Mother:  
Older brother: ....

Older sister: ....  
Younger brother: ...  
Younger sister:

Younger brothers:

---

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Primary school	<input type="checkbox"/> Primary school
<input type="checkbox"/> Middle school	<input type="checkbox"/> Middle school
<input type="checkbox"/> High school	<input type="checkbox"/> High school
<input type="checkbox"/> University	<input type="checkbox"/> University

---

Younger sisters:

Father	Mother
<input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant owner	<input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant owner
<input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant worker	<input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant worker
<input type="checkbox"/> Store owner	<input type="checkbox"/> Store owner
<input type="checkbox"/> Store worker	<input type="checkbox"/> Store worker
<input type="checkbox"/> Import/export business owner	<input type="checkbox"/> Import/export business owner
<input type="checkbox"/> Other business (owner)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other business (owner)
<input type="checkbox"/> Another sector (worker)	<input type="checkbox"/> Another sector (worker)

15/16. Which is the education level of parents?

Father	Mother
<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily
<input type="checkbox"/> Several times a week	<input type="checkbox"/> Several times a week
<input type="checkbox"/> Once per week	<input type="checkbox"/> Once per week
<input type="checkbox"/> Every two weeks	<input type="checkbox"/> Every two weeks
<input type="checkbox"/> More than two weeks	<input type="checkbox"/> More than two weeks

17. Parents' work

Father	Mother
<input type="checkbox"/> Voice call	<input type="checkbox"/> Voice call
<input type="checkbox"/> Video call	<input type="checkbox"/> Video call
<input type="checkbox"/> Send WeChat message	<input type="checkbox"/> Send WeChat message
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: .....	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: .....

18. During summertime in China, how often do you talk with your parents?

Frequency	Means
<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Voice call
<input type="checkbox"/> Several times a week	<input type="checkbox"/> Video call
<input type="checkbox"/> Once per week	<input type="checkbox"/> Send WeChat message
<input type="checkbox"/> Every two weeks	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: .....
<input type="checkbox"/> More than two weeks	

17. How do you communicate with your parents? (Mark all that apply)

19. How often do you talk to your siblings? How do you communicate?

20. Normally, with your siblings you speak in... (mark all that apply)

- Mandarin
- Chinese dialect
- Language of the country of residence

---

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Mandarin	<input type="checkbox"/> Mandarin
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese dialect	<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese dialect
<input type="checkbox"/> Language of the residence country	<input type="checkbox"/> Language of the residence country
<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Other

---

- Other

---

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Native	<input type="checkbox"/> Native
<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good
<input type="checkbox"/> Basic	<input type="checkbox"/> Basic
<input type="checkbox"/> Bad	<input type="checkbox"/> Bad
<input type="checkbox"/> Very bad	<input type="checkbox"/> Very bad

---

21/23. Normally, with your parents you speak in... (mark all that apply)

---

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Very good	<input type="checkbox"/> Very good
<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good
<input type="checkbox"/> Normal	<input type="checkbox"/> Normal
<input type="checkbox"/> Bad	<input type="checkbox"/> Bad
<input type="checkbox"/> Very bad	<input type="checkbox"/> Very bad

---

24/25. Language skills of your parents in the language of immigration country:

26. How would you rate your relationship with your parents?

27. Do you have extra escolar classes?

Yes: .....

	<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
Affectionate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understanding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strict	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Old thinking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Open minded/modern	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Controlling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't care about me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

No

<b>Sentence</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
He/she is always busy at work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she give me less freedom than that of my friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she is very strict with me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she do not care about me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she value me a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she is very different to me because they grow up in China	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

28. How will you define your parents?

29. Do you agree with these sentences? (Mark if yes)

30. Do you suffer racist attitudes in the country you live in?

- Daily
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not often
- Never

31. If you live out of China, are your friends Chinese?

- Most of them
- Some of them
- Few of them
- None

32. When you come to China, your friends are overseas Chinese?

- Most of them
- Some of them

Few of them

Weekly Day	Weekend
<input type="checkbox"/> Tide up my room	<input type="checkbox"/> Tide up my room
<input type="checkbox"/> Wash my clothes	<input type="checkbox"/> Wash my clothes
<input type="checkbox"/> Preparing dishes	<input type="checkbox"/> Preparing dishes
<input type="checkbox"/> Dishwashing	<input type="checkbox"/> Dishwashing
<input type="checkbox"/> Help at family business	<input type="checkbox"/> Help at family business
<input type="checkbox"/> Care elderly	<input type="checkbox"/> Care elderly
<input type="checkbox"/> Care siblings	<input type="checkbox"/> Care siblings

None

33. In a normal day in the country you live, what do you do?

34. Do you want to do when in the next years? (Mark all that apply)

Study in China

Study in the country I live

Study abroad: .....

Work in China (family business)

Work in China (non-family business)

Work in the country I live (family business)

Work in the country I live (family business)

Work anywhere else abroad

35. What would you like as a profession? .....

36. Where will you like to live as an adult?

## Chapter 4

# Transformations of Early Childhood in Japan: From Free Play to Extended Education

*Frederick de Moll and Akihide Inaba*

### Abstract

In recent decades, childhood in Japan has undergone significant transformations. Government policies geared at boosting women's labor force participation, a declining fertility rate, rising costs of having children on the one hand, and increased spending on public childcare and support measures for families, on the other hand, contribute to these ongoing changes. Having only one child is becoming the norm while mothers' role in society is shifting. The traditional family structure is moving from the previously predominant male breadwinner model to more dual-earner families. Children now spend significant amounts of time in care and education institutions.

In this chapter, we analyze current configurations of early childhood in institutions and the family from a policy perspective and regarding children's predominant education and care arrangements. Drawing on various survey data sets and evidence from demographic statistics to pedagogical ethnographies, we look at how childcare policies and families reshape the organization of children's lives and outline how institutions and educators create learning experiences aligned with the values of a collectivist society. However, despite being deeply rooted in traditional child-rearing goals, many parents also subscribe to rigorous educational arrangements from early childhood onwards to prepare children for success in a competitive education system. The chapter finishes with an outlook on future directions of how policymakers and the ongoing institutionalization of childhood continue to change children's lives.

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*Keywords:* Early childhood; educational practices; parenting; gender relations; care arrangements; Japan

## Introduction

In recent decades, childhood in Japan has undergone significant transformations. Government policies geared at a higher labor force participation of married women, a declining fertility rate, rising costs of children on the one hand, and increased spending on public childcare and support measures for families, on the other hand, have contributed to these changes (Ogawa et al., 2009). Having only one child is becoming more common. As women's and, therefore, mothers' role in society is shifting, the traditional family structure has moved from the previously predominant male breadwinner model to more dual-earner families. Mothers' participation in the labor market is also a consequence of the growing job insecurity of their husbands. Inequalities in Japanese society are growing, and parents are often concerned about their children's competitiveness in the education system. The use of cram schools (*juku*) is widespread, and children attend extra lessons outside their regular school hours from early primary school onwards.

Parents are now in growing need of institutions providing long hours of education and care to children soon after birth, which kickstarted a reorganization of early childhood and an expansion of early daycare (Newport, 2000). Although attending a daycare facility is neither compulsory nor free in Japan, early childhood is highly institutionalized, with nearly all children from three years old attending one of the three main types of preschool institutions: kindergarten (*youchien*), day nursery (*hoikusho*), or an ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) center (*nintei kodomo-en*). Therefore, early childhood institutions are crucial in defining intergenerational relations beyond the family.

Despite the continuing modernization of Japanese society and its institutions, traditional educational goals like playfulness, empathy and sociability are still highly endorsed by Japanese parents and appear to dominate child-rearing practices in early childhood institutions and families (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Izumi-Taylor & Rogers, 2001).<sup>1</sup> However, as children transition into primary school, parents begin to adjust children's lives to the expectations of the standardized test system that structures Japanese schools.

Using data from several national surveys and drawing on a wide range of studies from sociology, anthropology and educational research, we first outline the ongoing transformations of parenthood, family structure and childcare policies in Japan and investigate their effects on the organization of children's lives. Second, we discuss the

---

<sup>1</sup>In his history of middle-class childhood in early twentieth-century Japan, Jones (2010) argued that the ideology of the "childlike child" was introduced and upheld by established urban elites to counter the emerging new middle-class construction of the child as the "superior student," which became dominant in the postwar era. However, Japanese parents today still embrace the children's right to play freely and show more positive attitudes toward children having unstructured time than parents, for example, in the United Kingdom and France (Gleave, 2009).

predominant normative approaches to education, the cultural logics of child-rearing and how they shape adult–child interactions in childcare institutions and the family. We provide examples of how educators create socialization experiences geared toward becoming members of a collectivist society. Toward the end of the chapter, we move on to middle childhood and discuss how intensive parenting practices and educational activities outside preschool institutions and schools increasingly shape children’s lives. We look at different forms of extended education, such as cram school, arts and athletic activities. Although social class differences in Japan might not be as vivid and profound as in Western countries such as the United States (Lareau, 2011), the anxiety among parents that their children might be left behind is amplified. Therefore, more and more parents arrange for intense learning opportunities for their children to prepare them for successfully applying to private and elite secondary schooling. The competition has led to increased participation in cram school during primary school. This recent development contrasts with the cultural norms and pedagogical philosophy prevalent in early childhood to give children time to play and gradually adapt to societal norms. Thus, the organization of early childhood in Japan reflects a collectivist but simultaneously success-oriented society.<sup>2</sup>

## Changing Family Patterns and the Normalization of the “Only Child”

Two trends can be identified that are reshaping family patterns and, as a result, children’s lives in Japan. The *first* well-known fact about Japan is its severely low fertility rate, which among the great industrial nations is only rivaled by Italy (Trifiletti, 2006). The decline in childbirths has a significant impact on childhood not only because for children it means that there are fewer other children, but given the lowering number of children within families, children also grow up more often as a couple’s only child; both developments reflect in children’s early childcare arrangements.

The *second* trend is that it has become more common for mothers to reenter the workforce shortly after childbirth. Traditionally, Japanese women would stay home and willingly carry the largest share of care work, which has long been widely believed to be the ideal of motherhood (Watanabe, 1999). Devotion to one’s children and self-sacrifice were long praised as the pathway to a woman’s happiness and rewards, with the hardships of child-rearing being the source of maternal pleasure (Sasagawa, 2006, p. 131). Today, the increasing cost of living and economic needs, alongside the global trend for women to build their own careers and seek employment for personal fulfillment and financial benefits due to the popularization of higher education among

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<sup>2</sup>The combination of success orientation and collectivism is, of course, not unique to Japan. In a recent edited volume by Chen and Lau (2022), authors from different Asian countries report how childhood relates to notions of success and collectivist values as represented in various outlets such as children’s books and movies. Regarding the organization of daily life, Gu (2021) discusses the impact of values and beliefs on parenting practices geared toward educational success in China.



women, are changing women's approaches to family life. This trend is reflected in the dramatic growth of maternal employment over the past decades. This section will present statistics underscoring these two trends that have uprooted the dominant configurations of childhood in Japan.

- (1) Expanding on the first issue, the low fertility rate, we can see that, like in Western nations, the lowering fertility rate has been considered a serious political issue in Japan.<sup>3</sup> The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has gradually declined since the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> In 2021, the TFR was 1.30 children per woman and, therefore, well below 1.5, which has been hypothesized as the threshold of the “low-fertility trap” (Lutz et al., 2006). As Lutz et al. (2006) argue, low fertility, in the long run, generates a generation that is used to seeing a significant fraction of the adult population not having children or only one child, which over time shapes people's mindset and makes it more acceptable to prefer having no or only a few children. These trends were long thought to be primarily caused by a decreasing marriage rate in younger generations. As a result, the nonmarital childbirth rate in Japan has been meager. In 2019, the nonmarital rate of total childbirths was only 2.38%. This shows that the decreasing rate of childbirth in Japan is closely connected to the decline in marriage. In 2020, 25.7% of men and 16.4% of women were unmarried at age 50.

Although for years, the number of children per couple did not seem to be low, thus not delivering an explanation for the low birth rate, the situation is now slowly changing. According to the 16th National Fertility Survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS), the number of children per couple in 2021 stood at 1.90 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022). This figure used to be around 2.2 between 1977 and 2002. Since 2002 the number is gradually going down. Regarding the final number of children per couple, the mode value in 2021 is still two children (50.8%), but the second most frequent value is one child (19.7%). Although, in 1997, 23.8% of couples still had three children. That percentage

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<sup>3</sup>The Japanese government has responded to the low fertility rate by funding surveys and studies to find out the root causes of the lowering birth rate and by implementing a series of pro-family policies all geared at raising the birth rate, though without successfully turning the tide (Raymo et al., 2015). Rosenbluth (2007) argues that family-friendly policies and improving childcare services will not convince women of having more children as long as the labor market stays inhospitable to women. Currently, the labor market requires women to focus their efforts and time on building their careers if they want to secure the jobs they desire. Permanent full-time work contracts guarantee indefinite employment with gradually increasing wages but typically long, inflexible work hours that are hardly compatible with motherhood and family life (Nagase, 2018). In January 2023, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced “unprecedented countermeasures” to simultaneously increase women's occupational opportunities and double the childcare budget (The Japan Times, 2023).

<sup>4</sup>Consider that in the 1940s Japanese women on average bore 4.5 children, which fueled the booming postwar economy and helped build the solid social welfare state that is now in danger.

dropped to 18.6 in 2021. The number of couples without children has been gradually increasing (7.7% in 2021), although it is still low compared to many Western nations. We can see from these changes that having “only one child” is gradually normalizing in Japan. This trend is most robust in couples who got married at around 35 years and older. Fig. 1 shows the mean of the ideal number of children, the intended number of children and the actual number of children by women’s age at their first marriage in 2015 (The 15th National Fertility Survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research). All three indicators decrease as the age of marriage increases. For those who got married when they were older than 35 years, the intended number is 1.16, and their mean of the actual number of children is only 0.7.

- (2) Japan’s second significant change in young married couples is the increasing employment rate of women after childbirth, which bears wide-ranging consequences. Between 2015 and 2019, 42.6% of mothers went back to work after their first childbirth, and 74.7% of regularly employed mothers were continuously working after childbirth. In the late 1980s, only 5.5% of

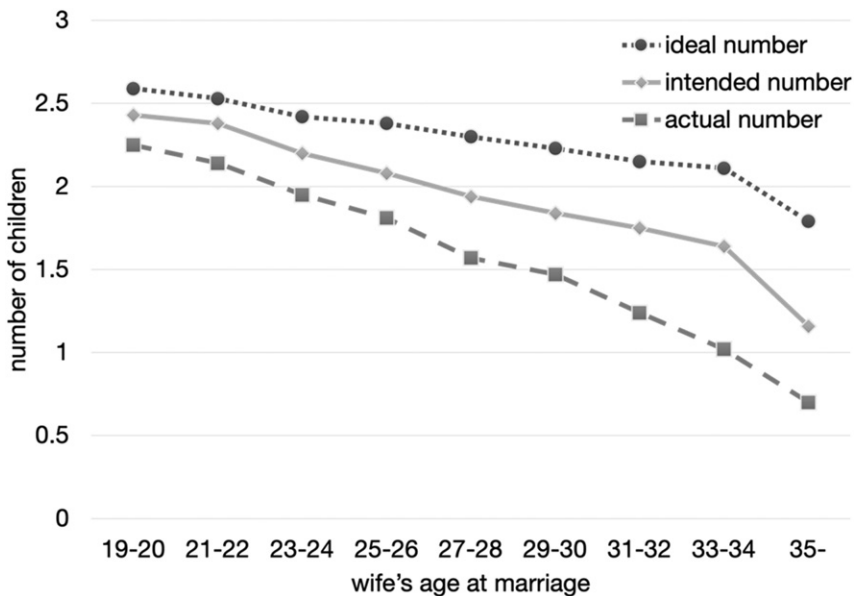


Fig. 1. The Ideal Number of Children, the Intended Number and the Actual Number of Children by Wife’s Age at Marriage. *Source:* The 15th 2015 Japanese National Fertility Survey (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022a).

mothers returned to work after having their first child (National Institute of Population and Social Security, 2022). Today, women are aware of the highly gendered division of care work. Hence, they are less likely to give up employment to have more than one child. Facing the decision between having a career and having children, more than a few women compromise between having a career and starting a family by having only one child and returning to work soon after (Brinton & Oh, 2019). However, the “male breadwinner” and “woman as homemaker” family model has by no means become obsolete (Tachibanaki, 2010; Tokuhiko, 2009). In 2016, 38% of households still had a full-time homemaker (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2016), while men’s time spent on unpaid care work was less than an hour per day (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019). So, many women still quit their jobs to commit their entire time to child-rearing and other care work.

Nevertheless, the ongoing changes to family patterns mean that many infants and children have dual-earning parents. In this situation, the question of who takes care of their children has become a social issue in multiple ways. First, parents need to select a childcare institution to care for their children during parental working hours; second, as care institutions usually do not cover the whole day, parents might have to combine professional childcare with private care providers such as babysitters and other family members; third, as parents increasingly organize their children’s daily lives outside the core family, some might decide to enroll their children in additional educational programs and so-called “enrichment activities.” As in Western societies where social class differences and the pressure on parents to train their children to “get ahead” (Smyth, 2016) from early childhood through the preschool years are increasing (Stefansen & Farstad, 2010; Vincent et al., 2008), parents in Japan – and especially mothers – are part of the globally expanding discourse around intensive parenting during early childhood as a critical period in cognitive development (Smyth & Craig, 2017). While the use of “enrichment activities” and classed patterns of child-rearing in early childhood has not yet been fully explored for Japan, there is evidence from different East Asian nations showing that parents have added conscious choices of care and education institutions and “enrichment activities” to their educational work (Göransson et al., 2022). For example, using Japanese panel data of children from primary school third grade to junior high school third grade (during six years in a three-wave survey), Nakanishi (2017) showed that mothers holding university or college degrees tended to use storytelling and extracurricular education for their children more often than those having high school degrees. Also, extracurricular education positively affected achievement scores, and children of highly educated mothers tended to get higher scores.

The following sections will discuss children’s education and care arrangements in more detail. However, it is crucial to understand that mothers still do the largest share of household and care work, even if both parents are regularly

employed, and children increasingly attend nonfamily care and education services.

## Care and Education Institutions

Although attending a daycare facility is not compulsory, early childhood in Japan is highly institutionalized with two central childcare institutions: kindergarten (*Yochien*) and day nursery (*Hoikujo*), which cater to different parental needs and partially different age groups of children. The day nursery is a *welfare institution* for children 0–6 years old. Contrary to kindergarten, children can stay there from morning to evening (in exceptional cases overnight). The day nursery is mainly used by working mother families. In 2020, there were 23,759 nurseries with 2,040,000 children enrolled. As more and more women continue to have jobs postnatal, the need for nurseries is rapidly growing, making the shortage of daycare centers a severe social issue in metropolitan areas. At the same time, the number of children enrolling in kindergartens is decreasing.

Kindergarten in Japan is an *educational institution* for preschoolers from 3 to 6 years old. Children go to kindergarten for two or three years, but 3 years has been the norm in recent years. Its history began at the end of the nineteenth century. Over time, the number of both public and private kindergartens increased. Families with a homemaker mother traditionally use the kindergarten because care hours are shorter than at day nurseries. Most kindergartens are open from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., which makes them less attractive for working mothers. In 2020, 1,080,000 children were enrolled in 9,698 kindergartens. Although kindergartens and day nurseries historically have been entirely distinctive institutions run by different ministries, they are becoming more and more alike. According to Ben-Ari (2005) and Peak (1991), the two types of institutions follow different philosophies, styles and guidelines but provide similar learning experiences to children.

In 2006, a new childcare institution entered the stage. Given the growing demand for longer care hours and care institutions better adjusted to families' and mothers' needs, the Japanese government introduced ECCE centers (*Nintei kodomo-en*). These institutions offer four types of care: (1) there are hybrid institutions that combine kindergarten and nursery, (2) there are kindergartens with daycare function, (3) there are daycare centers that offer the services of a kindergarten and (4) there are local variants approved by the local government.<sup>5</sup>

In 2020, 43.2% of the five-year-olds were enrolled in kindergarten, 40.7% at nurseries and 14.4% at one of the new ECCE institutions. Only 1.7% of children did not attend any early childcare institution. For three-year-olds, the attendance rate is about 95%. Although almost all children of a given cohort are enrolled in childcare services, making it uncertain whether childcare policies can leverage the provision of institutional childcare to increase the fertility rate, the Japanese

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<sup>5</sup>In 2020, there were 6,093 type 1 institutions for about 786,000 children, 1,246 type 2 institutions for about 162,000 children, 1,164 type 3 institutions for about 110,000 children and 82 local institutions for about 5,000 children.

government has put forth a range of pro-family policies involving financial benefits for children and free services.

## Social Policies for Childcare

One of the primary drivers of social policies to restructure family life, parenting and childcare services is the fight against the declining birth rate (Boling, 2015). In this regard, Japan's policies are comparable to the social policies in Germany and other countries facing fertility crises. Consider that for the 2010 birth cohort, the representative Japanese *Longitudinal Survey of Newborns in the Twenty-first Century* (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan [MHLW], 2015) ( $n = 30,535$ ) shows that 30.9% of parents used childcare services (mainly nursery) for the 1.5-years-old child (second wave conducted in December 2011), and 39.7% made use of the childcare service when their child was 2.5 years old (third wave conducted in December 2012).<sup>6</sup> When their child had reached 1.5 years, 50.9% of the parents did not use childcare services because they did not have any needs, and 12.3% did not use services although they wanted to use them. At the age of 2.5, 44.7% of parents had still not used any services as they did not have any needs; 9.8% did not use childcare although they wanted to use it. For the 2010 cohort, about 77% of mothers were not regularly employed when their children were 1.5 years. In the following years, to increase childcare use, gender equality in employment and halt the lowering fertility rate, the Japanese government entirely cut the fees for childcare for children from three to five years old. Since 2019, kindergarten, daycare and ECCE centers can be used free of charge (with some exceptions). For low-income households, childcare is also free from infancy to 2 years.

Another crucial social policy is medical insurance for children. Japan has a universal social insurance system. For preschoolers, parents pay one-fifth of the total medical charges for their child's treatment, and the medical insurance pays the residual four-fifth. Some local governments (municipalities) provide more support; for example, in some places, the medical charge has been free for adolescents by 15 years old. These patterns vary with municipalities regarding income limitation, children's age and coverage of medical procedures (for example, allowing hospitalization or not).

In addition to the financial benefits of free childcare and highly subsidized medical care, the state pays parents a monthly childcare allowance (*Jido Teate*). In 2022, the monthly allowance amounts to ¥15,000 (ca. \$115 in January 2023) for children aged 0–3, and monthly ¥10,000 (ca. \$77) for ages three until finishing primary school (for the third or subsequent children, the allowance increases to

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<sup>6</sup>The *Longitudinal Survey of Newborns in the twenty-first Century* is a panel study conducted yearly by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare since 2001. A second cohort started in 2010 and is the basis for the statistics reported here. In the remainder of the chapter, we consistently refer to this survey as the *MHLW survey on babies born in 2010*. The 2001 cohort is used for comparisons in later sections of the chapter and referred to as *MHLW survey on babies born in 2001*.

¥15,000), and monthly ¥10,000 for junior high school students. Lower-income single parents receive additional benefits (*Jido Fuyo Teate*). Looking back at how primarily single mothers suffered from financial burdens attached to raising a child and having to work for a living, the new policies are certainly an improvement (Peng, 2003). Although some scholars criticize the low amounts of the various child allowances (Hagiwara, 2016), overall, the circumstances of raising a child have improved.

## The Growing Diversification of Childcare Arrangements

As discussed above, with the “age of the homemaker mother” slowly ending, the changing family patterns generate the need for parents to use professional care but still look for private care providers to cover the remaining hours. The *MHLW survey on babies born in 2010* provides the best estimation of how parents organize their children’s care needs. Table 1 shows the frequencies of parents’ use of different daily caregivers for children aged 2.5 years (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan, 2015). The table combines data from the *MHLW survey on babies born in 2001* and the *MHLW survey on babies born in 2010*. Parents were asked who is involved in daily care for their child, if the mother is working and if the mother is a homemaker. The questionnaire provided a selection of multiple

Table 1. Percentages of Daily Caregivers for 2.5 Years Old Children in the MHLW Survey on Babies Born in 2001 and the MHLW Survey on Babies Born in 2010.

	Mother	Father	Mother’s Mother	Mother’s Father	Father’s Mother	Day Nursery	Babysitter
<i>2010 cohort</i>							
Total	92.2	49.2	15.1	6.4	8.7	39.7	0.5
Working mother	84.5	53.3	20.3	8.6	11.6	77.8	0.9
Homemaker mother	99.2	45.9	10.6	4.3	6.1	5.9	0.1
<i>2001 cohort</i>							
Total	93.3	44.8	14.6	5.7	11.9	26.2	0.4
Working mother	82.0	44.4	22.7	8.8	18.3	65.7	0.9
Homemaker mother	99.4	45.2	10.2	4.0	8.4	4.8	0.1

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan (2015).

Note: The statistics for the 2001 cohort are based on  $n = 41,532$ ; the 2010 cohort comprises  $n = 30,483$ .

possible answers, including various caregivers within the (extended) family, paid care and institutional care. At first sight, the results for the two cohorts do not differ much. In both cohorts, mothers take the top share in care work, irrespective of their employment status. However, we can observe interesting differences between the first cohort and the second cohort a decade later in the involvement of fathers. In 2001 and 2010, fathers' care rates were around 45% when their wives were homemakers. However, in households with working mothers, fathers' participation in care work has increased in the 2010 cohort compared to 2001. The use of grandparents as caregivers seems somewhat random. It will likely depend on changing availabilities, although we can see that working mothers rely heavily on their mothers (i.e., the child's grandmother) to help with children's care. The use of day nurseries has increased substantially, especially among households with working mothers. This figure is about 78% in the 2010 cohort. Although it is often believed that grandparents fulfill an essential role when mothers are working, mothers don't rely on them as much as on daycare. In essence, the care work is now mainly done by the mothers and institutional care.

A recent survey reveals more details about changing patterns of how families organize childcare. The 16th National Fertility Survey ([National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022b](#): repeated cross-sectional survey) shows that working mothers with one-year-olds have received less support from the mother's parents in the years after 2000. Although grandparents still fulfill an essential role for working parents ([Yoda & Shintani, 2018](#)), social policies have gradually enabled working parents to organize childcare even if their grandparents are not readily available, a common issue in metropolitan areas like Tokyo.

We can observe similar trends in the *Nationwide Survey on Families and Children* (*Zenkoku Katei Doko Chosa*), conducted by the [National Institute of Population and Social Security Research \(2020\)](#). However, this repeated cross-sectional survey shows that grandparents still have an essential function in emergencies in childcare.

In households with homemaker mothers, child-rearing is mainly done by mothers, while using day nurseries with extended opening hours is less common, and the fathers are involved to some extent. Interestingly, unlike in many other nations where nonrelative care is more prevalent, the rate of babysitter use is tiny in Japan.<sup>7</sup> One reason why nonrelative caregivers are almost inexistent in Japan might be the government's long-standing unwillingness to introduce foreign domestic care workers. Therefore, as the number of working mothers is increasing, fathers' participation in care work and childcare is slowly becoming a social necessity, and traditional gender roles must adjust accordingly. For fathers

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<sup>7</sup>In Western nations like Australia, England and Germany, nonrelative caregivers like nannies and babysitters in early childhood are used by around 3%–5% of parents. In Canada, the numbers are even higher, with about 18% of children receiving unregulated, nonrelative care. However, statistics do not differentiate between young and older children (for an overview of the situation in Australia, England and Canada, see [Adamson, 2015](#); for Germany, see [de Moll & Betz, 2014](#)).

of preschool children, the average hours of household work (including childcare and other care activities) per day were 1 hour and 54 minutes in 2021. In contrast, this figure stood at 48 minutes in 2001 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, 2022). Time spent on childcare was 1 hour and 5 minutes per day (and only 25 minutes [sic] in 2001). For mothers, the average household work per day was 7 hours and 41 minutes in 2001 and 7 hours and 28 minutes in 2021. The average childcare time was 3 hours, 3 minutes in 2001 and 3 hours, 54 minutes in 2021. Even though care work in Japan still is strongly gendered, these trends indicate that the gender division of household work is gradually leveling out. Interestingly, the average childcare hours of mothers were increasing even though fathers' participation increased. These trends may show intensive parenting.

One of the main factors maintaining the gender division of labor in Japan for many decades was men's long working hours (Brinton & Oh, 2019; Iwai & Inaba, 2000). However, in 2015, the Japanese government endorsed the *Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace* (*Josei Katsuyaku Suishin Hou*). This act requires companies to introduce corporate efforts to improve employees' work-life balance, encourage men to take parental leave and promote women to managerial positions. The latest trends in parents' organization of childcare might reflect the early effects of Japan's recent social policies geared toward greater gender equality and the restructuring of family life.

## Approaches to Child-Rearing in Early Childhood

Child-rearing approaches and practices are strongly influenced by normative beliefs, which shape adult-child relations at home and in institutions and influence peer interactions among children, especially in early childhood. In Japan, normative beliefs about young children and early childhood education seem somewhat paradoxical, given the strong emphasis on performance and conformity that shape the East Asian school systems (Yoda & Shintani, 2018). Japan has a pedagogical and ideological divide between preschool and school education. Although like in most OECD countries, the preparation for school has gained more attention in recent years, Japanese care institutions traditionally emphasize *sociability* and *playfulness* as critical educational goals. Children are believed to need nurturing and preservation as they are considered innocent and immature (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2014). Educational approaches in the family are mostly in line with professional goals and practices. Mothers and fathers emphasize kindness, sensitivity, politeness and smooth peer interactions as important educational goals in early childhood (Holloway & Nagase, 2016). In this section, we first take a closer look at approaches to childcare and education in institutions before moving on to educational beliefs and practices in the home.

Education and care practices in early childhood institutions in Japan have been at the center of research efforts for many years (Hayashi et al., 2009; Hoffman, 2000; Nakatsubo et al., 2022). In particular, comparative education and anthropology scholars have shown great interest in the Japanese approaches to



childcare and child-rearing. Tobin (2011) argues that as Japan is rapidly modernizing its institutions and society, people have become concerned about a potential loss of the Japanese culture and way of life. Since mothers have become more involved in the labor market and the family structure has changed over time, with institutional care becoming more important than care within the (wider) family, institutions are tasked with transmitting cultural traits, behaviors and beliefs that are viewed as traditionally Japanese (Tobin, 2011). Therefore, traditional cultural logics are deeply embedded in professional childcare practices in preschool institutions, even though they are not prescribed by the curriculum or government policies (Hayashi, 2011). As Tobin (2011, p. 20) puts it, early childhood institutions are “islands of cultural continuity in a sea of social change.”

Traditionally, Japanese preschool institutions prioritize extended times for play and free peer interactions with little direct instruction and interventions by educators (Lewis, 1995; Peak, 1991).<sup>8</sup> The noninterventionist approach of educators aims to foster children’s interpersonal skills, their problem-solving capabilities and provides various opportunities for peer learning. As Tobin (2011) points out, early childhood educators purposefully provide much time for free play to promote children’s emotional and social development. In addition, solidarity and taking care of others are especially encouraged in mixed-age interactions in day nurseries, where older children can interact with infants and teach them skills such as using the toilet without adult help (Tobin, 2011). Japanese educators often hesitate to intervene and rather stand by when children engage in physical fights unless there is a chance of physical harm. As Tobin (2005) explains, this can seem quite disturbing to the eyes of Western childcare professionals. However, educators’ noninterventionism reflects a conscious approach called *Mimamoru* (watch and guard), or *teaching by watching* (Nakatsubo et al., 2022). This strategy aims to promote children’s cognitive and social development (Hayashi et al., 2009). Interestingly, although widely practiced, the approach is not part of official guidelines. Still, when asked about their educational approach, educators explain that intentionally withholding an intervention allows children to develop sociability and explore the effects and consequences of their actions (Nakatsubo et al., 2022). Matsui (2021) explains that educators acquire the *Mimamoru* approach through experience and reflections with colleagues; educators also consider children’s feedback on play and relationships with adults and children. In this line, Hayashi and Tobin (2015) describe how early childhood

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<sup>8</sup>Jones (2010) traces the child-centered approach in Japanese pedagogy back to the 1910s and 1920s when educational reformers, kindergarten practitioners, children’s book authors and established middle-class parents advocated children’s freedom of expression and their right to play. During those years, public spaces, times and cultural content for children in Japan were significantly extended with the rise of kindergartens, playgrounds, children’s books, toys and the building of parks and zoos. Japan was much in sync with similar endeavors of reforming institutional pedagogy and child-rearing practices in the Western hemisphere (Kiuchi, 1997). Japanese scholars welcomed Western pedagogical concepts and translated and popularized the ideas of Ellen Key and others (Dahlgren, 1996).

educators have embodied specific feedback techniques and ways of teaching through facial expressions and gestures, allowing them to intervene or interact with children without physical contact. The practice of *Mimamoru* provides an example of a Japanese approach to early childhood education that shows how educators turn free play into social learning experiences for children. In addition, the practice can be seen as part of the more general approach of providing group experiences that foster the ability to interact harmoniously with peers. The notion that playtime is a significant learning opportunity is underpinned by the idea that children build social and emotional knowledge and skills by interacting with others and becoming aware of their needs and feelings (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010).

Prioritizing empathy, sociability and fun over promoting talents and early academic skills is not only a standardized approach in early childhood institutions but deeply embedded in parents' thinking. In the 16th National Fertility Survey (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022b), parents were also asked about their reasons for having children and their child-rearing goals. About 80% of parents said that they had children "because the presence of children makes life more fun." This figure has been consistently high since 2002, indicating that parents' purpose for having children is expressive rather than instrumental. Through the analysis of large-scale personal interviews, Holloway (2010) concluded that Japanese mothers generally did not prioritize developing their children's distinguished excellence but gave high weight to cooperativeness or independence. In a repeated cross-sectional survey conducted by the Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute in the years 2005 ( $n = 2,931$ ), 2010 ( $n = 3,431$ ) and 2015 ( $n = 3,838$ ), mothers of preschool children were asked about their educational goals (multiple answers). In each year, over 50% said they aimed to develop their child's sympathy with others, and around 45% indicated that they find it essential to spend much time interacting with their child. In contrast, "bringing out their talents" and "having them study numbers or letters/characters" were rarely endorsed by parents (less than 15%) (Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2016). These numbers underscore Japanese parents' high emphasis on playfulness and sociability, thereby endorsing educational goals aligned with professional educators' goals and practices. Interestingly, the numbers also relate to findings from comparative research by Zhou et al. (2007), who showed that Japanese parents have lower expectations of their children's educational development in various other dimensions, such as willpower, morality and attention to diet than Chinese and Korean parents, thus putting less pressure on their children's development. Evidence from earlier psychological research into mother-child interactions in Japan found that Japanese mothers encourage their five-month-old children to make eye contact and interact more frequently with them than American mothers (Bornstein et al., 1985). In this line, Tamis-LeMonda et al. (1992) found that Japanese mothers routinely teach their older infants relatedness through pretend play, for example, by encouraging them to take care of a doll. In contrast, mothers in the United States spend more time on cognitive learning, e.g., by showing their children sorting toys.

Parental goals and styles seem to shift during the transition into primary school when competition and performance become more important in children's lives. The playfulness and emphasis on empathy that dominated institutional and parental care and education during the early years fulfilling the function of instilling Japanese culture, habits and styles in children give way to more performance-oriented approaches to parenting. At the same time, as children enter school, social inequalities increase in Japanese family life and the education system, while parental beliefs and practices are more similar in early childhood across social strata (Deuffhard, 2018).

## **Intensive Parenting and the Increasing Role of Extended Education in Early Childhood**

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the interplay of parenting and children's educational success has gained increased attention from social scientists and policymakers in Japan. Special attention has been paid to various forms of *extended education*. There are different understandings of extended education, which can either denote school-based educational efforts outside the formal curriculum or activities that extend children's learning *beyond* school. Our use of the term in this chapter refers to "activities implemented outside of the allotted school time, including before school, after school and during summer/winter vacation" (Kanefuji, 2020, p. 223). Extended education may be strongly linked to formal education, like private tutoring, or provide learning opportunities in areas that do not typically take center stage at school, e.g., athletics and arts. All activities have in common that they provide "organised opportunities for students to have educational experiences throughout the time not engaged in formal instruction" (Kobakidze & Suter, 2020, p. 1). For Japan, extended education is often referred to as shadow education, but the term usually refers to cram school or tutoring. There are two types of shadow education: Children either go to cram school (*juku*) or use correspondence education (*tsūshin tensaku*), an addition to the educational market that emerged in the 1990s. Correspondence education works like a remote *juku* with students receiving study materials by mail or online and submitting their assignments to the providers for feedback. Both types are fee-based, often aligned with state school education's contents and use similar forms of instruction (Stevenson & Baker, 1992). In this section, we focus on diverse activities under the umbrella of extended education that occur in children's lives outside of education (and care) institutions. Since globally, more and more children attend so-called "enrichment activities" (Vincent & Ball, 2007) from early childhood onwards, we chose to look at how frequently children attend different activities from 2.5 years old through the early primary school age. Over the past two decades, scholars have primarily discussed children's involvement in extended education as part of an intensive parenting strategy. Intensive parenting or "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011) is a social phenomenon that was first observed in the United States, where middle-class parents tend to orchestrate their children's lives by enrolling them in a variety of educational activities, enriching

their out-of-school learning experiences with educational trips and engaging them in talks about school (Lareau, 2000, 2015). For Japan, Matsuoka et al. (2015) found that parents with a university degree tend to employ what Honda (2008) calls “rigorous” parenting, a form of intensive parenting that produces a growing level of effort in children during the primary school years. The general assumption among scholars is that extended educational activities tend to increase social inequalities in educational outcomes. Matsuoka (2019) ascribes the specific pattern of rigorous parenting in Japan to the characteristics of the education system.

In contrast to decentralized systems such as the United States and Germany, Japan’s education system is centralized, highly egalitarian and standardized in terms of curriculum and learning materials used by schools (Cummings, 1980). The funding of schools is spread equally over the 47 prefectures to avoid differences in learning opportunities between rural and urban, poor and rich regions. In addition, between-school tracking in upper secondary education induces a form of educational stratification that raises competition (LeTendre et al., 2003). At the end of junior high school, students take admission exams determining the high school that matches their demonstrated ability. The high-school track students attend is crucial for their academic future and life chances (Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010). The competition for an advantageous placement in upper secondary school is highly consequential, prompting parents to increasingly strengthen their children’s academic involvement as children progress through the late primary and lower upper secondary school years. Scholars have addressed this critical issue in various studies.

For example, Matsuoka (2019) reports three main findings. First, he finds that parents’ education level correlates with children’s participation in extracurricular activities, cultural activities and attendance of *juku* (*cram schools*) during the early primary school years. When children are in third grade, college-educated parents practice a form of “concerted cultivation” that resembles what Lareau (2011) described for the United States. Second, during the later years of primary school, parents decrease children’s participation in organized activities and increase the hours spent at *juku*. Drawing on Honda (2008), Matusoka (2019) argues that parents vary the way they cultivate their children intentionally by slowly adjusting children’s lives to the requirements of the education system. Third, as standardized testing becomes more critical in children’s educational careers, parents increasingly regulate children’s time spent on media use. They limit children’s time spent on cultural and extracurricular activities and encourage children to spend more time on academic studying. This pattern is more prevalent in families with highly educated parents. Finally, evidence of inequalities in the use of tutoring during the secondary school years is growing (Matsuoka, 2015), although at least some use of tutoring seems standard. Yamamoto (2015) showed that middle-class parents in Japan incorporate the heavy use of *shadow education* from very early on. Research by Shinogaya and Akabayashi (2013) shows that time spent on studying and private tutoring is shaped by socioeconomic status and positively linked to school performance in primary school.

Irrespective of these classed patterns in using *juku*, extended education plays a substantial role in Japanese children's lives, similar to most East Asian countries. Many parents are eager to promote their children's educational success (Yamamoto, 2015) and invest a lot of money in children's tutoring lessons. Therefore, attending a *juku* is common practice among both primary and (junior) high school students. In addition, many children participate in other forms of extended education. Table 2 shows the use of such activities for children aged 2.5–7.5, using data from the *MHLW survey on babies born in 2010*. At 2.5 years old, 14.2% of children attended some educational activity. This figure rises as children grow older. At the age of 7.5, when children are in the first grade of primary school, 81.7% take extended education classes. However, the declining use of activities other than cram school that Matsuoka (2019) observed for the later primary school years cannot be found during the transition period from early childhood into primary school. During these years, children's participation in any activity outside the family is generally growing.

There are also gendered patterns in children's activities. Swimming was the most frequent activity among boys across all ages; 19.2% used correspondence

Table 2. Children's Extended Educational Activities During Early Childhood and at School Entry by Gender and Age.

	Survey (Children's Age)	3rd (2.5)	4th (3.5)	5th (4.5)	6th (5.5)	7th (6.5)	8th (7.5)
Total of all children		14.2	23.4	38.5	56.6	74.9	81.7
Boys	Cram school			3.5	4.4	11.2	13.4
	Music			5	7.7	9.6	10.0
	Swimming			14.4	23.0	34.3	36.4
	English			9.2	11.7	11.9	12.1
	Correspondence education						19.2
Girls	Cram school			3.8	4.2	10.2	12.7
	Music			14.2	24.9	36.0	38.8
	Swimming			11.5	18.3	27.0	29.5
	English			11.2	14.1	15.4	15.7
	Correspondence education						21.2

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan (2022).

Note: The total numbers refer to the percentages of children doing any activities at a given age. A blank cell means that the category was not assessed. In the third and fourth surveys, participants were only asked if their children participated in any activities, which is why the information of specific activities is missing.

education, and 13.4% went to cram school at the age of 7.5. For girls, swimming was also a frequent activity for all ages, but music lessons (mostly piano lessons) were the most common. Correspondence education was used by 21.2% at age 7.5, higher than boys. Both for boys and girls, we can see nearly one-fifth used correspondence education, and more than one-tenth went to cram school in first grade. Gender differences can be found in music and sports, but not in educational lessons. Going to cram school was 30.4% for boys aged 10.5 years (fourth grade of primary school) and 31.0% for those girls. At the end of primary school, cram school has become the dominant out-of-school learning setting among children (Matsuoka, 2019). However, despite children spending extended time on learning activities during after-school hours, media use and free play are still highly prevalent in their daily lives. About 46.6% of first graders play video games on a given weekday; this figure is 74.5% among fourth graders. Playing video games becomes more common as children grow older. In fourth grade, about 52% play games for more than one hour per day, which is the case for only 28.8% of first graders.

## Conclusion

Early childhood in Japan is currently transforming in multiple ways. Current trends in how parents and institutions structure children's lives are closely related to societal changes. Above all, the dramatic decline in fertility has reshaped social policies regarding family structure, gender equality and care arrangements, with wide-ranging consequences for children's care and education arrangements. As a result, childhood is now more than ever taking place in institutions from soon after birth, and traditional family models and associated care arrangements within the extended family are in decline. At the same time, traditional values and practices are preserved by childcare institutions, which purposefully resemble child-rearing practices that have long been practiced in domestic care arrangements with multiple children and generations present (Tobin, 2011).

Early childcare and education institutions in Japan continue to emphasize sociability and free play. Educators implicitly teach empathy and relatedness to others. Parents share these values and practices during early childhood but become increasingly concerned with a more performance-oriented educational approach when children move on to primary school. As children enter the education system, social inequalities arise in child-rearing approaches and their participation in learning activities outside the home and school. Future research on early childhood in Japan could focus on at least three areas: *First*, more research is needed on how growing social inequalities in Japanese society, rising income inequality and growing immigration might also increase educational inequalities and produce ever-greater competition in the education system and beyond. Researchers will need to address how parents design early education and care arrangements aligned with traditional educational goals on the one hand and the characteristics of the education system on the other hand. McLanahan (2004) argued that changes in family structure, women's role in the labor market and

partnerships are accompanied by new social policies regarding gender equality and childcare, leading to “diverging destinies” in children’s lives. These transformations are gradually emerging in Japan.

A second question will be whether early childhood institutions can withstand rising competitiveness and uphold their cultural logics at odds with trends promoted by the OECD. The redesign of early childhood and care institutions into learning hubs geared at preparing children for life in ever-diversifying, competitive, market-oriented societies has already changed educators’ professional practices in many Western countries. Early childhood institutions are undergoing reforms turning them into vehicles of social mobility and school readiness. These trends may undermine the gentle introduction of children to Japanese traditions and personal interrelations still practiced by parents and educators today.

Third, this chapter has focused intensely on policies, recent changes in Japanese society and professionals’ and parents’ approaches to childcare and education. Thus, our analyses centered on the perspectives and actions of adults. How children perceive and experience the developments in their lives and their participation in education and care arrangements were not the focus of this chapter. The sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990) has not yet developed strong roots in the Japanese social research environment (as an exception, see Isa & Shimizu, 2019; Fujita, 2015). Interest in representations of children and youth as social actors has existed in historical and cultural studies for many years. For example, scholars have discussed how teenagers’ agency unfolds in their online activities without adult supervision (Ito, 2010) and focused on how girlhood, representations of gender and childhood are intertwined in Manga and Anime (e.g., Castro, 2019). However, the education and care arrangements discussed in this chapter are rarely explored through children’s eyes. Ozaki (2016) interviewed teenagers about their involvement in the decision for a specific *Juku* and how they experienced their participation in high-school entrance examinations. The author shows how young people develop a sense of duty and commitment to *Juku*, which they feel contributes to their (future) well-being. The study illustrates and discusses a specific form of “conjoint agency” (Markus & Kitayama, 2003) embedded in Japanese culture that emphasizes a sense of social self within interpersonal relationships. How younger children in Japan view and experience care and education arrangements structuring their daily lives is an issue for future research to explore.

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# Section Two – Introduction

## Multiplicity and Fundamental Inequality of Childhoods in South Asia

*Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Asma Khalid*

### Abstract

To contextualise the contributions in this section, we present some data on growing up in South Asian societies. It is important to consider the fundamental diversity of conditions in which children and youth live. We suggest some theoretical terms that are helpful in this regard and preview the contributions against this background. The studies on which the contributions are based impressively document the striking inequality in this region.


*Keywords:* South Asia; childhood; multiple childhoods; unequal childhoods; normative pattern “good childhood”; generational order

More than one fourth of the world’s children (under 18 years old) are living in South Asia, in the countries Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (UNICEF, 2023). To get to the point: this common regional affiliation does not tell us very much about their childhoods, which can be very different. Internationally, it is above all the often problematic conditions of growing up that are perceived. When reports about children and adolescents in South Asia reach the public beyond the narrow circle of childhood researchers, they usually do so as bad news. For example, the (still) high child mortality rate in South Asian countries or the high rate of child labour is mentioned (ILO, 2014, 2017; UNICEF South Asia, 2021). Reading reports and studies from these countries, one gets the impression that every crisis, every national and international conflict and every national peculiarity is directly reflected in the conditions of growing up: in groups of children with special

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vulnerability. One might think here of the child soldiers in Sri Lanka (Gates & Reich, 2010), of illegal international adoptions in the wake of civil war and poverty in this country as well (Loibl, 2021), of children who grow up in the area of border conflicts between India and Pakistan (Malik, 2020), of so-called “street children” in India without families or with parents who themselves had been “street children” (Dutta, 2018), of the enormously high proportion of working children in very agricultural Nepal (ILO, 2014), of children in hazardous work in Bangladesh (Hoque, 2022), of the children of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (Hoque, 2021) – this list could go on for a long time.

However, it should not be overlooked that the South Asian region has achieved an economic take-off in the past decades (Devarajan, 2007). Compared to other poor regions of the world, considerable progress has been made in an astonishingly short time. The region has achieved “a dramatic shift over the past 5 decades from a region of mainly low-income economies towards one that is largely middle-income” (Estrada et al., 2017, p. v). With the exception of Afghanistan, none of the South Asian countries are still classified as low-income economies (World Bank, 2023). Child-focused policy programmes have been implemented and have been successful, improving some of the key indicators commonly used to characterise growing-up conditions. A new UNICEF report recognises the following achievements: “In the past quarter century, the number of children dying before their fifth birthday in South Asia has more than halved. Since 2000, the number of stunted children under 5 has fallen by over one third. In the past 25 years, the likelihood of a girl under 18 becoming a bride has dropped by a similar percentage. Secondary school enrolment has risen steadily, including for girls. And more than 90% of the population today has access to safe drinking water” (UNICEF South Asia, 2021, p. 6). However, the same report cautions that the consequences of the pandemic and renewed economic crises of recent years are not yet fully apparent. Furthermore, one common root of all these problems remains: social protection systems are still partly inadequate, although many projects and programmes are running (Chanaveer et al., 2019; Devarajan, 2017). This lack of social protection is then also a reason why events such as internal conflicts, environmental disasters and economic difficulties hit children and adolescents – or at least parts of them – hard, and why there are still vulnerable groups of children despite all of the achievements. However, it must be added that there are differences between the South Asian countries in this respect. Sri Lanka, for example, has a child mortality rate that is 10 times lower than that of Pakistan or Afghanistan (Index Mundi, n.d.). It can be assumed that medical care and the position of mothers play a role, possibly also the much lower proportion of children and young people in the total population.<sup>1</sup>

Although some serious problems affecting the situation of children have been somewhat mitigated by positive economic developments and socio-political and humanitarian efforts, this does not mean that there is less variation in the way that

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<sup>1</sup>38% of the population is less than 25 years old in Sri Lanka and 61% in Afghanistan (CIA, 2003).

children grow up in South Asia. The economic rise has also exacerbated the already considerable social inequality. For example, the economic conditions of the already better-off social classes have improved to a very different extent than those of the less affluent and the poor population during the years of the economic upswing (Devarajan, 2007). Inequality is undoubtedly not a new phenomenon in South Asia. A complex structure of caste, social class and ethnicity is rooted in not only the religious tradition but also the colonial past, in the sense of “divide and rule” (Ganguly, 2006; Riser-Kositsky, 2009; Simha, 2015); and all countries in South Asia, except Nepal, were under British colonial rule. Beyond the groups of particularly vulnerable children, of which we have given a far from exhaustive list above, this results in a further diversity of conditions for growing up. Riser-Kositsky (2009), for example, illustrates the complex structure of caste and class in Sri Lanka using the example of the different childhoods that the various groups establish, and describes these differences primarily in terms of the type of schooling that the children receive, whether the children are educated privately or publicly, in the language of the country or in English.

In the following, we will focus on India and Pakistan, whose children alone account for more than 85% of the children in South Asia. These are also the two countries from which the contributions in our volume originate. Especially as far as India is concerned, research and theoretical reflection on childhood has already progressed far beyond the alarming reports on groups of marginal children. Why such a research scene has developed in India, while for the other countries it has remained rather isolated studies and reports, cannot be clarified at this point.

With 55% of people under 25 years old in Pakistan and 43% in India (CIA, 2003), children and young people make up a huge group of the population in these two countries. However, they can only be called “a group” of the population to a limited extent, for the uniformity of this group is far less striking than the fundamental differences that can be found. This begins with the sheer variety of ethnicities, tribes and cultures in these countries. For example, in an overview chapter on growing up in India, Behera and Nath (2008) mention that people are speaking “1600 languages, grouped somewhat arbitrarily into 114 groups” (p. 190). They then discuss major quality differences of schools according to regions and the language of instruction (p. 193), a different valuation of girls and boys resulting in different percentages of school enrolment, different work and different recognition of the work between girls and boys (p. 195), just to mention some of the heterogeneity. One difference between girls and boys that has not been addressed as such in research so far results from the more frequent very early marriage of girls: almost a fifth of girls in Pakistan and more than a quarter in India are already married by the age of 18 – the figures are four to five times lower for boys (CIA, 2003). This means that the childhood of girls can also be a very short one, and we don’t know what this time perspective alone means for girls. There are also large differences in social stratification, i.e. between poor and rich populations, castes and social classes, all of which are also reflected in the conditions of growing up (Barn, 2021). Gulrez and Hafeez (2008) conclude their overview on childhood in Pakistan with the statement of “the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer” (p. 342), with corresponding implications for childhood. In the three contributions, we will present in this section on these two



countries, the differences between the childhoods that they report about could hardly be greater. Recent years have not been conducive to narrowing the differences. Pakistan was among the countries with the longest school closures in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2022), and there were high differences in the learning level between the poorest and wealthiest quartiles, as well as gender gaps in favour of boys for both literacy and numeracy as well before (ASER Pakistan, 2019). Pakistan is also one of the countries hit particularly hard by climate change, and this has devastating effects for many children.

## A Conceptual Inventory to Study Multiple Childhoods

One may question to what extent, with such differences, the subsumption of these realities of young and very young people under one term, “childhood,” and the application of a uniform conceptual inventory to childhood – and this is the claim of a social scientific study of growing up – is still justified. After all, the scientific use of the term childhood and the theoretical concepts attached to it that have been gained *in* and *for* the study of childhood – Barrie Thorne (1987, p. 103) speaks of a “conceptual autonomy” of childhood studies – presupposes a certain uniformity of the phenomenon and must sensibly do so. However, if one goes back a bit in the still young history of childhood studies, then the idea of a uniform childhood was first sustainably undermined in the best-cited book of childhood studies ever: “Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood” of Allison James and Alan Prout (1990a). Based on historical and culture-comparative studies showing a variety of different ways and ideas of growing up, these social constructivist childhood researchers of the 1990s relativised the idea of a universal childhood, and certainly did well to do so, since – prior to the rise of childhood studies – this claim was based on the argument that biological laws of development would dictate one single and appropriate form of childhood (James & Prout, 1990b). But what should now take the place of this deconstructed uniformity if one wants to preserve the conceptual autonomy of childhood research? In any case, the concept of children as “independent social actors” (James & James, 2012, p. 3), which was offered and often used after this deconstruction of uniformity, does not lend itself to studies in countries of the Majority World. These countries must be understood in their strong intergenerational relations, as we have also underlined in the introduction to Central Asia and Caucasus countries (Kim & Bühler-Niederberger, in this volume).

A social structural approach to childhood research offers the notion of a *structural* commonality that characterises children as a group. Qvortrup (2009), for example, bases his claim to a conceptualisation of children and childhood as a social phenomenon on the fact that they all inhabit the “segment childhood” and thus occupy a particular position in the generational structure (2009, p. 24). This, he argues, is a segment that is always distinct from the segment of adulthood and old age. Qvortrup admits that this “structural form” (p. 25) of childhood varies because it is influenced by political, social, economic, cultural and technological parameters. He illustrates this variation in time and uses the example of France in 1920, 1940, 1960 etc. However, it is unclear to what extent he is informed about this, but he chooses a country where centuries of efforts to standardise this early

phase of life preceded the period that he uses for his argumentation – on the part of the Church, the State, moralists and gradually emerging experts (Ariès, 1962; Donzelot, 1979; Snyder, 1965). The goal of these efforts was a disciplined population. These efforts were, therefore, not motivated by the attempt to give children a happy childhood, nor by the attempt to give *all* children an *equally happy* one. This interest was not even there for the children of their own country. This is an important point when talking about the “uniform” childhood, which was in any case based on a government claim and corresponding efforts, which involved a lot of coercion – we will take this up again later on.

For the countries we are talking about in this section, the argumentation of a structural commonality is only partly convincing, since, for example, the variation between childhoods that take place at one and the same time is already much larger than the one Qvortrup refers to in his example. The heterogeneity mentioned here at the beginning of the text should have made this recognisable. But how are we to approach this first phase of life scientifically if this notion of a structural commonality of childhood – across times and societies – also breaks away? The explosive nature of the question of whether childhood is a phenomenon for which a uniform interpretative framework should be chosen also arises from the fact that it is not only a question of scientific analysis. It is equally a question of normative settings, which gains in explosiveness around the issue of children’s rights as a governmental claim that has worldwide validity (Barn, 2021). The answers in both areas are in principle given independently, once on an analytical basis and once on a normative basis. However, childhood studies have understood their concepts, especially their concept of a strongly individualistically conceived agency, as not only analytical but also advocacy (Mayall, 2000).

Sarada Balagopalan has become visible in a debate about uniform versus “multiple” childhoods as a representative of a standpoint from which borrowings from a common conceptual inventory are rejected. In a study of Indian children involved in the informal labour market, she sets herself very clearly apart from the notion of a uniform childhood (Balagopalan, 2014). These children do not inhabit a somehow (globally or even regionally) uniformly shaped segment of society; rather, her study shows how principally different the reality of daily life is for these children and what other notions of childhood apply. This is measured against the contemporary notion and reality of Western childhood but also, for example, Indian middle-class childhood (Barn et al., 2022). From this, she also derives a reproach to childhood research: a Western bias is inherent in its theoretical conceptual vocabulary and thus this vocabulary remains inappropriate because it is gained from a fundamentally differently structured phase of life. She recognises in this conceptual approach, in postcolonial critique, a cultural paternalism (Balagopalan, 2019).

Therefore, it requires argumentation if we approach the situation of young people in South Asia, despite this heterogeneity, with the notion of childhood, which thus implicates a certain uniformity and a distinction from the programmes of other age groups. And the follow-up question arises: which further theoretical concepts are suitable for the analysis of a reality of growing up, which is

characterised by such heterogeneity? There are three concepts in particular that we would like to propose, and with some reflections on what these three concepts can contribute to approaching childhoods in South Asia, we also justify why – despite the multiplicity of the first phase of life – it makes sense to analyse them as childhoods, hence with a certain conceptual autonomy. The three concepts are able – despite or even because of the multiplicity of situations and conditions of growing up – to span an overarching theoretical grid.

It is, first, the concept of a *generational order* (Alanen, 2009), of relations between age groups, in the sense of the structured and continuing reciprocal attribution of scopes of action, valuations, obligations and rights. The concept guides the whole volume and will not be elaborated here, as we did that in the introduction to the whole volume and we will only recall that we start from the in-principle diversity of these intergenerational relations (cf. Cole & Durham, 2007). As Alanen states, we have to leave it “to empirical study to find out what actually is the constitutive principle in the social ordering, an organizing, of adult-child relation in each (e.g. national) case and in different social fields” (2009, p. 167). One of these constitutive principles – as all our contributions in this section show – is that South Asian childhoods are very much involved in *inter-generational commitments* that will last a lifetime and in which the younger generation in particular will have to assume responsibilities.

Second, it is the concept of a *normative pattern of good childhood* (Bühler-Niederberger, 2021, p. 57; Donzelot, 1979). This is a substantive idea of how childhood should be, namely the idea of children embedded into and protected by families that are coming up to their public duty of contributing to an industrious population. These families have to conceive of their children as “economically useless and emotionally priceless” (Zelizer, 1985, p. x). The idea of this childhood is not mere ideal, as there is always a claim of the enforcement of such a childhood, which comes along with some pressure and manifold ways to exert this pressure. In this way, the normative pattern of the “good childhood” has the double content of a moral devaluation of the cultures and social classes that do not practice it and the promised (future) valorisation through the conversion to the “right” education of their children. The real growing up in the countries which are under discussion here corresponds to this pattern partly more, partly less and partly not at all. Just from this, paradoxically, the pattern gets its relevance – in the measuring of the distance and proximity to it which happens constantly – by the participants themselves, by the policy but also not least by many researchers who regard the deviation depending upon their point of view as deficit or as cultural inherent value and necessity or as both (see, for example, the various chapters in Behera, 2007, and Maithreyi et al., 2022). Whether the pattern is rejected or adopted, it dominates scholarly debates on childhoods in these countries and the childhood programmes of international and national organisations, where they are launched. Therefore, it is useful to describe what pressures it exerts on which populations and growing up in them, through what processes and with what results. In India, interesting studies have emerged on how – in the publicly organised attempt to approximate the normative pattern of good childhood – poorly equipped and corrupt institutions can also significantly reduce the

quality of growing up, especially for marginal groups and tribal students (Behera, 2009), how relevant knowledge stocks other than those imparted at school may be lost in formal education (Behera, 2017) as well as how children and adults may consider education as a risky investment as they face severe obstacles when transforming education into a decent livelihood (Froerer, 2015). It is urgent to study these dynamics in more detail. The changing nature of the multifaceted reality of growing up could thus be better captured (cf. Graner, 2020). Insights should be gained into how these processes can be better governed, more appropriately governed for these children living in colonial legacies and nevertheless and because of that in very different concrete life situations (Balagopalan, 2011).

As long as very different ways of growing up take place in different and largely socially and regionally isolated groups, we may speak of a *multiplicity* of ways of growing up. However, multiplicity becomes *inequality* as well if the offspring of groups with different modes of raising their children aspire to the same positions in the society, as different childhoods implicate different chances to get access to good positions: based on acquired skills, manners and “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977) as well as certificates. This content of childhood becomes more important with the growing middle class in South Asia and thus the growing segment of the labour market, whose positions are also awarded through a (tough) competition in the educational sector. Inequality, then, is the third concept we would like to propose for analysing childhood in South Asia. It would be an illusion to believe that this inequality and injustice could be decisively reduced by aligning childhoods with the normative pattern of “good childhood.” For it is precisely childhood, oriented around this ideal of the economically useless and emotionally unaffordable child, that is fundamentally unequal. This childhood prevails in social classes and strata – via corresponding parenting patterns – that distinguish themselves from other social strata. Offering one’s offspring a “good childhood” allows distinction per se (Barn et al., 2022), but it allows distinction also in the future via the hoped-for head start for the children in the competitive education system and later on the labour market. “Good childhood” consists essentially of the investment of financial, cultural and social capital in the child (Bourdieu, 1986), and this investment can be constantly increased, in principle almost indefinitely, as evidenced by today’s development in the upwardly mobile middle class worldwide (Barn et al., 2022; Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007).

## **Contextualising the Contributions in This Section**

This basic inequality of a “good childhood” is not only a problem of social justice but also produces, especially under precarious economic conditions, childhoods that are strongly committed to social advancement or at least to status preservation. This is shown by the contribution of *Adrienne Atterberry*. Adrienne impressively shows that Indian parents do not simply copy the childhoods of Western countries when they prepare their children for demanding careers. It is precisely in this group of parents that had been successful in a profession in the United States and where the financial and social resources are available to plan

childhoods in a maximally thoughtful way that parents move back to India. In order to optimally prepare their children for the future in a globalised world, they are not relying on an education according to the American model and in this environment. The parents want to achieve something that Western pedagogy would consider incompatible to some extent; Adrienne speaks of “high achieving, hardworking and empathetic children.” To that end, the parents are developing careful plans. And they very openly confided in Adrienne their deliberations, implementation of plans and successes and disappointments in implementation. Their stories show that – once back in India – they rely on various means to achieve their goals. One of these is private schools, where it is known that their students subsequently go on to prestigious colleges at home and abroad. But they also rely on contacts with members of the extended family, which the parents assume are important in fostering not only their children’s aspirations but also their social ties. Contacts with the grandparent generation then also play an important role. Finally, they rely on a third means that may be particularly surprising: parents also value exposing their children to the lives of those from less affluent backgrounds, whether it is domestic staff whose daily concerns the children learn about or whether it is through volunteer activities in which the children participate. We don’t yet know whether this careful and complex planning by the parents will bear the desired fruit in the end. And, of course, the pressure for success and the threat that exposure to the lives of poor people also poses are unmistakable. But what we see very clearly is that this is a very particular pattern of education, against the background of the economic conditions of the country and the ideals of social relations and embedding that apply to these parents. In contrast, there is little evidence of democratic parenting as propagated in the advice books of Western middle classes (Cleverly & Phillips, 1986); the parents clearly set the plan, and the children in the studied group were by no means only enthusiastic about returning to India.

Therefore, while aspects of the normative pattern of “good childhood” have found expression in this upbringing by parents of an internationally mobile elite group, it is clearly not a mere adaptation of a Western childhood pattern, despite, or perhaps because of, the resources available in this group. And such specific adaptations of the idea of a “good childhood” we also recognise in the contributions of *Ravneet Kaur*. The urban middle-class groups in which Ravneet conducted her ethnographic research have significantly fewer resources to prepare their children to compete in the education sector and the job market. But even here, parents clearly place their children’s upbringing under this demand. They send the children to moderate fee-paying private schools. Long bus rides to school take up children’s time. After school, the children attend additional tuition and hobby classes – many designed to boost academic performance as well. For these children, the extended family also plays an important role: it is the household context in which one grows up. Childhoods in the rural area differ very markedly, if one disregards embeddedness in extended or joint families, which is also the rule here. While urban children are only minimally involved in household chores, and are considered – as Ravneet writes – “too young” for that, these rural children are heavily involved in the household’s activities once they have finished school.

Children in urban and rural contexts are being prepared for completely different social futures, and the circles do not seem to overlap. However, if one considers the rapid urbanisation in India (World Bank, 2011), the children from the rural context could nevertheless push into an urban labour market in the future, where they would then – we can assume – probably have significantly worse chances. So, from that point of view, we have to talk about unequal childhoods, and that’s probably also true when you look at the access to social resources like health care, education and especially higher education that they have while they’re growing up. Ravneet highlights that in both contexts, parents play with children and make an effort to take good care of them. Occasionally, her descriptions of rural childhood evoke the idea of an idyll, such as when we imagine rural children in extended families, when the older ones help the smaller ones with their homework, while the mothers – themselves mostly still illiterate – do their chores, take care of the animals and keep an eye on the children. As with growing up in the middle classes of the city, however, clear hierarchies apply by generation and gender. In both contexts, children are clearly expected to keep a low profile with adults and to stay out of serious discussions. Corporal punishment is also mentioned for rural childhood. Different goals apply to girls than to boys: respectable marriage and not a successful future career. Also, mothers play a very different role in education than fathers.

On the other hand, the childhood of Afghan refugee children in Pakistan, presented by *Asma Khalid*, takes place far away from a globally propagated normative pattern of childhood. Using an ethnographic approach, Asma gained access to a group of children who fled Afghanistan with their parents and now work in the markets and streets of the cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Having gained the trust of these boys, Asma could observe them at work but also visit them at home and talk to the family. These boys confidently perceive themselves as supporting their families. They can only count on their family and the wider network of relatives and other refugees. In this network, a strict code of honour applies, called “*Pakhtoonwali*,” and it also regulates generational and gender relations in a strictly hierarchical way. Young people – although important for the family’s livelihood – have no voice in it. This is doubly true for girls, who are confined to the home and thus do not speak the language of the country of immigration. The boys fit into this hierarchy, even if not unconditionally. They also have dreams for their future; after all, they argue, there are also rich Afghans in the country. However, they are largely without rights in the immigration country. And they also realise that under the conditions in which they grow up, they acquire little in the way of knowledge and skills that could help them out of their position on the margins of society, and – some argue – they also experience little respect in this society. So they know about how the childhood experience can disadvantage. This is an important contribution to childhood research in Pakistan, which is rudimentary. Asma points out the few studies that have been conducted. Childhood research has not taken much of a foothold in Pakistan. Recently, the child well-being of children in Pakistan has also been recorded, but only on school children (Haider & Zaman, 2021) and so the results obtained require some relativisation, because Pakistan is the country with the world’s

second highest percentage of children who do not attend school (ASER, 2019; Shabbir & Jalal, 2021). For a group that is not even registered by the authorities, like these boys who fled Afghanistan with their families, to have a voice, only ethnographic research like Asma's can help.

The difference between the upbringing of Afghan refugee children and the organised and planned childhood that Adrienne shows for the children of a successful middle class could hardly be greater. By showing the principled variety of childhoods, on this side and beyond the normative notions imposed by the West, research on childhoods in South Asia can contribute decisively to childhood studies. It can also show how childhood can be used as a "framework for the analysis of broader political, social, economic and cultural dynamics," as Bowen and Hinchy suggest (2015, p. 317). Insights into multiple pathways of modernisation (Eisenstadt, 2002) become possible, as well as insights into the dislocations, and disadvantages, that can occur in these processes, especially with a vulnerable and, what is more, extremely heterogeneous group such as children.

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## Chapter 5

# Return Migration, Parenting and the Subcontinent: Parents and Youths' Perspectives of Life in India

*Adrienne Lee Atterberry*

### Abstract

This chapter examines the lifestyles of upper-middle- and upper-class return migrant parents and youth living in Bangalore, a city in southwest India. It does so by addressing the following questions: What benefits do return migrant parents see in raising their children within their country of ethnic origin? What are the experiences of youth who grow up within their country of ethnic origin? I answer these questions by analysing 95 conversations with return migrant parents and their children, as well as alumni of Bangalore-based high schools. Building upon literature related to parenting, social class and racial-ethnic socialisation, I discuss parents' efforts to produce children who have the skills needed to succeed within the twenty-first-century global economy, and how the youth experience these child-rearing practices.

*Keywords:* Return migrants; Indian Americans; parenting; transnational youth; identity; India

### Introduction

I met Naresh and Damini Iyer, an upper-middle-class South Indian return migrant couple, in their penthouse apartment in a high-rise complex located in a northeastern suburb of Bangalore, a city in southwest India. Naresh works as a director for a publicly traded US IT company that has operations around the world. Damini works as a math teacher – a profession she pursued after working

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as a banker so that she could better focus on raising her children. While they live in India full time, Naresh often returns to the United States for work and sometimes takes the couple's son, Anand, with him on these trips.

The Iyers initially moved to the United States for Naresh's work. They first landed in Chicopee, Massachusetts, before relocating to Nevada, Missouri and then, finally, South Carolina. While in the United States, they had two children: Zuleika and Anand. Interestingly, it was their children who motivated them to return to India. Naresh and Damini felt that life in the United States was too easy and that this would handicap their children's ability to succeed later in life. Meanwhile, they began to see India as the place that would give their children the skills needed to achieve success within a competitive world. They also liked that by raising their children in India they would be exposed to Indian culture to a greater extent. Therefore, after spending more than a decade in the United States, Naresh and Damini relocated their family to Bangalore.

They opted for Bangalore, as opposed to their natal city of Chennai, the capital of the South Indian state Tamil Nadu, for two main reasons. First, they anticipated that their children may have some challenges adjusting to the relatively hot and humid weather that is customary in the city. To see if their children could adapt, they tested out living in Chennai for a short period of time. Unfortunately, their children would constantly get sick. Therefore, they felt that this would not be an ideal place to raise their family. Second, they found the schools in Bangalore to be more supportive of people migrating from other parts of the world. They noted that schools in Bangalore would give children 'time to breathe' and 'get adjusted'. For example, shortly after they arrived and enrolled their children in school, their daughter's foreign language teacher would spend half of the day on Saturdays teaching her Devanagari script. Additionally, their daughter's school did not mandate that she be tested in Hindi or Sanskrit. The Iyers compare the welcoming atmosphere they found in Bangalore to the more rigid conditions they anticipated in Chennai where schools would expect their children to have facility in Indian languages, particularly Tamil (a South Indian language), on par with their India-raised classmates from the first day. Therefore, because of the weather in Chennai, their children's health and the openness of Bangalore schools relative to those in their natal city, the Iyers chose to relocate to Bangalore.

Even though they lived outside of Chennai, Damini and Naresh's parents remained very present in their children's lives, especially Anand's. For example, when they first moved to Bangalore, Damini's parents helped Anand adjust to the new city. Anand told me how his maternal grandfather would take him around to places, such as Cubbon Park and the Circus. Importantly, his maternal grandparents' presence in his life has not waned as he got older. He described to me how during his exams, they would come to Bangalore to make him tea and snacks as he studied. While his maternal grandparents make relatively frequent visits to Bangalore, Anand's paternal grandparents do come to the city to help celebrate family birthdays. As a result of his time in India, and getting to know his grandparents, Anand told me that he feels 'better connected to his roots'.

While in India, the Iyers enrolled their children in a well-known, English-medium school with campuses throughout Bangalore, the Indian Academy of Science (IAS). Aside from getting a good education at the school, Zuleika

and Anand could also take advantage of numerous extracurricular activities that would help them better connect with the community and gain beneficial skills that will help them later in their professional lives. For instance, Zuleika told me how through IAS she volunteered with the Interact Club, which she describes as a corollary to the Rotary Club for those under the age of 18. Through this group, she took field trips to destitute homes where she brought household necessities, such as cleaning products, and served food to those in need. She also volunteered for a group that assists those with autistic children, which gave her the chance to learn about how autism impacts families. As an aspiring doctor, she found this community work to be important because she could see, first-hand, the complex problems facing families and individuals with health issues. According to her, these experiences helped improve her empathy skills.

While there are many boons to being able to raise their children in Bangalore, Damini expressed to me some remorse about aspects of life in the United States that are not easily replicated in the subcontinent. Many of her concerns stem from the level of cultural engagement she sees among her children, especially her youngest, Anand. For instance, she expressed a longing for the days in which they would attend events at the Hindu temple as a family and send the children to Sunday School. She also recalled how Anand used to sing a Tamil song during Diwali and be very active in celebrating the harvest festival Pongal – activities that he has stopped doing since moving to Bangalore. Damini also feels that had they stayed in the United States, Zuleika and Anand would have kept up with their studies of Carnatic music and learnt to play the veena. Instead, they both play keyboard and Western classical violin. Despite these concerns, the Iyers like that by relocating their children to Bangalore, they can provide them with first-hand experience of life in the subcontinent, which they believe will benefit them once they become adults.

By analysing 95 interviews with upper-middle- and upper-class return migrant parents and their children, as well as alumni of Bangalore-based high schools, this chapter addresses the following questions: What benefits do return migrant parents see in raising their children within their country of ethnic origin? What are the experiences of youth who grow up within their country of ethnic origin? To answer these questions, I examine how affluent return migrant parents use resources available in India to cultivate children who have the skills and disposition necessary to become hardworking, high-achieving, and empathetic adults with a deep connection to their ethnic identity.

Through this chapter's discussion of return migrant parents and youth, I illustrate how parenting practices and childhoods are changing in response to what is taking place within the contemporary global economy. By focussing on the experiences of relatively affluent Indian and Indian American return migrant parents and youth living in Bangalore, India, this chapter broadens our perspective on what it means to be a transnationally mobile Indian or Indian American, explores how the global economy shapes elite parenting practices and childhoods, and makes an argument for why parents – who are relatively well-settled in the United States – may opt to uproot their lives and relocate to a country roughly 8,000 miles away. In other words, this chapter provides a snapshot of contemporary life for one relatively small, elite group, and in so

doing, it contributes to our understanding of international migration, parenting within a transnational context and elite childhoods.

## **Child-Rearing Practices in a Transnational Context**

Intensive parenting practices have become normalised among relatively affluent parents. Intensive parenting is characterised as labour-intensive, child-centred, expert-guided and emotionally absorbing (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996). This form of parenting emerged as a result of a confluence of factors including parents' fears that their children will *not* be 'okay' in a competitive, global economy (Brown, 2014; Faircloth, 2014), the notion that childhood is a sacred space and that children have a special value outside the market economy (Hays, 1996), and the belief that parents' actions are deterministic of their children's future academic, professional and personal outcomes (Faircloth, 2014).

Annette Lareau (2011) conceptualised one type of intensive parenting logic: concerted cultivation. Lareau originally coined this term based on a study that included Black and White middle-class families in the United States. She found that middle-class parents engaged in child-rearing practices designed to give their children advantages later in life. These practices include discussions between parents and children, as well as children's participation in organised extracurricular activities. Lareau suggests that through these experiences, children develop a sense of entitlement, learn to make demands on adults, and develop the ability to navigate institutions, such as schools, to their advantage. Lareau's analysis of parenting practices forefronts the role of social class in shaping parenting norms. However, other scholars (e.g. Ayling, 2019; Etienne, 2021) argue for the necessity of considering how class *and* race work in tandem to influence the way parents raise their children.

There are three notable examples of scholars who explicitly build upon Lareau's work by infusing her class-based parenting framework with discussions of race and ethnicity to explain parenting practices among Indians in diaspora. Collectively, these studies extend Lareau's framework by placing race and ethnicity at the centre of the child-rearing logic of middle-class parents from minority backgrounds. However, they are just three examples among many others (for examples, see, Barn, 2008; Mukherjee, 2021; Purkayastha, 2005) that discuss how members of the Indian/South Asian diaspora pass on elements of their ethnic cultural heritage to the next generation.

For instance, in Dhingra's (2018) elaboration of concerted cultivation as it applies to middle- and upper-middle-class Indian American families in the United States, the author argues that parents' status as immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities influences their emphasis on education and their proclivity for promoting their children's involvement in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. Meanwhile, Usha Mukherjee and Ravinder Barn's (2021) study of professional middle-class Indian parents in Britain reveals that parents' desire for their children to learn more about their heritage and combat racist discrimination influences the types of activities in which they enrol them.

For example, they highlight how parents promote their children's engagement in heritage activities through language lessons, watching Bollywood films and being involved in Bollywood and Indian classical dancing. Additionally, they describe how parents incorporate discussions about racial identity and racism into their conversations, as well as enrol their children in self-defence courses to help them come to terms with and combat their prior and possible future experiences of racial discrimination.

Last, Pallavi [Banerjee \(2022\)](#) conceptualised the term *visa-regimented trans-cultural cultivation* to describe the parenting practices she witnessed among families of highly skilled Indian workers in the United States, whose child-rearing practices are shaped by their (middle) class background, transnational lifestyle and legal immigration status. This parenting logic consists of involvement in extracurricular activities, passing along aspects of ethnic heritage through religion, food, language, skill development and spending extended periods of unstructured, leisure time with extended family both within the United States and India. Overall, this parenting logic aims to cultivate children who are multilingual, talented and excel in school.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on child-rearing practices by considering how upper-middle- and upper-class Indian and Indian American return migrant parents enact a class-specific, racialised parenting logic within a transnational context. I refer to this parenting logic as *transnational concerted cultivation* (for a more comprehensive discussion of this concept, see [Atterberry, 2021](#)). An important aspect of transnational concerted cultivation is harnessing the resources available in India to produce high-achieving, hardworking and empathetic children who are also connected to their ethnic heritage. Interestingly, parents have a relatively easy time providing their children with the resources they need to cultivate the first three characteristics compared with the fourth. For example, while the parents I interviewed want to use India as a tool to socialise their children into what it means to *be* an Indian, they face unexpected challenges to doing so. These challenges emerge from how Indian culture is structured in India relative to the United States, and the interactions their children have with peers and extended family members that challenge their ability to claim an unquestioned Indian identity. Parents did not describe similar challenges when it came to the other qualities. I elaborate on this in the findings section.

## Data and Methods

The data analysed for this chapter come from 95 interviews with return migrant parents, their children and former students from Bangalore-based high schools who were born and/or raised in the United States prior to relocating to India with their families. Participants in this study come from upper or dominant caste, upper-middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Additionally, the vast majority of participants are Hindu. They either work as professionals within the areas of healthcare, information technology (IT) or education, or are the children of similarly situated professionals. In other words, those who I interviewed grew up with and continue to experience varying degrees of class and caste privilege.



Additionally, all participants live within a context where transnational mobility is the norm. In the case of parents, they may anticipate travelling internationally for work or vacation. Meanwhile, the youth I interviewed often recall travelling to the United States, Europe and elsewhere to attend summer programmes, enjoy family vacations or participate in school-based exchange programmes.

I conducted all the interviews, except for one, between May and June 2015, and March 2017 and January 2018. About 80% of the interviews took place in-person, whereas the remaining 20% were conducted via telephone or a videoconferencing technology (e.g. Skype or WhatsApp). Interviews were conducted remotely if a research participant lived further than a two-hour commute from my residence. In one instance, I conducted a remote interview with a high-school student at the request of the parent to limit the interview's interference with their child's schoolwork. All interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I developed an interview script that included questions and broader points of discussion that I wanted to address with each participant; however, I let each interviewee dictate the flow of the interview. In this way, I could make sure that what was most important to each participant was discussed while also addressing the topics necessary for my study.

Each interview lasted between 19 minutes and over 2 hours. Most interviews were digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed. In the rare instance when participants asked that I not record them, I took handwritten notes on the interview and then created digital field notes. I have used pseudonyms for all participants and obscured any identifying details to protect their identity. Only after analysing the interview transcripts and field notes did I connect the data to extant literature on parenting, ethnic identity and childhood.

## **Producing High-Achieving, Hardworking and Empathetic Children**

Parents described India as being better suited as a place to raise their children relative to the United States. For instance, Riya Haldar states:

Some of our Indian friends [in the USA] who decided to settle and stay back there [...], their kids were not high achievers as compared to the parents. The parents were super achievers. They were like the well-known M. D. [medical doctor], gynaecologist, and the husband was some big fund manager with like a million dollar home with like a pool and stuff and the kid could be – for all you know – a garage attendant some place and still trying to figure himself out. And um, which was I guess for them it was alright, but for me it didn't sit well. I mean, in my view it is that if you are having kids, you should give them the best and they should also be somewhere in life.

Riya saw what was happening to her friends' children and she feared the same thing possibly happening with her own – if they stayed in the United States. She conveyed to me how she felt that the lack of rigour in some of the local middle and high schools, along with the cushion provided by upper-middle- and upper-class parents' affluence were to blame for the lack of achievement among the US' second generation. Fearing her children having a similar outcome, she and her husband began to question how (and where) they were raising their children and ultimately decided that relocating to India would be the best option.

Other parents felt similarly. They believed that second-generation Indian Americans in the United States were not pushed to excel. They described witnessing the children of friends and extended family members struggling to enter a professional vocation. Additionally, they expressed concerns about how growing up in affluent urban and suburban enclaves in the United States may distort their children's understanding of how the world works. In other words, parents had qualms about raising their children in the United States. In contrast, they believed that India would provide their children with the resources and motivation to garner the skills needed for future success.

### ***Enrolment in 'Good' K-12 Schools***

Bangalore's educational offerings serve as one of its main attractions for the transnationally mobile, affluent families that I spoke with. The city provides a mix of 'good' English-medium schools that offer state, national and international curricula. Importantly, these schools provide their students with the opportunity to cultivate the skills needed to be successful in high school and later in life. For example, I spoke with Kiara, an 11th grade student at IAS, who intends to go to college in India or Singapore for architecture. When identifying the benefits of attending IAS, Kiara told me, 'I've always liked doing something different. Like something that was other than academics or other than just coming back home and doing homework. Something that's as a break but would also add up to my career, add up to my resume'. At the time of the interview, she was part of a Cultural Club and Environmental Club, so I asked her, 'So, how do you feel being involved in these different clubs and activities is helping you build towards your career?' She replied by saying that through these school clubs she has learnt skills such as how to be a 'good loser', how to initiate conversations with strangers and acquaintances, and the value of teamwork. Additionally, at IAS, she is learning how to adapt to change and compete for scarce resources. She referred to the opportunities provided by the school as helping her to climb 'a ladder' whereby she can reach new personal and academic heights both at and beyond IAS.

Others, such as Pratap, a student at the Richmond Academy of Science (Academy) – a school that offers the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum – talked about how they benefitted from the international exposure their school provides, viz international exchange programmes and/or having classmates from around the world. They felt that this exposure early on would help them navigate the multi-ethnic and multinational spaces they might encounter in college and/or

the workplace. Still others liked how their school provided them with a plethora of extracurricular activities where they could cultivate leadership skills, such as time management and public speaking.

Beyond facilitating their children's cultivation of advantageous skills, parents also appreciated how Bangalore-based high schools could catapult their children to competitive colleges within India, and around the world. For instance, when remarking on how he decided to send his sons to the Academy, Matthew says, 'The students coming out of there go to great schools – the U Chicagos, Johns Hopkins and things of that sort. Great schools'. Overall, parents could rely on schools in Bangalore to provide their children with a 'good' education, and they could relax knowing that their decision to relocate to the subcontinent would not handicap their children's chances of attending a competitive college or university in India, the United States or elsewhere. The ability of Bangalore-based schools to prepare their students for admission to competitive colleges and universities is evident in where their alumni attend college. Some of the alumni I interviewed attended institutions such as Princeton, Pomona, New York University, Fordham and UC Berkeley.

### *Facilitating Connections to Extended Family Members*

One of the other boons of relocating to India was the opportunity for children to form close connections with their extended family members. For example, I spoke with one woman, Amara Bhalsod, a mom of two who lived in Oregon before relocating to Bangalore, about the benefits of raising her children in India. During our conversation, she talked about the importance of family in helping keep children on track. She said:

So, you are not like the driver of your car – that is the thing. Your parents, your elders, your cousins – they also guide you in a lot of things: how to go about the life path, which is like appropriate and much safer – before you fall in a pit of a problematic situation, which is not easy to handle in India but not acceptable also.

By having extended family in the area to support them, Amara believes that her children are more likely to make good decisions and avoid making bad ones. Additionally, Amara feels that forming connections with extended family members will encourage them to pursue a more professional path. For instance, she liked how, 'In India, everybody – most of her [daughter's] cousins – are very, very competitive. They all want to join medicine or IT or accounting, something like that. Like everybody's pursuing a career'. This is different from life in the United States, which Amara characterised as being much more permissive of things like teen pregnancies and dropping out of school relatively early. By having extended family in the area to support them, Amara and the other parents I spoke with believe that children are more likely to make decisions that will benefit them.

The importance of family to children's aspirations is highlighted by the case of Aarushi Kaleka. In her early years, Aarushi's grandparents took care of her while her parents were busy working. She spent a lot of time with her maternal grandfather who worked as a cardiologist. When talking about his influence in her life, she says, 'I've been really inspired by my grandfather – he's a doctor – and also, he's my main inspiration. Just seeing him treat his patients every day just made me want to become like him'. Due to her grandfather's influence, Aarushi anticipates pursuing a career in the medical profession as either a psychiatrist or a cardiac surgeon.

### ***Exposure to the Economically Marginalised***

Extended family members play an important role in transnational youths' lives. They shape youths' aspirations, while also providing them with the support needed to excel academically and professionally. However, extended family members are not the only resource parents utilise to ensure that their children grow up to be hardworking, high-achieving and empathetic. Parents also value exposing their children to the lives of those from less affluent backgrounds to encourage them to excel, while also learning to be considerate and caring of others.

I spoke with one couple that values exposing their children to the economically marginalised – Dhaval and Kamda Chola, a middle-aged professional couple from Tamil Nadu. In the United States, the Cholas lived in a relatively affluent section of the California Bay Area. As a result of where they lived, their children's exposure to the poor was quite limited. However, in India the family has hired servants including a maid and a cook. While Kamda expressed some ambivalence as to whether having servants was good for their children's development in general, it was quite clear that they appreciated how having servants enabled them to learn more than they otherwise might about the lives of the poor. Exposing their children to the economically marginalised has dual purposes: to make them more empathetic to others, and to encourage them to be hardworking and steadfastly pursue their goals. This is clear in the following exchange between Dhaval and Kamda:

Dhaval: So, I think that allows them to appreciate the things they have a bit more, right. I think they have some level of appreciation now that they do have it a lot easier than other people. Just given sort of how they've grown up. I think that appreciation would not have been as easy had they grown up in the Bay Area. So, the heterogeneity in the environment. The diversity there. It is not something we had to work at giving them. It just happens automatically, right. Like I was saying, we have gardeners, maids, cooks coming in. They all come with their own problems.

Kamda: So, they know a different side of the world, you know. We live this way, they live that way. [...] So, they probably get somewhere in their mind that I really have to do something very well in my life: [...] make a living for myself, do a job, be independent. Otherwise, there's also this other side where life is not so good. Maybe that pushes them to do a little better.

Like what other parents expressed, raising their children in India is paramount to the Cholas being able to inculcate the 'correct' values in their daughters. While in the United States their lives would have been too circumscribed to those who come from a similar class background, in India they learn about the lives of those from different social classes first-hand. This not only encourages their daughters' curiosity and concern about people who come from less affluent circumstances but also demonstrates to them that they are relatively privileged, while encouraging them to not take their advantages for granted and to work hard. The Cholas are not the only parents who encourage their children in this way. I also spoke with parents who demonstrate their compassion for others by running social service organisations, helping their children conduct social service work and donating money to support college scholarships.

Parents' efforts to encourage their children to care about those who are less affluent are not lost on their children. For instance, children described being involved in different volunteer activities including participating in clean-up drives around local lakes and highways, establishing libraries in government-funded schools, raising money for children experiencing health crises and joining the National Social Service (an initiative by India's Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports that facilitates high school and college students' participation in government-led community service activities). One of the most profound acts of social service engagement came from Sajan Talwari, a student at the Academy. In response to noticing the number of children in Bangalore who lacked shoes, Sajan started a shoe drive with his father's assistance. Their efforts ended up receiving media coverage, and so Sajan expanded the shoe drive's operations to include other organisers in different localities.

While it is not clear whether their exposure to the economically marginalised motivates transnational youths' desire to work hard, the youth I spoke to want to succeed. Their efforts to succeed academically and professionally are evidenced through their conscientious attitudes towards their academic and extracurricular activities, their drive to attain their ambitious higher education and professional goals (see [Atterberry, 2021](#)) and their enrolment in highly competitive colleges and universities.

## **Parenting, Ethnic Identity and India**

Some parents hoped that raising their children in India would result in them becoming more grounded in their ethnic identity. For instance, Karun and Malvika Chowdhury saw the move to India as removing any questions that their

eldest child, Liyana, may face about her identity. Karun says, 'As a consequence of the move, it turns out that she doesn't have to be - anything. She's just who she is'. When prompted to elaborate, Karun stated, 'There is something to be said about being amongst Indian people. You're not different. And when you're not different, you're not questioned. And, therefore, you can do what you feel like comfortably. That's it. It's as simple as that'. Karun and Malvika believe that by moving their daughter to India, they have simplified some of the challenges about her identity that she would have encountered in the United States; however, the reality of transnational Indian Americans' experiences in India is much more complicated than what the Chowdhurys describe.

### ***Being Indian (American) in India***

Transnational youth discussed instances in their schools – most often interactions with their classmates – that reminded them of their differences from their India-raised peers. For example, when discussing her experience acclimating to IAS, Bhavya recalled:

There would be girls who would come up and irritate you. And just because I'm from America they used to be like, 'Oh so if you're an American, why are you in India? But if you're an American, how do you know an Indian language? And how do you look Indian?' And I tried to explain to them that I am of Indian origin, but I was born and raised for a few years in America.

School was not a neutral setting in which the multiple identities that Bhavya claimed were equally appreciated and celebrated. In fact, because of her multiple identities, she experienced ridicule from her classmates who struggled to accept that she could be both Indian and American. In contrast to Karun Chowdhury's statement that being among Indians leads to youth benefitting from their identity going unquestioned, Bhavya's example shows that this is far from reality.

Being made to feel different is not an experience unique to those enrolled in a primary or secondary school. This also happens in college. I interviewed Zuleika who – unlike many of her transnational peers – opted to attend college in India. She made this decision because she did not want to accrue debt and knew that she could more easily afford college if she stayed local. When we talked about her experience of belonging within India and the United States, Zuleika stated that she feels that she does not fit in anywhere. In college, her India-raised peers would assume that she was 'just' American. Her transnational background and the years she spent living in India as a child went unacknowledged. Her India-raised peers would say things like 'She's so fancy' to highlight her difference from them. This led to Zuleika feeling *too* American among her college peers in India. This mirrors her feelings of difference in the United States where she often feels *too* Indian.

Even those who are simultaneously citizens of India and US permanent residents reported moments of social ostracism related to their identity. I spoke with one such person, Tiya, about her experiences with having her identity questioned. She described how she experienced the most ridicule through interactions with peers and extended family members who would laugh at her American-accented speech and chide her for not knowing certain Indian languages. Tiya reminds us that these issues related to transnational youths' experiences of identity are not strictly the purview of US citizens living in India. The feeling of being an outsider may also extend to Indian citizens who spent their early years in the United States.

With that said, not everyone experiences bullying or social ostracisation. For example, Kavita – a college student in New York City – shares the following about her time in India, '[. . .] when I met people from other schools who were Indians from India or weren't from America it wasn't a big deal. If anything, they were like "Oh that's cool, like how was it or something?"' No one ever treated me negatively I don't think'. Like Kavita, other transnational youth stated that they did not face social ostracisation while living in India and were generally accepted by their peers and the broader community.

### *The Role of Context in Parenting Practices*

Not every parent has or holds onto Karun Chowdhury's idea that their children may fit seamlessly into Indian society; rather, they understand how they may have to adjust their parenting practices based on the realities of raising their children in the subcontinent. For instance, Ananya Subashree described how she and her husband switched their children from one school to another by saying:

We wanted our kids to be in that ['local'] crowd because we wanted them to get exposed to that in the first place. But then they didn't fit in so well there because they were not used to that culture. The transition was not easy on them. Once we moved them to [a different school] they were more comfortable because they saw many kids that had returned from USA and also the crowd was a lot different.

While Ananya and her husband had certain ideals for the type of school their children would attend, the reality was that they could not adjust to being educated among other 'local' schoolchildren because of their very real differences from them due to their transnational background. In fact, many of the parents I spoke to made initial schooling choices for their children because of their perceived and real differences from the local Indian population (for a discussion of this, see [Atterberry, 2022](#)).

Parents adjust their child-rearing practices to life in India in other ways, as well. For example, I asked Matthew about how he and his wife, Soniya, inculcated a sense of being Indian in their two boys while in the United States. He said,

'The church played a very important role. In a sense, Christians are extremely rigid [as it concerns] the ways of the church. So, we participated in all of that. They went to the Sunday School'. However, once they returned to India, Matthew says that he became less religious and stopped sending his children to Sunday School. He even referred to the teachings of the church as 'brainwashing'. When discussing his about-face in his attitude towards religion Matthew says:

Religion was important from a perspective of religion's sake, but it was a tool for building up an identity primarily as an Indian and a Syrian Christian. So, when you're in India you don't need tools to help you build an identity as an Indian. And the second is, the need for religion as an identity – not the need, the rationale – went away. I was convinced it was doing more damage than good. So, I moved away from it. And our discussions and conversations became much more varied in nature.

While they were devout Christians in the United States, in India Matthew describes his family as being more *spiritual* in nature – they talk about Buddhism, Hinduism and even practice yoga.

Matthew is very comfortable with the changes that he sees taking place regarding how he raises his children in India relative to the United States; however, this is not the case for all parents. I asked one mom, Ravika, who lived in Texas before moving to Bangalore, the following question: 'How do you feel about the decision to raise your children in India?' She gave this impassioned response:

Right now, 80% I don't regret. But 20% seeing the Indian children in the USA right now, they know much more about our culture than children living in India. [...] They know much more about our culture and then they speak more of our language than children in Bangalore do. My children do not know how to read and write my mother tongue. Their mother tongue! They don't know how to read and write but children in USA – they know.

Ravika was not the only mom who languished at the idea that her children do not know how to read and write in their mother tongue. During another interview, one mother admonished her children – in front of me – for their reluctance to communicate in Tamil, a South Indian language.

Parents offered several explanations for why they may experience more challenges in cultivating their children's ethnic identity through language acquisition, religious engagement and extracurricular activities in India. Pramila and Janak Iyengar, return migrants from New Jersey, suggest that this difference in cultural engagement may be due to the varied pressures parents feel in India relative to the United States to transmit Indian culture to their children. Pramila says, 'They're [Indians in the USA] a little more conscious that they have to work harder at making an effort with the Indian culture bit. Here [in India], you don't have to



work that hard because it's part of living. So, you're a little bit more relaxed about those things'. Janak reiterates this idea by saying, 'I think maybe Indian American parents in the USA are working harder to give their kids an appreciation of Indian culture. But for us, it's easier, I guess. It's all around us so we don't have to do as much'. Echoing this idea, Ravika says, 'So, I felt that since it's not a common thing in USA, children are pushed to educate themselves towards their mother tongue, go to temples, learn this, learn that'. Children may not experience a similar 'push' in India.

In other words, the challenges parents face when trying to inculcate certain aspects of Indian culture into their children's lives may be due to their relaxed attitudes towards transmitting culture in India relative to the United States. In the United States, parents cannot depend on broader society to teach their children about Indian culture and what it means to be an Indian. As a result, there are infrastructures, such as Sunday School, designed to help children learn about their heritage. In India, parents feel that they can 'relax' and rely on the broader social environment to teach their children what it means to be an Indian. This results in parents not making as much effort as they might in the United States to define what it means to be an Indian in terms of specific religious and other cultural practices. Whereas some parents, such as Matthew, wholeheartedly embrace the changes brought about by being in India, others miss how Indian culture is structured in the United States.

## **Conclusion**

The return migrant parents I interviewed want to provide their children with the skills and resources they need to become successful adults. As such, they start early – ensuring that their children have access to what they need to become high-achieving, hardworking and empathetic people. To accomplish this task, parents realise that they need to raise their children in the 'correct' environment. After careful considerations, they decide that India is the best place for their children.

In the subcontinent, their children have access to 'good' schools, extended family networks, and numerous opportunities to engage with people from socioeconomically marginalized groups. Parents rely on these resources to cultivate children with advantageous characteristics and skills. In this way, India becomes a source of an abundance of advantageous cultural and social capitals that transnational youth may be able to leverage as adults. Interestingly, parents also want their children to be able to cultivate a deeper understanding of their ethnic heritage while living in India. While several studies discuss how – for Indians living in the diaspora – trips to the subcontinent can be advantageous to children's development of their ethnic heritage (e.g. [Banerjee, 2022](#)), that is not the case for the families I spoke with. In fact, living in India seems to curtail youths' engagement with aspects of their ethnic heritage to some extent. As such, the reality of life in India is complex for these families. While in many ways India provides parents with the resources to raise the future generation of upper-middle-

and upper-class, transnationally mobile professionals, it is not a seamless process and does have its own hurdles.

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## Chapter 6

# Pluralising Indian Childhood: Children's Experiences and Adult–Child Relations in Urban and Rural Contexts

*Ravneet Kaur*

### Abstract

The present chapter explicates urban and rural childhoods in India. It presents childhood as a dynamic product arising out of an intersection of children's experiences in different familial–socio-cultural contexts, and children's positions within parent–child interactions and relations. These contexts and interactions tend to colour and shape the childhoods that children inhabit. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in urban and rural India, the chapter documents (1) nature of children's engagements and (2) parent–child relations, explicitly observed in parent–child interactions, provisioning warmth and care; parental control and supervision over children and children's participation in the overall fabric of family life and so forth. Forty-eight parents (24 urban and 24 rural) of children aged 7–11 years participated in the study. Qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews and home observations revealed distinctions in urban and rural Indian childhoods. Urban childhood is characterised by rights and privileges, and the centrality of academic pursuits, while rural childhood is featured with subtle induction into economic and social fabric of rural life. Although the world of 'Indian childhood' seemed plural, childhood playfulness and learning seemed to be the unifying themes. Geared to the fact that children have to make a living with limited means in the future, both childhoods were accelerated in preparation for future. Dwelling on the complexities in children's lives, this article appreciates diversity and multiplicity in childhoods.

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*Keywords:* Rural childhood; urban childhood; childhood–adulthood dichotomy; parent–child relations; diversity of childhoods; multiple childhoods; India

## Introduction

All children across cultures do not grow up in similar environments, despite ‘universals’ that bind children. The new paradigm of childhood studies (James & Prout, 1990) maintains that children are socially constituted (James & James, 2004; Qvortrup, 1993) and childhood is a culture-specific ‘construct’ (Misra & Srivastava, 2003). Childhood varies as a function of time period and space (Aries, 1962; James et al., 1998). Each society’s separate social conditions, ideologies and beliefs, and correspondingly how they think of their children (Archard, 2004), mediate what it means to be a child. Therefore, notions of childhood need to be situated and understood through a cultural lens, its varying social contexts and processes through which human development takes shape.

Until relatively recently, what is considered normative Indian childhood synchronised closely with Western, middle-class white, urban childhood (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Vasanta, 2004) that is characterised by linear progression in development, objectivity, reasoning and rationality, vulnerability, age-appropriate play-based methods and need for materials. Most research on Indian childhood studied children from the lenses of the West (Balagopalan, 2008), schooling (Sarangpani, 2003) and socialisation. Furthermore, specific conditions and aspects of rural childhood such as father–child relations have not been highlighted adequately. Constricted freedom and inequality in the childhood of girls remained underrepresented (Kumar, 2016). A Hindu childhood predominated; that believed only a boy child can relieve his parents of the debts of gods and ancestors (Kakar, 1981; Kumar, 2019; Walsh, 2003). Burman (2008) urges researchers to take up studies focussed on cultural representations of childhood that question middle-class norms of childhood, such as child-centeredness, sensitive mothering and providing for children’s material needs. The lives of working children (Balagopalan, 2011), which cannot be bracketed within the protected childhood that legal framework promises, need to be brought to the mainstream. The tendency to view culture as deterministic makes one assume that people within a given community have common ways of living (Ortner, 2006). Despite shared beliefs about the ways of bringing up children within a community, variations within population must be accounted for in the dynamics between global, collective and local reality (Chaudhary, 2018). The social, economic and political conditions (Anandalakshmy, 2002; Sharma, 2003), as well as the macro structures of the society, interpolate into childhood contexts (Kumar, 2006) and processes (Sharma & Chaudhary, 2009), which influence children’s micro-lives. Therefore, children’s development needs to be viewed as interactional, located within historicity and socio-cultural specificity.

Against this backdrop, the present chapter investigates urban and rural childhoods in India. It locates the childhoods that children from these socio-cultural contexts are likely to inhabit within parent–child interactions and

relations. It unfolds the conception of childhood, as it appears at the ideological level (engrained in the common psyche of the people) and manifested at the behavioural level (in people's behaviour with children). It emerges out of an intersection of the social contexts and interactions rooted in it. [Alanen and Mayall \(2001\)](#) suggest that positions and relationships of 'parent' and 'child' get defined within these interactions and eventually 'childhood' takes shape. Thus, in this chapter urban and rural childhoods are understood through parent–child interactions mapped against the complex familial–socio-cultural ethos that children grow up with.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Empirical data for this research were gathered from urban and rural parts of India, which were identified as per the Census of [Government of India \(2011\)](#) definitions.<sup>1</sup> To appreciate the context better, it is notable to mention that 68.84% of the Indian population lives in rural areas, while 31.16% live in urban areas ([GoI, 2011](#)). Data on selected indicators point to gaps in urban and rural contexts. While 87.7% of urban and 73.5% of rural population aged 7 years and above was literate, only 5.7% were graduates or above in rural areas while the percentage was 21.7% in urban areas. Only 38% of rural households had secondary schools within 1 km of their residence as compared to 70% for urban households. Nearly 4% of rural households and 23% of urban households possessed computers, and nearly 24% persons in rural areas and 56% in urban areas were able to operate computers ([GoI, 2014](#)). Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 1.7 in urban and 2.3 in rural areas ([GoI, 2019](#)).

The urban population has witnessed a gradual increase between two Censuses from 2001 to 2011. The People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE) survey which focussed on India's 63 biggest cities with a population of more than 1 million in 2021 revealed that these cities generate 29% of the country's household disposable income (27% of the total spending and 38% of total savings) that drives demand for goods and services. These million-plus cities are home to more

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<sup>1</sup>The definition of an urban unit at the 2011 Census of [Government of India \(2011\)](#) was as follows:

- (1) all administrative units that have been defined by statute as urban, such as Municipal Corporation, Municipality, Cantonment Board, Notified Town Area Committee, Town Panchayat, Nagar Palika etc., are known as Statutory Town. Furthermore, Statutory Towns with populations of 100,000 and above are categorised as cities.
- (2) All other places satisfied the following criteria:
  - A minimum population of 5,000 persons;
  - 75% and above of the male main working population being engaged in non-agricultural pursuits and
  - A density of population of at least 400 persons per sq. km (1,000 per sq. mile).Based on these criteria, rural areas are distinguished by saying what is not urban is rural.

than a quarter of its middle class (27%) and almost half of its rich (43%) population. Nearly 55% of households are middle class in the nine metro cities of India. Urban families in this study were sampled from such a metropolitan city – Delhi. Most could be counted as upper-middle and middle-middle social class in society. By the standard of PRICE, households with an annual income of 0.5–1 million INR (USD 6,033–12,067) belong to the middle class. It is notable that although the middle class has largely been understood as an income/economic category, it also has psycho-social political relevance. Identification of oneself as belonging to middle class appears to have experiential effects (consumption levels, choice of products and experiences etc.) and gears social attitudes (roles, future aspirations etc.). The set of rural families were selected from rural parts of the district Wardha, from the state of Maharashtra, India. In 2011, nearly 60% of the total population of Wardha district lived in rural areas (GOI, 2011).

A sample of 24 family units (12 urban and 12 rural) were selected through convenience sampling. Each family had a child (either boy or girl) in the age range of 7–11 years, residing with both parents. Thematic semi-structured interviews and home observations were conducted. Although interviews were conducted with both parents and children, this chapter foregrounds the views of parents. For interviews, a list of facilitative themes was drawn up based on the initial scouting and through consultation with experts. The themes included the meaning of childhood, continuity–discontinuity between childhood–adulthood, parent–child interactions and relations, parent–child dialogues and communication as well as parental control, supervision, monitoring and disciplining over children. Each interview spanned over an hour. Home observations revolved around daily routines and rhythms of children and families, including the children’s participation in daily activities such as studies, domestic chores, sibling care and context-specific activities and parent–child interactions and relations. Each child and their family were observed in their home for more than 4 hours per day, which lasted for one week. Detailed descriptions of family processes and practices were gathered. Embedded in the qualitative tradition (Ponterotto, 2006), these thick descriptions were subjected to descriptive content analysis. Knowledge gained from interviews and observations were interpreted with meanings inherent in them and interspersed with the researcher’s in-depth knowledge of the background context. These interpretations were informed by the researcher’s cultural continuity with the field. Geertz (1973) and Denzin (1989) consider the researcher as part of the data collection instrument, wherein their ability to extract the correct information from the context adds to accurate portrayal of the phenomena.

Each family was contacted through a contact person known to the family. To maintain the standards of research, the objectives and time required to be invested for the study were made clear to the parents and children. Furthermore, it was ensured that none of the other family members had any objection to be observed. After clarifying any queries and questions, permission and consent were sought. No one was compelled to participate in the study. Aligning with the demand of the local social dynamics, the researcher at times addressed participants in relational terms, such as agreeing to the participants’ suggestion for interviewing right outside of their home as well as accepting to drink tea/coffee and eat with

participants to sustain conversations. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. For data triangulation, the study relied both on interviews and observations. A conscious effort was made to safeguard against researcher bias and subjectivity. Researcher effect was minimised by a relatively long presence in the field.

## **Results**

### ***Urban and Rural Familial Contexts in India***

Urban families lived in one to three bedroom-set houses. In some families, grandparents, paternal married and unmarried uncle, aunt and cousins stayed together as one family unit. At times, the extended joint family owned more than a floor in the same building. The children went to moderate fee-paying private schools. The fathers were either salaried or owned their business. Nearly two-thirds of the mothers were homemakers and the rest were employed outside of homes. Most grandfathers had retired from paid work, and some continued to remain involved in family business, though peripherally. Most grandmothers were homemakers. Household chores were shared by women of the family and important decisions were made by men of the family, who were the primary income generators.

The lives of rural people at Wardha are based on the Gandhian principle of simplicity. Some participant families lived in houses made of mud and wood and the rest had houses made of brick and cement. The families consisted of children, parents and grandparents, paternal married and unmarried uncles, aunts and cousins residing under the same roof, all with a common kitchen. Rural children went to government schools. The families were agrarian in nature, with most family members including fathers engaged in farming. The traditional occupation of people in Wardha was cotton farming and soybean cultivation and trade. All mothers were homemakers and also contributed in farming.

### ***Daily Lives of Children in the Urban Socio-Cultural Context***

#### **The Nature of Engagements**

Urban children's daily lives seemed rather structured, tightly packed and regimented, in sync with schooling and everyday family rhythms and routines. Their day primarily revolved around attending school, for which they woke up early in the morning. Most children travelled to school either by school bus or van which usually carried more children than the sanctioned seating capacity. Despite encouragement for 'neighbourhood schooling' by the government, many families send their children to 'good' schools that are reasonably far from their homes. Therefore, children spent more than 2 hours travelling back and forth to school besides the usual 6 hours at school. Most activities at school were geared to accelerate academic performance, coupled with some co-curricular activities such as music, sports and fine and performative arts.



Children returned home from school in the late afternoon, escorted by an adult from their bus point. They had freshly prepared lunch. Some children watched television along with lunch, and others discussed their day at school with their parents. They informed their parents if any learning material was to be taken to school the next day, so that it could be arranged. Some children took a quick nap, and others rushed for the lined-up evening activities.

Children's evenings were packed with activities including tuitions, hobby classes, homework, playing, having dinner, watching television and some family time. The majority of tuitions were taken with unskilled or semi-skilled para-teachers in the vicinity of children's homes. The purpose of tuitions, as stated by the parents, was to provide extra academic inputs and support, and to bring regularity in children's academic work. After tuitions, children often played outdoor games with neighbourhood children, either in one of the children's verandah or in the street or nearby community parks. Short of space, the urban landscape offered minimal dedicated spaces for children's play. While unplanned localities had few parks, government and private housing societies had some. High-rise buildings and gated housing societies had planned spaces for children's free and organised games, such as table tennis, swimming, badminton and so forth. Children also engaged in indoor play that mainly involved playing with electronic gadgets such as playing games on the phone, laptop and tablet, as well as watching television. Indoor games were either played alone or with one or more children or adults.

For after-school engagements, many children attended hobby classes such as Western and Indian dance, drawing and painting, instrumental and vocal music, Taekwondo, judo, yoga and so forth. These classes, available within the housing societies or in the vicinity, were taken with semi-trained instructors. The purpose of these, as opined by the parents, were to polish children's personalities, boost creativity and keep them meaningfully occupied and under adult supervision until the parents returned home from work.

Children spent the rest of the evenings finishing homework. On a day-to-day basis, they were not expected to do any household chores, but they sometimes assisted adults in small errands, such as picking up one's stuff, filling water bottles, laying mats and utensils for dinner, picking up and passing on stuff such as the remote control, glass and spectacles, answering the doorbell and so on. At times, they engaged younger siblings in play to give their mothers some time off. Children were considered too young to do 'serious' household work. Only some token responsibilities were given to them with the purpose of building initiative and independence.

At dinner time, family members chatted and also enquired from the children about their everyday concerns regarding schooling, siblings, friends and so forth. Some families had dinner with the television switched on. While in the afternoon children could choose programmes to watch, evening television hours were more about watching programmes that the entire family could watch together, like family soap operas, dance and singing based reality shows, informative programmes, news etc. The night discourse revolved around packing the school bag for the next day and sleeping 'timely' as the hectic life at school awaits children.

Weekends seemed relaxed with children being allowed to 'treat themselves' by waking up later than usual, playing for longer and engaging in recreational and leisure activities with their parents. Nevertheless, they completed school-related projects and homework and prepared for upcoming tests at school.

### **Parent–Child Relations**

The lives of urban families were ordered with fixed routines and rhythms, which were strictly adhered to by all family members. As a result, the time spent by each parent with the children was also decreed. Mothers were the children's constant companions, who *devoted* themselves to fulfilling the needs of the children throughout the day. They aligned their routines with their children's and prioritised as per children's wishes. The companionship of fathers was dependent on their availability after office hours. Although fathers expressed a desire to spend more quality time with their children, they were unable to do so due to the paucity of time.

The parents played the significant role of providers of food, shelter, clothing, education, toys and play materials, recreational activities, companionship and care. They also acted as moralising and socialising agents. As childhood was considered the time for building one's physical and mental prowess, parents tried to provide children with healthy and nutritious food. Mothers packed a sumptuous meal to school and kept lunch ready for the children's consumption upon their return from school. On special occasions like birthdays and festivals, children were provided with new clothes. Parents often prioritised buying items for children rather than themselves when facing budget constraints. At times, children were passed down the clothes of elder siblings and cousins which they wore without any apprehensions. Many children slept either with their parents or with other adult family members. As children 'grow up', families would make arrangements to either provide a separate room or cover up balcony area to provide for a separate space for children to study and sleep.

Education was considered the only means for ensuring upward mobility and a better future. Therefore, parents invested judiciously into their children's education and geared them from the very beginning to be high achievers. Regardless of how much input the parents were able to make, they wished their children would do well in academics. They made it clear to the children from early on that they do not possess financial funds in abundance either to invest and establish business or pay the capitation fee for different professional courses, so the children must study hard to make a future for themselves. Education was seen to have an emancipatory role for boys. Education of girls was valued by all families, but many did not link it to preparation for a livelihood. Some families with traditional outlooks believed that a certain level of education was necessary for girls so that they can get educated grooms. They favoured women having jobs that were compatible with their homemaking duties.

Parents enrolled children into 'good' private schools with adequate basic infrastructure. They were provided with all of the required course books and inexpensive toys. To inculcate values of hard work and inspire children to do well in life, some parents bought the biographies and autobiographies of eminent

people like APJ Kalam and Sachin Tendulkar, along with general knowledge and story books for children. To encourage sharing, parents often bought only one set of colours, toys and other play materials for all children. Some families had internet facilities at home and others made sure that children could access it whenever needed for any educational purposes. Parents opined that providing access to technology-oriented learning assured a better future for the children. Apart from tuitions, mothers helped children complete their school homework. Fathers also took outtime to help children in academic activities, such as completing projects and downloading things from the internet, buying stationery and study-related arts and craft materials.

Apart from investing time in education-related tasks, 'playing together' emerged as one of the dominant forms of interaction between children and parents. Mothers usually played indoor games like carom, ludo, snakes and ladders and online games or games on mobile phones. And fathers, mostly during weekends, played outdoor games like cricket and badminton, in colony parks and on streets outside homes, with the children. Parents acknowledged the need for recreation in children and took outtime to take them to relatives' places, local markets and malls, cinema halls, parks, play-zones, family dinners and get-togethers with friends, museums, book fairs, holiday trips within and outside of the country and so forth. These activities, like hobby classes, were planned not just for children's entertainment but also to give them a variety of exposure.

Companionship and care played out hand-in-hand. Parents played the role of playmates as well as knowledgeable others in various activities. Care got reflected in many everyday acts that mothers did for children, including getting them ready for school, cooking and serving food, escorting them to school, tuition, hobby classes and park, organising recreation activities, buying what children desire, helping in studies and so forth. Care was also manifested in spending 'quality time' with children, discussing sensitive matters, socialising and moralising and listening to children's experiences at school, with friends, their engagement in games and sports and so forth.

Care was intermeshed with adult supervision and control over what children can and cannot do without adult permission, especially the mother. On account of children's susceptibility and vulnerability, parents kept a strict vigil on children's movement outside of home; monitored the duration and content of television that children watch and do on the tablet, computer and internet; controlled the children's speech and communication urging them to practice restraint when talking to adults; rationed eating junk food and so forth. While family issues were being discussed, children sat around and heard adult conversations, but they were seldom allowed to make an intuitive comment. Nevertheless, children and parents were of the opinion that they have an open channel of communication where children can freely voice their emotions, needs and wishes.

### *Daily Lives of Children in the Rural Socio-Cultural Context*

#### **The Nature of Engagements**

Rural children's daily lives were much less centred on academic engagements, though schooling took substantial time of their day. Their daily routines were

intermeshed with everyday family rhythms and routines. They woke up at dawn, got fresh either at home or in open fields and bathed in the nearest water body. Nearly all children travelled on foot to schools, located either in their own or neighbouring villages. School-home continuity could be witnessed in parents' free interaction with teachers upon casual meetings. Education at school aimed at equipping children with life skills for rural living. The prescribed syllabus was rooted through the everyday activities of farming and dovetailed with the rural lifestyle. School schedules allowed for free play and engagements with natural surroundings.

Children walked back home in the company of other children of their village in the afternoon. Usually mothers were in the fields at this hour. Children were served food by any female member, or they put out food for themselves. After lunch, they either played at home or went to their parents in the fields or shops. There they assisted in farm activities, such as pulling out grass, plucking vegetables, watering plants and cleaning and preparing grains, as well as helped in milking and grazing cows, goats and so forth.

At dusk, on their way back home with their parents, children carried farm products and often stopped at the local market to buy essential home items. Children who did not go to the fields, instead played, took care of younger siblings and contributed to household chores. Evenings meant time to play with other children of the family and neighbourhood, either in the courtyard or at any other open space of the village. In comparison to the urban sites, rural sites had open spaces to play in and children engaged much more in outdoor play. Everyday objects like clay pots, sticks and household items were used as play materials. Children played with many children as playmates. Furthermore, children of the extended family often sat together to study and finish school-related work. Older children explained concepts and helped younger children complete homework. Mothers were unable to help children actively in academics but sat around to oversee homework. They continued to do their household tasks like chopping vegetables, feeding cows etc., while keeping an eye on the children completing their homework.

It is noteworthy that, unlike their urban peers, rural children did not engage in after-school organised hobby classes or with technological gadgets, but their time at home was still very engaging. Many children independently cooked simple food by the time their mother returned from the fields or finished other household tasks. Even when mothers were available, children took on the tasks of cutting, chopping and washing vegetables while mother cooked meals. They fetched water, washed clothes, got flour milled, painted pots and smeared walls with cow dung or mud, cleaned the house, hemmed garments that their mothers bought from local shops to do at home to earn an extra penny and so forth. The families opined that children must start contributing as soon as they can contribute to household chores. It was seen as their responsibility, and parents expected children to take on adult roles and responsibilities as early in life as possible. Although parents never forced children to make time for household chores at the cost of education, children's daily lives were ordered in a way that contributing to household chores flowed rather naturally.

At dinner, children and male members sat around the hearth while female members served freshly cooked food. Usually, women ate after children and men finished their meal. Children picked up dishes and mothers washed them. Girls helped dry and stack these in the kitchen and the boys laid beds. Weekends gave children much more time to play and engage in unplanned recreational and leisure activities with their parents. They also finished pending school tasks and prepared for upcoming tests during weekends.

### **Parent–Child Relations**

Rural families followed their family routines and rhythms, which were not religiously ordered and strictly adhered. There was an element of flexibility based around the season of produce, festivities, local community activities, visitors at home and so forth. As a result, the time spent by each parent with children also varied. Children spent most of their day at home in the company of mothers and other female members. They shared space with mother as she engaged in everyday acts of eating, cleaning, washing and so forth. No exclusive time was given to children in the name of 'quality time'. Mothers provided children with basic food, a clean and healthy family environment, opportunities for education and so forth, but they did not accommodate family routines to make space for children's needs and demands. Likewise, the companionship of fathers was dependent on their occupation. Children whose fathers worked at farms enjoyed the tacit presence of their fathers as they visited them in the fields. On a day-to-day basis, fathers did not directly enquire about school and other issues from the children, but asked mothers about children's academic performance and conduct at home and in the neighbourhood.

Parents sent children to nearby government schools where education was provided free of cost. They wanted the children to do well academically, but they didn't pressure them to excel. Higher education was not seen as the only means for earning a livelihood by rural families. They schooled boys with an aim to attain functional literacy, sufficient enough for farms, rural markets and better livelihood opportunities at nearby towns. For girls, basic education was required to earn a groom from a decent family.

In provisioning, rural parents ensured that their children get whatever they missed out during their childhood. They provided basic necessities including adequate food, shelter, clothing and education to their children. Children ate food cooked for the entire family; no extra food supplements were given to the children. As a matter of routine, they wore clothes passed down from elder siblings and cousins. On special occasions, they were provided with new clothes (depending on the financial condition of the family). Children had no exclusive spaces in the house for them to sleep and study. They slept around other children and adults of the family and studied anywhere. They had no internet facility at home and accessed it only at their fathers' mobile phones. Parents expected them to share books, stationery and toys with siblings. Children made toys for themselves from locally available materials, as parents bought toys only occasionally. Moreover, their games involved less toys and more the company of other

children. Parents let children accompany them to relatives' places, local markets, family functions and weddings, community gatherings like *ram katha*, *ramlila*, *bhandara* and so forth for leisure, but these activities were not deliberately planned for children. Care also played out in teaching societal mores, culture and socially approved ways of behaviour to children. The inculcation of values of one's culture was done through everyday acts, religious discourse and stories of *Rama* and *Krishna* from Indian mythology. As companions, parents were not playmates but knowledgeable others in activities such as studies, domestic chores and farming.

Care was interwoven with adult supervision, monitoring and control regarding what children can do and cannot do without permission from adults, especially mother. On account of children's susceptibility and vulnerability, parents kept a vigil on children's company. Children were instructed to make friends with children from good family backgrounds and intermingle largely with children from one's own caste. Girls' interactions with boys were especially monitored from early on. Children's speech and communication were under constant parental scanning. Talking back at adults was not at all tolerated and invited the fury of the parents. Children's complaints by adults were taken in bad taste and invariably children were held guilty for any mischief done. Parents used authoritarian disciplinary techniques which included beating, scolding, denying privileges and being talked down to. Nonetheless, children accepted these as the norm and usually complied with these explicitly. Furthermore, although children witnessed adult conversations over family finance, relations and other dynamics of village life, they were never allowed to comment on adult matters. There was no composite family dialogue that factored in children. Parent-child dialogues were limited to children's needs (such as requirements at school, wishing to eat something, buying a dress/toy etc.) and concerns (such as conflict with peers, issues while travelling home etc.).

## Conclusions: Contours of Urban and Rural Childhoods in India

The present study brought to the fore the distinctiveness of urban and rural childhoods in India. Urban childhood stood out as a stage of preparation for adulthood that played out through the centrality of academic pursuits in children's lives. Pushing the child for studies was identified as a common phenomenon for the middle class (Saraswathi, 2003), which Elkind (2001) perceived as a feature of 'hurried childhood', and Viruru (2001) related to 'a sense of insecurity which pervades the Indian middle-class'. Much like Kumar (1999), an expression of adult-child continuity surfaced. Rural childhood witnessed subtle introduction into the economic and social fabric of rural life which laid foundations for adult-life roles and responsibilities. Early introduction into caregiving roles, early marriage and contributions to income-generation and household maintenance feature at a much younger age in rural contexts. Traditional gendered roles of domesticity and breadwinning for girls and boys, respectively, coloured rural childhood. In urban and rural socio-cultural contexts, the childhood-adulthood

binary was reaffirmed as children were viewed as ‘not yet adults’ and ‘in the state of becoming adults’. Furthermore, both childhoods were geared towards the fact that children have to make a living with limited means later on and thus must be trained for that.

With regard to the nature of care and provisioning, urban parents provided what are often referred to as the material culture of childhood (Hunt, 2001), which included books, toys, clothes, eatables, creating specifically demarcated spaces and belongings and so forth. Moreover, building the children’s educational base and cultural capital through a facilitative environment featured prominently in urban parental provisioning roles. Parents deliberately invested time, energy and money in providing ‘quality’ childhood experiences to their children. Perhaps this ties in with the number of children that one has and resource availability. Rural parents envisioned their role both as providers for the children’s needs of food, clothing, shelter, safety and socio-emotional support, as well as for disciplining children and equipping them with ways of economising and using resources optimally. They grounded children in cultural heritage and put in efforts to make them ‘worldly-wise’. Affirming the needs-based discourse, Woodhead (1997) and Madan et al. (2018) suggest the significance of children’s needs in care giving and the nurturance functions of parents that formed the core of provisioning in both urban and rural contexts. Childhood appeared as a stage where children were being ‘provided’ and adults became their ‘providers’. Kaur (2022) found a shift in the sentimental and economic value of children. The position of urban higher and middle-class children has changed from those supplementing family income to those who are in need of protection from the adult world of work and hardship.

Urban parents considered ‘serious’ participation in domestic tasks to be a hindrance to academic engagements, albeit token tasks that did not stand in opposition with professional pursuits could be undertaken by children. Rural parents considered these engagements as absolutely necessary for preparation for adult-life role responsibilities. Despite parents being relieved of household tasks through the children’s participation, parents did not fully acknowledge the children’s contribution to overall household functioning. Families organise domestic labour within the constraints of their daily lives (Zeicher, 2001), and dependence and reciprocity in exchange in adult–child relations may be seen as interrelated (Hockey & James, 1993). ‘Providing care and shouldering responsibility’ seemed bidirectional. Urban parents allowed children access to technological gadgets, and in turn children helped adults, especially grandparents, operate features on phones and tablets, book e-tickets, make e-payments and so forth. Likewise, rural children contributed in the maintenance of family chores and sustenance of the family economy.

Despite authoritarian disciplining, an open channel of communication prevailed between urban parents and children. Children exercised the liberty to voice their likings, dislikes, needs, wants and desires. This discernible shift towards valuing selective autonomy in urban contexts seems to be driven by circumstances and domain specificity. Nonetheless, in both urban and rural childhoods, children were expected to practice restraint in speech and communication when in

conversation with adults. Parents refrained children from spontaneous utterances and use of socially undesirable words. Adults usually dismissed these impulsive acts as 'childish'.

Parents opined that urban children's visits to several locations throughout a day, interaction with a number of casual acquaintances and unknown persons and exposure to digital technology and media heighten their susceptibility to abuse and crime against children. Although rural contexts offer more close-knit and personalised community interactions and limited exposure to digital technology and media, rural girls were considered especially vulnerable. Any movement outside of the domain of the house was closely tied to parental fear of children being abused or exploited. Children's movements, especially those of girls, were thus monitored and supervised by parents.

In the nutshell, the urban childhood appeared as a unique stage of life. On the one hand, responsiveness and indulgence by parents through the investing of their time, energy and money in children's lives and educational and occupational outcomes made it special. On the other hand, high degrees of parental control through establishing strict routines of study and restraints on speech and movement were seen as concomitant desirables in urban contexts. The focus in the rural childhood remained on inducting children into adult-life, and teaching them to be 'cultured' enough to live a life integrated with others. Much like the Indian society, Indian childhood appeared to be a melting pot of conglomeration arising out of modernity with a tempering of Indian tradition. Different contours of childhood appeared in urban and rural contexts. These got coloured by specific socio-cultural contexts and children's positions within parent-child interactions and relations. The childhood-adulthood dichotomy, parental expectations and socio-economic opportunities create different niches for the childhoods of urban and rural children in India. Nevertheless, both childhoods were marked by playfulness and learning. The childhoods were oriented towards raising adults who can assert themselves in their respective contexts as well as remain embedded in their social fabric.

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## Chapter 7

# Childhood Construction: Intergenerational Relations in the Afghan Refugee Community Living in Pakistan

*Asma Khalid*

### Abstract

This research aims to explore childhood construction in the Afghan refugee community living in Pakistan. Young Afghan people aged 12–18 who were working on the streets participated in the generation of data for this study in 2019. Ethnographic research approaches with semi-structured in-depth interviews and field observations were used to obtain real insights. Young Afghan refugees have been a constant phenomenon on the streets for decades in the twin cities of Pakistan – Rawalpindi and Islamabad – where this research was conducted and are involved in different street-based casual activities. The findings show that young people face discrimination and exclusion from the mainstream of society due to their undefined citizenship status and poverty. Parents see their children as dependents and as assets for their old age, and children and young people need to work to support their families who live in poverty. In fulfilling their filial responsibilities, young people sacrifice their schooling and have limited opportunities to learn new skills. It is concluded that the government and other international institutions with responsibility for setting policies and creating programs for young Afghan refugees need to understand the dynamics of the families in which the young people live and how these families inculcate them with their generational values.

*Keywords:* Afghan refugees; young people; working on the streets; ethnography; childhood construction; filial responsibility; Pakhtoonwali

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## Introduction

Children are integral to any society, yet each society treats children and childhood differently (Corsaro, 2005, p. 3). In Pakistan, as in other societies, children working on the streets is a constant phenomenon. They can be seen hard at work in what is known as the rag-picking trade, that is, searching through the cities' dump sites to find the recyclable items, sorting and sifting through plastic material, glass, iron, steel, as well as bread and the like, selling goods and involved in many other activities in the informal sector. Among them, many are refugees from Afghanistan who have fled their homeland due to war at various times. In Pakistan, these children are regarded by society and the state as a burden on resources. As time has passed, cross-border migration from Afghanistan to Pakistan has continued at various periods, including recently in 2021 after the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan (EUAA, 2022). The Afghan refugees (who are the focus of this study) living in the slum areas of Rawalpindi and Islamabad (2% of the number of total Afghan refugees, Ansari, 2019) have no clear citizenship status in Pakistan contrary to a right specifically guaranteed in Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC hereinafter) and Article 4 of the Pakistan Citizenship Act from 1951 (see for details, EUAA, 2022).

Afghan refugees in Pakistan and their children are thinly researched (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2002). Most of the studies focus on those Afghans who live in refugee camps, on their refugee status, nutritional and health status, low levels of education and skills, their difficulties in everyday living and their repatriation overall (EUAA, 2022; Gopalakrishnan, 2022). Accordingly, a detailed review of the literature on the lives of marginalized children and young people showed that there was also a dearth of research on street children and young people in Pakistan. Until now only a very few studies have been conducted in Pakistan on street children (Ali et al., 2004; Iqbal, 2008; Jabeen, 2009; Khalid & Haider, 2022). In particular there have been very few studies on those children who work on the streets and live with their parents and families (Khalid & Haider, 2022). There has been no study from a sociological perspective in which the construction of young people's childhood is the focus, and to the best of my knowledge, there has been no study from the perspective of sociology of childhood in the Afghan community in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. This current research, therefore, seeks to add to the existing literature.

Keeping UNCRC and the sociology of childhood in mind, it is important to understand the roles of Afghan young people in their own families in Pakistan where sociocultural, geopolitical, legal and leadership situations have features that are likely to be unique in the world; this is especially the case for Afghan young people who face cross-border migration. The absence of a comprehensive social protection system or policies for children, young people and their families in Pakistan in general and for Afghan refugees in particular further reinforces poverty and exploitation and pushes the poor to live in vulnerable and risky situations whilst excluding them from mainstream society. Young Afghans work

in the informal economy to help their families financially due to poverty and their lack of learning and working opportunities.

In this research, young Afghans living and working in Rawalpindi and Islamabad are considered to be Afghan nationals, even though they may have been born in Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan has declared that those Afghan refugees who have Proof of Registration (PoR) in Pakistan can legally reside in Pakistan and are Afghan citizens (EUAA, 2022). Those Afghans born in Pakistan also have refugee status. Pakistani laws do not allow for citizenship by birth or naturalization for refugees. As of January 2022, there were approximately 3 million Afghans living in Pakistan, around 1.4 million of them are Proof of Registration (PoR) cardholders, approximately 840,000 hold an Afghan Citizen Card (ACC), and an estimated 775,000 are undocumented. While PoR and ACC cardholders are offered limited protection, mainly from refoulement, undocumented Afghans are exposed to arrest, detention and deportation.

Against this background, the study presented here started with the following questions: what is life like for Afghan refugee children in Pakistan, what significance does work have in their lives, and what does education mean to them? What obligations do children assume for the family, and what perspective do they develop on themselves, their work and their future? To what extent do they meet the needs and expectations of their families? These are the questions this qualitative study explores, and it answers them against the broader background described above of the sociopolitical situation of these children. The study also considers the hierarchical family structures as they are reinforced under the moral code of *Pakhtoonwali*. The Afghan community lives within the code of *Pakhtoonwali* as part of their cultural traditions and norms. *Pakhtoonwali* is an unwritten guiding principle of life for Afghans and the Pukhtoon tribes. This code includes notions of honour and shame, dignity, courage and bravery within families, as well as usually a great deal of mutual support (Rzehak, 2011). *Jirga* is also an important part of *Pakhtoonwali*. A *Jirga* is a meeting of a group of tribal men which has the authority to settle a dispute in a way that is acceptable to all sides (Otfinoski, 2004, p. 45). There is seldom any formal selection of representatives in the *Jirga* and decisions are unanimous and unchallenged, with women's representation being wholly absent in such arrangements. Islam is the dominant religion in this community, but the cultural traditions and norms are even more important than religious beliefs and concepts and guide the lives of people.

It is thus a study of the social construction of childhood which is taking place under conditions of social insecurity and poverty while, at the same time, being subject to exceedingly tight moral guidelines that, although they grant children a certain amount of support from extended kin if need be, place them on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy and expect them to make a considerable contribution to the family.

## Literature Review – Street Children and Their Families

The phenomenon of street children faces many conceptual difficulties across the globe (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015). First of all, there is no exact figure for the

number of street children worldwide, although it is a phenomenon that has been reported and studied for over 20 years across the globe. However, globally it is estimated that the number of street children may be 150 million (Theirworld, 2022) and such estimates are generally used to propose interventions, policies and programs. Second, there is no clear definition of street children. Literature from the 1980s used categorizing terms such as “ON” the street (working on the street but returning to their homes at night) and “OF” the street (children both working and living on the street). But according to leading researchers (Thomas de Benitez, 2011), this too is a misleading division because it does not encompass different categories within street children.

Due to a dearth of research on street children in Pakistan, as mentioned above, there are no clear definition(s) and categories to be found in the literature on Pakistan’s street children (Jabeen, 2009, p. 409). Some scholars, such as Ali et al. (2004), Iqbal (2008) and Jabeen (2009), borrowed the definition and categories of street children from the existing literature in their research in Pakistan. In this research, my key informants (sample) correspond to the definition of the first category defined by Mark Lusk (Lusk, 1989): children who work in the daytime but return to their homes at night.

There is no exact official estimate of the number of street children in Pakistan. According to CSC (2019), there are 1.5 million street children in Pakistan who are living and working on the streets. However, these data are not further disaggregated to show the details of the young people working on the streets, although different individual researchers have established some details of the street children in different cities (see for example, Ali et al., 2004; Iqbal, 2008). Moreover, the available information on street children in Pakistan gives us little understanding of their specific cultural traditions and how these impact on their daily lives.

Researchers across the world have found that the childhood of street children is not only a consequence of disastrous social conditions but also that parents who raise their children according to their culture and traditions play a part (Aptekar, 1994; Birhanu, 2019). For example, Montgomery (2007) found in Thailand with child prostitutes that child prostitution is considered acceptable in the area she studied. In her study, the main feelings of children were of duty and obligation to help their families. Obligation to the family is found to be a strong imperative in several studies on street children: according to Aptekar and Heinonen (2003), the culture of Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) stresses dependence as well as blind obedience, rather than independence in children. Thus, in that environment, total respect for parents and all other adults was the objective in the socialization of an ideal child and childhood. Such ideas are quite similar to those found for street children in Pakistan by a study conducted by Abdullah et al. (2014). The family structure and dynamics determine the extent to which they work to help parents as their filial responsibility. Such work may include paid work, even though it may be considered exploitative by outsiders, as well as household work, which is often accepted as part of nurturing and socialisation by parents and outsiders, too (Abdullah et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the studies also show an interconnection between such functionalization and strict hierarchical subordination of street children by their parents on the one hand and the precarious social conditions of the parents themselves on the other hand. Several studies from different national contexts state that the parents have little education (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015; Nasir et al., 2021), and that there is poverty (Beazley, 2003; Luiz de Moura, 2002; Ward & Seager, 2010), child abuse and neglect at home (Ward & Seager, 2010). Parents of street children are often employed in the informal labor market. Nasir et al. (2021) and Yokying and Floro (2020) show that parents' participation in the informal labor market has a positive correlation with their children working in this labor market too. This means that if parents live in poor social conditions, they will force their children to work to fulfill their filial responsibility.

In conclusion, we can state that the childhood construction of street children can be seen to be a result of: (1) the poor social conditions of their families and (2) a cultural tradition of children's subordination in poor social conditions where children are required to work to support the family financially.

## Methodology

In this research, I used an ethnographic research approach in which I worked closely with the children of the Afghan community, relying particularly on in-depth interviews and participant observation (James & Prout, 1997; Wolcott, 2008). The researched group consisted of 15 boys aged 12–18 living and working in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. This research is an extension of my previous research which was completed in 2012. The purpose of repeating this research in 2019 was to explore the living and working conditions of Afghan refugees in the twin cities – whether they had maintained the same status that they had in 2012 (Khalid et al., 2020; Khalid & Haider, 2022) or if their situation had improved. My current research again focused on young Afghan boys and their families living as refugees in Pakistan. This research was completed in 2019 over a period of 3 months (March to May). The data were collected in Dhok Hassu (Rawalpindi), fruit and vegetable market and Sunday market (H-8) in Islamabad. These are the areas where there is a concentration of young Afghans working on the streets. These young boys are involved in different street-based casual activities such as selling plastic bags, carrying fruit and vegetables for customers in the markets, selling corn from a cart, selling flowers, car washing, rag picking and working in small hotels as dish washers or waiters. As the study group comprised young boys, semistructured in-depth interviews with broad questions and a loosely structured guideline were embedded into field observations. This procedure was intended to make the children feel comfortable and relaxed and lead to in-depth insights. Purposive and snowball sampling were used as these two sampling techniques provided the required and comprehensive information to achieve the objectives of this research.

In the absence of national and organisational ethics committees, Alderson's (2005) ethical framework was used and followed throughout the research process



and data generation. Thus, particular attention was paid to the following points: harm to children during research should be avoided, and confidentiality and privacy should be maintained. I obtained the consent of young people by giving them full details of the aims of the research. They were very clearly told that they could opt out of the research at any time and would not have to give a reason for withdrawing their participation. While they were assured of confidentiality and secrecy, they were also promised that pseudonyms would be used to hide their identities (Morrow, 2008).

One of the basics of qualitative research processes and ethics with children is rapport building. In this process, gaining access to children was a challenge. I spent a lot of time in the studied areas and tried to talk to children in my national language, which they had learned in the course of their work. After a little chit chat, I talked about the research, the purpose of the research, their role in it and the above-mentioned ethics. I also expressed a wish to meet their family. However, this was not possible at the beginning of the research. My continuous presence, long discussions about their lives and activities and roaming around with them made me trustworthy, and ultimately seven children invited me to their homes to talk to their families. I visited their homes where they were living with nuclear or joint families. Talking to their mothers and sisters (elder or younger) was a challenge because they were not very familiar with the national language that I was speaking with the boys. Fathers and other male relatives, however, could speak the national language well because of their exposure to the outside world. For women, it was different because they only go out of the house in urgent cases such as visiting hospitals. In this situation, the boys became my helpers and assisted me in having discussions with mothers and girls/women in the homes. Getting access to their homes was extremely useful for gaining an insight into their lives as refugees.

Participant observation, as used throughout the course of the fieldwork research, is also part and parcel of good qualitative research (Wolcott, 2008). Through observation of my key informants in different contexts – workplaces and streets, drop-in centres (DICs), visits to the homes of the boys who allowed me to visit their families and through discussion with family members – I was able to explore their diverse behaviors and attitudes to different things. It provided me with a good understanding of the boys' capacity to survive in a new working and living environment through adaptability, cleverness and sharpness (their personal characteristics). It also enabled me to involve them in a more relaxed and friendly way, which provided insights that might not have been possible in more formal processes.

Erickson (1986) writes that for qualitative research, “evidentiary adequacy” is needed, by which he means sufficient time in the field to gather and generate data extensively to understand the studied phenomenon. The recorded data in this research consisted of over 25 hours of audio tapes which included semistructured interviews with children and their families over a period of 3 months. All the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The data also included field notes, written observation and self-reflective memos (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 160). The analysis of data involved immersion in the material. I read the

material repeatedly and scrutinised all the data. Through this process, I found patterns of ideas in what the participants were saying and what the tone of their ideas was, among other things. This process generated descriptions of the setting and experiences of the young Afghans' lived experiences. Codes and categories were sorted, compared and contrasted until the analysis was saturated (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Besides this, newspaper clippings, articles and documents and reports from GOs and NGOs were also studied to gain a broader understanding of the situation of Afghan refugees in the twin cities of Pakistan.

## Results

### *A Boy's Perspective on His Situation*

The report on the results begins with a more detailed description of one of the boys and my contact with him and his family. His details will be discussed in relation to other boys studied in this research. I met Zaryab Khan (a pseudonym) – like other key respondents – while shopping and looking for Afghan refugee boys in the Sunday market. I asked him to give me his time, since I, as a teacher working with Afghan refugees, would like to talk to him about his migration experiences. Initially, he was reluctant because he and the other boys were suspicious that I might belong to some government agency seeking to obtain their data. However, after providing them with all the details of the research and ethics, he decided to talk to me – not on the first day but on another date and time. On the day of the interview, at the Sunday market in H-8, we sat in a corner during his free time and he shared his story as follows:

I am from Tagab, a district around 117 kilometres from Kabul. I came here in January 2019 with my family to live in my uncle's home. My uncle has been living here in Islamabad for many years, and he suggested that we come here. We came to Pakistan because there were Talibs (Taliban) who were surrounding our area. We had land to cultivate but there is no other income-generating activity and that has made our lives difficult. We do not have enough cash to meet our needs because of high inflation and political situations. Our region is a mountainous area and there is no business activity either. So, what could we do there? We came to Pakistan by bus, and at first, we lived with our uncle and his family, but now we are renting a small house. There are seven of us altogether, my parents and my 4 siblings. I am the oldest (aged 14). I was attending school in my hometown, but now, as our economic situation is poor and my father is the only person able to earn, I began working in this Sunday bazar (market) as a porter. My father works in the fruit and vegetable market (where most of the Afghan and Pushtun men and children work) and I started in this market. I will move to the fruit and vegetable market where my father works but right now this market is where I can earn money.

I came here at around 7 a.m. and work till 8 p.m. I like working here because I can work and earn at the same time. I like the environment here because there are other children like me. Sometimes, there is too much work and heavy things to carry for customers, but some days are relaxing. During the day, we get some time to rest and chat with each other and enjoy eating or drinking together. I can save money – around Rs. 500–600 (\$ 4–5) in a day. We use this money to pay the rent for the house, the electricity and gas bills and for daily groceries. You know how much inflation is here in Pakistan too and everything is so expensive. It is very difficult for my father and me to meet our expenses because all my siblings are younger than me. They are going to the Madrassa (religious school), and I am working. If I compare my life in my hometown and in Pakistan, I do see a lot of differences, however we are still better off than many other families who migrated from Afghanistan. The big difference is that I was studying there, and I am working here. I am happy that I am earning some money for my family to support them and to fulfill my filial responsibilities. As you know, this market only operates three days a week, so the rest of the time I sometimes go to the fruit and vegetable market with my father or play cricket all day with other children from my street who do not attend school. My mother does household chores and sometimes I help her too. I am happy here, but I want to study as I was doing in my own town, but I also realize that I cannot continue because I have to support my family. I guess someday we will go back, but when and under what conditions, I do not know because this is my father's and uncle's decision. Most of the decisions are taken by these men in my household because they think that we children are young, irrational and do not know anything. Sometimes, I remember my hometown and miss it.

This is the daily routine of an Afghan refugee child who belongs to a poor family and who started work after migrating to Pakistan. Whether the boys work in the above-mentioned market or the fruit and vegetable market, or any other work on the streets, their lives are almost the same with variations due to their household dynamics and social capital and support in Pakistan.

### ***The Social Situation of Afghan Refugee Families***

This subsection of current research is about the boys and the families I studied with information from documents and statistics from other researchers and international organizations. Pakhtoonwali – the code of life (as discussed in the introduction to this chapter) – governs the structure of the Afghan refugee families who were studied in this research. In the Afghan community, there is strict

segregation of sexes (Bezhan, 2021; Gopalakrishnan, 2022) and women are made part of the background only in their families. The presence of women in the house became visible only through their food and household chores. Only little girls can be found in the areas where they live because adult women are not allowed to be seen by outsiders. The girls and women are the “honour” of the family which all family members – boys and men, girls and women – must keep with them throughout their lives. When it comes to marriage, the roles of young men and women (or rather boys and girls still) are almost negligible. Therefore, this matter is entirely in the hands of parents, who decide both partners and age of marriage. In general, the abovementioned characteristics hold true for the Afghan community in this study.

Access was obtained to seven households, who allowed me to visit their homes and meet their families. The studied households are poor, with few/almost no assets. The adult males in the families are paid daily wages which are highly irregular in nature which leads to income insecurity. This economic situation has made it difficult to increase the assets in poor households because the erratic daily income of a parent or elder can range from PKRs. 300–1,000 (\$US 3–\$US 15), depending on the work in which they are involved. The average income of impoverished families is not enough to feed a typical family of 8–10 people (Kronenfeld, 2008, p. 44).

As far as education is concerned, only some of the key informants had the opportunity to go to Afghan designated schools, although they all attended the drop-in centres<sup>1</sup> (arranged by different NGOs in the studied areas). The children who participated in the study did not attend any public school in the twin cities. The average number of siblings was six or seven. It is claimed by researchers that large family size contributes to poverty (Abdullah et al., 2014; Fantahun & Taa, 2022).

Most of the parents and elders (70%) studied in this research were illiterate or less well-educated, which is usually the case for the families of street children. Some male members may have completed primary education in their villages or cities or towns in nearby schools. None of the parents and elders had completed high school education because most of them had lived in United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camps set up in various areas of different cities. And in most of the camps, there were no organized permanent efforts at schooling, although schools operated in the area occasionally. The women lagged even further behind in obtaining an education. All parents and elders considered that their lack of general education and technical skills were the main reasons why they worked in the informal economy (Hassen & Mañusb, 2018), which keeps them in an intergenerational cycle of poverty (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup>Drop-in centres are run by two to three NGOs in the studied areas. These centres provide services such as informal education, free breakfast and lunch, limited vocational training (sewing and painting) and psychological counselling to street children.

**“Parents Know Best What Is Good for Their Children”**

The parents and elders of the Afghan community consider children and young people to be their property (possessions) and believe that they are wholly dependent on them. Generally, in Pakistani society, but even more so in the Afghan community, the parents make decisions on behalf of their children. The patrilineal system is hierarchically organized in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the male as the head of the household being bestowed with the primary responsibility for the economy of the household. As he controls the economy, he has the authority to make all the decisions including education, work and marriage (as mentioned above). This cultural aspect leads to other societal practices such as not sending children to school in case of emergencies (for boys) and as a rule (for girls) and sending the boys to work instead.

In the studied Afghan refugee community, parents believe that children and young people are helpless, irrational and need care and protection – that is, they take a *protectionist* rather than an *empowering* approach. It is also a well-established notion among young people that their parents will always do what is best for them. In this regard, children’s opinions are sought in very few matters, and their opinions will not necessarily be taken seriously in decision-making. This applies even more strictly in the extended Afghan families where children’s rights of expression and decision-making are rarely recognized or respected. For example, Darya Khan (12 years old, working on the streets, selling corn) shared:

When I was in my hometown in Afghanistan, I went to the Madrassa (religious school) and now after migrating, I neither go to the Madrassa nor to school. This is wholly my father and my uncle’s decision.

However, children and young people generally accept such norms and act accordingly. They did not complain about these decisions, but they have changed their lives following migration to a new country.

The irony regarding this prevailing notion of children’s dependence is in striking contrast to the other side of the picture, in which parents think that their children are big enough to help them financially and force them to work, especially when their living and working situation changes, as in the case of Afghan refugees. It is widely accepted by poor Afghan refugee families that children need to work for the family and that they are obliged to their parents to fulfil their filial responsibility. The age at which children start working on the streets might be as young as 7 years old, but most of the young people studied in this research started work at between 8 and 9 years. In the course of my field work, however, I also found many young children (aged 3 or 4) at the different sites where this research was conducted, suggesting that through exposure and training, a sense of responsibility is inculcated in children toward their family as part of childhood construction.

Taking care of parents and families is a customary practice in the studied Afghan community. Gul Zaib was aged 16 and migrated in 2018. I met him in the fruit and vegetable market, and he shared his story:

Family is the most important thing to me. It is not only the immediate family, but it includes a lot of people (extended family). If someone needs help, I have to help because this is our tradition, this is what I am taught. My cousins are orphans, as they lost their parents in the war and now they live with us. As I am working, it is my responsibility along with my father to support them. Taking care of family and fulfilling our filial responsibly is one of the codes of life that are taught to us from childhood.

There are many other stories, shared by young people, where a single person is taking care of many members of the family, and they do not leave another family member if they are struggling. This example shows that for children, working and supporting family is part of childhood construction where family and cultural norms and traditions are taught in a clear way and deviations are not allowed.

### ***“Children’s Perspective on Their Work”***

This report reiterates that children are among that group which is neglected most in the migration process. The findings of this research reveal that young people from migrant families must survive in a new, to some extent bitter, and unfriendly environment, and also bear the cost of migration in the form of working on the streets. Social exclusion and unwelcoming treatment from institutions and the host society challenge their self-esteem and dignity. Some of the Afghan boys studied clearly felt they belonged to a stigmatized category of people because of several factors. Their work on the street, lack of status and poverty all led to a feeling of social exclusion and not being welcomed by institutions and the host society. This challenged their self-esteem and dignity. An Afghan boy (Arsalan Khan, aged 14), born in Pakistan and living in a rented house in Islamabad’s slum area, who worked in the fruit and vegetable market, explained:

I do not like my work because due to it, I do not have respect from society. I am part of this society and I need respect like any other human being. I face discrimination and disrespect while working on the streets, because I have a lower class status and also do not have legal status in this country even though I was born here. I feel powerless in this society which blames us for being on the streets and a burden on resources. This leads to me feeling hostile towards society.

However, some other key informants who migrated in 2018 and 2019 expressed different views and thought that Pakistani society did not treat them

badly; they felt accepted in Pakistan. This can be attributed to the fact that they had spent less time in Pakistan than other young people like Arsalan Khan. They also had some support from families who had already settled in Pakistan. Overall, the young Afghan people thought that the attitude of society toward them was unfair and that they deserved as much respect as other people in society. And in this situation, they were unable to understand the legalities relating to their citizenship. With both bad and good feelings about their situation, the children and young people show resilience in their daily lives. They do not see themselves nor present themselves as victims of poverty, exploitation and marginalization. They face the realities as they are and try to overcome the barriers to obtaining good things in life. For example, Gul Ghattak (aged 17) shared:

Living in a peaceful country (as per his perception), gaining employment here, as there are few working opportunities in Afghanistan, a bit of acceptance from society and living with a family are the things that I have right now. I am looking forward to becoming a successful businessman here, as many other Afghans are.

Some of the young people who participated in the study had begun working at the age of 8, 9, or 10 and had been involved in different economic activities. These experiences and increasing financial and other household responsibilities had taught them that they were adults. As they had been on the streets for many years, they had wide exposure to the public domain and the adults' worlds. Nevertheless, they thought that despite being aware that they were being exploited, for example, with long working hours, meagre earnings, no breaks during the working day, bullying and harassment and sometimes not being paid the money they had been promised, they had no power to stop it. The key informants stated that despite many years of work, they still did not have the opportunity to satisfy basic needs such as free formal schooling and the chance to learn skills, basic health facilities, safe and readily available water, the ability to work with dignity, employment with fair wages and less exploitation. Such insights and a breadth of concern demonstrate their thinking and analytical abilities toward life and its hardships.

The young people explicitly stated that they strongly believed it was their responsibility to take care of their families, as their parents were ageing, and their younger siblings needed their care and support. They asserted that this was part of their cultural values, expectations and orientation during childhood. They expressed clearly that they wanted to work for their families and did not consider that banning children from working would help any of their families. The importance of young people's work in and for the family cannot be neglected, whether forced or voluntary. In this connection, it is important to take account of young people's own perspectives regarding their work. It was observed in this study that every working child and young person placed value on the work they did to earn money to help their families. All the young people participating in the study thought that their contribution meant a lot to the family and despite mixed feelings at times, they expressed a positive attitude toward work precisely because

of its value to their families. The young people stated that they considered that working on the street is a core attribute of their identity. One boy (Rashid Khan, aged 13) expressed his views as follows:

It is very important for me to work to support my family. Our financial situation is bad as we are living in the slum areas of Rawalpindi City. It is hard to survive in Rawalpindi as it is expensive to live here, the rents are high, and food is expensive too. Due to migration to Pakistan, my father cannot afford to send any of my six siblings to school. I started work when I was eight years old. I work eight to twelve hours as a shoe polisher and in the fruit and vegetable market. I am happy that I am helping my father to meet the expenses of my family and helping my siblings to have a better future through education.

Children and young people have accepted work as part of their lives, but they are unsure about their future. Upon investigation, they were not sure what they would do in their near and distant future. However, during the discussions in different research sites, they stated that they knew they would work for themselves and their families, but if they wanted to earn more, they would need skills. However, there were no institutions, except for a few operated by various NGOs, that would help them to develop the necessary skills, and the scope of skill development was very limited. As mentioned above, most of the Afghan children and young people were working on the streets where no skills are required, and they learned by doing. By obtaining employment, they are also in competition with the local population, which has grown resentful because young Afghan people work for less money than the locals. This is not only the case with young children but with adults as well.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter concludes that Afghan refugee children from impoverished families live difficult and different lives after migrating to Pakistan. Their social and economic situation changes, and they must face the consequences in the shape of living in a new country, leaving school and the Madrassa and working in different settings including the streets, where they face exploitation and harassment.

It can also be concluded that the overall situation of working children and young people presents a paradox. On the one hand, they are happy to help their families and feel that they are contributing to the families' income, even though they are working in an exploitative and unsafe environment. On the other hand, children and young people feel bad that their education is being neglected or not completed. What I found for Afghan refugee children has been found in studies on street children in other countries too (see [Gebretsadik, 2017](#); [Woodhead, 2012](#)). My study also aligns with research on street children in identifying not only economic hardship but also hierarchical family relationships as a condition



and part of the problematic situation of these children. This is something the children studied here complained about but also accepted. In a normal situation – if they were living in their homeland – they might negotiate, however after migrating, young people were not in a position to negotiate. They do what they are told to do, either by their father or another male relative.

Furthermore, the absence of a social security system in Pakistan for victims of the war in Afghanistan and the lack of affordable necessities of life including schooling and health puts unnecessary pressure on families, and thus ultimately on children. These households are powerless due to their defined noncitizen status in Pakistan, which excludes them from the mainstream of society (Fantahun & Taa, 2022). It should be mentioned here that the average income of young people is PKRs. 150–200 per day, and the average working hours are 5–6 hours, but these boys show resilience. This resilience is due to strong social capital built on their families, peers, their own personalities and a strong belief in God.

The children and young people recognized that education and technical skills were important for bringing positive change to their lives. This is because they have observed many Afghan nationals who have worked in the locations where the research was conducted for the whole of their lives and have been unable to improve their financial position. On the other hand, they have also seen many rich and settled Afghans in Pakistan. As far as the skills development of the young people who participated in the study is concerned, the opportunities are limited. In general, they all emphasized that they wanted to work with dignity and be respected by society. This is also a finding reproduced in studies on street children in other countries (see Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2013). It can also be concluded that Afghan refugee experiences are not isolated experiences and most of the refugees living in different parts of the world live in more or less the same conditions and face similar kinds of attitudes from, and treatment by, their various host societies (see Hoodfar, 2010; Mann, 2012).

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# Section Three – Introduction

## Living as a Child in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye: Navigating Between Solidarity, Collective Pressures and Kinship Support in the Times of Disruption

*Elena Kim and Doris Bühler-Niederberger*

### Abstract

This section focuses on Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye where knowledge on children and youth has been misconstrued as homogenous and ahistorical. To address this epistemic gap, authors explore the social, cultural and economic experiences of children and youth, their expectations, aspirations and risks under the premise that the region's imperial history, participation in the Soviet Union and postindependence transition, and post-imperial present account for and produce social and historical continuities which persist and make for differently experienced childhood, adolescence and youth. Chapters in this section emphasize diverse and creative ways in which young citizens living in Central Asia and Caucasus (CAC) countries engage in negotiating, collaborating, adapting and confronting challenges and barriers presented by the rapidly changing social realities shaped by global labor market transformation, growing economic inequalities and advanced communication systems. This analysis is done from the standpoint of those on whose behalf research is conducted – the youth and children themselves.

*Keywords:* Azerbaijan; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Türkiye; childhood and youth; intergenerational solidarity

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The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies, 171–176



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This section's geographic focus is on three countries of post-Soviet Central Asia and Caucasus (CAC) countries – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, we have added a study of childhood in Turkey to this section, as this country does after all have some proximity to the CAC countries (linguistically, in terms of religion and in geographical location). This particular choice is necessitated by a problem of a missing account in the accumulated body of knowledge on children and youth, produced predominantly in North America and Europe – the peculiar silence about or/and a misconstrued representation of the region's domestic and family life. Indeed, more often than not we have been subjected to superficial, homogenous, ahistorical and synchronized portrayals of contemporary Central Asian children and youth bereft of pertinent historical and social backgrounds. It was also noted that youth in transition and children's life stories have been constructed with no references or recourse to the older generations (Bhat, 2018). Our goal here is to reinstate a meaningful analysis of childhood and youth experiences conducted under the premise that the region's imperial history, participation in the Soviet Union's *civilization mission*, postindependence transition and postimperial present account for and produce social and historical continuities which persist and make for differently experienced childhood, adolescence and youth. We set out to use empirically based and locally produced approaches to analytically explore the social, cultural and economic experiences of children and youth, their expectations, aspirations and risks. Importantly, our objective here is to elucidate and radiate diverse and creative ways in which young citizens living in CAC countries engage in negotiating, collaborating, adapting and confronting challenges and barriers presented by the rapidly changing social realities shaped by global labor market transformation, growing economic inequalities and advanced communication systems. The youth and children, we are looking at in this section, were born in families or/and to parents whose lives were abruptly disrupted in the 1990s by uncertainties, postcolonial nation-state building, access to global markets and erosion of state welfare. These circumstances meant more diversity, opportunity and flexibility for these new generations as well as new threats and insecurities, yet these rich sites of experiences have not yet been thoroughly understood. This section embraces the unique opportunity to study various youth scenarios by mobilizing five systematically and methodically conducted studies pertaining to youth and children's everyday life experiences in modern CAC countries.

The strikingly insignificant references to the region's youth in serious and critical debates about youth and children are a recurrent theme in all the contributions in this section. As *Mariya Levitanus* describes it, paucity of sources on childhood in the region was consistent prior to the region's encounters with the imperial Russia and later when the Soviet Union turned these countries into the Soviet Socialist Republics. With research interest to children and child rearing growing in the socialist era, it focused on the imperial center of Russia and the European part of the USSR, leaving behind its peripheral Southern territories. As a result, today the discipline of childhood studies is nonexistent, while research on childhood is limited to ethnographies of childhood rituals and customs. *Aysel Sultan*, *Doris Bühler-Niederberger* and *Nigar Nasrullayeva* echo the reckoning

about the gap in the literature around child rearing, children's voices and their own understanding of subjective well-being. Acuteness of the necessity to urgently address this gap evolves from the considerations that after three decades of transition, economic crisis of 2008, COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, the ongoing war in Ukraine present a mix of old and new challenges for improving the lives of children and youth. These predicaments have and will continue affecting youth and children disproportionately.

Yet, it would be unfair not to mention the 2022 special issue in the *Journal of Child Indicators Research on Foundations of Children's and Youth's Well-being in Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan*, edited by Hunner-Kreisel and coeditors. The authors focus on two countries, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, to discover various sources of influences on children's well-being with a shared thread of arguments centering upon dysfunctions within the countries' state-funded social infrastructure. Editors there posited that the interactions among such institutions as the family, the state and international human rights interventions form important impacts for the well-being and welfare of youth and children, and these observations were generalizable to the areas beyond the said geographic regions (Hunner-Kreisel et al., 2022). From this special issue we learned about several current challenges in the region. One was that the international discourse on children's welfare and the local social policies were often in discord with each other. The commitments made in international treaties did not align with the realities and practicalities of the various local circumstances and institutions. Second, the youth and children having the right to participate in society and needing protection were almost never consulted about how they can best access them (Hunner-Kreisel et al., 2022). Third, in understanding childhood and youth development in these two countries, relationships between the family and the state must be questioned on such parameters as "formal and informal education, questions of mobility and space, normality, and deviation from it through children's and young people's social and cultural practices, institutional welfare, social and health policies, and their problematizations including questions of socially ordered (power) relations according to class, gender and generation" (p. 1134). The special issue showed how interactions between patriarchal social institutions and contemporary families tended to discard youth's well-being as a value. In this subsection of the Handbook, we extend these authors' scholarship to build more knowledge about how young people in CAC countries themselves actively interact with what they see as oppressive and cope with adversities asserting their own resilient capacities and agency in distinct contexts and conditions.

It must be understood as one reads the chapters in this section, that in the countries we are examining, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, deinstitutionalization and erosion of state-funded social services shifted the responsibility of social reproduction from the state to families (Huseynli, 2018) to provide care for children, the sick and the elderly. Bearing in mind the conditions of malfunctioning welfare state, decaying social and physical infrastructure, unemployment and insufficient financial resources, this placed a considerable burden on families and women in particular. Indeed, the historical backdrop in which we invite you to contemplate the questions we are posing is complex and



multifaceted. Briefly speaking, this kaleidoscope necessarily incorporates post-imperial collective trauma exacerbated by political uncertainty and instability, revivalist national ideology and ethnic identity formation policies riddled with traditionalization of gender norms and hierarchized gender order, valorization of patriarchy, Islamization of social norms and everyday practices, corruption, labor migration, but also globalization, urbanization, international humanitarian presence and a notable discourse of a democratic vector of development (Kim, 2022a, 2022b).

Nonetheless, this section's geographic focus rationale extends beyond filling a gap in the childhood literature on the peripheral regions like the CAC countries. We offer a valuable research standpoint from which we explore childhood experiences by adopting an epistemological approach to speak from the standpoint of those on whose behalf research is conducted. It is our position that any talk about inequality, poverty and injustices cannot be fully grasped without an epistemological turn to a bottom-up approach in which the silenced ones can occupy an agentic standpoint from which our knowledge and understandings are derived from. This contrasts itself from the more classic decorum of scholarly process, one in which dominant theories inform conceptualization of inquiries and shape the findings in terms of the categories inherent to these theories (Smith, 1987, 2005).

## **Contextualizing Contributions**

This section begins with the contribution by *Mariya Levitanus* who reports on queer childhood in Kazakhstan and, specifically, on the cultural production of queer childhood narratives. She pays attention to the notion of silence around nonconforming sexuality and the impacts this silence has on queer-identifying Kazakh youth. Quite in the spirit of this handbook, Mariya incorporates her analysis about youth's own contestation of social pressures and refusal to play along with their relegated role of what she calls an "impossible subject." She notes the dire absence of queer childhood studies in the region and offers to bridge this gap by moving beyond the ethnocentric and heteronormative perspective of childhood in Kazakhstan.

Next is a chapter by *Ekaterina Chicherina* whose analysis centers on migration aspirations among the teenagers in Kyrgyzstan. Drawing upon 14 interviews with adolescent participants living in Kyrgyzstan, she reveals predominance of out-migration in the narratives for future among these young Kyrgyz citizens. They seek to remove themselves from the Kyrgyzstan's unsatisfactory education and employment opportunities. Interestingly, Ekaterina's findings illustrate that their individual mobility desires have a rather collective nature and underpinning, such that she labels them as "the collective project of the family." Personal life trajectories are embedded in the interests and expectations of their families and shaped by what is considered best for their kinship. In children's own mental schema of adulthood, their success is defined in terms of their ability to provide care to their parents and siblings – something that only becomes possible if they

live and work outside of Kyrgyzstan. Conflicts emerge when parental wishes collide with young people's own imagined lifestyles. This contestation becomes a site for them to overcome ambivalences and establish their own agency, including adapting and transforming their aspirations for the future.

*Aysel Sultan, Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Nigar Nasrullayeva's* chapter on Azerbaijani children's smartphone use unravels the moderating role of the device on the quality of interactions among generations. Their findings are impressive in, for example, showing how smartphones mediate enactment of different identities in children, including those of a "responsible child" and how smartphone use can both reinforce and disrupt familial solidarity. The authors move further into confident demonstration of how the use of smartphones can help children to reestablish and renegotiate generational relations and facilitate *generationing*. This happens as a function of smartphones' affordability to foster shifting of social boundaries, norms, expectations and needs of parents and children in new ways and spaces. Notably, this contribution boasts an innovative approach to the modern study of childhood, the sociomaterial approach, which allows for a new understanding of children's agency as distributed among human and nonhuman forces and its inherently relational nature.

This is followed by a chapter on children at the threshold between childhood and youth in Türkiye. Türkiye is also a mainly Muslim country of Asia and it is very present in Central Asian countries, with the offer of schools, universities, consumer goods, and accordingly it plays an important role in the migration plans of young Central Asians. In addition, there is a certain linguistic proximity because the majority of the inhabitants in the three countries of Central Asia/Caucasus speak Turkic languages. Türkiye is sometimes seen as a "between country" (reference?), a bridge between Europe and Asia. But it is also true for this country – with a conflict-ridden history and present – that large groups of adolescents are affected by the numerous unresolved political and social problems in the country and that the scientific study of these problems has only gained momentum in recent years. *Aytüre Türkyılmaz* provides more detailed information on the achievements and gaps of childhood research in Türkiye in her chapter. The pubescents *Aytüre* studied are striving to expand the scope of action in their rather hierarchically structured families. They are partially successful in this, via a skillful "trust management" that they engage in. At other points, they have to or want to give in, in order to prevent their relationships with their parents from becoming too conflictual.

Lastly, *Elena Kim* takes us back to Kyrgyzstan to examine *nebere aluu*, an intergenerational child-rearing setting of informal kinship fosterage wherein grandparents adopt their first grandchild to raise as their own. Elena is concerned with the contemporary iteration of *nebere aluu* from the perspectives of the grandparents themselves, responding to the opaqueness of their roles in this practice in media and scarce scholarly sources. Holding their standpoint central to the inquiry, Elena discusses the phenomenon as reflective of a destabilizing social, economic and political context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, in which the practice acquires unique social significance and reinforces intergenerational care and continuity allowing for reconciliation and solidarity among diverse family

members. Elena illuminates grandparents' voices to unfold grandmothers' own grappling with generational and gender asymmetries as they raise the children and expect reciprocation of care and gratitude in the future. Building upon their higher status of authority these participants partake in and perpetuate the power relations imposed on them but simultaneously enhance solidarity and mobilize support for the benefit of the younger generations.

In compiling these five chapters in this section, we seek to provide our audience with a reflective reading of the dynamic connections between contemporary social transformations in Central and Western Asia and childhood/youth experiences of everyday lives from the intergenerational and relational lens. We believe that we are offering enough material for you to ponder upon the questions of specifying the diverse experiences of people we study from the vantage point of local and global dynamic processes and transformations posing causal consequences in shaping children's and youth's life opportunities and entering into communication with them. We hope that this section can be used to establish a possible conceptual frame to widen and foster a locally relevant and theoretically sophisticated childhood and youth study in Central and Western Asia.

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## Chapter 8

# ‘I Thought I’d Kill Myself When I Grew Up’: Queer Childhood Narratives in Kazakhstan

*Mariya Levitanus*

### Abstract

Recent years have seen the development of new approaches to the study of gender and sexuality in childhood, with attention given to socio-historical, cultural and political contexts. This chapter aims to contribute towards a limited field of research on queer childhood and youth in Central Asia by considering how narratives of queer childhood in Kazakhstan are culturally produced. This chapter draws on the material from in-depth interviews of 11 queer people living in Kazakhstan, focussing on their narratives of childhood. The study exposes the effect of silence about non-heteronormative identities in Kazakhstan on queer children. Narratives of bullying and managing school violence are explored along with narratives of queer childhood within the families of origin. Lastly, the chapter foregrounds instances of agency and resilience, considering how queer children manage to steer themselves away from being an ‘impossible subject’ and contest dominant societal attitudes and discourses.

*Keywords:* Queer childhood; Kazakhstan; LGBTQ+; traditional values; suicide; agency


### Introduction

On 27th October 2021, Sergey Kim, an eighth grade student at the Nazarbayev Intellectual School (NIS) in Almaty, died by suicide ([KazTag, 2021](#)). The story

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soon gained momentum in the media as Sergey, according to some accounts, had worn a skirt on the day before to a themed school event, which resulted in the disapproval of a teacher who took the student to the school psychologist and called their parents (Danilin, 2021; Gluchova, 2021). The day after Sergey took their life by jumping out of their family's 11th floor apartment, fellow students of other NIS from across Almaty came to school wearing skirts and held a protest under the slogan 'Clothes have no gender' (Danilin, 2021). While it is impossible to know what exactly happened to Sergey and whether their actions in wearing a skirt and transgressing gender norms had anything to do with their gender identity, this instance taps into numerous untold suicide cases of queer<sup>1</sup> youth in Kazakhstan. It also tells a story of the resistance and agency of young people in Kazakhstan who protested the perceived injustice following Sergey's suicide.

For over 30 years, literature and research in policy, psychology, sociology and other fields, predominantly from Global North, have documented that non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender younger persons are at greater risk of suicide (Bailey et al., 2014; Bostwick et al., 2014; Cover, 2016). In Kazakhstan, which scores high in rates of suicide in adults (Varnik, 2012), amongst children aged between 15 and 19, suicide was identified as the leading cause of mortality, one of the highest adolescent suicide rates in the world (UNICEF, 2020). Existing research on queer youth suicidality suggests that the risk of suicide ideation and attempts can be two to six times higher than that of non-queer youth due to factors such as bullying, forms of shame, marginalisation and exclusion (for example, Zhao et al., 2010). While no research to date looks at suicides amongst queer youths in Kazakhstan, existing evidence on suicidality in queer adults in the country (Seksenbayev, 2018) indicates that the rates are staggering. Assuming the link between queerness and suicidality is not unproblematic, and it bears risk to create a fixation on the woundedness of queer young people, leaving little space for 'alternative youth voices that might express complex strengths, pleasures and curiosities' (Driver, 2008, p. 4). Queer youth suicidality, therefore, needs to be thought about within socio-cultural, environmental and institutional contexts, where queer youth suicide becomes thinkable (Cover, 2016).

This chapter aims to consider what it is like to be young and queer in Kazakhstan, providing some means of understanding how the vulnerabilities and difficulties of queer youths are culturally produced. Furthermore, this chapter intends to bring the agency of queer youths to the foreground; hence not treating queer children and young people as purely and permanently endangered and victimised but instead considering nuanced ways in which they negotiate the multi-layered contours of their everyday lives.

This chapter is based on in-depth interviews of 11 people who identify as queer and live in Kazakhstan, conducted in November 2017 as a part of a Doctorate in

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<sup>1</sup>I use 'queer' in this chapter to denote children and young people who identify in ways that exceed the boundaries of heteronormative and/or cis-normative gender and/or sexual categories.

Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh (Levitanus, 2020).<sup>2</sup> The study looked at the everyday lives of queer people in Kazakhstan with questions focussing on daily experiences within contexts that were relevant to and determined by each participant, including but not limited to home, school, university, online dating scene and workplace. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed.<sup>3</sup> Each participant gave informed consent in the pre-interview meeting and the study was approved by the University of Edinburgh Ethics committee. Interviews took place in Almaty, Astana and Karaganda.

Out of the 11 participants, 3 identified as cisgender gay men, 3 as bisexual women, 1 as a lesbian, 1 as a pansexual, 2 as transgender women and 1 as a transgender man. While interviews were conducted in three cities, participants in this study were born and grew up across different regions of Kazakhstan. Identifying characteristics such as their place of origin and profession were not noted in order to protect participants' confidentiality, unless they were deemed important by the participants themselves. While this study did not focus specifically on participants' childhood experiences, all participants recalled aspects of their early experiences when asked to talk about their everyday lives. This is, therefore, a retrospective study based on queer participants' narratives and recollections of their childhood experiences (Russell et al., 2011).

Foucauldian-informed narrative analysis (Tamboukou, 2013) was employed to examine the childhood narratives of queer people in the light of specific power structures and discourses around gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan. A Foucauldian approach views individual narratives as discursively constructed as well as challenging and producing the reality of the subject. As pointed out by Maria Tamboukou (2015),

Stories should not be conceived only as discursive effects but also as recorded processes wherein the self as the author/teller of his/her story transgresses power boundaries and limitations (...). It is this very process of storied actions, revealing the 'birth' of the political subject, that the political in narrative research is about (p. 43).

From this perspective, narratives of queer childhood are both vehicles through which power and discourses are circulated, while at the same time offering spaces and tools for those discourses to be grappled with and resisted.

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<sup>2</sup>Parts of this chapter have been published in a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Edinburgh (Levitanus, 2020) and other chapters (Levitanus, 2022a, 2023).

<sup>3</sup>I used the pragmatic approach to transcription (Evers, 2011), omitting the micro-linguistic and structural features of participants' narratives and instead focused on the emerging narratives and their relationship with wider societal discourses on gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan. Within this chapter, '(...)' signifies omitted fragments of the transcript and '(.)' signifies a brief pause.

## Childhood Studies in Kazakhstan

In this chapter, I conceptualise childhood as a socially and historically bound construct. As Chris [Jenks \(2005\)](#) points out,

Childhood (...) makes reference to a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society to society (...)  
Childhood then always relates to a particular cultural setting (p. 7).

In Kazakhstan, the place and experience of the child cannot be understood without its historical context. Before the nineteenth century, literature on childhood in Kazakhstan was severely limited; while Russian historians and ethnographers, such as [Nikolay Rychkov \(1772\)](#), [Yakov Gaverdovskyi \(2007\)](#) and Count Konstantin Pahlen (1964), studied Central Asian territory, their research gives limited information on children's lives. Contemporary historians of Kazakhstan give some insight into the lives and traditions of children's upbringing in Kazakhstan before the twentieth century ([Masanov et al., 2007](#); [Mustafina, 1992](#); [Stasevich, 2008](#)); however, further research is needed. On the contrary, the Soviet project of childhood has been the focus of many studies. Seminal work by Lisa [Kirschenbaum \(2001\)](#) offers an in-depth analysis of child upbringing and kindergartens in Soviet Union. [Catriona Kelly \(2007\)](#) looks at the Soviet childhood project, drawing on the official information, children's literature, films, theatre and interviews. It is worth pointing out that with few exceptions (for example, [Kaşıkçı, 2020](#)), existing research on Soviet childhood predominantly focusses on the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and not specifically on the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. Post-independence childhood research in Kazakhstan is also scarce. The sociology of childhood does not exist in Kazakhstan as a separate discipline ([Umbertaliev et al., 2016](#)). The study of childhood in post-independence Kazakhstan is dominated by ethnographers, who, to a large extent, focus on childhood rituals and folkloristic customs ([Konovalov & Shakhanova, 1998](#); [Kul'sarieva, 2017](#)). One example of an ethnographic study examining the upbringing of children in Kazakhstan comes from [Cynthia Werner \(2004\)](#), who describes the cultural construction of gender. [Werner \(2004\)](#) emphasises that transition to adulthood for Kazakhs is interconnected with heterosexual marriage. Furthermore, [Werner \(2004\)](#) writes that while adulthood is granted to a Kazakh person upon marriage, it is sealed by having children. While such studies give an insight into aspects of children's experiences, the ethnographic studies in the region are predominantly concerned with the aspects of 'becoming' Kazakh children, giving little attention to children's voices and first-hand experiences. Such focus bears a risk of ethnic particularism and pays little attention to the complicated fabric and various intersectional identities of children in Kazakhstan.

In recent years there has been some interest in studying childhood in Kazakhstan ([Apakhayev et al., 2017](#); [Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021](#)), although, with some exceptions ([Kulakhmetova, 2017](#)) the focus has predominantly been on education, policy and children's welfare. Research on children and young people's

gender and sexuality is even more limited. In the next section, I will explore some key theories around queer childhood, whilst making links to existing literature and research on children and young people's gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan.

## **Queer Children and Young People in Kazakhstan**

The question of where childhood ends and adulthood begins has been debated and much related to the concepts of 'childhood innocence' (Edelman, 2004; Egan & Hawkes, 2009), which is in turn interconnected with the child's contact with sexuality and physiological sexual maturity. The hegemonic discourse of childhood, therefore, posits that childhood sexuality is non-existent. As Louise Jackson (2006) points out,

The concept of childhood, youth, and adolescence have underpinned the construction of modern sexualities: through their positioning as formative stages in the *growth of sexual and self-awareness* as well as their construction as *periods of susceptibility to sexual danger* (p. 250).

Childhood innocence from this standpoint is supposed to be protected, which in turn leads to pathologisation of the sexual subjectivity of children (Jackson, 2006). Yet, as highlighted by Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), a paradox emerges: on the one hand, there is a belief that children are void of sexuality, while on the other, children are assumed to be growing up towards heterosexuality.

Debates and anxieties around sexuality education around the world are a clear illustration of the notion that children's innocence is to be guarded (Egan, 2013; Shapiro, 2001; Talburt, 2018). In Kazakhstan, the school curriculum does not include a separate course on sexuality education (Arystanbek, 2021). Some schools deliver a subject named 'valeology', or the science of healthy living, and classes in '*özin özi tanu*', which from Kazakh directly translates as 'knowledge of oneself' (Kettling & Ivanova, 2018, p. 111). However, according to Aizada Arystanbek (2021), valeology and *özin özi tanu* classes do not have a stable place in the curriculum, often face pushback from parents and are significantly underfunded. Karlygash Kabatova (2018) points out that one of the key barriers to sexuality education in Kazakhstan is the culture of *uyat* or shame. 'It is *uyat* for unmarried women to get pregnant, but it is also *uyat* to talk or ask about sex' (Kabatova, 2018, p. 4; original emphasis). Furthermore, according to Kabatova (2018), discussions between children and parents about topics concerning sex are against social norms in Kazakhstan, which creates a barrier for children accessing information about sexuality and sexual health.

Historically and in contemporary times, across different countries, restrictions on sexual rights (mostly within the realm of LGBTQ+ rights) have been interconnected with the idea of the protection of children and insistence that moral and physical development of minors requires prohibiting propagation of information regarding same-sex desire and gender non-conformity (Thoreson, 2015). Indeed,



the child or young adult becomes a site or a vessel of meanings and projections, or as Hannah Dyer (2017) puts it, ‘a locus of anxiety for homophobic culture because on it rests the reproduction of a heteronormative future’ (p. 291).

The law ‘On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to their Health and Development’ that was attempted to be passed in Kazakhstan in February 2015 (Human Rights Watch, 2015) speaks directly to those anxieties. The draft of laws included a broad ban on the publication or sharing of information relating to LGBT in settings where children might receive or encounter that information (Draft of Laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015), much like the Russian 2013 gay propaganda law. While the literature on the effects of the law on queer children and young people in Russia is limited, existing reports suggest that the propaganda law has been detrimental to queer children and youth (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Voyles & Chilton, 2019). Indeed, research in adults shows that, along with the increase in physical violence motivated by homophobia (Kondakov & Shtorn, 2021), the law has other consequences such as an increase in everyday homophobia and self-censorship in the public sphere, and a deterioration in mental health of the queer community in Russia (Horne & White, 2019; Hylton et al., 2017; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015). While the propaganda law was not approved in Kazakhstan, there has been a marked increase in the ‘traditional values’ discourse and retraditionalisation practices in recent years (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Levitanus, 2022a).

As pointed out by Craig Calhoun (2007), ‘tradition’ is not only a fixed past, rather it is a political project that is continuously reinvented and reproduced. In Central Asia, traditional values discourses generally represent patriarchal and heterosexual normative behaviour as well as a binary view of gender (for example, Peshkova & Thibault, 2022; Kudaibergenova, 2019). In her study of popular Instagram accounts in Kazakhstan and Russia, Diana Kudaibergenova highlights the role of retraditionalisation in defining and regulating sexual identities and bodily expressions. Kudaibergenova defines retraditionalisation as a set of discourses about culture and nation that ‘seek to establish power over defining what “national tradition” means by rethinking tradition in a more contemporary sense’ (Kudaibergenova, 2019, p. 365). One of the examples of retraditionalising discourses in Kazakhstan is the discourse of shame or *uyat* mentioned earlier, which can be understood as a tool for legitimising the heterosexual normative order and regulating any deviant behaviour (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Levitanus, 2022a). It is important to point out that traditional values’ discourses and retraditionalisation in Kazakhstan are intertwined with the ethno-national interpretation of the ‘nation’, as opposed to more flexible, inclusive, civic views of national discourses (Fedorenko, 2012; Kesici, 2011). When ‘traditional’ gender roles are addressed, reference is often made to what it means to be a Kazakh boy/man or a Kazakh girl/woman, omitting the variability of gender expression, the multicultural population or civil identity.

While examining the historical evolution of the construction of gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is useful to outline some of the contemporary discourses around femininity and masculinity circulating within the country. The official government discourse emphasises the role

of women being primarily concerned with parenting, domestic tasks, family and motherhood, which in turn are seen as a foundation for a successful nation (Nazarbayev, 2012). This discourse is being reproduced in the school context within *valeology* and *özın özi tanu* classes mentioned earlier, where continued emphasis is made on Kazakh national traditions and family values (Arystanbek, 2021). Arystanbek's (2021) study of the official school curriculum and state-issued textbooks on *özın özi tanu* highlights that femininity is being equated to passivity, subordination and sensitivity, while masculinity is associated with decisiveness and strength. Within the textbooks, the emphasis on 'serving the family' is made for both genders, but particularly for women, whose value rests 'on her ability to find a husband and preserve their relationship within the institution of heterosexual monogamy, with biological reproduction being seen as the main goal' (Arystanbek, 2021, p. 24).

Queer childhood within the 'protection of children' and 'traditional values' discourses is an impossibility, and a queer child becomes unthinkable as a subject who troubles the assumption of a heteronormative future. The impossibility of a queer child in Kazakhstan is further reinforced by the absence of queer children's voices and narratives within childhood and youth studies and policy debates. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Jose Muñoz (2009) points out that not all children are wanted by society and not every child receives state protection. Indeed, there are structural disparities that, apart from sexuality, race, class and gender, play a role in the 'privileges of childhood' (Nyong, 2011, p. 52). This chapter begins to address this gap in the research by looking at the narratives relating to a queer childhood in Kazakhstan. Within this chapter, various intersections of identities that queer children and adults inhabit are considered, going beyond the heteronormative, binary and ethnocentric view of childhood in Kazakhstan.

## Results

### *An Unthinkable Child*

A 44-year-old participant from Almaty, Gulzada,<sup>4</sup> describes her difficulty making sense of her experiences while growing up in an *aul* (a village) in southern Kazakhstan. Gulzada could not recognise nor identify her feelings. She struggled to find information on anyone that was 'like her', even in literature, where she often found respite. However, just like the people around her, the characters in books were all heteronormative. She explained this as a consequence of living behind the Iron Curtain. Indeed, during the Soviet period anything concerning non-normative gender and sexuality was heavily censored and silenced (Kon, 1995). References to same sex desire were removed from Soviet publications and translations of foreign literature (Baer, 2013). It was especially difficult to find any literature featuring non-heterosexual desire in the small *aul* where Gulzada grew

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<sup>4</sup>Participants' names and other identifiable information were changed or omitted in this chapter, apart from one; Gulzada chose to opt out of anonymisation.

up. She started to hide her uncomfortable and unfitting feelings and thoughts 'deep inside', as she describes it; this was a way for her to survive. Gulzada spoke about one moment in her childhood:

I have one vivid memory from when I was 12 years old and going through puberty, you know you start feeling different from others, well (.) about sexual orientation. I didn't understand what was happening (...) I did not fit in. And I thought that when I reached around 30 years old, maybe I would have to kill myself. Because as a child I thought I did not want this life, the life I saw adults living. Because it was not for me, but I didn't know what was.

Gulzada's narrative highlights her struggle to situate herself within the context of an *aul* in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, where gender and sexuality diversity was non-existent. She never shared her feelings with the adults around her as she did not feel she would be understood. Gulzada speaks about her feeling of loneliness and alienation as she tries to make sense of her feelings and emotions whilst growing up. I describe Gulzada's narrative elsewhere (Levitanus, 2023), where I focus on the way the lack of representation of non-heteronormative identity in the Soviet Union affected Gulzada's ability to find the language and symbolise her experiences (Baer, 2013; Rotkirch, 2002; Stella, 2015). As a child, Gulzada finds her future inconceivable within the society where there is no space for her queerness and decides to kill herself. Later in the interview, Gulzada repeated with an uncomfortable laugh, 'Indeed, I thought I'd kill myself when I grew up', but things changed after Gulzada moved to a bigger city. As the collapse of the Soviet Union approached, she was able to find information about other people 'like her', eventually finding the language to talk about her experience and feel a sense of belonging.

While most participants in this study were born after the Soviet Union had collapsed, the experience of not existing in the eyes of others is echoed in other narratives. For example, a Kazakh in his early twenties, who identifies as a cis-gender gay man, spoke about there being no acknowledgement of non-heterosexuality in Kazakh schools. He describes that at his school, it was not a matter of not being accepted, but being gay was not a possibility and was never mentioned. 'There wasn't such a thing as being gay' (Levitanus, 2022a, p. 125). Consistent with existing research on sexuality education in Kazakhstan (Arystanbek, 2021; Kabatova, 2018), the topic of sex and sexuality is a taboo and a subject of shame or *uyat*. While heteronormative sex is already silenced, queer sexuality is off limit (Levitanus, 2022a), especially in school settings. Arystanbek (2021) points out that Kazakhstan's alternative to sex education actively promotes heteronormativity, whilst dismissing young people who in any way deviate from gender norms, especially when it comes to sexual activity. Research from other countries indicates that sexuality education is not sufficient to reduce negative attitudes towards non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people. Indeed, it may contribute towards doing the opposite by reinforcing stigmatisation and

marginalisation of queer youths by representing queer people as deviant (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Shrestha et al., 2020).

### ***Bullying at School***

Several participants recounted their experiences of being bullied at school. For example, a cisgender gay man from Astana, in his early twenties, spoke about being bullied for several years. While he was not open about his sexuality, in this participant's words, his classmates 'picked up on some of his mannerisms'.

They were mocking me, and they attacked me at times. It began around fifth form [10–12 years] and it continued until seventh or eighth form [14–15 years].

They used words. *Pidoras* ["pederast" or "faggot"] for example, and other words. They told me things like, 'why are you at all in this country, you should live there, where there are people like you'.

Existing research predominantly originating from the Global North demonstrates that for youth who identify as non-heterosexual, transgender or gender diverse, rates of bullying victimisation are several times higher than those of their heterosexual cisgender peers (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Toomey & Russell, 2016). Bullying refers to repeated and deliberate victimisation of a person by one or more other people (Olweus, 2010). A power imbalance between actors and the target of bullying is implicit and makes it difficult for the young person who is being bullied to defend themselves physically, emotionally or relationally (Berry, 2018). Whilst using the concept of bullying, it is crucial to acknowledge that bullying emerges from a complex interplay of factors, such as individual identity, the family, the school system and other aspects of a person's socio-cultural context (for example, Smith & Brain, 2000). The bullying described by participants takes local dimensions of utilising discourses around what it means to be a Kazakh and the culture of shame or *uyat* as tools of regulation, which are often entwined with traditional values discourse that privileges heteronormative gender order.

While homophobic slurs are not uncommon in the bullying of queer youths (for example, Espelage et al., 2018), the question of location is particular; where were the bullies from the narrative of the participant referring to? Another participant who identifies as a homosexual man in his early twenties, also from Astana, recounts an episode where he and his friends were specifically sent to Europe by one of their fellow students at the university and told, 'people like you should not live here'. This narrative of being 'sent away' can be associated with the anti-LGBT discourse around 'Gayropa' (Suchland, 2018) – a reference to Europe as a place where queer rights are affirmed, which is contrasted with traditional and 'purely heterosexual' (Healey, 2001, p. 253) societies, such as Russia, or Kazakhstan in this case. This discourse is being reproduced in the

school bullying recollection of the cisgender gay man (see [Levitanus & Kyslitsyna, forthcoming](#) for more details on the narrative of queer people being ‘sent to Europe’).

For transgender participants in this study, bullying was a much more prominent experience. For example, a transgender woman in her mid-twenties from Almaty spoke about her experience of growing up in a small town in the South of Kazakhstan.

It was tough at school. (...) Some moments were particularly difficult. Even though people in my class were more or less friendly, there were pranks and name-calling. There were groups who would shout and pick at me as well, (...) insults, verbal abuse almost every day.

This participant spoke about trying to dress down and hide at school, yet the abuse was relentless. There is a large body of literature demonstrating the numerous adverse effects of bullying such as mental, behavioural and health problems, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, higher rates of absenteeism at school and lower academic performance ([Arseneault et al., 2010](#); [Bayzdakhmanova, 2015](#); [Klomek et al., 2015](#); [Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010](#)). Participants in this study described feeling permanently unsafe, missing school and finding little consolation at home, where they often also had to hide their queer identity (see below). Bullying came from both children and adults as teachers often turned a blind eye to the bullying of queer children. A transgender woman in her early twenties from Astana recalled an episode when one of the teachers saw her being beaten up by other children and interfered, saying, ‘you can do whatever you want; kill each other if you wish, as long as you don’t do it within the school gates’. While the teacher stopped the beating, their comment simply encouraged the children to take the bullying outside school territory.

### ***Queer Childhood in the Family of Origin***

Participants who described bullying rarely spoke about their difficult experiences at home, as that would have necessitated ‘coming out’ or revealing their queerness to family members. As cisgender gay man from Astana in his early twenties pointed out, the most explicit conversation about sex in a Kazakh family is often the question ‘when will you get married?’ ([Levitanus, 2022a](#), p. 127). Most participants in this study chose to avoid the topic of their sexuality with their parents when they were younger. Some waited until they had a stable relationship before ‘coming out’ while others never explicitly spoke about their non-heterosexual identity, preferring to adhere to ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ family protocol ([Levitanus, 2022b](#)). Telling parents was often described as one of the most difficult moments. As a participant from Astana who identifies as a cisgender homosexual man in his early twenties recalls,

I was in a terrible state before telling them. I felt sick. I especially worried about telling my father. I explained things to my mother and she sort of let me know that our relationship wouldn't change: 'We love you in the same way as before'. My dad, on the other hand, was very serious and said 'this is bullshit' (...).

While this participant received some reassurance from his mother, he was fearful to tell his father. Other participants in this study described the opposite gender dynamic, being more nervous about telling their mother and feeling more supported by their father. The family of the cisgender homosexual man mentioned above hardly raised the topic after the initial conversation. It was particularly important to his parents that he remained quiet about his sexuality. This emphasis on keeping a child's non-normative gender or sexuality invisible can be attributed to the culture of shame or *uyat*, where particular importance is placed on public visibility of norm transgressions (Harris, 2004) and the opinion and views of others. Indeed, this participant explained that his parent's desire to hide his sexuality was related to their fear of disgrace and shame that would befall on the entire family if other people found out about him being non-heterosexual (Levitonus, 2022a).

Attempts to deny and hide their children's non-cisgender gender identity were made by parents of transgender-identifying participants of this study. For example, a transgender woman in her early twenties who lives in Astana described how while her mother used gender-neutral terms and pronouns, such as referring to her as 'my child', she kept refusing to use her name and preferred pronouns. This participant also recounted an episode when her brother tried to forcefully cut her hair at home to make her look more masculine. Arguments often happened around the choices of clothes that participants chose to wear to school.

Even though I tried to protect myself as much as possible, I felt very uncomfortable with my family. (...) Sometimes I would come back from school already exhausted after all the slurs and stuff that people hurled at me, and my family would just add more on top of that.

While it is important to point out that not everyone's family was unsupportive and that some participants recounted positive experiences with their families (see Levitonus, 2020, 2022a), this participant in particular felt that family was not a place of comfort and support.

No one in the family understood me; not grandmothers, not granddads, uncles, aunts. (.) And some family members still don't talk to me. They rejected me, I died in their eyes. They died for me, too. Why would I need contact with such people?

The rejection and lack of support came not only from the immediate family but also from the extended family, for whom this participant ceased to exist once

she was open about being transgender. The importance of the families of origin to queer people's psychological well-being, living conditions and lifestyle choices is generally recognised (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014; Mayock et al., 2008). Equally, the negative effects of familial rejection and denial to the disclosure of queer identity has been researched and acknowledged (for example, D'Augelli et al., 2005).

### *Negotiating Queer Childhood*

Despite the difficulties encountered at school and at home, participants' narratives highlighted their strategies for overcoming those struggles. As pointed out by Rasmussen et al. (2004), '[t]he complexity of queer youth's subjectivity, agency, sexuality, and cultural practices is flattened by a dominant framing of them in terms of danger and victimization' (p. 7). It is, therefore, essential to examine how queer youth express their agency, whether it be in terms of their sexual desire, identity formation or other domains of their everyday lives. Within the narratives of queer participants of this study, agency was evident in various ways. Some actively choose to hide their sexuality and gender identity, knowing that there might be risks associated with being open. For example, a pansexual man from Almaty in his mid-forties speaks about his experience at college (between 15 and 18 years of age).

It was difficult. There were cute guys there and I looked at them. But, of course, they did not understand what was happening. I knew that it may even be unsafe for me to reveal myself. (...) I understood that and never attracted much attention to myself.

It was safer for this participant to remain unknown to his peers. For transgender participants, hiding was not necessarily an option and they found that having social support was one of the most important sources of protection for them, particularly against bullying at school. For example, a transgender woman in her mid-twenties from Almaty spoke about the importance of her friends.

I had people who protected me. One of my good friends was always by my side. She would even fight for me sometimes.

Similarly, a transgender woman in her early twenties from Astana speaks about the importance of belonging to a social group:

When there was a wave of subcultures in Kazakhstan, I started to identify myself as a punk. I found belonging there, and there were different people in this group I joined. (...) They were also different from others, and there were people who also studied at my school. They were a bit older than me and they, basically, became people who sometimes protected me and helped me out. (...) I had one friend in

that group who early on saw me as a girl and treated me as her girlfriend. That was massively important for me.

For these participants, social support carried several functions: a feeling of belonging, protection and a space where some of them experienced acceptance and recognition for the first time. Indeed, research shows that for queer youth, social support is associated with better mental health and well-being (Snapp et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2019). The narrative of the participant above features her finding her belonging in Kazakhstani punk subculture. The connection between queer and punk has been previously discussed in many studies, predominantly originating from the Global North (for example, Halberstam, 2003; Sharp & Nilan, 2015). Halberstam (2003) points out that punk can be seen as creating its own community through exclusion from and rejection of dominant societal norms. In this way, being queer and punk, ‘one can be simultaneously included and excluded based on non-normative values and beliefs’ (Sharp & Nilan, 2015, p. 455). The transgender woman in her early twenties from Astana continued:

When it was unbearable at home, I spent time with my friends. They were my real family. I found comfort with them.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) uses the concept of the avunculate family that goes beyond biologically imposed family members and speaks to the broader and more fluid definitions of family. This participant illustrates this notion in referring to her friends as her ‘real’ family, where she is able to find safety.<sup>5</sup> This participant also found sanctuary in her room:

My relief was also in my bedroom. I closed the door, and it was my whole world there. I deliberately decorated my room so that it resembled a scene from my favourite book, *Alice in Wonderland* (...). I painted a Cheshire cat on my wall. I had a magical lamp with twigs. I felt that I could shut myself away from everything. I now understand that it was a very relaxing space; I felt safe in my room.

Despite a lack of support from her family of origin, this participant created spaces and social connections for herself where she could express herself and her gender openly and authentically. As highlighted by Schroeder (2015), who conducted an ethnographic study of queer cultural politics in the Midwestern United States, ‘[f]or queer youth, the bedroom becomes an important space they choose for their own privacy, or are banished to, due to other circumstances’ (p. 796). On the one hand, for this participant the bedroom became a safe space where she could retire to from the outside world. On the other hand, safety seems possible

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<sup>5</sup>See (Levitonus, 2022b) for other instances of using avunculate relationships by queer people living in Kazakhstan.



only behind closed doors. [Schroeder \(2015\)](#) compares queer children's bedrooms to the closet, which 'can conceal protectively or trap oppressively' (p. 796), and often does both at the same time.

## Conclusion

This chapter contributes towards the growing field of childhood studies in Kazakhstan by looking at narratives of queer childhood. Key narratives, including that of an unthinkable child, bullying at school, being queer within the family of origin and negotiating a queer childhood, have been examined. Within the narrative of an unthinkable child, participants' difficulties in finding self-identification and a means of understanding their experiences have been highlighted. Queer children in Kazakhstan are an 'impossible subject', who are not acknowledged in policy, within families or in schools. This creates and reinforces an environment where queer children and young people have little protection in most settings. The queer people in this study recount multiple experiences of severe bullying and violence at school. They also find little consolation in their families of origin, where non-heteronormative gender and sexuality often remain unnamed and unacknowledged.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of recognition and support from schools and their families, queer people in this study spoke about their ways of steering themselves away from being 'unthinkable subjects' into being possible, real and agentic. Queer narratives reveal ways in which participants negotiated their difficult experiences when they were young and found ways to support themselves by seeking information that might help them to recognise their experiences, choosing to hide or remain unknown, seeking social support (whether blood-related or not) or carving out spaces for themselves where they felt safe. The choice of strategies often depended on the individual circumstances and levels of support of people around them and their families. Often, the size and location of the place of residence of the participant made a palpable difference, with bigger cities offering more opportunities to find community and signification to their experiences. As Marnina [Gonick \(2006\)](#) writes in the chapter on queer girlhood:

They have refused to be rendered invisible or to accept the negative stereotypes thrust upon them. Instead, they have worked to produce positive self-identifications and representations and to create the social conditions that will open up new possibilities for living life as queer people (p. 137).

All in all, along with social struggles, exclusion and the lack of support, the narratives of queer childhood in Kazakhstan reveal stories of agency, resistance and resilience.

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## Chapter 9

# Adolescents' Migration Aspirations in Kyrgyzstan: A Migration Project as a 'Collective Project' of the Family

*Ekaterina Chicherina*

### Abstract

This chapter considers adolescents' migration aspirations in Kyrgyzstan. The discussion is based on the data obtained from 14 semi-structured interviews with adolescents as part of a qualitative study devoted to changes and continuities in biographic projecting across three generations. The study reveals the tendency towards having aspirations to move abroad for studies, work and/or life. Thus, the objective of this chapter is to consider the adolescents' motivation and to trace opportunities and challenges which may promote or hinder the realisation of individuals' migration projects. Special attention is paid to the role of an adolescent's family in this process. Adolescents' aspirations oriented towards future life in foreign countries are analysed with the help of two theoretical concepts – the concept of intergenerational solidarity and the concept of individualisation.

The analysis has shown that in Kyrgyzstan, adolescents' plans concerning going abroad are often framed by their extended families' interests and expectations. Adolescents' migration aspirations become a collective project of every family member for the sake of the family's future well-being. Parental expectation of care and support in their older age is one of the main limitations on adolescents' aspirations to move abroad. Those adolescents whose migration aspirations do not correspond with parental expectations may experience strong ambivalence, when they face the conflict between their individualised biographic projects oriented towards promising global opportunities and intergenerational solidarity norms.

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*Keywords:* Adolescents; biographic projecting; migration aspirations; inter-generational solidarity; individualisation; Kyrgyzstan

## Introduction

This chapter is devoted to Kyrgyz adolescents' migration aspirations. The discussion is based on the empirical data obtained within a larger intergenerational qualitative study on changes and continuities in biographic projecting. The data analysis within that study has revealed a high tendency among adolescents towards aspiring to move abroad (Chicherina, 2021). Fourteen out of twenty-six respondents in the age group from 12 to 15 declared a wish to migrate for study, work or life to neighbouring countries or farther afield in the future. The objective of this chapter is to give an insight into adolescents' migration aspirations in Kyrgyzstan. This is done by considering adolescents' motivation and tracing opportunities and challenges, which may promote or hinder the realisation of their migration projects. Special attention is paid to adolescents' families and their resources that might be considered and used by adolescents to plan and organise the realisation of their migration aspirations.

The number of migrants leaving Kyrgyzstan for educational or employment reasons is increasing (IOM Central Asia, 2019). The deterioration of the education system and poor prospects within the current labour market in the country are among the most important factors influencing the rising level of migration from Kyrgyzstan to other countries (IOM Central Asia, 2019; Suvanov & Ukueva, 2021). Since its independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan has become more open to the global community, international connections and opportunities for migration. In spite of this, the main destination points for migration from Central Asia are within the borders of the post-Soviet space. The majority of migrants are workers, and the main destination countries are Russia and Kazakhstan (IOM Central Asia, 2019). According to UNICEF (n.d.), 11% of children under the age of 17 in Kyrgyzstan have at least one biological parent currently living abroad.

The number of educational migrants has also grown. This can be attributed to numerous problems in the education system which have been identified by the researchers (Abdoubaetova, 2020; Steiner-Khamsi & Teleshaliyev, 2020), alongside new-found educational opportunities brought by modernisation processes in the last decades.

The educational system is faced with challenges such as a lack of resources for education, a teacher shortage, low quality education, a lack of public schools and poor facilities, as well as never-ending changes in school curricula (Steiner-Khamsi & Teleshaliyev, 2020). The number of higher education institutions has rapidly increased from nine universities in 1990 to 52 in 2018, and most of them offer fee-based study programmes (Platonova, 2018). There is a mismatch between the number of university graduates and the needs of the labour market in the country (Galeazzi, 2016; Tilekeyev et al., 2019). Recent data from youth studies show that 31% of adolescents and young people are concerned about their future (UNICEF, n.d.). All of these local conditions are pushing young people to seek a quality education abroad (Brück & Esenaliev, 2013; IOM Central Asia, 2019). The top three

countries for educational migration are Russia, China and Turkey. More than 15,700 Kyrgyz citizens were studying abroad in 2018 (IOM Central Asia, 2019). In addition, the rising number of educational migrants has a negative effect in the form of brain drain. Many educational migrants who receive a high-quality education abroad do not return to their homeland (IOM Central Asia, 2019).

Under the effects of all the processes mentioned above, pluralisation of educational institutions, low labour market opportunities, enhanced offers from abroad and adolescents' migration aspirations in Kyrgyzstan are worthy of special attention. In contemporary studies, individuals' aspirations related to migration are often considered to be a weak factor determining their actual migration in the future (Carling, 2014). Carling (2014) suggests that actual migration should be seen as 'the tip of the iceberg of aspirations, which for the most part remain unfulfilled' (p. 5). However, even unrealised migration aspirations play an important role. In the countries with a high level of migration aspirations among the population, the dream of migrating is an important aspect influencing internal societal processes and national development (Carling, 2014). People with aspirations to move abroad are less interested in making any efforts or any investments into obtaining skills or managing relationships in the local context. This may have negative consequences not only on the personal level but also for the society at large, especially if migration aspirations do not actually become real mobility (Aslany et al., 2021). That is why it is especially important to pay attention to adolescents' migration aspirations and their formation, irrespective of whether they are realised or not in the future. This is the aim of this chapter, with particular focus on the adolescents' family networks and family nexus, subjects that are always mentioned and prioritised by the studied adolescents in their narratives about their life plans.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Adolescence is the period when individuals start planning their transition to adulthood (Schoon, 2001; Shanahan & Hood, 2000). One of the essential dimensions with regard to an individual's life planning is their aspirations. Schoon (2012) suggests considering adolescents' aspirations and expectations as 'an aspect of life planning, reflecting subjective assessments of how far in the education system young people expect to go' (p. 335).

When talking specifically about migration aspirations, it is important to consider them on both macro and micro levels (Carling, 2014). 'The particular emigration environment' (Carling, 2014, p. 3) with its social, political and economic conditions plays an important role in the formation of migration aspirations. In Kyrgyzstan, as already mentioned in the introduction, the deterioration of the education system and unfavourable labour market are considered to be the main reasons for migration (IOM Central Asia, 2019; Suvanov & Ukueva, 2021). At the same time, individual characteristics play an important role, and migration aspirations must be considered as a part of an individual's overall biographic project (Carling, 2014; Schewel, 2015). In this chapter migration aspirations are

also studied as part of overall biographic project including aspirations concerning other areas such as education, career and family.

The aim of this chapter is to consider adolescents' migration aspirations in relation to opportunities and limitations, with special focus on the family's range of opportunities, which on the one hand, may provide valuable resources for adolescents in terms of fulfilling their own aspirations, but at the same time may impose restrictive expectations. That is why, in this chapter, the adolescents' aspirations concerning their future lives, work or studies in a foreign country are discussed with the help of two theoretical concepts – individualisation and intergenerational solidarity.

In some Western societies, researchers have observed a trend towards a loosening link between the aspirations of children and those of their parents (Schoon, 2012). That is why some researchers suggest that to consider adolescents' aspirations today, the concept of individualisation (Beck-Gernsheim & Beck, 2002) should be applied (Fuller, 2009). The Beck's concept of individualisation (1992) implies that class biographies have been transformed into reflexive biographies which are more dependent on individuals' own decisions. Individuals have been set free from class and gender commitments, and families have transformed to negotiated families (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). However, in the meantime, social uncertainties and risks have appeared as consequences of a 'risk society or 'late modernity', which in turn may cause the destandardisation of lifestyles and biographies (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Empirical data confirm that in modern society biographies have become more individualised, and young people consider their lives to be filled with risks and uncertainties (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). However, the distribution of these risks and uncertainties is unequal and still framed by class and gender (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Thus, all individuals are affected by social changes, but differently, and this may lead to the exclusion of the less advantaged from new opportunities (Schoon, 2012).

This growing individualisation has been primarily observed and reported in Western societies. The researchers highlight the essential role of the education system and the opportunities it provides in further developing individualisation (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). However, we should keep in mind that Kyrgyz society differs from the Western societies discussed by the researchers mentioned above. That is why, in addition to the concept of individualisation, I have also applied the concept of intergenerational solidarity. Using this concept, I explore adolescents' migration aspirations in the context of Kyrgyz society, where multi-generational extended families represent a common form of household, and intergenerational relations play an important role (Zholdoshalieva, 2016). In Kyrgyz society, which is considered to follow collectivist norms, a child's individualised activities and desires are restricted by a strong hierarchical structure (age and gender) within the family (Bühler-Niederberger & Schwittek, 2014). Bühler-Niederberger (2021) defines two main patterns regarding generational relations – an 'independence model' and an 'interdependence model'. She explains these patterns using the example of material and non-material intergenerational transfers. The 'independence model' in childhood is characterised by a child having few obligations to fulfil and focussing on their self-development. For the

parental category, the same pattern implies parental support and investments (both financial and non-financial) in a child's self-development. The 'interdependence pattern', which according to [Bühler-Niederberger \(2021\)](#) dominates in Kyrgyzstan, promotes children's active work both inside and outside of the household. Parents are considered to be life-givers who are supposed to meet basic needs such as food, clothes and upbringing. In the interdependence model, as they enter adulthood, children bear many responsibilities towards their parents, and this is considered to be their duty, proof of their respect ([Bühler-Niederberger, 2021](#)). Thus, the context, which is oriented towards the fulfilment of intergenerational obligations at present and in the future, has to be taken into account in the discussion of adolescents' aspirations. All this leads to a sub-question: can the interdependence pattern also be observed in adolescents' migration aspirations, and if yes, how does it interact with processes related to the pluralisation of educational opportunities, offers from abroad and global promises of success?

## **Sample and Study Design**

The discussion in this chapter is based on the empirical data from 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with adolescents in the age group from 12 to 15 years old in the largest cities in Kyrgyzstan – Bishkek and Osh. Fourteen adolescents out of the sample of twenty-six respondents declared that they had aspirations to migrate. The remaining respondents did not mention any thoughts, intentions or aspirations concerning any sort of migration in their narratives about the future and that is why their cases were not included in this discussion.

The focus of the interviews was on school and family life, relationships with parents, educational and career aspirations and choices and motivation in the transition to adulthood and did not include any specific questions about migration or going abroad. The topic of migration was raised during the interviews by the adolescents themselves, without any questions on this topic. These adolescents, when talking about their life plans, clearly declared their aspiration to leave their homeland and to go abroad to study, work or live in the future. This makes adolescents' migration aspirations especially important and relevant for discussion.

The adolescents that raised the topic of migration in their interviews come from families with different socio-economic statuses and from different ethnic groups. Ten out of the fourteen adolescents who expressed a desire to move to another country in future attended public schools. The socio-economic status of their families varied from lower-middle to middle class. Four respondents, who come from families of upper-middle class socio-economic status, studied in private and elite public education institutions.

The interviews with adolescents were supported by the use of an additional research tool – Vidaview Life Story Board ([Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2019](#)). Furthermore, the study applied the ethical protocol proposed by the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) project ([Graham et al., 2013](#)). This protocol insists on the consent of parents and children for their participation and full confidentiality during data processing and presentation of the results. Thus, for confidentiality purposes, the respondents' names have been changed in this chapter.

## Results

### *Adolescents' Migration Aspirations*

The data obtained from the interviews with adolescents in Kyrgyzstan revealed a tendency towards migration aspirations (Chicherina, 2021). This chapter is dedicated to the consideration of this topic in relation to the interplay between an adolescent's individualised migration projects and intergenerational solidarity within their family system. The reasons and explanations for migration aspirations given by the adolescents vary. One of the most common reasons, which is often seen as the nearest opportunity for adolescents to go abroad, is post-secondary studies:

Ok, honestly, I don't want to study in Kyrgyzstan. The quality of studies is not so good here. My older brother and sister chose other countries for their university studies. But we will always be connected to each other through our common home. (Aidana, female, 12 years old)

No, I don't want to stay in Kyrgyzstan. To promote myself I should study at university, but not in Kyrgyzstan. (Aibek, male, 14 years old)

Not all adolescents could provide a well-argued answer to the question 'why do you want to go abroad?' Some adolescents' migration aspirations are purely status-oriented, for example, in case of Alikhan (male, 14 years old):

Alikhan.: Yes, I was thinking about this. I was considering England. It would be great to study in Oxford.

Int.: Why would you like to go to Oxford?

Alikhan: I don't know. I just like it.

Int.: Is there a medical school in Oxford? You told me you want to become a doctor.

Alikhan: I don't know if there is a medical school there or not. I just want to study in Oxford.

In the case of Aidana (female, 12 years old), a carefully planned migration aspiration based on personal interests was more the exception in the sample:

There is a system in Korea... there are some organisations in Korea, which choose children for a kind of traineeship that lasts between 2 and 7 years. They teach people to perform on stage. Usually, they have bands in Korea. So, me and my friends, we applied for this programme. But I also want to become a film-director, to make movies. My parents say that they will support my activities.

The interviews with adolescents allowed to identify several informational resources about opportunities abroad. The children, who declared a wish to leave for Turkey or Korea, gladly spoke about their hobby of watching Turkish and Korean film series or listening to popular Turkish and Korean music groups and stars.

Without Korean film series, I don't know, I am addicted to them [. . .]  
When I grow up, first I will go to Korea, I will work there, but I will need to learn the Korean language first. (Bermet, female, 15 years old)

I like Turkey, its culture and I've watched many Turkish film series. That is why I like it and the Turkish language is quite nice. That is why I started to learn it. (Daulet, male, 15 years old)

Another source of information is the school environment – some education institutions promote their international cooperation with schools and universities abroad.

Yes, they all talk about this. In news, various foreigners come to our college. Turks, Englishmen, they represent their university. Here we have such and such, here we have such, state employees, everything will be fine. As a student you will have free accommodation. Then you listen to them and think, maybe it is a good idea to go to Europe? (Aibek, male, 14 years old)

However, the source of information represented by international visitors and international cooperation between education institutions is available to only a limited number of adolescents in Kyrgyzstan. Such activities take place mainly in private or elite public schools. Adolescents who study in public schools are mostly deprived of this kind of resources and information.

### ***Adolescent Migration Projects as a Collective Project of the Family***

In addition to the influence of mass media and foreign education actors, the data analysis has revealed that family kinship networks play a special role within and outside the country of residence in the formation of adolescents' migration aspirations. Migration experience within adolescents' kinship settings does not always lead to well-structured and precise aspirations. However, adolescents who have connections within personal family networks abroad, which might be considered mobility capital, tend to present more reflection regarding the advantages, disadvantages and benefits of migration, compared to their peers without such connections:

Most likely to leave, I don't know yet, but I plan to. My aunt has suggested that I study in Moscow. This is a good possibility, but I am still holding on to this place (Bishkek), because this is my refuge. I think about it, but I'm not sure. But she says that even if I don't want to study in Moscow, I should just visit her next summer and we will definitely go to St. Petersburg. (Olga, female, 15 years old)

Parents often take an active part in the organisation and promotion of their children's life projects (Chicherina, 2021). This has also been confirmed with regard to children's migration projects. An adolescent's migration plan is often initiated by family members, namely, parents:

Because I like learning languages, to visit other countries and cities in the future. My mom says: "If you learn English, then you can go to any country." To learn their traditions, their lifestyle and so on. But now I am also learning French on YouTube. (Kanyshai, female, 13 years old)

I also wanted to become a doctor, but my parents won't allow me. They say... my mother says... she wants me to become an English teacher. She also wants me to go to the USA and stay there. To live there. [...] So, if my mother says, I agree with her. (Aigul, female, 13 years old)

Projects about going abroad are often framed by adolescents' extended families' interests and social capital. However, as we can see from the following examples, parents' ideas of the countries that are suitable for migration do not always correspond with the adolescents' own aspirations.

Int.: And where do you want to study?

Bermet: In Korea, oh no, in Moscow

Int: Why Moscow?

Bermet: That's where my parents have advised me to go.

Int.: Why?

Bermet: The education is good there. (Bermet, female, 15 years old)

Int: Why did you choose the Czech Republic? Was it your independent choice or did someone suggest this country to you?

Elina: No, not independently. I was told – we are moving, and we moved. I was told – you will go to the Czech Republic, and I am going. Well, in the beginning I felt like: oh, my God, I am moving to a new place again... Again, I will have to look for new friends – and I do not like this. On the other hand – this is Europe. I am moving to the Czech Republic, not many people have such an opportunity. And... I have forgotten to say that I like to take photos. I do not have a camera, and this is my small dream. I can say I am a mobile photographer. And I think, there are so many beautiful places there. So, all my doubts went away. (Elina, female, 15 years old)

Elina wishes to go abroad and does not want to stay in Kyrgyzstan. But she is not very happy about her family's decision to send her to the Czech Republic for post-secondary studies. Still, she accepts this option and tries to adjust her own aspirations to this opportunity. Elina's case is a good example of how adolescents manage their individualised aspirations within the boundaries defined by adults and adapt their personal interests to parental expectations.

Talking about their life plans, not only adolescents refer to their parents as the main advisors regarding this question but their parents are also included in adolescents' projects for their future adult lives.

My future. . . I am sure that I will become an economist and will work and earn very good money. I will help my parents in everything, I will buy them things, clothes, a car. I will travel. When I grow up, first I will go to Korea to work. But to do this I will need to learn the Korean language. (Bermet, female, 15 years old)

Adolescents' narratives show the awareness of the parental expectations that adult children will take care of their elderly parents. This issue was also noticed frequently in the interviews when they spoke about their migration aspirations. For some adolescents, this expectation concerning intergenerational obligations was a clear reason for planning only a short-term stay abroad and then returning to Kyrgyzstan after achieving their main goal, such as obtaining a high-quality education or earning money.

I will work there. And then I'll come back. I can't leave them (parents and sister) here. I want to be around [. . .] No, I can't take them with me, they won't go. We are close, close to my cousins. We all want to be together. (Nuskayim, female, 11 years old)

Others make an attempt to negotiate with their families and find a way of combining their individualised aspirations concerning permanent emigration with fulfilling this social norm of filial piety.

Yes, they want me to study abroad [. . .] Hm, sure, London would be great. [. . .] I will stay there. Later I will invite my parents. They ask me why I want to stay there, who will take care of them later. But I will take them with me. This is my opinion. (Aibek, male, 14 years old)

A good future would have everything that I want in it. And I should become whom I want to become. I want to become an interpreter. Also, my parents should be nearby, my relatives. So, if I stay in the USA, I want to take my parents with me. (Aigul, female, 13 years old)



In the context of the traditional hierarchical structure within the family, adolescents tend to accept family norms regarding the formation of adult life. However, my data show that not all adolescents are ready to accept the traditional social norms common for the Kyrgyz society. The sample includes one case that presents a migration aspiration as an ‘escape strategy’.

To tell the truth, I would not like to come back here and to live here. Not because I do not like the country – in any place you can find something interesting. Just the European way of life is closer to me [...] But here (Kyrgyzstan) I have to follow the norm, how I should behave, not saying some things, respecting older people and so on [...] And in the future, I do not like to live this way. I hope that I will stay in the Czech Republic at least, or somewhere else, not here – where I have to live under a certain pressure. (Elina, female, 15 years old)

Elina’s migration aspirations are driven by her unwillingness to conform to the social normative system, which implies the compliance with traditional social norms and expectations with regard to mutual intergenerational obligations. Unlike the stories of other adolescents in the sample, her narrative does not include any plans to take care of her elderly parents in the future.

## Discussion

The conditions of the current labour market in Kyrgyzstan have led to the increase in unemployment and external migration of young people to other countries for work (IOM Central Asia, 2019; Suvanov & Ukueva, 2021). The data presented above confirm that many adolescents do not see appropriate educational and career opportunities in Kyrgyzstan. Better quality of education and the employment market abroad are among the most popular explanations for the adolescents’ migration aspirations. The destination countries in the adolescents’ migration aspirations in this study tend to correspond with the migration reality of the country. The adolescents with more precise and well-argued answers named Turkey, Russia or Korea as countries where they would want to work or study. And according to the IOM report from 2019, these are the main destination countries for educational migration. Considering the destination countries in adolescents’ migration aspirations was not the aim of this study, but this issue deserves further investigation.

There is empirical evidence from other studies about the correlation between the level of educational attainment or the socio-economic status of the family of origin and the country to which individuals aspire to migrate (Elbadawy, 2011; Ramos, 2019). In my study, due to the limited number of cases, I did not trace a similar correlation. However, the data obtained made it possible to observe a trend towards ambitious migration aspirations among adolescents who do not have appropriate opportunity structures for realising them at this time. According

to studies in other countries, there are various factors which might affect the formation of migration aspirations, as well as the actual migration ability (Cummings et al., 2015). Among those factors is a migrant experience within an individual's social network or personal migration experience (Elbadawy, 2011; Ramos, 2019). The adolescents in my sample, who spoke of very ambitious aspirations to migrate to European countries and the United States, do not have any personal experience abroad or connection within their social networks to these countries. The adolescents with ambitious migration aspirations tend to present vague arguments and little reflection on their wish to go abroad and cannot provide any specific information about how they will achieve this, where exactly they will study or what they will do there. Moreover, these adolescents are from lower-middle socio-economic status families and have poor school performance. Thus, the adolescents' aspirations about Western European countries and the United States are currently not supported by available resources. In times of economic insecurity and instability, in order to increase investments into human capital, in many countries the state promotes the discourse among youth to aspire high (Zipin et al., 2015). This might be one of the reasons for the Kyrgyz adolescents to have high aspirations to migrate to high-income countries with strict migration policies.

However, this finding also supplements another inference of my study about high educational aspirations of adolescents irrespective of their school attainments or family's socio-economic capital (Chicherina, 2021). Even those adolescents, who recognise that they perform poorly in school, expect to study at university in the future and obtain academic degrees. In previous research on early childhood in Kyrgyzstan, Bühler-Niederberger (2016) highlights the 'success leitmotif' in parents' and children's life planning. She argued that both children and parents tend to declare very ambitious plans without considering their current economic and cultural resources. My study shows that adolescents seem to be quite ambitious regarding migration aspirations as well, and their aspirations do not always correspond to opportunity structures available to them at present. The key initiators and advisors for adolescents in developing ambitious aspirations are their parents (Chicherina, 2022). And as we have seen from the adolescents' narratives, their migration aspirations often include intention to ensure parental well-being at the destination point of their life project, namely, to take their parents with them to a destination country or to come back to Kyrgyzstan in order to be close to their family of origin and being able to take care of elderly parents. Thus, children's dreams about moving abroad are an integral part of their ambitious overall educational and career projects, which are aimed at improving not only their own lifestyles but also ensuring the possibility of taking care of and providing financial support to their parents in old age. This fully corresponds to the 'interdependence pattern' of the intergenerational solidarity emphasised by Bühler-Niederberger (2021).

Furthermore, the fulfilment of intergenerational obligations is one of the reasons why adolescents plan to return to Kyrgyzstan after working and studying abroad. In her study on the life world of Kyrgyz pre-schoolers, Bühler-Niederberger (2016) suggests that ambitious parental expectations regarding their children's university

education and successful careers might be motivated by their offsprings' potential contributions to the future welfare and prosperity of their immediate families. In the context of the risks and uncertainties of today's reality and state social welfare conditions, parents expect their children to be their main subsistence resource in the future, maintaining life-long obligations towards elderly parents (Bühler-Niederberger, 2021). The results of my study show that this also works the other way around. The same risky and unstable local context pushes adolescents to consider their immediate families as their main source of support and the only economic and social capital they can rely on in achieving their aspirations. That is why if there are certain discrepancies between parental expectations and the adolescents' own aspirations, the latter often choose to adapt or transform their own projects.

While most of the parents support and even instigate their children's desire to go abroad, at least for a short period of time, there are other cases when adolescents' aspirations about migration are not in line with their parents' expectations. In addition to the norm of filial piety, another important determining factor is a child's gender. The interviews with the adolescents' parents show that girls are less likely to be allowed to go abroad to study than boys (Chicherina, 2021). Parental unwillingness to let their daughters leave Kyrgyzstan might be caused by traditional norms and strengthened by the prioritisation of traditional women's roles and normative expectations for girls – to get married and to take care of children. And education abroad might become an obstacle on the way to starting a family. According to Schröder (2020), there is a view in Kyrgyzstan that without appropriate family supervision in a foreign environment, the image of a girl, her innocence and moral purity will be damaged, and this might affect her future chances of getting married and forming a family. This is similar to what Schewel (2015, p. 10) calls possible 'non-economic repelling factors' for individuals' aspirations to stay in the homeland and not to migrate to another country. She refers to the study conducted by Gardner in Bangladesh, where one of the subject's explanations for not leaving their homeland was 'the perceived moral deprivation of Western countries' (Gardner, 1993, as cited in Schewel, 2015, p. 10). Gender norms are strongly interlinked with such non-economic aspects as family relationships or religion (Schewel, 2015). Schewel (2015) insists that norms regarding gender affect the formation of individuals' priorities and choices and must be considered as 'intrinsic constraints' (p. 26) in the realisation of migration aspirations. As we have seen from the example of my data, adolescents' understanding and perception of parental expectations regarding intergenerational obligations, which can be strongly gendered, should be also considered to be the inner aspect limiting adolescents' choices and ideas about migration.

At the same time, my finding of a strong tendency towards migration aspirations among adolescents leads to the assumption that the context of economic, social and political risks and uncertainties in Kyrgyzstan is one of the driving forces effecting the formation of aspirations related to studying, working and living abroad. Empirical data from some other studies also confirm that concerns and insecurities about future well-being is one of the main factors forcing individuals to consider the possibility of migration (Elbadawy, 2011).

The analysis of my data has also shown that the adolescents, whose migration projects are based on real personal or other family members' experience and available social networks, tend to present migration aspirations which are more reflective in terms of advantages and risks compared to those respondents who do not have any connections outside of Kyrgyzstan. This corresponds to the results of other studies, which highlight social networks abroad and experience of migration within personal social networks as one of the main factors influencing the development of migration aspirations (Elbadawy, 2011; Ramos, 2019).

## Conclusions

The analysis has shown that adolescents' plans to go abroad for the purpose of studying and working are strongly interlinked with their ambitious educational and professional aspirations, and desire to ensure higher financial prosperity for themselves and their family. Adolescents' projects to go abroad to study or work are often framed by parental expectations and family social capital. Thus, adolescents' migration aspirations become a collective project of all family members for the sake of the families' future well-being. One of the main limitations on how adolescents plan a long-term or permanent migration project is parental expectations of care and support in their old age. The adolescents' awareness of these expectations and their readiness to accept them is observed in the interviews conducted in this study. Two main tracks of adolescents' plans regarding this issue stand out in the respondents' narratives. Some of the adolescents plan a short-term period of studying or working abroad in order to obtain a high-quality education, earn money and then later return to Kyrgyzstan to be close to their families and support their parents. Others plan to move their parents to the destination country at a later stage should their migration be successful in the long term. Both tracks correspond to the 'interdependence pattern' of intergenerational solidarity observed by Bühler-Niederberger (2021) and show the complex interrelationship of an adolescent's individualised aspiration and opportunities offered by the family and the state. Those adolescents whose migration aspirations do not correspond to parental expectations, and who are not ready to accept them, may experience strong ambivalence, when they face the conflict between their individualised biographic projects oriented towards promising global opportunities and intergenerational solidarity norms.

I believe that the formation of adolescents' migration aspirations in Kyrgyzstan deserves further and deeper investigation in a broader context, considering gender aspects and individuals' intergenerational extended family relationships, which as we have seen in this study play an essential role in this process.

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## Chapter 10

# Sociomaterial Analysis of Azerbaijani Children's Smartphone Use: Generational Ordering Through User-Technology Interactions

*Aysel Sultan, Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Nigar Nasrullayeva*


### Abstract

Smartphones play an integral part in many children's lives. Their constant presence in various contexts and the multitude of affordances they present have a tremendous effect on how childhoods are lived today. One important aspect is the way children's interaction with smartphones can affect relationships and particularly generational relations. In this explorative study, we investigated Azerbaijani children's interaction with smartphones in the family and at school using the sociomaterial and relational approaches. Thinking relationally, we followed children's stories to unravel how smartphones can mediate different types of behavior and assist children in negotiating their place in generational order with the adults in their lives. Analyses suggest that smartphones can both present children with bargaining power to negotiate pleasure and fun as well as means to reinforce the generational order by children themselves. The findings point out that children often transfer social norms and expectations placed on them to the ways they use smartphones.

*Keywords:* Azerbaijan; children and youth; generational order; smartphones; sociomateriality; relationality

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## Introduction

Children's use of smartphones has been of prominent interest to many childhood and youth researchers. Recently, with the COVID-19 pandemic, more studies emerged showing that children's screen time has risen to 'alarming' levels (Richtel, 2021). Studies have focused on the harms and potential negative outcomes of children's exposure to smart devices, especially with access to the internet. General findings indicate that children's use of smartphones is often tied to concerns about physical health (e.g. eye strain, sleep, mental well-being, attention span, cognitive and other developmental processes) (Oliveira et al., 2022; Serra et al., 2021). However, in many countries, smartphones and tablets have become an integral part of children's lives, not least in education, both in classroom and at-home formats. Smartphones prominently feature in learning processes and knowledge-construction via digital educational programs, with this need especially exacerbated during the pandemic. While this is more relevant in wealthier countries (e.g., Goh, Bay, & Chen, 2015), in other parts of the world, having access to a smart device can be a more demanding requirement (Mathrani, Sarvesh, & Umer, 2022). In addition, many children have cultural and normative limitations set to their use of smart devices that requires balancing between the necessary, even inevitable use of smartphones and the strict curation to reduce distractions and harms (e.g., Lauricella, Wartella, & Rideout, 2015).

The distractions that smartphones provide also have social and emotional consequences, and have direct impacts on the relationships in domestic environment (Kushlev & Dunn, 2019). Earlier works on the role of digital media in family have already highlighted the values that adults uphold and gate keep to restrain the potential disruptions that media and communication technologies presented. For example, in an ethnographic study of a family in their London home, Silverstone and Hirsch (1992, p. 218) depict the following picture:

Charles and Natalie both enjoy television plays, but only Charles watches films on television. [...] The television viewing of their children is carefully regulated and only the eldest is allowed to watch television after supper. The doing of homework has a high priority among the children and is clearly separated from any TV viewing. Homework is often done by several children in a group around the kitchen table. Again and again in our discussions about television, it was downgraded as passive and inappropriate form of activity to spend much time on. [...] Their relationships with objects and others, and those of their children, are informed by these and related values.

Today, we are observing similar concerns around children's use of smartphones. Although the technological advancements and the values that smartphones represent might differ from those of a television, they are still often treated as vices of distraction and sources of multitude harms. Parental control and mediation remain central to shaping children's relationships, socialization and learning experiences when it comes to the use of smartphones. In this interaction, parent-child relationships and family values take various forms. For example,

studies have investigated how the innovation and availability of various parental mediation tools affect children's use of digital media (Bakó & Tóké, 2018; Ko et al., 2015). Some parents rely on the use of such tools by setting limits to daily use, restricting access to certain sites and applications and controlling screen time. These control measures are higher among educated parents whose digital literacy allows for more nuanced interventions. Studies show that negotiated and mutually agreed rule-setting has been proven to be most effective especially among tweens (Ko et al., 2015). As our study will show, however, some parents and especially teachers rely on other more 'hands-on' interventions, not least with admonishment and punishment for excessive or noneducational use.

Smartphone usage and parent-child relations are manifold and manifest in accordance with family values and the household's moral economies (Mascheroni, 2014; Mascheroni et al., 2018). Family values as understood in terms of generational relationships and parent-child interactions, in turn, reflect local, context-specific social norms that can affect the ways in which children themselves perceive and practice smartphone use. Social norms embedded in the learned ways of communication, especially in domestic adult-child relationships, constitute children's interactions, self-control and self-discipline practices involving digital technologies at large. As children explore 'new' ways in digital spaces, they transfer previously learned modes of face-to-face communication, social norms and values to these spaces, too (Yoon, 2006). Moreover, understanding how children themselves perceive the role of smartphones in their lives and learn to use them provides insights into local contexts of family values, social norms and social constructions of childhood itself (Abbasi et al., 2021).

Our interest in this chapter focuses on children from Azerbaijan where, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have been conducted on children's perspectives on smartphone use in school and domestic environments. The study's initial hypothesis expected to find smartphone use to be strictly tied to family and cultural values besides being reflective of hierarchical generational order and strict parental mediation (Savadova, 2021). This study explores how smartphones mediate parent-child relationships and generational order in Azerbaijani families and schools. Drawing on five interviews with groups of children and tweens aged from 9 to 15 years, we investigate how smartphones mediate parent-child relations and how affordances of smartphones continuously challenge hierarchical generational relations.

### *Contextualizing Childhood in Azerbaijan*

Azerbaijan counts in the ranks of resource-rich countries that have poor child development, welfare, education and care systems, despite its comparatively high gross national product and the state's high revenues from natural oil and gas resources (Huseynov & Abbasova, 2021). In addition, infant and under-the-age-of-five mortality rates are considerably higher, for example, in Kyrgyzstan with considerably less resources (SABER Country Report, 2018). The implementation of children's rights to protection and provision remains significantly underdeveloped and has been attracting the critical attention of international researchers (e.g. Ismayilova et al., 2014). As for child protection, existing institutions no longer meet the requirements that are placed on child protection today, as the institutionalization

of children in need of protection is still the usual procedure (Huseynov & Abbasova, 2021). The ‘State Programme on Alternative Care and Deinstitutionalization’ created with the purpose to address this issue is slow to progress and represents the lack of political will in this regard (Huseynli, 2018). Moreover, the lack of allocated resources shows gaps in the professional coordination of services and in the shortage of social services that could provide alternatives and effective prevention (Huseynov & Abbasova, 2021).

There is also a critical need for fundamental educational reforms in the refs. Early childhood education is insufficient and underfinanced, even in comparison to several other and with comparatively lower income countries in the region (SABER Country Report, 2018). Scores in reading, mathematics and science among the students in the capital Baku, in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are below the average for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2019).

In the recent years, some infrastructural progress has been made showing a substantial improvement in children’s rights, social protection and ‘child-friendly’ learning environments in Azerbaijan (UNICEF, 2016). International organizations, most notably UNICEF’s international comparative data on childhood, mainly highlight the priorities of international rights and legislations. These focus on early childhood development and disciplinary practices, especially on the use of violence in disciplining. Although based on data collected by UNICEF in 2006, a recent study states a high level of violent disciplinary practices in Azerbaijani families (Huseynli & Jonson-Reid, 2022). Previous studies on Azerbaijani children’s role in traditional (i.e. heteronormative) family environments have also shown that children rarely question their parents’ parenting strategies and generally agree with the expectations and demands set for them (Hunner-Kreisel, Nasrullayeva et al., 2022). Similar findings were published on other Muslim-majority post-Soviet States such as Kyrgyzstan (Bühler-Niederberger & Schwittek, 2022). In part, this is interpreted as a legacy of Soviet educational doctrines, which did not make domestic violence an issue, but warned against ‘too much coddling’ (Huseynli & Jonson-Reid, 2022). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013), Azerbaijan within the comparative context to European and CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries shows a particularly harsh parental discipline, partly because the country has fewer corresponding child protection laws. Criticism is leveled at the state’s overall lack of commitment to a social policy for children where children’s well-being is highly dependent on their families and their resources (Hunner-Kreisel, Bühler-Niederberger et al., 2022).

Yet, there is still a significant gap in the literature around the upbringing of children within families, children’s voices and their own understanding of subjective well-being. In their pioneering work, Hunner-Kreisel asked about the well-being of children in Azerbaijan and tried to capture this from the children’s own perspectives (Hunner-Kreisel et al., 2020; Hunner-Kreisel, Nasrullayeva et al., 2022). They used a concept of a ‘spatial well-being’ (Fattore et al., 2021), which studies showed to be limited for children in Baku because children are hardly allocated any place in the public infrastructure that they can use with a certain degree of autonomy. In the family, their studies showed that children have limited activities and perceive

themselves in a strongly hierarchical age structure and recognize its limitations as such (Hunner-Kreisel, Ben-Arieh et al., 2022). This research already encountered the possible relevance of a 'translocal own space with friends constructed through the use of digital technologies' (Fattore et al., 2021, p. 18), although without systematic consideration of the design of such spaces by the children and the affordances of digital media.

Taking smartphones as our primary focus, we explore upbringing in Azerbaijani families by asking how children navigate smartphone's presence in the family's life on a day-to-day basis. This perspective allows approaching limits, possibilities and modes of negotiating generational relations as continuous and fluid processes embedded in the heterogenous relations mediated by smartphones. In this way, our study aims to contribute to the study of children's place and well-being in Azerbaijani families by showing how the use of smartphone can continuously reestablish generational relations and renegotiate them as afforded by the device. To do this, we turn to the sociomaterial approach and draw on recent ontological scholarship in childhood studies.

## Approach

The ontological theorization of childhood and recent attention to sociomaterial approaches rethinking childhood as a phenomenon have been important impulses in childhood research. The arrival of the 'new' materialism has been received with much debate in childhood studies. Many studies around materialism, especially inspirations drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS) have focused on rethinking and decentering children's agency (Spyrou, 2018). Against this background, debates have carried on whether understanding childhood as a relational and sociomaterially constructed phenomenon would strip the childhood sociology off its agential achievements (Alanen, 2019). Hence, the recent contributions have engaged with agency differently, to show that seeing agency as distributed and heterogenous (meaning that it includes both human and nonhuman forces) can help deessentialize the idea of childhood. The main reason behind deessentialization is to liberate childhood as a phenomenon from structural and hierarchical interdependencies (Sørenssen & Franck, 2021). If understood as a relational phenomenon, childhood becomes more than just an age category or a structural layer in the society and instead manifests as continuously constructed and shaped in heterogenous relations (Spyrou, 2018, 2019). This has borne studies of material mediation and childhood as a *relational achievement* to highlight the multiple realities in which childhood can be understood and conceptualized.

Shifting the focus from child-centered interpretation of children's experiences and meanings, sociomaterial approach shows how experiences acquire meaning and form in relations between the social and the material. Children's relationships hence shape and become shaped by the effects of material objects in their lives. The term *sociomaterial* here does not denote a harmonious merged state of fixed being; rather, it means the relationality of social and material that do not always combine coherently (Law & Mol, 1995; Sørenssen, 2022). The social and the

material shape each other and *become* in fluid constellation of complexities that coproduce our experiences. The relations of the social and material hence are not causal; they do not *become* from a single source or contain a single agent doing the action, rather they are heterogenous and asymmetrical in ways they come to be (Latour, 2005). While such relationality primarily means the distribution of agency between human and nonhuman, it also highlights the relations and continuous motion at the center of all experiences. It is not merely about adding another dimension, that is materiality, to the array of forces that shape children's social lives, but rather highlighting the social within the materiality itself.

To do this, we follow how *affordances of smartphones* shape the sociomateriality of children's experiences (Hutchby, 2001). In this framework, affordances of the devices are not merely enhancement or extension of children's various abilities and desires, rather active enabling and/or constraining of certain environments, reshaping the very way children understand themselves in different sociomaterial contexts. For example, Ruckenstein's (2015, p. 353) study of children playing the Nintendo-DS game console shows how by the creation of new worlds and new kinds of social bonds they create a "context-specific nature of material encounters".

By integrating a sociomaterial approach in this study, we aim to elaborate on the concept of generational order in the frames of relational and material sociology of childhood. We build on Alanen and Mayall's (2001) ideas of *generational order as a relational phenomenon*, namely, of ongoing processes of attributing values, duties, rights and scopes of action to members of different age categories and generational position within the kinship lineage. These age categories always figure in relation to each other (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020). In such a relational perspective, the researcher is not endowed with *a priori* knowledge and competencies, to study such processes in which the relationship between individuals, groups and material entities is continuously shaped (Emirbayer, 1997). In other words, generational order emerges in fluid constellations of sociomaterial interactions, with fluidity meaning no causality or correlation. Hence, the focus shifts onto emergent relations in which all entities involved simultaneously shape each other without assuming any unilateral direction of impact. Part of the reason why sociomaterial thinking can be fruitful for exploring hierarchical generational relations is precisely due to methodological tools provided to avert hierarchical and causal or symmetrical interpretations (Latour, 1984, 2005). Within the context of Azerbaijan, the aim is to understand how nonhuman actors such as smartphones can help us see beyond culturally familiar depictions of Azerbaijani family relations that are often presumed as old-fashioned, hierarchical and neglectful of children's perspectives and voices (cf. Hunner-Kreisel et al., 2022).

The materialist framework can offer powerful analytical tools in achieving other forms of storytelling in which childhood and children's experiences can be interpreted beyond the traditional, heteronormative and Eurocentric understandings. While still drawing on Western scholarship and concepts such as 'generational order' and 'sociomateriality' for methodological and analytical purposes, it is nonetheless possible to unravel generational order and children's role in families by moving away from familiar narratives on parent-child and family constructs. This approach can help 'target hegemonic interpretive power of specific concepts and its inherent epistemic violence to diverse forms of living' (Hunner-Kreisel, Ben-Arieh et al., 2022).

Using the example of smartphones – a device with global usage and many culturally familiar meanings – Azerbaijani children's lives in families and at school is portrayed in a 'new' light where hierarchies, dependencies, agencies and normative expectations acquire meaning through dynamic contexts and complex, heterogenous relations between human and nonhuman actors (Sørenssen & Bergschöld, 2021).

This chapter provides insights into how a sociomaterial approach can be a useful analytical tool in understanding generational order through focusing on the example of children's use of smartphones. To guide our study, we focus on the various practices that surround the use of smartphones and illustrate the heterogenous relations in which children's relationships, learning and leisure emerge. In this framework, the formative power of the material object, in this case, the smartphone, becomes of interest through the very possibilities it opens up as well as the expectations from and for its use. Using sociomaterial analysis allows us to show that the relationships between parents and children undergo continuous negotiations that emerge within the heterogenous relations between human and nonhuman actors. In addition, we outline the scopes and limits of these negotiations as well as the basic standards that the relationships between parents and children must meet from the point of view of adult participants and the children.

## Methods and Materials

We have conducted five peer-supported interviews via video-conferencing tool Zoom with a total of 13 children and tweens – eight girls and five boys – living in Baku (see Table 1). Interviews were carried out in five groups with a maximum of three

Table 1. Overview of the Interviewed Children.

Groups	Pseudonym	Age	Sex	SocioEconomic Status	Languages Spoken at Home
1 (in English)	Firangiz	13	Female	Upper middle class	Azerbaijan, English
	Zarifa	15	Female		
	Teymur	11	Male		
2 (in Azerbaijani and Russian)	Raul	14	Male	Middle class	Russian, Azerbaijani
	Sayyara	12	Female		
3 (in Azerbaijani)	Haydar	10	Male	Lower middle class	Azerbaijani
	Hamid	12	Male		
	Rana	10	Female		
4 (in Azerbaijani)	Tahira	12	Female	Lower middle class	Azerbaijani
	Namiq	10	Male		
5 (in Azerbaijani)	Maryam	9	Female	(Upper) middle class	Azerbaijani, English
	Afat	9	Female		
	Sevinj	14	Female		

interviewees and mostly two researchers in one group. Nigar Nasrullayeva (NN) was responsible for conducting the interviews. Aysel Sultan (AS) and Doris Bühler-Niederberger (DBN) each participated in one interview to facilitate the interviewing process and to collect additional observational data. One interview was conducted in English (DBN and NN) with three siblings who were enrolled in a private English-speaking school; the remaining interviews were conducted in Azerbaijani. Children were recruited through NN's networks (from previous studies) across public and private schools in Baku and were from various socioeconomic backgrounds. In three out of five group interviews, children joined the video call from a separately allocated room at home, without parents' involvement. In the other two interviews, mothers were present in the room and sometimes intervened in children's responses, mostly in the background and after children muted their microphones so the interaction wasn't audible to the interviewers. This occurrence corresponded with our anticipations of parents monitoring the way children's smartphone use could be presented to outsiders henceforth interlinking parental monitoring and children's own perspectives that characterized our analyses.

Only six of the children owned their personal smartphone and the rest shared with a sibling, used a parent's phone, or a different family device such as tablets or laptops. Parents of all 13 children provided their oral or written assent for their children's participation and video-recording of the interviews. Additional to the informed consent form, DBN also provided a signed letter explaining to the parents the purpose of the study and the general theme of this edited volume. The children were informed about the study's purpose at the beginning of each interview and were asked to choose their own pseudonyms for the case if their statements would appear in this publication. Interviews were semistructured guided by questions around children's use of smartphones and any other smart devices (e.g. tablets and computers) in their daily life or what they thought about smartphones if they did not possess one yet. We included questions about various ways and settings in which children used their personal or their sibling's or parent's smartphones and asked if they had any restrictions for their use. We were interested in children's conceptions and constructions of privacy, (in)dependency, learning, fun, socialization with peers and relationships with parents and other family members as narrated about smartphones. While different children were involved in the interview, this was not a focus-group interview in a strict sense (Barbour, 2018) as the interviewers did not focus on the interaction and exchange between the children as focus groups require (Adler et al., 2019). The latter would have been difficult because, although the children all stated that they liked participating in the interviews, they were more oriented toward an adult-child interaction exemplified in the formal addressing of the interviewers, raising their hands to speak, etc. Hence, we have called this style of interviewing a 'peer-supported interview' (see also Parrish et al., 2012). In a peer-supported interview, the presence of several children was intended to address the power imbalance due to adult interviewers and reduce the pressure on an individual child to respond. This also allowed the children to occasionally make jokes or giggle among themselves to potentially 'escape' the hierarchies in the interview setting.

## Analysis: Affordances and Use-ability of Smartphones

The analysis focuses on different contexts in which smartphones mediate generational relations. Children as users of smartphones exhibit varied values and behaviors that continuously reposition their role and the role of adults in generational relations (see also Hadad, Meishar-Tal, & Blau, 2020). Smartphones, as the nonhuman actors in these relations, *mediate the enactment of social norms and values* in children's lives (Sørenssen & Franck, 2021) at home, at school and in communication with peers. Studying these enactments of the sociomaterial encounters (Law & Urry, 2004) unveils the normative cornerstones of the generational *ordering* and children's perspectives on their own role in this ordering. They become recognizable in children's practices of smartphone use, in the reported conflicts with parents and teachers, in the judgments of 'other' children and adults about their 'mostly wrong' use of smartphones and the strategies through which these norms and expectations are to be adhered to or approximated.

In many cases, children had to share devices with others. This had implications as to what smart devices can be used for and under which circumstances. Since in all cases smartphone use at schools was either forbidden or strictly regulated, smartphones often emerged in punishment scenarios or accidents such as bringing a parent's smartphone in the backpack unknowingly or forgetting to switch off the device. Our data show that the use of smartphones in classrooms is rendered either useful thereby elevating the pupil's status as docile and well-behaved or in contrast, distracting and disrespectful of the classroom environment deserving reprimand and punishment. Children describe a smartphone's use-ability in this preconditioned form.

Children in our study expressed significant alertness to such categorization of behavior. When asked to describe their daily use of the phone, children usually began with the examples that are typically associated with the 'right' form of use such as preparing for a class, staying in touch with their parents, or watching extracurricular educational content on YouTube. The approved or 'right' use of smartphones translates into how children align their own understandings about what a smartphone use should be like with expectations of their parents and teachers.

Smartphones as mediators help enact different identities and become a part of being a responsible child, a smart user, a good daughter/son, or a good friend. In the 'proper' understanding of the term mediator, smartphones as technologies of mediation do not simply enhance the already existing customs and relations in which children find themselves. Rather, we observe how children with smartphones transform and *become* in very specific, dynamic contexts (Latour & Venn, 2002).

Zarifa: When you are chatting with someone, you are not quite expressing your feelings towards them. Like, they don't even know if you are sad or happy, like in general. Like when you chat with them, they don't really know your true feelings. So, they might confuse it with wrong feelings, and instead of thinking positively,



they might start thinking negatively. If I say something too straightforward, that will stand pretty mean in chat. That would sound kind of not really. . . That would not have a positive impact, or it would not sound as positive as it would sound in real life. So, in chat, it might sound rude.

Communication over a chat instead of live communication is hence dissatisfactory because of the technological barriers. Here the device simultaneously reinforces Zarifa's need to communicate her feelings while at the same time restricting a full expressivity changing the appearance of her outward personality. This form of meaning-making of the device's specific affordances highlights different ontological realities which children and smartphones co-produce and in which children define and discover their own voices and perspectives.

Simultaneously, this alignment often reflects the general negative image about smartphones in that they are considered harmful and distracting overall. In this vein, socializing in a digital communication form is often degraded as inauthentic and even discouraging of 'real' connections and bonding.

Afat: I think it's a bit bad because this way people lie on the sofa at home and get out for fresh air less and mostly talk on the phone.

Maryam: I think so, too. Because, for example, some people, my relatives, now live in another district, and I want to talk to them; if I have their number I can call or write and the bad thing is that, as Afat said, they spend more time on the Internet than in the fresh air, go for a walk or actually meet friends or relatives.

Sevinj: I think it is bad because people go out less and, of course their ability to talk with each other, their communication has decreased. They can communicate on the Internet but cannot find a common language in real life. Also, the social environment is more favorable for people with a broken arm and in wheelchairs, but they also communicate less now. Now sociability decreased and friends cannot communicate at all. For example, now it is difficult for me to find a common language with my friends. They are more sociable online than outside the home.

Previous research has shown that 'real life' or, in other words, face-to-face interactions carry an important meaning for children through which they establish intimate and meaningful relationships (Davies, 2012). When treated as a nonhuman *actor*, the smartphone translates face-to-face social communication into a digital space where attachments, associations and expectations acquire new meanings and hence, need to be relearned. As quotes above show, children struggle to make sense of their previously learned communication skills in a digital space (e.g. WhatsApp), wherein intimate relationships become distanced

and even misinterpreted. At the same time, 'new' ways of socializing afforded by the smartphone's communication spaces coexist in the same sociomaterial realm as the face-to-face interactions.

Zarifa: I think it is obvious that they are mostly needed for entertainment, etc. They are also needed for distance communication. I think that's all. [...] I have like all my social life is in my phone. Let's say, all my chats or I don't know, discussions with my friends, all my applications, like the useful apps. Like if I have something to watch or want to entertain myself in general, I just go to my phone, or try to kind of distract myself from real life and concentrate on my social life.

This coexistence is divided into 'real life' and digital spaces with one dispersed across different physical locations and the other assembled in the device. Within a digital space, this coexistence of realms emerges in capitalization of social communication within one's individual, digital space. The 'other' world that socialization in the digital space represents, is also reflected in Zarifa's distinction between 'social life' (in the digital space) and 'real life,' as she points out the evasion of 'real life' to be occasionally more desirable.

Children also narrate about their abilities to choose which social media and communication platforms were satisfactory for socializing with peers. This ability was demonstrated in the careful management of parental demands by, for example, deleting accounts on certain social platforms but maintaining them in others in exchange. The multifunctionality of smartphones allows for articulating different practices of approved use of the smartphone by adults versus the desired use by children. Hence, the affordances of smartphones are dependent on the immediate contexts of their presence and use and are defined in relation to permissions and children's abilities to use them.

For example, children in this study often juxtaposed educational importance of smartphone use that was encouraged in classrooms, and in certain instances at home, with their own desired use featuring children's personal interests such as games, peer group chats and social media platforms. This juxtaposition manifested in smartphones' affordances that offered children a form of bargaining power.

### *Learning to Use the Smartphone 'Right'*

Smartphones offer spaces in secluded 'rooms' for communication and privacy that translates into child-parent relationships at home. In this sense, children expressed different views of the value smartphones presented to them and to their parents. If non-essential use of smartphones was generally condoned at home, one way was combining the 'essential' use with use for pleasure or fun. In this sense, smartphones sometimes act as spaces to navigate different interests in parallel. Using a family chat to communicate with family members inside the house, while

also attending peer chats or games at the same time is one such example. In the following section, the data analysis unveils specific understandings and practices of children learning to navigate smartphone use as allowed and afforded to them. Smartphones achieve significance in relation to the diverse contexts in which children practice their use. Through these contexts that are dynamic themselves (Latour, 2005), smartphones afford various forms of orderings within the heterogeneous and generational relations. For example, smartphones are important in the educational context as many children use them to complete tests, watch interactive material, or download their homework. However, their use in classrooms during the in-person lessons is strictly forbidden. As Sayyara tells it:

You know, the principal's deputies come, take the phone away. The kids' parents will come [to the school] and they [the principal] will say that your daughter should not bring the mobile phone to the school again.

Smartphones become the source of conflict between children and their parents as well as parents and teachers. In this example, the smartphones' variegated uses mediate the educational context and modify children's assessment of the device's use. In the first case, the use is approved for educational purposes limited to specific tasks and guidelines of use. In the second case, the children are admonished making the smartphone a distracting and forbidden object. Hence the temptation to use the phone often translates into judgment of 'bad' behavior. Such a multiplicity of contexts is also evident at home. Smartphones are acknowledged as the source of entertainment, and most children in our study reported playing games or watching entertaining content online on their smartphones.

Children express a very strong sense of judgment about their smartphone use and that judgment often aligns with the expectations of their parents. These expectations and children's respective alignments pertain to values that not only outline and guide the different kinds and purposes of smartphone use but also emerge from the interaction with the device itself. For example, taking care of eye health and spending time with family are frequent examples. Through these examples, smartphones acquire meaning within the contexts of their use and in relation to other entities (human and nonhuman).

Raul: I set myself the goal to not use the phone for more than 2–3 hours a day or not to enter any programs today, for example. And I do not let myself pick up the phone, and instead, I do my homework. We have mid-term tests, for example, so during those periods I try to limit my use of the phone as much as possible.

What Raul describes in this friction between the need to allow oneself potentially satisfying leisure time spent using the smartphone and the need to study for homework and tests, places the smartphone once again as a distracting actor that persistently demands self-discipline. The desire to use the smartphone

and simultaneously understand its distracting abilities materializes in the ways with which Raul prioritizes his educational goals and being a pupil over being a smartphone user (Ruckenstein, 2015).

### *Distractions, Pleasure and Fun*

Using smartphones also requires constant negotiations of boundaries. Children spoke about protecting their privacy afforded by smartphones especially expressed in the need to having one's own device instead of sharing with a sibling or a parent. Privacy in smartphone use is also part of navigating one's curiosity. This concern came up in insinuations around what content should be considered as 'bad' or 'harmful' versus what they found entertaining or interesting. Entertainment, pleasure and fun are considered distracting and unhealthy in the context of smartphone use and are tolerated to a certain degree, for example, as a reward for completing homework. Children often share these views of their parents and convey similar judgments on others' use of smartphones. This enables certain types of conduct, judgment and ideations that form the social norms around smartphone use and reveal different ways of conceiving of children's status in a traditional family context.

It is important to note that the importance of smartphones is at first always played down by the children as the self-presentation of an obedient child who does not succumb to smartphone's temptations. However, in the course of the interviews, it became clear that smartphones are often an important source of negotiating and establishing boundaries on a day-to-day basis.

Maryam: I think it [parental mediation] is right, but a little wrong as well. It is wrong because they always tell me to go to sleep, but at that time I want to watch an important scene of an episode. I get angry because at least I want to watch it till the end and then I can sleep. But it is also right because I should be sleeping by one a.m. By that time my eyes get tired, too. That's why it is both wrong and right for me.

Moreover, age-specific differences matter greatly in terms of who is allowed to have their own phone, how much time they can spend with it and should children have a smartphone at all. Within the focus on *generationing* (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020) and generational *ordering*, smartphones as objects with multiple affordances and mediation forces enact different forms of age restrictions, generational relations and show how the roles change what should be afforded and why. For example, children's awareness of how parental mediation tools (might) work impacts the way children understand their own activities different from how their parents do.

Firangiz: Like sometimes my friends say "oh, my mom is going to check my phone, so, I have to delete something, some social media account." Because like social media is just showing you some

random stuff, and some parents might not just like it. They might think that their child is just too young for it, and children, instead of understanding, try to avoid their parents checking their phones. I think it's [...] they ask other friends to leave some chats because they are just warning them like "my parents are going to check my phone, don't show me or text me that kind of thing."

Awareness of how online algorithms can work affords children advantages over some parents whose limited digital (Terras & Ramsay, 2016) does not allow them to exercise more detailed monitoring over the consumed content or screen time. This example supports the idea of material mediation of generational *ordering*. Smartphones and children's different practices in using them mutually enact on each other, producing desired behavior or manipulating parental perceptions when monitoring screen time.

### Renegotiating Generational Ordering

In this final section of the analysis, our focus is on how smartphones affect generational order in the family. Smartphones can enact multiple realities in which renegotiations of generational order are prompted to take different forms. As proposed earlier in the chapter, generational relations are continuously renegotiated, readjusted and maintained through the ways children and parents negotiate smartphone use. Given that most family members own individual smartphones, families' evolving moral economies and values challenge children's ideas of established generational order. In most scenarios, children narrate how their smartphone use corresponds to social norms and family values as they carefully adjust their behavior to adults' expectations and set limits. Simultaneously, children learn and also exercise similar expectations and demands toward adults when it comes to their parents' and grandparents' smartphone use.

What becomes especially apparent in this relationality is the sociomaterial emergence of generational *ordering* (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020). As was stated earlier in the analysis, all those involved in producing the effects of smartphone use (both human and nonhuman entities) put in effort to ensure the 'right' use. This becomes a continuous process of negotiations afforded to the permanent presence of the smartphones and their gradually changing importance. Put otherwise: the *generationing* is ongoing.

Hence, the possibilities of 'wrong' use of the device become the friction point – tempting not only for the children but also for their parents. Interestingly, this temptation manifests in mutual criticism as several children complain about their parents being equally distracted by their own smartphones. It becomes especially important for children to demonstrate that they know the 'right' handling of smartphones and, hence, actively engage in ensuring the subsequent 'right' generational relations.

- Maryam: My mom is always looking at her phone, especially at Instagram, and always tells me not to look at mine too much, that my eyes will hurt; she always says the same thing.
- Sevinj: For example, adults themselves look at the phone more than us. Even if there were no phones in their time. . . older people are now looking at Facebook and TikTok because it is more interesting for them than real life; there is nothing more interesting in their lives than looking at the phone. People are more interested in TikTok than walking down the street because it is less interesting than sitting on the phone on Facebook, and also there is a lot of false information and dramatization of life and [so] it is interesting for them on Facebook; they are busy spreading such fake news to everyone.

Children as users of smartphones are embedded in the relationship between their needs and desires, and the expectations of adults in their lives. Smartphones are not treated as mere material objects but rather crucial actors in the reestablishment of structures, power dynamics and meanings of relationships in the generational *ordering*. The dynamic view of general order is positioned here in the very ways smartphones enable certain modes of communication. In a way, smartphones 'embody "social relations"' (Law & Mol, 1995, p. 281) through their constant presence in the lives of children.

Punitive approaches to using smartphones during the class resonate with children's own expectations of how using a smartphone for 'wrong' reasons should be treated. These expectations are often narrated as case-in-point examples from other children's conduct.

Firangiz: Some students don't give away their phones [at school] as they should and if the teacher notices, she should just punish them because that happens all the time, anyways. For example, I have seen one student not give their phone to the teacher, so the teacher can put it into the box and give it back after the lesson. He got punished and I think he couldn't bring his phone [after that] because the teacher told his parents what he did. His parents didn't give [back] him his phone.

Meanwhile, parents' own distraction with phones often serves as a leeway for children's desire 'to live in a world without phones.' *Distractions result in the same conflict: family time is compromised, and the dissatisfaction is mutual.* High sense of self-discipline and self-critique is reinforced in the family due to excessive use. This often follows with the intentional belittling of any nonessential use and hence, the fun that smartphones can offer. These aligned expectations show up in two ways here: (1) smartphones act as a reminder of the value of spending time with family and (2) the possibilities between choosing what sides of smartphone to amplify according to the situation.

Nevertheless, generational relations do not always require this work of reestablishment and negotiation; rather they *are enacted in these sociomaterial relations* and specific contexts and through what can be expected of children and their relationships in the family. In this sense, the smartphone is at the center of the *generational ordering processes, provoking and enabling the constant generationing* (Alanen, 2020). According to children, this *ordering* appears as a constant practice of raising ‘good’ children *despite* and with their use of smartphones. Smartphones then trouble the ‘natural’ order of generational relations in that both parents and children find ways of reestablishing boundaries, expectations and their needs in new ways and new terrains.

## Conclusion

This study explored the practices of generational *ordering* in Azerbaijani families by focusing on children’s use of smartphones. Smartphones act as the central mediation forces that afford children and adults a variety of tools which they utilize in communicating boundaries, individual freedom, exercising judgment, self-discipline and control. Shifting the focus from human-only interactions to the ways nonhuman actors mediate and enact different realities, we explore the otherwise traditional and hierarchical generational order in a ‘new’ light. First, our findings challenge the normative conceptualization of familial relationships in Azerbaijan and conventional parenting styles by which we mean the hierarchical decision-making practices in the family. The data show that children’s own understandings of the presence of smartphones in their and their families’ lives are multidimensional. Smartphones reconstruct the existing social norms, parental expectations and demands that children learn to navigate with(in) their own interests. Because the devices also equip children themselves with a variety of tools, they figure as sometimes reinforcing the familial relationships (such as using the photo gallery to make a birthday video for the grandmother) and sometimes as sources of conflict when children push back on limitations (such as watching a series episode past the bedtime).

Second, studying smartphones as mediators of generational relations also shows how children form identities in accordance with social norms, for example, by matching expectations of ‘good’ behavior with private and preferred use of personal smartphones. These observations allow researchers to step outside the culturally familiar frames of children’s dependency on adults and lack of control over their own preferences and instead explore how generational order and parental mediation are renegotiated on a day-to-day basis, made and remade through the ways children interact with smartphones. It is here that smartphones become the sort of contingent mediators as they trouble generational relations and obligations, but simultaneously co-produce a constant moral discourse around their use in which children are involved and very actively involve themselves. This discourse makes children aware of what is expected from them regarding generational relations and family ties. In other words, while smartphones might break the ties toward the collective of the family, the discourse around it underlines and fortifies generational obligations.

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## Chapter 11

# Türkiye – Negotiating More Adulthood in an ‘In-between’ Country

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### Abstract

This contribution focuses on the transition from childhood to teenage years to gain insights into intergenerational relations in Türkiye. At this transition, relations between the age groups – maturing children and responsible adults – are partly renegotiated. Scopes of action, areas of responsibility, the right to have a say are being redefined, or at least contested. What becomes the subject of negotiation? How are the negotiations conducted? What are the successes and failures of negotiations? The answers give insights into the positions and mutual relations of adolescents and adults. Using focus group data with girls and complementing questionnaire material from teenagers in Türkiye, we illuminate some challenges related to the age transition from the adolescents’ perspective. The results show that the girls – in accordance with their peers and against the resistance of their parents – try to implement their idea that growing up means to become more equal and independent. From the parents’ side, responsibility and maturity – particularly regarding (increasing) household and school obligations – emerged as the most dominant expectations toward the teenagers. Our findings suggest that this strong ‘responsibilization’ demanded by the parents and the girls’ (albeit somewhat grudgingly achieved) ability to meet this expectation ensured girls’ subordination within the intergenerational relations – a subordination that is thus upheld beyond childhood. We conclude that the particular contradictions the teenagers are confronted with when coming of age are increased by Türkiye’s status as a society between the East and the West that cannot be considered wholly collectivist anymore.

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*Keywords:* Transition to adolescence; intergenerational relations; parent–child negotiations; trust management; responsabilization; exploratory mixed-method design

## Introduction

This contribution examines adult–child relationships by focusing on the topic of the transition from childhood to teenage years. The aim is to gain insights into the position assigned to adolescents within intergenerational relations: the right to a say, the scope of action, the competence to make decisions and the opportunities to improve that position. The social group under study is middle and lower middle-class families in three densely populated urban provinces in Türkiye. From a sociological perspective, the age passage from childhood to teenage years is not simply a problem of ‘raging hormones’ – a keyword under which this life phase is often studied (see a critical review in [Lesko, 2001](#)). Rather, it is a rung of what we may call the ‘social ladder of age’ that must be taken. From a sociological point of view, this ladder is nothing more than a particularly challenging and important status dimension – a problem created by social norms that individuals have to deal with, at least in Goffman’s view ([Goffman, 1961](#)). But what is it that is considered as particularly challenging about age as a status dimension? First, age is a ‘master status’ ([Hughes, 1945](#); [Lindesmith et al., 1999](#), p. 271), thus, a very important status that defines the individual’s position in society as well as the expectations that individuals are addressed with. In terms of a ‘social clock’, there is a ‘right’ and a ‘wrong’ age to do almost anything ([Elder, 1975](#); [Neugarten et al., 1965](#)). Second, age is a status dimension on which individuals continuously change and are expected to change their position. Coser refers to a ‘transitional status system’ (1966, p. 172) on which every change results in new impositions for individuals: often enough, they must still face the expectations that were associated with the position they just left behind, but at the same time must behave as demanded by the new position. Age-related concessions (that were directed to the younger age group to which one now no longer belongs) may now fail to appear. Thus, while age transitions must be accomplished in all societies, they do not simply ‘occur’ or ‘happen’ at a particular point of time to those concerned. As there are certain, at times contradictory, expectations that must be dealt with, the individuals who prepare to manage the transitions must work out solutions that their interaction partners will accept and that allow them a satisfactory self-presentation ([Goffman, 1961](#)). Thus, to study the elaboration of the age transitions by those involved opens an opportunity to explore what it means to be a child, an adolescent and an adult.

To the extent that the transition from child to adolescent was studied in such a perspective it has been done in Western societies. For these societies, research shows that privileges or obligations which are assigned to adolescents now can be considered as the subject and result of interactions that take place with peers and adults. It is the peers who are important supporters, pace setters, spectators and jurors in these processes and they are strict with their judgments in regard to all

that may ‘no longer’ or ‘not yet’ be done (Kelle, 2001; König, 2008; Waerdahl, 2005). As far as the adults are concerned as parties in these processes, mainly the parents have been examined. Research on parent–child negotiations illuminates how children at the threshold to adolescence face their parents’ expectations, deal with their requirements or make claims of their own regarding privacy and autonomy in different parts of their lives (Goh & Kuczynski, 2022; Horgan et al., 2020; Sarre, 2010; Solomon et al., 2002; Türkyilmaz, 2021; Williams & Williams, 2005). We can derive from the findings of these studies that offering a disclosure of information on feelings and activities, taking (new) responsibilities, engaging with household or school duties and sticking to agreements with parents or not getting caught when breaking them play an important role for the teenagers to avoid conflicts and to achieve new freedoms. Thus, gaining and managing the trust of the parents can be considered an essential ‘currency’ (Sarre, 2010, p. 71) within the negotiations that characterize the transition to adolescence.

In an own previous study, we compared the interactions between teenagers and their parents in three countries – Germany, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye. The results of this study support the impression that the transition to adolescence is experienced as negotiated and at times rather tensely negotiated – not just in Western families (Bühler-Niederberger & Türkyilmaz, 2022). From the perspective of the teenagers in all three countries, growing up in age made it necessary to repeatedly claim their rights and to refer to limitations caused by the parents. Our comparative analysis indicated further that the scope of action achieved in these negotiations had to be balanced out cautiously. On the one hand, teenagers had to account for the rules of the age hierarchy between children and adults in the local context, i.e. German teenagers – and especially girls – had the biggest and Kyrgyz teenagers had the smallest influence on decisions within the family, while the Turkish group remained in-between. On the other, the teenagers had to cope with negative consequences and conflicts caused by age-related concessions: More than any group, German girls experienced a decrease of parental affection (ibid.). For these girls, their remarkable profit in the negotiations was, therefore, also countered by costs.

In the following, we aim to achieve a more differentiated and comprehensive understanding of Turkish adolescents’ interpretations of their (changing) age status and the intergenerational relations they are involved in. We take up the notion of a negotiated transition to adolescence as it is suggested by research on parent–child relations in Western families and apply it on the Turkish sample for a more in-depth analysis of the data from the previous study. By this we expect to gain insights into intergenerational relations in a society that cannot be considered as completely collectivist anymore. What are the challenges that characterize processes of becoming more adult in an ‘in-between’ society? These challenges will be addressed in the following section on research about adolescents in Türkiye and underlined by the results of our analysis.

## **Children and Youth in a ‘Between’ Society**

In this section, we attempt to anchor our research on Turkish adolescents presented in this chapter within the achievements and desiderata of the already rich

but rather adult-centered research on growing up in Türkiye. Türkiye is often described to be a ‘between’ country (Bayirbağ et al., 2018, p. 391) – between the East and the West – geographically, economically and culturally. The country has a free market economy and a high level of institutionalization of capitalism like Western countries but at the same time cultural characteristics closer to the Middle East, which are reflected in demographics, e.g. a high share of children and young people in the population (almost one fourth of the population is under 15 years old; CIA, 2022) and almost 15% of women being married at the age of 18 (as estimated in 2018; CIA, 2022). Additionally, the country is burdened with many internal conflicts, surrounded by external conflicts in which it is not uninvolved and affected by natural disasters, for the consequences of which it is poorly prepared. It can be seen as a consequence of all these problematic situations and of political measures that are generally judged to be unsatisfactory that the problems in processes of growing up pile up (cf. Bayirbağ et al., 2018; Sen & Selin, 2022; UNICEF, 2022; Uyan-Semerci & Erdoğan, 2022a). This was compounded in recent years by high inflation and the COVID-19 pandemic (Erdoğan et al., 2022). As a result, not only did poverty and child poverty increase but education was even worse than it already had been in poor regions and neighborhoods before. Child protection services were no longer effective, court proceedings for domestic violence were delayed and children’s subjective well-being has been affected (Erdogan et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2022).

There are many especially vulnerable groups of children – not least because of this ‘between’ condition and internal and external conflicts – to which research is directed. Refugee children (Kilinc & Karsli-Çalamak, 2022; Sunata & Beyazova, 2022), child laborers (Uyan-Semerci & Erdoğan, 2022a), children of Armenian citizen migrants living in Istanbul (mostly made up of irregular migrants), Roma children (Uyan-Semerci & Erdoğan, 2022b), children in areas of armed conflicts (Kara & Selçuk, 2020) and politically oppositional children – all these groups may have limited access to fundamental rights and health (Uyan-Semerci & Erdoğan, 2022b) and experience political repression (Maksudyan, 2022a, 2022b). Research focusing on these groups is also understood as a basis and demand for political measures and as a criticism of current insufficient implementation of legal regulations (Sen & Selin, 2022). It, therefore, focuses primarily on the extent, causes, consequences and development of such problematic situations, and effects of political programs, etc. Meanwhile, the voices of children and young people are largely ignored (Kilinc & Karsli-Çalamak, 2022, p. 89). The research of Uyan-Semirci and Erdoğan (2022b) responded to this shortcoming and focused on the subjective well-being of the children. They found a very clear negative influence of poverty (which in many cases must be regarded as severe poverty) on the children’s self-assessed well-being. The children’s assessments of their well-being are also strikingly worse among children of internal migrant families compared to children of Istanbulite families (Uyan-Semerci et al., 2013).

The country is also characterized as ‘between’ when examining social relations and children’s involvement into their families. This addresses the fact that the country is neither at one end nor the other with regard to the dimension of individualism-collectivism, a central dimension to social psychological research on

cultures (Triandis, 2001). Rather, in the course of modernization, a form of social connectedness has emerged that can be described as ‘being both related and individuated’ (Imamoğlu, 2003, p. 367) or ‘psychological-emotional interdependence’ (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007, p. 20). Using these terms, research on Turkish family relationships achieved international fame primarily with the person of Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı and her coauthors (e.g. Ataca et al., 2005; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007; Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). This research is based on several large-scale studies; their results can be summarized as follows: a high level of family loyalty continues to apply, but at the same time the importance of material provision by the adult children is declining and more individuation is being conceded. Across the last three generations, the bond has become more of an emotional one, which is accompanied, for example, by a change from the former preference for sons to a preference for daughters and by a decrease in authoritarian parenting (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). In international projects such a development has been observed not only in Türkiye but also in other urbanizing collectivist societies, yet it applies mainly to better educated and urban families (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007; cf. also Gürmen & Kihc, 2022).

Again, however, this line of research on parent–child relations does not capture the perspective of children and adolescents – and that is the first criticism we make of it. It is mostly based on interviewing parents about the values they ascribe to their children and about parenting behavior, and on interviewing young adults, especially college students, about their attitudes toward family, society and individuation. There are several reasons for this methodological approach: On the one hand, these groups are easier to survey, and this allows to obtain considerable sample sizes. On the other hand – and this is the adult-centric theoretical perspective – the children are mainly seen as products of parental efforts. The variables that are empirically captured on the children’s side, i.e. children’s social or cognitive competencies, are then seen as a consequence of parental efforts (cf. as well Kağıtçıbaşı et al., 2009). The second criticism is that such research gives a somewhat embellished picture of Turkish family realities. It is a problem that always arises when college students serve as respondents in a research area, and it is also a consequence of the fact that primarily values and orientations were captured in this research. If one asks about concrete practices in Turkish families, a rather different picture might emerge. Sofuoğlu et al. (2016) found that the use of harsh punishment by Turkish parents is still common, and that parents consider such educational practices to be quite effective and appropriate. When Sofuoğlu et al. (2016) contrasted the parents’ statements with those of the children, they also noted an under-reporting of corporal punishment by parents. If parents were practicing believers, children’s submission and obedience were more emphasized, an effect that was consistent across educational strata (Aidoğdu & Yildiz, 2016).

Against this background, the study presented here – although modest in scope – makes an important contribution. It focuses on the children’s view of their circumstances, and this has only been done so far in research on Turkish children’s well-being, which has not been underway for long (Uyan-Semerçi & Erdoğan, 2022b). From the children’s point of view, we explore the relationships between parents and children, ask what scope of action in the family is thus open to them, how



they use it and how they seek to expand it, if necessary, what obstacles they encounter and how they deal with them. This is an approach to look at parent–child relations, which have been so often discussed in Türkiye, in a new way and to ask what the children themselves contribute to these relations. Parent–child relations are thus not only seen as products of culture and of social developments but as something that is constantly produced – in a mode of production in which adults and children are involved. Hence, our research is a theoretical and methodological turn from a focus on (culturally dependent) parenting to a focus on ‘generationing’, as relational and ongoing process between the younger and the elder generation (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Bühler-Niederberger, 2020).

## Study Design

*Data collection and sample:* The findings introduced in the next section are based on the Turkish subsample of an exploratory mixed-method study in which we collected data on children’s interpretation of their coming-of-age processes in three countries (Germany, Türkiye and Kyrgyzstan) in the years 2019–2021. We conducted focus-group interviews and questionnaires with children aged 11 to 15 years old in schools and extracurricular learning facilities. The participants lived in urban areas of the three countries. In total, 11 focus groups were conducted; we will focus on the three focus-group interviews we did with Turkish girls (three to four girls per group). These girls lived in middle-class areas of the provinces Istanbul, Aydin and Izmir where the interviews took place in *dershanes*.<sup>1</sup> The focus groups were hosted by one researcher per group and took 45–90 minutes of talk. Beforehand, participants were informed and gave their consent that all data would be recorded, transcribed and analyzed confidentially.<sup>2</sup> With the focus groups, we aimed to approach the collective interpretations the interviewees had regarding changes in the intergenerational relations with significant adults, especially with their parents. At the beginning, respondents were shown a graph with pictures of different age groups (from infants to the elderly) and asked to give their views and reflect on their age status, from their own, but also from the perspective of their parents. After this ice-breaking sequence, interviewers were cautious to maintain autonomous talk between the participants and followed a rather loose interview guideline which centered around claims, desires, rights and obligations that the adolescents considered a part of their changing age status. In the quantitatively oriented part of the study, a questionnaire was applied to an overall sample of teenagers ( $n = 156$ ) from the three countries. Most of the questions were standardized and concentrated on the subjects and scope of negotiation processes within the family; central results based on these data were

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<sup>1</sup>Extracurricular learning facilities that are visited by many high school students in Türkiye as preparation for the university entrance exams.

<sup>2</sup>The interviews were fully transcribed and translated. Substantial omissions in the quoted statements from the focus groups are indicated with three dots, the change of speaker with a slash.

presented in the cross-country comparison (Bühler-Niederberger & Türkyilmaz, 2022). In this contribution, we refer to the Turkish subsample ( $n = 50$ ) to complement the focus-group results and concentrate on the results of an open answer field that can be considered a ‘multiple perspective technique’ (Solomon et al., 2002, p. 969). Here, respondents were asked to fill in the likely answer of their parents regarding the sentence: ‘My mother/my father says I am...’.

*Data analysis:* Throughout the analytical process we used strategies that are characteristic for the methodology of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990): frequently moving back and forth between theoretical knowledge, empirical insights and continuous systematization of the data. For the focused analysis of the Turkish data, we can build and add on an already established theoretical framework from the comparative cross-national study: In accordance with the mainly Western research literature on parent–child negotiations and our own empirical material, we took up the perspective that the transition to adolescence, though inevitable in all societies, is defined by ongoing negotiation (Williams & Williams, 2005, p. 318) and that a large amount of these negotiations takes place within the family. Central to our following analysis is the concept of ‘trust management’, which we assume to be a significant part of these negotiations and with which we aim to emphasize the active role children play in these negotiations in Türkiye further. This raises questions as to what kind of parental boundaries the children can now extend and to which they must adhere still to be seen as ‘more adult’, but also what can be ‘traded’ by the children to achieve the desired changes and avoid conflicts with their parents.

## **Analysis**

In this section, first we examine the focus group data to illustrate what the girls desired for or had started to change about their relation to their parents and how they succeeded to do so. Then we approach the parents’ expectations toward their teenage children more specifically based on the results of the focus group interviews and the open answer responses of the questionnaire.

### ***The Negotiation of Boundaries, Scopes of Action and Voice Between Teenagers and Parents***

In the teenagers’ talk about the things they had recently started to negotiate with the parents, three shared topics could be identified among the groups. One of these shared topics referred to family activities in the presence of relatives. Most of the teenagers stated that they had begun to withdraw (partly or all together) from occasions when parents were visited by other adults, some had also stopped to accompany them for visits of relatives as described in the following examples.

When there are guests at home you go sit with them, everybody looks at you ... there will be critical remarks. ... This is why I go sit with them (parents and parents’ guests) for a few minutes only

and then I go back and forth, so they don't talk about that topic.  
(group b)

I don't have to go to visit relatives who I don't like anymore. . . I tell them (parents), they scold a little, but I convince them. Or I go out with friends on holidays, so I don't have to visit relatives.  
(group b)

Such boundaries between the nuclear family and relatives were created by the children rather progressively, and while parents showed some resistance, i.e. by scolding, they still made age-related concessions. Harsher forms of punishment, disappointment, or resistance from the side of the parents were not mentioned as a response to the children's withdrawal from situations. This indicates a partial liberation of the children at the end of childhood from the normative expectation of 'filial piety' (Bühler-Niederberger, 2021, p. 58f.) – the notion that children owed their parents gratitude, respect and support. On the children's part, the freedom to have more time to do things *outside* the family, i.e. meet friends, was only one reason given for the reduced time spent with parents in the presence of other adults. In the first place, many of them wanted to retreat from situations in which the parents would let others *inside* the private sphere of the own family, where they talked about their children, criticized or praised them – but most importantly still addressed them as little children. The behavior of the parents in this extended context caused embarrassment especially as the teenagers did not find it suitable for their age anymore:

. . .(my parents) show ugly baby pictures and tell stories that I don't like, even when my family visits . . . Then I'm ashamed. (group a)

What kinds of things we did when we were little (laughs). Little, little silly things. Our mother talks about them in front of the others (adult guests) and then we blush. (group c)

On the other hand, the children did not push their own boundaries too far either: they demonstrated that they respected the expectations of the adults regarding their own presence in relevant family matters. Visiting elder family members and kissing hands with their parents at holidays remained important to them to fulfill their obligations as the younger generation. Noticeably, by adhering to the demands of the intergenerational relations, the respondents could not only present their 'good behavior' as children but also their 'maturity' as becoming adults. This emphasizes the general life-long significance of 'filial piety' in the children's accounts.

They (parents) decide (on when to visit relatives). But we appreciate wherever they go with us. . .When I was little, I wanted to go somewhere else. Now there is no such need, wherever we go (as a family), that's it. (group c)

The second claim for changes in the intergenerational relations with their parents reflects the teenagers' clear desire to extend their scope of action, particularly regarding their spatial freedom. All girls mentioned early and strictly applied curfews, a very limited radius regarding their mobility and that they were not allowed to stay at friend's places overnight. The teenagers associated these rules with the parents' wish to monitor and protect them from danger but nevertheless found them oppressing. However, the girls were also aware that the parents did not grant their children permission yet to stretch spatial and temporal regulations. While they were upset to be 'treated as a child' in this way by the parents, they generally stuck to the rules to prevent conflicts and punishments – even though thereby they failed to achieve the longed for enlarged scope of action. Among their peers, they discussed that they were indeed capable of making the right choices and avoiding dangerous places for children:

I would prefer, if they allowed me to go out a little longer/ They say: "You are too little, you should be home before darkness". (group a)

They scold when I am late. Because something could happen or I could get lost. In this matter they still see me as a child. (group b)

We are not allowed to go anywhere on our own. ...If we go somewhere, something could happen to us. (group c)

I have to be home at seven, but if it was 8 or 10, there wouldn't be a problem because I know which places I shouldn't go to, where things could happen to me. (group c)

There was a third aspect that was considered a crucial step to become 'more adult' in the eyes of the teenagers and it was countered by the parents' resistance in a similar way as their claim for more spatial liberties: Repeatedly the teenagers claimed the right to have a say – to be acknowledged as an equal with an individual voice and valuable opinions in conversations with the parents. These attempts mainly failed and were experienced as humiliating, as they did not receive any counter-arguments of the parents but were just reminded of being 'too young' to be seen as an equal conversation partner. This is addressed in the following examples:

When mom and dad talk at home and I want to talk to them, too, they say: "You're too young to understand." (group a)

When the older ones talk about something, we're too young/ ... My mother says "Be quiet, you're too young, you don't chime in with adults." (group c)

***Parents' Expectations: Teenage Girls as 'Responsible Children'***

Negotiations at the transition from child to adolescent clearly concern not only demands on the part of children but also demands on the part of parents and the extent to which the growing children take these over. Participants in the focus groups were aware that parents demanded more of them in terms of generational commitments than mere compliance within family matters and regulations. Due to their growing age, the girls were expected to be autonomous and take new responsibilities, particularly in two central fields: school and household duties. The children coped differently with these tasks; this is evident when comparing the groups. Group 'c' regrets the decrease in parental affection and support regarding their school work:

I didn't want to go to online-classes. I wanted my mother to support me. . . . But she would say: "Do it, you're big already."  
(group c)

We would like some understanding from our mothers because it is a lot with the online-classes. But she says I rather sleep than listen. She says: "Go, throw water on your face and then you get up!"  
(group c)

It would be nice, if our parents would kiss us on the forehead and give us chocolate after school. (group c)

Conversely, group 'a' explained that they did not need much help anymore in coping with their school obligations to present their capability and responsibility as growing adults.

When I was little, I needed my parents' help with school work. But now it's easier for me, I don't need their help anymore. (group a)

Similarly, the respondents were increasingly expected to contribute to the household and presented their knowledge about these new obligations in the discussions with their peers. Many of the teenagers stated that they helped with the dishes, the laundry, caring for younger siblings and cleaning. They often cited the view of their parents that they had grown 'old enough' to be trusted with such responsibilities. However, the children's descriptions of the several ways they conducted domestic labor and supported the parents did not only serve as a marker for their maturity and growing competences. They also revealed the additional burdens and contradictions associated with the shift toward the new age status. All focus groups contained many complaints about the ever-increasing workload, the discontent of their parents about the amount and quality of household chores they carried out and the lack of parental appreciation for this help. Again, particularly participants in group 'c' felt disappointed that their dutiful support in the family household – and being the responsible child that was expected by the parents so clearly – did not lead to reciprocal privileges:

When they work there are chores at home, then we're adults. Then we're 20 years old, then we must do it. When they go to town and want to buy something for themselves and I want to come they say: "You're too little, you have to stay at home." (group c)

In sum, the results of the focus groups on parent-child negotiations indicate that the parents are much more successful in having their expectations met by their children than the girls are when negotiating boundaries, their scope of action or their right to a say. While the girls accept the responsibilities the parents expect them to take now as they grow older, they still cannot trade these responsibilities into more freedom and equality.

### *'Mature Children'*

Nevertheless, meeting the parents' expectations is associated with an upgrading, in the sense that one is praised to be a child who is maturing in the desired way, a good child, a child to be proud of. In the questionnaire data this perception of the children appears very clearly. Fifty Turkish boys and girls were asked to complete the sentence 'My mother/father says I am. . .'. The results of this open answer field are presented in Table 1 and explained in the following:

Most of the responses mirror parents' evaluations regarding their children's accomplishments in school and household matters and children's compliance to parents' regulations. We thus categorized these data as positive, negative, or mixed characterizations in the parents' eyes. The 28 girls who answered this question most frequently filled in one or a combination of the responses 'hard-working', 'good at school', 'helpful', 'diligent', 'clever', 'smart', 'successful' and 'respectful' for both, their mothers' and their father's view, which we categorized as praise or positive evaluations respectively. We counted 17 of such solely positive evaluations from the mothers' and 20 from the fathers' point of view. Girls used terms as 'messy', 'lazy', 'unorganized' to refer to negative evaluations of the

Table 1. Typical Responses in the Open Answer Field 'My Mother Says/My Father Says'.<sup>a</sup>

	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>
Negative	2(-) lazy, messy	6(2) too much outside, naughty
Mixed	9(5) messy at home but successful at school	6(5) lazy but good at school
Positive	17(20) clever, hardworking, kind-hearted, mature	9(9) good boy, smart, respectful

<sup>a</sup>First frequencies refer to the mothers' evaluations; references to the father's evaluations are given in parentheses.

parents; these occurred mainly in mixed evaluations (nine mixed evaluations of the mothers and five of the fathers were counted). The 20 boys who completed the sentence presented themselves similarly – most frequently filling in ‘good boy’ as a typical characterization of both of their parents. However, we counted a proportionally smaller amount of solely positive parental characterizations for the boys (nine from both, the mothers’ and the fathers’ point of view). They also mentioned more critical judgments by the parents than the girls – i.e. in addition to being seen as ‘lazy’ and ‘messy’ like the girls, they were considered as ‘naughty’ or ‘outside too much’. Additionally, there were more solely negative evaluations, particularly from the mothers’ side (i.e. six negative characterizations from the mothers, two from the fathers). Nevertheless, parental evaluations in which positive aspects were completely absent did only appear rarely – particularly in the girls’ sample in which only two such answers were given regarding the mothers and none regarding the fathers. This underlines the findings from the focus groups that the girls, who engage in household and school obligations dutifully and subdue to parental limitations (i.e. by not being ‘naughty’ and ‘too much outside’) have earned the trust of the parents to be seen as mature and responsible, the prerequisites parents seem so clearly to associate with adulthood.

Notably, less stereotypical characterizations – that referred to the individual personality of the children – were the exception. However, some of the answers provide insights into a strong emotional bond within the parent–child relations (i.e. ‘my little flower’, ‘my one and only’, ‘my joy of life’, ‘my father thinks I’m perfect’). Again, these answers were given particularly by Turkish girls. These results of the questionnaire data indicate that meeting parental expectations – as the girls apparently do more successfully than the boys – is central to maintain the praise and affection of the parents while moving through the transition.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this contribution, we claimed that it is important to approach children’s own perspectives and experiences to receive differentiated insights into generational relations in Türkiye. By focusing on the transition to adolescence and the transformations elicited during this age phase, we aimed to detect the processual and relational character of parent–child relations, as well as children’s and parents’ ongoing contributions in their (re-)production. The data on teenagers in Türkiye underline what is stated to be characteristic for Western parent–child relations at the end of childhood – an increase in negotiation. While the data basis of our focus groups is narrow and focuses on girls, we still identified repeated claims regarding the aspects that the teenagers wanted to change about their circumstances and their parents’ behavior, respectively. With the frequent references to their age-status the girls showed that they did not consider such treatment as appropriate anymore and developed different strategies in dealing with it. However, their success in realizing these claims was limited to drawing clearer boundaries between the family and relatives and the presentation of a responsible self. Their negotiations in order to achieve

more spatial freedom and to have a say on the other hand faced quite explicit resistance of the parents.

Nonetheless, gaining and managing the trust of parents in these processes was relevant, not so much to stretch the boundaries of the parents or to secure more freedom as it is presented in studies on Western parent–child relations (Sarre, 2010; Williams & Williams, 2005), but rather to meet the expectations toward adult maturity and responsibility. The Turkish girls presented trustworthiness by taking account of the new obligations as well as the consisting limitations set by the parents that they could not alter (yet) and their adherence to them. Concretely, they filtered how much absence their parents could abide in extended family matters, did not break the spatial regulations and took on the assigned duties regarding the increasing house and schoolwork. In exchange, they experienced parental praise: Numerous positive evaluations were recited in the questionnaire which clearly show that with these accomplishments the Turkish girls master to satisfy their parents much more than the boys in these matters, who were considered ‘naughty’ frequently and thus apparently crossed the parents’ boundaries too extensively.<sup>3</sup> Based on these positive judgments, we assumed that it is particularly the girls who let the parents hold them responsible for domestic tasks and the fulfillment of their duties. This impression is confirmed by a quantitative study of 12 (mostly Western) countries (Bruckauf & Rees, 2017). In this study, the gender differences regarding housework in Türkiye rapidly increase for 12-year-olds and are the highest among these countries for this group of older children. Such gender-specific differences in negotiating generational relations and individual independence, respectively, should be a focus of further research.

What became very empirically tangible by approaching the Turkish teenage girls’ accounts are the challenges and contradictory expectations that individuals are confronted with when transitioning in age (Cosser, 1966; Goffman, 1961). In this context, our study reflects some of the results of the adult-centered research on parent–child relations in Türkiye as a society between collectivism and individualization. Our data support the impression that new, mixed forms of social relatedness have emerged between these two societal orientations which are accompanied by inconsistencies: i.e. parents made small concessions toward the individuality of their growing daughters by allowing them to draw clearer boundaries against relatives, but at the same time, keeping up good relations with the extended family remained an implied task while becoming adult. Our study’s focus on everyday practices reveals further dilemmas that are caused by the teenagers’ narrow scope of action and denial of rights. This modifies the positive picture of family realities suggested by the research on adults’ parenting values: First, it seems that the Turkish teenagers must meet particularly diverging age-related expectations caused by the strong *responsibilization* that the parents demand, i.e. they are supposed to take responsibility for an increasing amount of household chores, but at the

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<sup>3</sup>In the cross-country comparison, boys were statistically significantly less content with their scope in decision-making than the girls (Bühler-Niederberger & Türkyilmaz, 2022, p. 194f.).



same time they ought to keep quiet in conversations with the adults and stay close (in the spatial sense). To some extent, it seems that they must move on this new platform of responsibility to keep the love of their parents and do not get as much affection (i.e. the chocolate and the kiss on the forehead – as one girl says) just for free like before. Second, a different horizon of expectation appears regarding the peers who claim the status of an adolescent by an extended scope of action – which is clearly denied by the parents in terms of spatial freedom and the right to have a say. Third, the efforts to claim this adolescent status within the negotiations bears no relation to the benefits: While the losses and the additional burdens of the new age status are quite visible in our data (i.e. less support, less affection, if expectations are not met), the benefits (i.e. new boundaries against relatives) are rare. In other words: the adolescents have to take on the new burdens without being able to trade these in turn for new rights and freedoms. All this leads to the impression that the teenagers follow the idea that becoming adolescent means to become more independent, equal and self-determined. On the contrary, from the parents' view a renegotiation of generational hierarchies toward more equality – as it seems to be a moral guidance for parents in Western families during their children's transition to adolescence (Solomon et al., 2002) – is not intended. At least this is not – or not yet – the case for our group of Turkish girls. Instead, in their parents' view in a sense they remain children – 'mature' and 'responsible' but still docile and subordinated children.

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## Chapter 12

# Grandparenting the Firstborn in Central Asia: Exploring the “*Nebere Aluu*” Practice

*Elena Kim*

### Abstract

This chapter presents an exploratory study of specific experiences among Central Asian grandparents who adopt and raise their firstborn grandchild as their own youngest child. The practice, referred to as ‘*nebere aluu*’, is deemed an ethnonational tradition of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh people and appears to be widely accepted among men and women, young and old. Drawing on in-depth interviews with grandparents themselves, I describe this phenomenon as situated within and dynamically responding to the shifting social, economic and political context of contemporary Central Asia. Drastic transformations in the everyday lives, while destabilizing and disorienting, may have supplanted *nebere aluu* with unique significance. Contemporary expressions of *nebere aluu* point to it being a complex social system of intergenerational reciprocal care, continuity and responsibility that provides a meaningful space for reconciling conflicting ideas about family, marriage, love and child-rearing. This discursive space is open for debate and negotiations and raises important questions about power and gender politics inherent to it.

*Keywords:* Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan; parenting; grandparents; firstborn grandchildren; tradition; intergenerational continuity


### Introduction

A 2020 article in an independent Central Asian news website, entitled “The firstborn is for the grandma. Why in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan older relatives

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may impound a child from the young parents,” focused on people whose parents were their biological grandparents. The author, Alina Dzhetigenova, introduced her topic astutely as:

In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, there is a tradition when older parents seize their son’s firstborn child. The baby’s sex does not matter. They can kidnap the baby and forbid the mother to have any contact with it. This can happen on the first day of a baby’s life or a few years after. And this is what happened to me. I was two months old, and my mom went to take her exam in college [in a nearby city], my father was a teacher there, too. My [paternal] grandma and auntie took care of me [while they were gone]. My parents returned in two weeks, but my grandma did not give me back.

(Dzhetigenova, 2020)

She introduced more such stories and interleaved them with professional opinions from psychologists and an anthropologist. Dzhetigenova concluded that what happened to her was an act of “violence with repercussions” such as trauma, jealousy, anger, sadness, loneliness, guilt, shame, fear and feeling hurt.

Berdaly Ospan, a journalist and a well-known expert on ethnic Kazakh traditions, offered a drastically different perspective on “why the Kazakhs ‘gift’ their children to grandparents” (Ospan, 2018). In his 2018 article, Ospan considered the practice as both an expression of affinity to children and respect to elders – all foundational ethnocultural norms in the Kazakh society – and as an “ancient Kazakh tradition” per se. Ospan assured his readers that the practice continued to live on in the present time and enthusiastically laid out success stories of the living individuals, including Kazakh celebrities, to illustrate the benefit and wisdom of this phenomenon. Referring to a historical source, Ospan alluded to the cultural belief that elderly people must be entrusted to raise young children into upstanding members of society, knowledgeable of traditions and having humane and fair personalities.

This chapter offers an analysis of what Dzhetigenova and Ospan are discussing in their respective articles – parenting patterns in contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, wherein grandparents adopt their firstborn grandchild to raise as their own. A review of existing literature on traditional kinship relationship and customary family law in Central Asia has not revealed sufficiently satisfying and conclusive knowledge on these patterns (Ismailbekova, 2014, 2016; Murzaev, 2016; Musaeva, 2017; Nursaiyn, 2017; Tegizbekova, 2016; Ulanova, 2018). More recent media sources, like Dzhetigenova’s and Ospan’s, have been sending unequivocal messages about the practice and its effects on family members. Such scarcity of scholarly resources on this topic and its contradictory public narratives call for systematic research to inform its better understanding. This chapter is one of the early scholarly attempts (Kenzhebaeva & Kim, 2022) to empirically explore the practice and provide a better understanding of its function and meaning to the diverse groups of people.

In what follows, I focus on grandparents’ personal stories of what happened, their own interpretations of experiences, their understanding of Kyrgyz/Kazakh

family and their changing roles within them. I adopt an intergenerational lens in my analysis to argue that this practice expresses intricate and dynamic social and cultural connections among the old and young, a discursive space where diverse ideas about family, love and children come to contact and interact. These interactions occur within and in response to larger social, economic, political and cultural contexts – all shifting and in motion – which may complicate any attempt to fully understand the phenomenon.

In terms of methodology, I base my analytic findings on the empirical data collected in February to June 2022 in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Two months prior to the fieldwork, I hired a team of six research assistants, all graduate students from the American University of Central Asia, who helped me to conduct interviews. I trained the team on qualitative methods of research with a focus on in-depth interviewing and research ethics. Once the Institutional Review Board approval was received, we started recruiting interviewees utilizing purposive methods of sampling via social media channels, personal connections and networks. We recruited individual respondents as well as multiple family members where *nebere aluu* was being or had been practiced. A total of 29 individuals were interviewed. They included eight persons raised by their grandparents (referred to as *nebere*), three siblings of *neberes*, five biological mothers, five biological fathers, five grandmothers and four grandfathers. In the analytical part of this chapter, I assigned all participants pseudonyms to protect their identity.

In the interest of space and the analytic focus, this chapter presents an analysis pertaining to the data obtained from grandparents only. I understand that these case studies approach does not provide a “complete” picture or an unbiased account of *nebere aluu*. Yet, they reveal much about the possible meanings to the lives of my respondents and offer a snapshot of the grandparent/parent/grandchild dynamic.

## Understanding “*nebere aluu*”

There appears to be a peculiar void in terminology for the phenomenon in question. Published sources refer to no specific term or a standardized signifier, neither does the colloquial and media discourse, in either Kyrgyz or Kazakh language. Participants themselves, too, used no precise vocabulary or any customary term when talking about *nebere aluu*. Even so, they could richly describe their own relation to it and the significant change it brought into their experiences. This peculiar absence may attest to the phenomenon not only being a reified practice as a “thing that people just do” but also to the level of complexity that could not be captured with a shortcut term. For the pragmatic purpose of clarity, I turn to Osan who adapted the name of a different practice called *bala beru* (translated from Kazakh language as *give a child*) to coin the term *nemere alu* in the Kazakh language, which translates as *take a grandchild* (2018). Following him, Kenzhebaeva and I (2022) translated it into the Kyrgyz language as *nebere aluu*. I will use this term in this chapter.



*Nebere Aluu as a Practice*

Nebere aluu is one approach to child-rearing in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where family types include nuclear arrangements, multiple generations living under one roof, elderly parents joining their adult children's families, single-parent families, childless couples, adopted children living with their relatives, grandparents temporarily taking care of their grandchildren while their parents are outside working as labor migrants, etc. Nebere aluu stands out from all of them because the claims of the ownership of parental rights and duties are fluid and leave questions open as to the power, the function and the symbolic meanings of the practice.

My own preliminary analysis of nebere aluu case studies suggest variability in the nature of the practice contingent upon whether the grandchild was born into a daughter's as opposed to a son's family. While this variability may need more robust evidence, in this chapter, my main focus is on rural families in which paternal grandparents choose to assume custodial responsibility over their son's firstborn. Within these cases, individual practices vary; however, common descriptions that I found in my material are as follows: When married, a couple resides patrilocally, in the house of the husband's parents. The young wife (referred to as *kelin*, i.e. daughter-in-law) participates in domestic chores and takes care of her in-laws whose expectations are strong for having a grandchild within the first year of marriage. Conversations about nebere aluu sometimes start immediately after the wedding day and even before any pregnancy has occurred. When the baby is born, paternal grandmother (*kaineneh*) becomes a primary caretaker of the newborn. *Kaineneh* spends most of her time with the baby, allowing *kelin* to breastfeed it. *Kelin* is supposed to withdraw from nurturing the baby and grew more distant in her role as a parent, similar to that of an older sister. In many situations, *kaineneh* insists on being called *apa* (mother, in the Kyrgyz language). The biological mother is to be called *dzheneh* (a wife of an older brother). In some cases, nebere aluu becomes materialized through the formal adoption process.

In some cases when a young couple lives in a separate household, paternal grandparents communicate their wish to adopt their grandchild. They instruct their daughter-in-law to shorten the breastfeeding period to ensure that the baby can thrive without it. The infant, sometimes as young as a few days old, is brought to the grandparents' home to live as their youngest child – *kenzheh* (translated as the “youngest child”). The infant's parents will have a restricted access to the baby. While not overtly prohibited, communications among the child and their parents are treated with caution and, sometimes, jealousy.

The grandchild resides with the grandparents until adulthood. Grandparents place specific importance on their ability to marry their *kenzheh* – the moment their parenting duty is considered complete. However, such a closure may be interrupted because *kenzheh* may be sent to their biological parents at a younger age. This happens if the grandparents find themselves in a situation of crisis, such as the premature death of the grandmother, her poor health, natural disasters, or

any circumstances which put the safety and well-being of the child in danger, including the child's own health.

Following *nebere aluu*, the young couple is expected to comply with the wishes of the elderly parents and move on with their lives, gradually becoming economically independent. Incompliance necessarily evokes social disapproval and exclusion. From the *kelin*'s perspective, resisting the desires of *Kaineneh* may lead to a familial conflict, disruption in the kinship relationships and cause divorce. Young women's own mothers would encourage their daughters to do as the in-laws wish (Kenzhebaeva & Kim, 2022). Doing otherwise would necessarily stigmatize the young woman as a *bad kelin*, and a *bad wife* – a curse in any place where much depends on a woman's reputation.

In terms of numerical prevalence, it is not clear precisely what percentage of Kyrgyz and Kazakh grandparents practice *nebere aluu*. There have been yet no quantitative studies to assess its statistical incidence and to systematize associated demographic data. The pattern, however, is well known and quite visible. I heard frequent stories, met numerous people who were involved in it, or who were related to those who took part in *nebere aluu*, or knew others who did. All of my research assistants had at least a few friends or relatives who were raised through this practice. One assistant herself or himself was a *nebere aluu* child. They told us that this was "how children were raised in their village" and that they "did not even think this was anything irregular." All this leads me to claim that *nebere aluu* is a fairly common arrangement.

### ***Placing Nebere Aluu in Existing Literature on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (GRG)***

A review of some historical sources about traditional family structures in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan suggests that its contemporary form can be traced back to the pre-Soviet history when a nomadic lifestyle demanded communal approaches to child-rearing (Murzaev, 2016; Musaeva, 2017; Tegizbekova, 2016). Accordingly, families were organized into extended patriarchal families comprised of three or four generations, including great-grandparents, grandparents, children and grandchildren. Such a family was often described as *family minor*. A collective of several families minor comprised a *family major*. They shared household economy and labor and raised all children communally under grandparents' supervision. In these nomadic communities,

...a child did not belong to a father or a mother, but to the entire community in which the child lived. It was, consequently, the community that was responsible for the child's upbringing. Those who fed and educated a child were considered their parents. The child could call many women and men *mother* and *father*.

(Musaeva, 2017, p. 2)

Children signified success and prosperity and were treasured by everybody in the family. It was not atypical for families to willingly give away a young offspring as a sign of friendship, respect, but also as an expression of compassion and sympathy to those in the family major or minor who could not or could no longer have their own children. This customary law was called *asyrap aluu* (Tegizbekova, 2016, p. 129). Tegizbekova made no indication of the *nebere aluu* practice but mentioned that the customary law (*adat*) regulated “the right of the child to be connected with grandparents” and that it included “obligations of grandparents to provide for grandchildren” (p. 131). She remarked an apparently frequent practice when a “Kyrgyz [man] fostered a grandson or a son of a daughter (*dzhuen*)” (p. 132). Similarly, Nursaiyn (2017), in discussing traditional child-rearing in Kazakh families, argued that paternal grandparents played the most influential role in child-rearing. In fact, the firstborn children were believed to be ones of paternal grandparents. Adopted in such a way, they became the favorites of the grandparents. Musaeva (2017) made a straightforward argument that some ethnic traditional customs had returned into contemporary lives of many Kyrgyz and Kazakh people and that “grandparents’ fostering their first grandchild” were among the revived traditions along with *soiko sahuu* (engagement custom with earrings), assignment of sworn parents (*okul ata* and *okul apa*), etc.

Apart from historical analysis, more media sources on *nebere aluu* focused their discussion on how this experience may induce psychological distress for the adopted children. Taking the standpoint of the child, the authors emphasized the traumatization from separation with the parents, confusion, adaptation distress, poor socialization, etc. (Dzhetigenova, 2020; Ulanova, 2018). *Nebere aluu* has also been discussed from the perspectives of the young women whose in-laws adopted their firstborn children (Kenzhebaeva & Kim, 2022). This analysis considered *nebere aluu* as one expression of systemic gender-based oppression against young women that reduced them to the materiality of their bodies and reproductive systems. Listening to the women’s experiences, the authors analyzed it as an instrument that provided a sense of continuity and cohesion for the grandparents but at the expense of young women’s confusion and traumatization.

Internationally, the last few decades saw a growing research interest in and fascinating scholarship about the phenomenon of grandparents raising grandchildren (GRG). The concept of “grandfamilies” has allowed for systematic examinations of grandparents-headed households (Cross et al., 2010). Scholars have explored ‘emergency grandparenting’ for situations such as teen pregnancy, pursuing higher education, incarceration (Lewis et al., 2018), labor migration (Ismailbekova, 2014), poverty and alcoholism (Fuller-Thomson, 2005). It has been established that cultural norms on grandparenting vary with regards to reasons for raising their grandchildren (Ikels, 1998).

This chapter presents a study that is distinctive from the existing research on GRG. Here, the focus on *nebere aluu* moves beyond providing culturally based understanding of grandparent/grandchildren relationships and family roles in Central Asia. The intent is to pry away from any normative understanding of family structure and functions. Those are typically prescribed by social theories

originating from the collective Global North, but also from the local literature. I do not see *nebere aluu* as an expression of irregularity, pathology, or disorganization. In agreement with a phenomenological approach to social inquiry, I believe the practice makes sense to the people who are involved in it and my goal is to learn and describe it. This chapter invites us to attend to the voices of the grandparents, who have something to say about what the practice means for them. From their account, I insist on the argument that *nebere aluu* is an inter-generational social practice with significance and meaning for all those involved, which provides space for reconciling diverse ideas about family, marriage, love and child-rearing. I argue that this space has been open for debate and change in response to shifts in economic, political and social conditions in the Central Asian region and beyond.

### ***Nebere Aluu Through the Lens of Good Grandmother Identity: The Patriarchal Bargain and Beyond***

One way of explaining *nebere aluu* from the perspective of grandmothers can revolve around older women's constructing their social status and authority within their community that has typically been framed with Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) paradigmatic framework of *patriarchal bargain*. It posits that in patriarchal societies, such as Kyrgyz and Kazakh, elderly women gain benefit, power and status by conforming to and supporting oppressive patriarchal practices against younger women. Following her, Ismailbekova (2016) revealed that women construct their authority as they age and smoothly proceed through life-cycle stages, events and family roles. In this process, giving birth to a male child and raising him up till his marriage secures a higher social status for them. A grandchild entrusted to a senior woman by exactly her son symbolizes public recognition and attestation to her accumulated empowerment. *Nebere aluu*, framed through patriarchal bargain, could be seen as one way for older women to compensate for earlier discrimination and to exert power over the younger women by expropriating the latter's babies. *Nebere aluu* can, thus, help mark a positive transition in the relationships between an older mother and a son wherein "both have their roles and statuses emphasized and enhanced" (Kenzhebaeva & Kim, 2022, p. 107). For the adult son, *nebere aluu* helps to shape and maintain his identity as a "good grateful son" – one of the building blocks of Kyrgyz masculinity (Kim & Karioris, 2020).

Using Kandiyoti's theory to explain *nebere aluu*, however, can be constraining because it would reduce it to older women's inhumanity toward younger women in quest for power within the patriarchal regime. Such an analytic choice would invariably lead to, explicitly and implicitly, their portrayal as malicious villains who knowingly aggress against the most vulnerable. It would neglect to acknowledge a number of significant features of *nebere aluu* and the multiple meanings it supplied for the elder women. Further, I explain these significant features starting with a relevant context within which they are embedded.

***Positioning Nebere Aluu Within the Social Norms of Compulsory Matrimony and Progeny***

In Kyrgyzstan, as in many other places in the world, marriage is a dominant social expectation to all members of society with serious costs to those who choose to transgress it (Kim & Karioris, 2020). Marriage is considered natural, mandatory and the only way in which the emotional, psychological, social, economic, and physical well-being of an adult person can be ensured. In rural areas especially, men who do not marry are considered socially deviant, incomplete as men and suspicious to the rest of the community. Upon marriage, men gain in reputation, respect and symbolic status of an adult person. They enjoy better economic and political opportunities entrusted to them in their new status. Unmarried women experience intense social pressure to be married and may suffer multiple forms of discrimination in the local society. In highly valued and frequent social gatherings, they could be publicly ridiculed, humiliated and reminded about how low their status is. For example, at a festive table they would be seated together with children or asked to do the hardest tasks in the kitchen. They may be isolated both from younger single women as an undesirable example of a “spinster” and, at the same time, from young married women whose company they are yet to deserve. Compulsory matrimony appears to be pervasive, yet, it is rarely discussed in contemporary scholarly networks as a separate issue worth its own research. Noor Borbieva’s (2012) research is one exception as she touches upon the overwhelming value of matrimony as an explanation for bride kidnapping practices in Kyrgyz Republic and I draw upon her scholarship here.

Pressures of compulsory matrimony is not exclusive to the young individuals themselves. It generalizes to their parents who want to see their children married as a guarantee for a happy life. Elsewhere (Kim & Karioris, 2020), we have described the feeling of inadequacy among older parents whose adult children were single. Marrying children raises the status of the parents who “by marrying their children publicly fulfill one of the most sacred responsibilities of a Kyrgyz adult” (Borbieva, 2012, p. 154). Parental interference, often through arranged marriage, is expected when necessary.

Early marriage is even more desirable for both young women and men. In the conditions of a strong taboo on premarital sex, a long courtship is discouraged because it may lead to malicious rumors (Borbieva, 2012). Courtship is also not seen as correlating necessarily with the marriage success. Parents are motivated to graduate their children into adulthood and are often in a rush. Importantly, childbearing, so foundational to the idea of a family, is maximized with a younger bride.

After the wedding, a new pressure arrives for the young couple – producing offspring. Indeed, as in Borbieva (2012), having children takes precedence over professional and social accomplishments. They are “the most reliable and enduring sources of happiness and satisfaction for a human being” (p. 156). Fecundity is one of the three pillars of a success in the dominant discourse of marriage along with friendliness (*yntymak*) and prosperity (*bereke*) (Borbieva, 2012). Romantic love is not considered essential for a marriage. Instead, if men

provide for the family and women deliver babies and take care of the household, the marriage will be regarded thriving and stable. In Borbieva's own interview with a Kyrgyz woman, she was told "[. . .] you have to understand that in Kyrgyz culture, children are the most important thing. That's the reason for marriage" (p. 156). Yet, practical realities may be at odds with the economic demands related to having children. Conforming to the norm of fecundity is associated with costs that may be incommensurable with the young couple's capacity and resources.

## **Findings**

Recently married and with a newborn, young couples are forced to experience a challenging bind. On the one hand, the pressure is strong for them to conform to the cultural convention of an earlier marriage and an expedited childbirth. On the other hand, there is a wider social and economic context, in which these expectations must be fulfilled. The focus on marriage deemphasizes the economic and material realities in which contemporary youth must productively live. Unemployment, poverty, economic instability and threatened sources of livelihoods constitute the climate in which young people are challenged to build their economic capacity. Social encouragement for marriage and children does not come with a financial support system. Instead, having a small baby puts certain limits on how well they can start building their economic and educational opportunities. In this pursuit, however, the practical wisdom of *nebere aluu* becomes apparent. The young couple's parents, having attained a certain level of economic security while still being physically healthy and energetic, are motivated to spend years supporting their adult children by overtaking the responsibility for rearing their first child.

### ***Grandparenting as an Extension of Parenting***

Analyzing *nebere aluu* suggests that participants continue parenting their adult children past their wedding and their having their own children. Parenting conflates with grandparenting, one is an inherent part of the other. The former necessarily and invariably implicates the latter. *Nebere aluu* is, then, one important and logical parenting stage, which, considering the practical effect of *nebere aluu* in the new challenging economic regime, enables their adult children to be more successful in the conditions of precarious employment, poverty and uncertainty. Being a good loving parent means being a good loving grandparent.

This desire to support their adult children was a recurrent theme across all interviews. Participants emphasized their passionate desire to help the young couple. I use an excerpt from an interview with Meerim (she and all subsequent participants are referred to by pseudonyms) a 70-year-old mother of three, who adopted her son's firstborn son (Akber) when he was three months. At the time of the interview, Akber, already a teenager, resided with Meerim, her husband (Akber's grandfather) and their two other adult children. Akber's biological parents lived in Russia with their younger children. Meerim retold us that "after

the collapse of (Soviet) Union, many people left their homes to go abroad for work, to earn money, become independent. They left their child with me and went abroad.” She emphasized that her raising Akber relieved her son and his wife of many worries:

...they did not worry about their son. They did not have to worry about which school he attended, how well he did in school. They were not worried about what clothes he wore, what he ate, because they trusted us.

Meerim shared that her own firstborn son grew up with her in-laws because she needed time to finish her university and was busy with her job. She was a third-year college student with a full-time job of a schoolteacher then. Her son was seven days old, when her in-laws told her “You go and study! Complete your degree! Give the baby to us. We will help you raise him.” Meerim agreed, and her “kainehh came to [anonymised name of city] and took [her] son away on an airplane.”

Similarly, Asel adopted and raised her first granddaughter, Nadia, because she “wanted to help, wanted to participate.” Asel enthusiastically took care of Nadia, which, in her view, facilitated Nadia’s participation in the labor market:

I was working as a schoolteacher. Nadia’s mom was also a schoolteacher. I let her work. To take care of Nadia, I changed my work schedule. I worked in the mornings and Nadia’s mom worked in the afternoons, so we took turns. I wanted my kelin to keep her job because she wanted to.

Asel repeated that taking care of Nadia was “[her] own decision, out of [her] own free will and free wish” and that “nobody forced [her] to do it.” For her, this arrangement was mutually beneficial for her and her kelin because it allowed “Nadia’s mom to have her job and [Asel] could spend more time with [her] grandchild.” As a grandmother, she said she “did everything and had time for everything.” Asel emphasized that raising Nadia was “not difficult” and that she “enjoyed it,” and that Nadia and her became “the closest persons.”

The motivation to support and help the newly married couple as they transition to adult life came hand in hand with experience of gratification and satisfaction of nurturing the baby. Other interviewees echoed Asel in expressing their utter enjoyment while parenting their kenzheh and took pleasure in their close relationships. In fact, they acquired a sense of purpose in life associated with the feeling of being needed and self-fulfillment. Nebere aluu was a source of happiness to them. Asel explained,

It was all one happy moment. Nadia was a very kind girl. She loved her grandma a lot. She always slept next to me. [...] Till this day she always runs up to me for a hug whenever she sees me. She still loves me and still has warm feelings towards me.

Upon meeting her newborn grandson Aktilek, Akmaral, then 42 years old, was overwhelmed with love and joy. She immediately fell in love with him and treated him as hers right away:

The moment he [Aktilek] was born. . . right then, I felt that he was my blood. . . someone very close to me. . . even closer than Marsel (her son). I felt as if I myself have just given birth to him. I did not want to give him back to (kelin). It was as if I gave birth to him. I brought him home from the birthing home and took care of him. I did not want to be away from him even for a minute. I did not want to even let him be breastfed. Before him, I had not known that your first grandson was sweeter than even your son! So, I did not let anyone around him, I did everything myself. When she stopped breastfeeding him, he became fully mine. He slept with me; he woke up with me. Whenever I went, I took him with me. My eyes were always on him, I did not let anybody around.

Meerim, too, shared that her “feelings for [her] grandson are stronger” and that “He brings [her] joy.” Reflecting on her own jubilation, Meerim empathized with her own in-laws,

I do not regret that I gave my son to my in-laws. He brought so much joy to them. I am happy that they were busy taking care of the child. I am thankful that they raised my son and I think I was right that I never fought with them over the child.

Interviewees’ emotional accounts did not imply that the process was unchallenging for them, though they did give more precedence to the positivity of their experience. They accepted the practicality of parenting their *kenzheh* with full responsibility and commitment. Their poignant stories were also riddled with ideas of love and dedication.

Interviewees perceived themselves as primarily responsible for ensuring that their *kenzhehs*’ needs are satisfied, feelings protected, well taken care of and loved. They expressed their affection, love and devotion through enthusiastic nurturing. They emphasized the role of education and invested resources to ensure that the child did well in school and attended any required extracurricular activities. They exerted extraordinary effort and personal sacrifice to performing the role of a parent to their grandchildren. Akmaral told one such story:

I gave him good upbringing. I took care of him daily and nightly, even when he was sick. When he had fever, I took him to a hospital, and we stayed there together. I did not let him be away from me, even when he had this fever. I did not trust them [the parents], they did not take good care of him. He had fever. The fever did not go down. He was so little, he did not even walk yet. I did not sleep for three nights, I carried him in my arms. I did not



sleep and rocked him in my arms. The doctors and other patients said, “no, he is your son, not a grandson. You are just shy. The doctors were surprised to know that it was my grandson, they did not believe me.

Nebere aluu placed women like Akmaral in the high-intensity roles that directed their energy, wisdom, resources and experience toward those members of the family and society most in need. Asel, Akmaral and Meerim reached a fairly secure economic status, owned their own homes and had savings and assets, thus, were well positioned to be the main providers for their grandchild. In the standoff between the cultural convention and economic demands, their participation in nebere aluu served to smoothen and ease young couples’ transition to adulthood. They acted in the interest of family and self-sacrificed. They also found meaning, enjoyment and new emotions in their roles. All this suggests that nebere aluu is more than a tradition, a practical arrangement, or merely an adaptive response to uncertainty and hardship. It is a practice permeated with multiple and significant meanings. The narratives of love, support and devotion are supplemented with those of symbolic status associated with their roles in affirmation of ethnic identity and keeping knowledge about their culture. I discuss those in the next section.

### ***Social Status, Ethnic Identity and Passing Cultural Knowledge***

In the context discussed here, cultural expectations hold it that grandparents will play a major role in the upbringing of their grandchildren, passing down cultural knowledge and maintaining cultural and ethnic identity and values. Participants in this study provided instructions and guidance that taught their grandchildren appropriate behaviors, including how to be Kyrgyz or Kazakh. Asel shared her approach to raising her grandchild:

We teach our children to be kind and humble and thoughtful. We treat kindly everyone in our family. You must act like a human, act like a family member. We love guests. We take care of our guests. Kazakhs must be open, compassionate, and accepting. We never leave anyone behind. That’s our way of living.

Participants shared what they knew with their kenzhez in creative and caring ways. For example, they would often mention that they did not part with their grandchild even for a minute and took them “everywhere they went to.” This expression can be linked to what [Murzaev \(2016\)](#) called the “traditional socialization practices of the Kyrgyz people” (p. 1395), a specific expectation that grandparents socialized their grandchildren through continuously introducing them to the intricate social fabric of their local culture. Hosting and attending social gatherings (big and small), paying and receiving visits and even dropping by are essential parts of the local cultural life. Older people are expected to give

blessings to hosts and guests and their presence connotes respectability of the event. At any such celebrations, visits, trips, particularly those commemorating life-cycle milestones, it is the local convention that young grandchildren accompany their grandparents. The value of this tradition is to endow children with life experiences that shape their culturally appropriate behavior, enrich their spiritual nurturing and social skills and enhance their ethnic identity through direct observation and participation. Certainly, public appearance in the company of a young grandchild is a tribute to this socialization tradition, which exerts additional benefits such as recognition and respect from others.

Participants in this study were aware of their commonly expected respectable and honored roles of wisdom bearers and keepers of tradition. They used, variously, the narrative of ethnic traditions to explain to their *kenzheh* about *nebere aluu*. Meerim explained to Akber that his living with her was a tradition necessitated by the practical realities of nomadic animal breeding lifestyle:

From ancient time, the Kyrgyz had a tradition of giving the first grandchild to grandparents, while the young ones worked, increased the animal stock and took care of the household. Children were the responsibility of the grandparents.

Asel put it straightforwardly that *nebere aluu* was a primordial ethnic identity marker, signifying symbolic difference from other groups living in Central Asia:

You know, life is a circle. We take care of older and younger generations. That's our tradition, our way of living. We are not [ethnic] Russians to just only care about ourselves and live only our own lives. We are Kazakhs, it's in our traditions. We don't put our parents into retirement homes. That's not right for us. We take care not only of our children, but also of other people's children. Even during wars, we adopted orphans and refugees as our own.

Participants expressed disappointment and concern when they saw that youth were no longer learning from their elders due to the spread of information technologies and access to alternative sources of knowledge. Considering this finding, one could propose an argument of *nebere aluu*'s symbolic function of rectifying the perceived and reckoned loss of the traditional lifestyle and values. When the ethnonational generational order was no longer seen continuous with their own adult children, its reestablishment becomes possible within the *nebere aluu* – a uniquely facilitated connection with a grandchild.

Ismailbekova (2016) noted that “being a good grandmother” was foundational for women to acquire higher social status and respect, but left largely open the implications of such an identity in terms of specific behaviors. My data illustrate that they understand their roles in contributing to the well-being of their extended family, their adult children and young grandchildren and consider their role as an important source of support and caregiving. They nurture their grandchild, raise them as their own and pass their wisdom and cultural knowledge to them in love

and joy. They act as vital cultural resources and fear that their cultural legacy may otherwise disappear. All that facilitates intergenerational continuity and vitality of cultural knowledge, which would be obstructed otherwise, in the contemporary environment of rural outmigration, labor migration abroad, declining rural infrastructure and, in general, an increased level of disconnection among the old and young.

### ***Dealing With Disruptions and Change***

Nebere aluu must be seen as open to adjustment and change in response to external influences, such as deepening rural poverty, declining social protection services, decreasing quality of secondary school system and in higher education and failing infrastructure, etc. These changes are varied and unique, and I focus on two specific ones. One deals with expectation of reciprocating care. The second one addresses forced reassignment of custody.

In [Kenzhebaeva and Kim \(2022\)](#), we have put forward an argument about nebere aluu as reassuring stable financial flow and social support from the income-earning adult children to their parents. We added that nebere aluu guaranteed maintaining social connections and interactions among adults and their parents. There, the idea of reciprocity between the grandparents and the grandchild revolved around the circular economy of providing care for the young by the elderly and for the elderly by the young adults. This would appear to be an economically rational coping mechanism in the situation of negligible social protection services and provisions from the state to its senior citizens. But again, we created this account from the standpoint of the young kelins, not the grandparents themselves. As per this study, grandparents' voices provided a more subtle and nuanced perspective in which their self-sacrifice took precedence over expectations of transactional material benefits from their young and younger relatives. They emphasized that the love and joy they experienced was satisfactory and sufficient for them. They underlined reciprocated affection from and bonding with their grandchildren as abundant and exuberant. None of the participants reported being financially dependent upon their kenzheh. Certainly, the issue of economic and social class among nebere aluu practicing families remains an open question to be pursued in the future.

The effects of gender on particularities of nebere aluu are an important aspect of this practice. Participants who raised their male grandchildren assumed that they would continue living together indefinitely. They imagined, dreamed and planned for raising them into adulthood and marrying them off. They highlighted the fact that they treated the young boys as their youngest sons, who, according to local conventions, were supposed to stay in the parental house to live and grow their own family. The youngest son was the one bestowed the main responsibility of taking care for the elderly parents. "I have always had this big dream about how I raise and marry Aktilek," said Akmaral. Meerim exclaimed, "my grandson is my son and he will stay with me forever. This is what I endlessly ask the mighty God for." My data on granddaughters within nebere aluu revealed no

comparable expectation of joint residence, but hopes were expressed for uninterrupted bonding, continued emotional connection and expressed mutual care between the child and the grandparents.

Adverse external circumstances bring discontinuity to participants' representation of their future prospects. Limited educational opportunities in rural and provincial areas bring worries to the families concerned with the future of their young children, once the latter grow out of early childhood into adolescence. A decision might be made, motivated by concerns over the child's life opportunities, to shift the custody to the biological parents themselves. With the understanding that the biological parents have attained some level of financial stability and possess better resources to prepare their child for the rapidly changing world, grandparents grant their permission. The necessity to do so comes as a disruption to the participants' goals and desires.

When Aktilek was 10 years old, Akmaral's kelin insisted that he would be "returned to her." Akmaral reluctantly agreed, but her heart was broken. She felt hopeless, hurt and disappointed:

I always said that I would treat him as my youngest [child], that I will marry him [off] and that he will stay to live with me [with his wife and children]. I... I... I had this big dream that I will raise him and marry him [off]. I was good at taking care of him, I raised him. [...] I loved him so much.

She felt that her parenting of Aktilek was abruptly aborted, and he was taken away prematurely. She felt being treated unfairly and ungratefully:

I fully provided for him. I bought him everything. They did not have time for him. Wherever I was, in Bishek or Tashkent, the first thing I did was buying him clothes. [...] I took care of him. I raised him myself.

Akmaral felt unappreciated and canceled, especially when she learned that Aktilek was being forced to address her kelin as *apa*, i.e. mother in the Kyrgyz language. She recalled indignantly:

Aktilek knew about his parents, but he always called me 'apa', not his mother. From the moment he started talking, he called me 'apa'. He did not call her anything. He still calls me 'apa'. They forced him to and he started calling her 'mama'. Aktilek started calling her 'mama' in Russian. He just can't call me grandma [because I am the mother to him].

Aktilek, indeed, grew up, received a good education, got married and lived a life of a young professional in a city. Akmaral felt satisfied with the kind of care he rendered her:

If I tell him anything, he listens to me. If I ask him for something, he brings it to me. When he worked abroad, he called me on the telephone. I feel that he is close to me. I know it. It is evident.

After his wedding, Aktilek told Akmaral that he “wanted to take her to his house to live with him and to take care of [her].” Akmaral politely declined his offer, even though Aktilek “did not agree to it. He kept calling [her] to join him.” She cherished the invitation, but nonetheless intercepted the young man’s attempts to convince her to come with him:

I stopped him. [I told him that] I am used to living in my own house. [I told him], if I live with you, I will not be as happy as I am at my own home.

Akmaral came to terms with Aktilek’s separation from her, but the idea of her joining him and his family elsewhere was an unacceptable stretch for her. The young family was supposed to be living with her in her home, not the other way around.

Separation in *nebere aluu* can be painful and traumatizing. Participants dread it and exert maximum efforts to retain the bond with their grandchildren. Those with better resources made efforts to minimize the possibility of losing their custody over the child. Meerim, whose grandson was a teenager at the time of the interview, was determined to never let this happen. She and her husband had become Akber’s legal guardians. “I had his documents changed and had my name written into his birth certificate as his mother and my husband’s name as his father. According to all the documents, he is our youngest son,” Meerim told us. She formalized her parenthood rights, securing thereby her role and presence in Akber’s adult life. This was how she chose to address the questions she kept asking herself, “Will he stay with us? Will he love us? Or will he go live with his mother and father”? Securing her legal rights over the child brought her solace and confidence.

Still more, the formal adoption process allowed Meerim increase her assurance about Akber’s future economic opportunities – “it bothered me to think about what would happen when my grandson grows up,” she said. She made sure that the resources she had were enough to ensure he would not experience any need for change:

When I die, my house, all my animals – everything will be his. Nobody will have any [inheritance] rights but him. I raised this grandson; he is my closest person. As long as I live, I will never return him to my son.

Certainly, Meerim saw Akber as the only heir to their family entitled to inherit all the property she owned. Her wish was respected by her adult children. Meerim notes, that “our children are now far away, but our grandson is with us, and he will always help us. He brings me joy.” Her assumption was, too, that Akber will

grow up in her house, bring his wife to her and spend his life taking care of Meerim and her husband, just as the youngest sons are expected to.

## **Conclusions**

Any attempt to better understand *nebere aluu* requires a careful analysis of how different ideas about the notions of family, children and kinship interact with each other in the context of dynamic social changes, economic instability and political volatility. These ideas vibrantly engage with each other and with the wider environment, in which people make sense of their experiences and put their lives together. *Nebere aluu*, being one approach to intergenerational child-rearing in the region, cannot be reduced to one specific standardized description, yet some of its characteristics appear to be rather stable across data. Grandparents who enact the practice participate in a complex social system serving diverse utilitarian and symbolic functions. The meanings attributed to the practice are multiple and complex. From the standpoint of the grandparents, *nebere aluu* provides them a space in which they support their young adult children who may find themselves struggling in the bind between the social expectations of earlier marriage and having children when they might not be economically well-prepared for independence and a growing family. The grandparents invest their time, energy and resources to this high-intensity labor with dedication and enthusiasm, thoroughly enjoying and appreciating their experience. They take pleasure in creating and maintaining close alliances and emotional bonds with their grandchildren and receive a sense of attainment and goal in their lives. They often self-sacrifice and exert extreme efforts to be good parents to their youngest family members. All this work ultimately helps rural communities support those who are in the most need. Additionally, the everyday practice of *nebere aluu* allows for grandparents to continuously engage in passing down cultural knowledge, and ethnonational traditions and values to their grandchildren. Building off the commonly shared respect toward these educational roles, they anticipate and achieve a higher social status and public recognition. All actors participating in the enactment of the practice interact with each other through generations. They uphold social relationships and important continuities persisting in the grandparents' roles as vital resource within their families and communities. *Nebere aluu* operates as it does today because it allows the old and the young to reconcile the contradictions between different ideas about family and love, between the social norms and economic realities, expectations and aspirations, challenges and solutions. It can also be a space that is open for debate and change in response to shifts and transformations in wider economic, political and social conditions. *Nebere aluu* is constructed socially by all involved, the older and younger, men and women in a dynamic interplay of relationships. Yet, it would be naïve to conclude that all are equal partners in this construction. Power relations characterize *nebere aluu* with grandparents clearly having more control over the discourse about it. Future research needs to focus on illuminating these hierarchies, sources of tension and ways they are addressed.

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# Section Four – Introduction

## Childhood and Youth in Southeast Asia: Confronting Diversity and Social Change

*Jessica Schwittek and Elizer Jay de los Reyes*

### Abstract

In the following, the region of Southeast Asia will be introduced by offering an overview of the recent developments regarding demographic transition, socioeconomic change, social inequality and the diversification of migration patterns. We will sketch out, how young people fare in the face of these conditions, especially with regard to their own or their families' mobilities. Finally, the four contributions of this section, each reflecting a specific context of Southeast Asia's transnational societies and the related inter-generational dynamics, will be introduced.

*Keywords:* ASEAN; demographic transition; socioeconomic change; inequality; well-being; migration

### General Information on the Region

Southeast Asia (in the following referred to as the SEA region) consists of 11 countries lying east of the Indian subcontinent and south of China: Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The region's total population is currently estimated to amount to 686 million people, accounting for approximately 8.5% of the world population (Worldometer, 2023). Despite sharing some historical experience and ways of living, *diversity* has always been a salient characteristic of the SEA region (Yeung et al., 2018). The region's feature of diversity can be traced in the histories as well as in the present political, cultural

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and social figurations in the 11 countries of Southeast Asia. This is most evident especially in the region's youngest history, including the heterogenous decolonisation and nation building processes that can be characterised not only by "a great deal of political and intellectual conflict" but also by "an outpouring of new ideas and creativity" (Frederick, 2018, n.p.). In the following, selected aspects of the changing Southeast Asian societies, and the ways in which they become relevant for families' and young people's lives, will be presented.

To do so, we include statistical data and qualitative studies to provide a more complex understanding of these social processes. We emphasise on their implications to children and young people by deliberately using studies with an explicit child-centred approach – highlighting children's views – and identifying gaps wherever necessary. This chapter does not aim to depict the whole heterogeneity of lived childhoods and youth in SEA nor does it provide a comprehensive state of scholarship on the matter. Instead, it offers a rough sketch of key processes of social change in SEA, the multiple realities that shape young people's lives and how young people, in turn, shape these realities.

*Demographic Transition:* In Southeast Asia, total fertility rates have sharply decreased from five to seven in most SEA countries to one to three in the four decades between 1970 and 2010 (Yeung et al., 2018, p. 470). The opposite direction can be traced for females' age at first marriage which has risen from 19 to 23 years in 1970 to 21–27 years in 2010 (Yeung et al., 2018, p. 471). These developments in SEA are in between those of East Asia where total fertility dropped in the 1990s close to or below replacement level, and South Asia where the development has been somewhat more modest. Southeast Asian countries can be considered at different stages and paces of demographic transformations, the reasons of which are manifold. These include factors such as social and economic developments. But as Yeung et al. (2018) argue, distinct features like colonial experience, kinship patterns and gender norms as well as religious, cultural and ethnic diversity add to the heterogeneity of the demographic processes in the area (Yeung et al., 2018). For example, the authors contrast (Buddhist-dominated) Southeast Asian kinship patterns with those of Southern Asia, the former being more flexible in terms of inheritance and residential arrangements, and with a clear preference for matrilocality (Yeung et al., 2018, p. 473).

*Economic development and social inequality:* Most SEA countries have succeeded in economic advancement, especially through industrialisation in the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since the 1960s. While Singapore became known as one of the four 'Tiger states' representing one of the world's largest and most innovative commercial centres, other countries in SEA have developed their economies in different ways and paces. However, all have reached the status of (mostly low) middle-income countries in the new millennium (Tran, 2013, p. 11). In general, this has contributed to an overall gain in living standards, life expectancy and health of the population in general as well as for children, and is associated with the improvement of school enrolment rates (especially for girls, cf. Yeung et al., 2018, p. 477) and child protection (UNICEF, 2019; United Nations, 2019). It becomes obvious, however, when examined per country, that not all social groups in SEA countries have profited from the economic advancements in the same way.

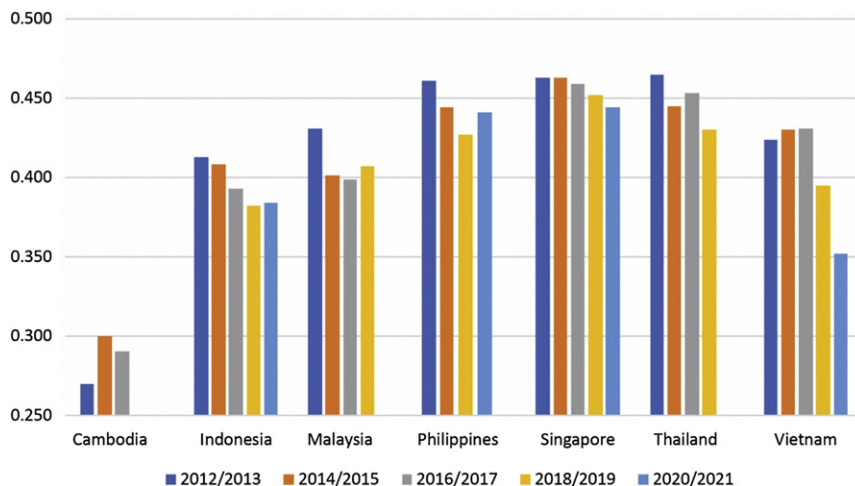


Fig. 1. Gini Coefficients in Selected ASEAN Countries 2012–2021 (as far as data is available). *Data source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook (2022).*

Fig. 1 shows the Gini coefficients for selected SEA countries in the decade between 2012 and 2021. They point to the high variety of inequality between countries and non-linear developments in recent years, suggesting that the overall socioeconomic advancement in the region plays out very differently between and within the countries and may produce new vulnerabilities for specific social groups. According to UNICEF (2019, p. 53):

While poverty rates have fallen overall, there remain considerable variations within and between ASEAN countries, with sizeable pockets of poverty. These pockets of poverty may be demographic in nature (for example, among certain ethnic groups or household types), geographic (in the case of marginalized regions or sub-regions) or, increasingly, may reflect lower skilled workers in urban settings.

Nearly 25 million children in the region are estimated to suffer from multi-dimensional poverty (UNICEF, 2019, p. 15). Despite the countries' growing (though heterogenous) investments into social welfare policies for children, individual (extended) families are oftentimes the primary units of managing social change and of developing strategies to escape poverty (Furuto, 2013; De Los Angeles-Bantista, 2004).

*Migration as a regional and transnational phenomenon in Southeast Asia:* Migration has been for centuries and still is a large-scale phenomenon in the SEA region, with 23.6 million persons living away from their country of origin. Among

them, 15 million remain in Asia, 10.6 million in the region, and 7.1 even stay in the subregion (MDP, 2023). For transnational migration, as well as for domestic migration, rural-to-rural as well as rural-to-urban mobilities are common. Reasons for migration range from escaping political or environmental instability to family reunion or access to education. However, labour migration is by far the most common reason. Migration can be considered a “multigenerational poverty reduction strategy” (IOM, 2019, p. 48), reflecting the persistence of high regional differences in economic opportunities within the sub-region. Countries with stronger economies such as Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia are main destination countries for migration within the region. The main countries of origin are Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar and Vietnam (MDP, 2023). However, migration patterns are complex, especially at the face of growing educational levels, globalisation and transportation systems (MDP, 2023). While serving (in many cases successfully) as a poverty reduction strategy, migration also produces new vulnerabilities (e.g. exploitation) which are shouldered to varying degrees by different social groups (divided by gender, age, place of residence, ethnicity etc.).

## **Qualities of Growing Up in Southeast Asia**

Demographic transitions, socioeconomic development with its inherent inequalities, as well as the diversification of migration patterns as outlined above all have distinct, but again very diverse implications for children’s and young people’s lives.

*Growing up in smaller families and households:* For children, the above sketched demographic change implies that they are likely to grow up in smaller households, with fewer siblings and extended family members than their parents and grandparents did. In a comparative study by UNESCO on Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam, Los Angeles-Bantista points to the advantages of demographic change: growing up with fewer siblings implies receiving “more of everything”, resulting in better health, education and well-being (2004, p. 5). This sufficiency or even abundance of resources, she argues, can even act as a “protective cushion” in times of crisis, such as economic downturns (2004, p. 6). However, demographic change also comes with disadvantages for children. For example, growing up with fewer siblings also means missing out on valuable experiences offered only by multiple sibling interactions and lifelong bonds with siblings (2004, p. 5). In the case of the Philippines and Malaysia, having more siblings serves as a source of “family immunity” as seen among commuter marriages. In this arrangement, brothers not only support each other for work (e.g. farming and fishing). When they are away, their wives also extend help to their left-behind families and parents (Gregorio, 2022). In the Philippines in particular, because of several demographic changes (e.g. smaller family size, improvement in longevity) as well as labour migration, the pool of caregivers is reduced while the number of elderly individuals in need of care is on the rise (Abalos et al., 2018). As children grow older, the reduced number of siblings also implies, that filial obligations towards the parents cannot be shared with (several) others. However, the implications demographic transformation processes have on children’s lives and

experiences, on intergenerational relations and on social structures such as the generational order more broadly are not yet understood very well.

*Children's Well-being:* Taking a closer look at children's well-being and the way it is measured in SEA, [Bin Aedy Rahman and Yuda \(2022\)](#) reflect that overall scores are lower than in East Asia (cf. also [Cho, 2015](#)). The authors criticise that child well-being in SEA countries is in a subordinate position in social policy making and mostly subsumed under the family. They plea for a child-centred approach to measuring child well-being, as well as the development of a conceptual framework which is more fit with the lives of children in the SEA region, their families and their environment than global standards are ([Bin Aedy Rahman & Yuda, 2022](#), p. 5). Differentiating child well-being along the four domains of health, education, household and protection, [Bin Aedy Rahman and Yuda \(2022, p. 19\)](#) conclude that:

The richer and more developed countries like Singapore have emerged as leaders in this comparative assessment of child well-being in almost all domains. By contrast, the least developed and poorer countries like Myanmar and Timor-Leste have performed worse than other countries across the Southeast Asia region. The strength of the richer and developed countries like Singapore and Brunei as well as developing countries like Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand lies primarily on their good performances in the household domain.

This household domain was assessed by a combination of indicators on basic necessities like access to electricity, clean fuels and technology for cooking, basic drinking water services as well as sanitation and hygiene ([Bin Aedy Rahman & Yuda, 2022](#)). The findings suggest that while SEA countries' socioeconomic development is associated with overall advancement in well-being, it is decisive whether it plays out in the household as a microsystem in which children live ([Bin Aedy Rahman & Yuda, 2022](#), p. 7). Considering developments in the field of child well-being research methodology, it is to be welcomed that the authors develop child-centred approaches and call for a context-specific conceptualisation that considers local features. However, the children's subjective perspective on their well-being is largely missing in Southeast Asian research. The Children's Worlds report from 2020 hints at the discontent of children in SEA with several aspects of their lifeworlds, and with low scores of overall subjective well-being in all three participating countries (Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam) ([Rees et al., 2020](#), p. 27). Qualitative approaches, which allow to consider local or regional particularities (as proposed, for example, by the international [CUWB Research Group](#), cf. [Fattore et al., 2019](#)), are needed to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the factors hindering (and advancing) SEA children's (subjective) quality of life.

*Children and youths as (labour)migrants:* According to a report by the NGO Save the Children ([West, 2008](#)), children in the SEA region have participated in migration movements in different ways, with or without their parents, for many

years. They migrate both in-country and internationally for a variety of (and often multiple) reasons, e.g. for work in order to contribute to family income (or reducing household burden), to obtain education, to live with other relatives or to escape violence and abuse (West, 2008, p. 22). Their migration patterns are complex, including for example “unskilled migration such as that of child domestic workers moving from Lao PDR and Vietnam to Cambodia, and children moving from Myanmar and Vietnam into China” (West, 2008, p. 3). In the report, children’s migration is related to a growing demand for (unskilled) labour in informal sectors, such as domestic work, the fishing industry and agriculture, especially in those regions where local work force is sparse. However, children’s migration is difficult to grasp empirically and conceptually. According to West, a variety of terms other than “migrants” have been applied, such as street children, working children, child domestic workers, children in conflict with the law or trafficked children. They all point to different degrees of problematisation and moralisation of children’s (labour) mobilities, and lead to different types of interventions by governments and NGOs (West, 2008, p. 4).

Further research, which is informed by childhood theory, focuses especially on precarious forms of children’s labour and migration, such as child prostitution (Montgomery, 2001) or child trafficking (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012). The authors present dense in-depth accounts from their ethnographic studies in which they emphasise children’s experiences and agency. While children’s suffering and exploitation becomes evident, the authors nevertheless warn against over-simplifying and under-complex interpretations – in (globalised) media discourses or in policies and interventions launched by international organisations. For example, Huijsmans’ and Baker’s analysis lead the authors to critique the dominance of categories such as “child trafficking” when children’s migration is discussed. Initially meant as a term to fight the “worst forms of child labour” (ILO, 2008, p. 3), the anti-trafficking approach, the authors argue, has come to dominate debates on child migration policy, resulting in interventions to remove or discourage children from migration altogether. This may worsen, rather than add to, the quality of children’s living conditions (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012). Based on their own research, Huijsmans and Baker offer an approach which understands child migration as “intrinsically related to wider processes of change” (ibid., p. 941), and accounts for the scopes and limitations of young migrants’ agency and their efforts in negotiating the structural relations behind exploitative work arrangements.

## **New Vulnerabilities of Children’s Lives in Transnational Southeast Asia – and New Ways to Research Them**

In the following, some more recent phenomena regarding children’s lives in SEA will be presented which relate strongly to transnational dynamics, and which produce new vulnerabilities for children, as well as new – child-centred – research perspectives.

Regarding the ways children are involved in migration, a topic which has already received a great deal of attention globally is that of ‘left behind children’ whose parents leave for work (mostly temporarily) either to urban areas or abroad. The Philippines, with 6,094,307 emigrants in 2020 (MDP, 2023), are considered the number one sending country of labour migrants in the region, and due to a high share of female emigrants (54%, MDP, 2023), the issue of left behind children is especially pronounced (Parreñas, 2005). However, much of the research has focused on questions of transnational motherhood and the (re)distribution of care work in transnational families. Because of this, child-centred perspectives have long been a lacuna in migration research. In recent years, a growing body of research is emerging with growing attention to the perspective of “left behind children” in SEA countries, for example the CHAMPSEA project (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Lam & Yeoh, 2019) and other related works (de los Reyes, 2020; Somaiah et al., 2019). These studies add to the understanding of how children and youths experience parental migration processes, including the decision to leave (and to return), on (new) care arrangements and the emergence and negotiation of practices of “doing family” at a distance. In addition to that, immobility is an emerging concept used to capture children’s migration and mobility related dynamics (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020; Hertzman, 2020). A diversification of child-centred perspectives on children’s mobilities in Asia is reflected in several special issues, e.g. of *Children’s Geographies (Children and Young People’s Emotions of Migration across Asia*, Vol. 16/6, 2018 and the special section *Asian Children and Transnational Migration*, Vol. 13/3, 2015), each including several contributions on SEA contexts. For an overview on transnational, including South-to-South migration in Asia, see [Parreñas et al. \(2022\)](#) in the introduction of their special issue on *Children and Youth in Asian Migration*. In this issue, the editors draw attention to the emergence of children’s “unlikely” destinations, as demonstrated by contributions on the flow of Korean migrants to the Philippines, Vietnamese migrants to Cambodia and Korean-Vietnamese children to Vietnam ([Parreñas et al., 2022](#), p. 220).

A pressing concern regarding children’s lives in SEA countries which has hardly been touched by research are the consequences of climate change, conflict and violence. Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable to environmental disasters, including earthquakes, volcanic activity, tropical storms and flooding, as well as other consequences of global warming. Natural disasters lead to steadily rising numbers of new displacements in the region, with the highest amounts in 2021 being 700,000 in the Philippines, and 155,000 in Indonesia ([IDMC, 2022](#), p. 51). While international organisations like UNICEF demand to accelerate child-sensitive climate actions in the SEA region ([UNICEF, 2019](#), p. 77), research is needed to understand the social, economic and health-related consequences of natural disasters for children in the region. Displacements due to conflict and violence are also highly alarming, especially in Myanmar where 649,000 people were displaced in 2021 ([IDMC, 2022](#), p. 52).

In addition to internal and regional mobilities, children from SEA families are also involved in migration of more permanent character, with families settling in the diaspora of either other Asian or Western countries, such as Australia, the



United States or European countries. Migration from the SEA region to Western countries as a large scale phenomenon has started in the 1960s and continues until today. Reasons for Southeast Asians to migrate to Western countries are heterogeneous, comprising of forced migration due to conflict and war, migration for work (Geddes, 2021) and, more recently, for (higher) education, particularly within Asia (Ha & Fry, 2021; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020). Research has focused on the intergenerational dimension of families' adaptive processes, especially when cultural norms and values of the destination country differ from those of the SEA country of origin. Since the descendants of SEA migrants grow up and integrate in the social orders and institutions of the destination country, tensions are reported resulting from discrepancies between parents' and children's (cultural) orientations and paces of assimilation (Qiu et al., 2011). At the same time, an orientation towards the ethnic community, its language, religious and social practices has been associated with advantages in academic achievement, e.g. for Vietnamese-American students in a well-known study by Bankston and Zhou (1998). In addition to such integration-related issues, visible Asian ethnic minorities are confronted with the "model minority" stereotype in Western countries – as well as anti-Asian racism – pointing to the positive and negative reductionist identifications as 'Asian' (e.g. Barber, 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

## **Contextualising the Contributions of This Section**

The preceding sections have offered a broad overview of the heterogeneity (and the inequality) of childhoods and youths in Southeast Asia at the face of transformative social processes regarding demographic, socioeconomic and migratory developments in the region. The presentation of (selected) studies has also shown that much of the research is conducted and published by NGOs and international organisations, which usually aim at monitoring and implementing children's rights and respective policy-making or focus on specific groups of children. In addition, a growing body of research on Southeast Asian contexts is emerging from the (interdisciplinary) field of childhood studies. Studies from this field are mostly undertaken by scholars from Western countries and often chose contexts of pronounced precarity and young people's impressive ways of dealing with all kinds of adversities and impositions. Meanwhile, the studies presented in the four contributions of this sub-section turn their attention to what may be called rather 'ordinary' childhoods and youths in SEA (and its diasporas), which are nevertheless shaped fundamentally by ongoing processes of social change in the region. By offering fine-grained insights into the ways young people position themselves in their families, peer groups, society at large as well as in transnational social spaces, the four contributions add to a contextualised and comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asian societies and of growing up therein.

*Giuseppe Bolotta* focuses on Thailand as a Southeast Asian society with pronounced episodes of social change within the last decades, involving political protest and activism by very different groups and actors. Giuseppe in his

contribution spotlights Thailand's youth activists as protagonists of current movements who are not only voicing critique against the patriarchal government. Rather, they are shaking fundamental pillars of Thai society's moral order by questioning the traditional generational order and children's unquestionable respect to elders. Giuseppe's findings suggest that (symbolic and mediated) collective experiences on a peer-level are at the core of young people's protests and motor of transnational and transcultural hybridisation processes. Interestingly, the notion of collective family solidarity is not given up but rather reframed and reconstructed by aligning with activists from their parents' generation in terms of "engaged siblinghood".

With young Filipinos refusing the mobility imperative, *Elizer Jay de los Reyes* offers insights into another, strongly political and yet utmost private issue in a country where notions of the 'good life' are tied closely with an imperative to migrate abroad. Elizer Jay's interviews with left-behind children reveal that the young imagine their futures 'at home' with their families. In doing so, they do not simply make a different choice than their parents did, but critically reflect on a social construction of the 'good life' that is upheld not only by their parents, but also by the government, their communities, as well as commercial structures. Elizer Jay's approach is refreshing as he goes beyond the questions usually discussed when it comes to the experiences and views of left-behind children (mainly their coping with issues evolving around the absence or return of their parents). His study reveals that children critically reflect the normativity of migrating as well as their parents' migratory decisions and lifestyles. However, also here, young people's commitment to family obligations becomes apparent, hinting at the challenges of adhering to moral norms and stretching them at the same time in order to develop their own life plans.

The two remaining chapters by Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot and Jessica Schwittek, Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Kamila Labuda focus on contexts of migration from Southeast Asian societies to European societies. Both studies are mainly concerned with the cultural gap that migrant families are required to deal with. *Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot* investigates the logics of forenaming in Filipino-Belgian mixed families living in Belgium. Her study reveals that families may pursue the goal of either emphasising their children's individuality through single forenames or that of reinforcing collective affiliations – to both Belgium and the Philippines – by choosing compound forenames. Asuncion puts to the fore children's strong symbolic role as "social bridges" – built to reconcile parents' wishes of connecting with different nations, ethnic and cultural identities and their own parent or grandparent generation. And while forenaming in itself rarely offers opportunities of children's participation, Asuncion's analysis shows that children engage in several practices of interpreting, evaluating and of using or abandoning the forename(s) given to them.

The study by Jessica Schwittek, Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Kamila Labuda focuses on Vietnamese migrant families in Germany and their processes of reworking generational order in their families. The authors identify the emergence of a hybrid family pattern which they term "individualized interdependence". The concept draws together the study's findings that the notion of

family solidarity remains strong, but it is constructed as an intimate space in which mutual obligations and support are based on the acknowledgement of each other's individuality and (personal) wishes. This is especially interesting as individualisation is not only claimed by the young generation for themselves (a finding that is quite typical for members of the 'second generation' in several migrant communities in Germany); but that they demand that their parents should also live out their individuality. A complex balancing of different notions of intergenerational solidarity and rights and duties between parents and children becomes apparent, and much effort is taken to keep the family together. Individualisation is not understood as contradicting collective orientations and is not constructed as an either-or-decision by the interviewees. Instead, they engage in complex and time-consuming negotiations to arrive at viable solutions, again bridging (traditional) family solidarity patterns from Western Europe and Southeast Asia.

All four contributions portray young people in different countries and contexts, all of them facing different types of challenges and choosing different ways of dealing with them: they contribute to bridging the old and the new with their own names; they demand new and more open relationships through public protest and yet also borrow symbols from their own culture; they deal with their "left-behind" childhoods or try to adjust their family relationships to the opportunities of the immigration country. However, their different strategies follow a common thrust, and that is that they all aim to reconstitute and rebuild social relationships, which are heavily loaded emotionally and as well symbolically. The relations the young people (re)build are family structured, their ideal ultimately being connections of a communal kind, siblinghood, a new individualised intimacy, being together with the (extended) family, the connection between ancestors and the new. This drive towards *relationality*, an emphasis of connection – rather than separation – especially when the young position themselves in opposition and criticism of elders and authorities, is remarkable and calls for further research on young people's particular ways of encountering diversity and social change.

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## Chapter 13

# Parenthood Versus Childhood: Young People's Generational Rebellion in Thailand

*Giuseppe Bolotta*

### Abstract

Thailand has seen waves of youth-led protests over the past three years. Pro-democracy youth activists have vociferously criticised authority figures: teachers, parents and political leaders, especially the king. Drawing on vignettes assembled over a 14-year ethnographic work with young people in Thailand, as well as on current research on youth (online and offline) activism in Bangkok, I examine the multi-layered meaning of kinship in Thai society. The chapter reveals the political nature of childhood and parenthood as entangled modes of governance that come into being with other, both local and international cultural entities. I argue that Thai youth activists are attempting to rework dominant tropes that sustain “age-patriarchy” in the Buddhist kingdom. Their “engaged siblinghood” aims to reframe Thailand’s generational order, refuting the moral principles that establish citizens’ political subordination to monarchical paternalism and, relatedly, children’s unquestionable respect to parents. As I show, Thai youth activists are doing so by engaging creatively with transnational discourses such as “democracy” and “children’s rights,” while simultaneously drawing on K-pop icons, Japanese manga and Buddhist astrology. In articulating their dissent, these youths are thus bearers of a “bottom-up cosmopolitanism” that channels culturally hybrid, and politically subversive notions of childhood and citizenship in Southeast Asia’s cyberspace and beyond. Whatever the outcome of their commitment, Thai youth activism signals the cultural disarticulation of the mytheme of the Father in Thailand, as well as the growing political influence of younger generations in the region.

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*Keywords:* Thailand; children and youth; digital activism; Milk Tea Alliance; social movements; Southeast Asia

## Introduction

On August 10, 2020, during a student demonstration at Thammasat University – Thailand’s most progressive university, founded in 1934 by socialist revolutionary Pridi Banomyong – a 20-year-old innocent-looking yet combative girl, Panusaya “Rung” Sithijirawattanakul, broke a silence that had lasted for more than 80 years: the royal institution, historical pillar of the Thai national identity alongside Buddhism, needs urgent reform, according to the students. It was a bold move, liable to stringent legal penalties, which desecrates the symbolic foundation of Thailand’s social hierarchy (Bolotta, 2021a). It won’t be the last.

Thailand has seen waves of youth-led protests over the past few years: intrepid acts of dissent against the government that are challenging the army’s grip on power, but also the Thai social body’s moral structure. In the last half of 2020, there were close to 400 demonstrations, staged by 112 different youth groups in 62 provinces all over the country (McCargo, 2021, p. 188). Unlike previous generations of pro-democracy activists, today’s youth protesters come from different socio-economic backgrounds, age cohorts, political mindsets and gendered positionalities: high school and university students, LGBTQI+ and feminist activists, working class youths and slum children alike took to the streets to demand a rapid shift to “full democracy.” In articulating their (extensively digital) dissent, these youths are bearers of a “bottom-up cosmopolitanism” (Appadurai, 2013) that creatively engages with transnational discourses such as “democracy,” “children’s rights,” “gender equality” and “republicanism,” while simultaneously drawing on K-pop icons, Japanese manga, Hollywood celebrities and Buddhist astrology. Their criticism is aimed at authority figures: teachers, parents, political leaders, even the king.

Together with the immediate resignation of Thailand’s Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-o-cha – the army chief who seized power in 2014<sup>1</sup> – a democratic revision of the 2017 military-drafted Constitution<sup>2</sup> and fresh elections, the young demonstrators had the audacity to call for the lifting of royal immunity and, relatedly, the abolition of Thailand’s draconian lese majesty law (Section 112 of the Criminal Code), the world’s harshest, with penalties of up to 15 years imprisonment for the vaguely defined crime of “defamation of the crown” (Streckfuss, 2011).

The verbalisation of “the unsayable” (Ivarsson & Isager, 2010) – that the monarchy needs radical reform – shook the nation’s social body, already numbed

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<sup>1</sup>In May 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), a military body headed by General Prayuth, took over the country’s leadership through a coup, ousting Yingluck Shinawatra’s democratically elected government. Yingluck is the sister of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, himself removed from office in 2006.

<sup>2</sup>With the 2019 general elections, Prayuth was confirmed in his role as Thailand’s Prime Minister. The elections, considered by several commentators a farce, were preceded by a “military revision” of the Thai constitution (2017), which turned the Buddhist Kingdom’s senate – formerly an elected body – into an army’s semi-permanent outpost in parliament.

by the virologic surveillance and suffocating control of Prayuth’s “praetorian government” (Montesano et al., 2020) during the COVID-19 pandemics. The taboo of criticism of the monarch was broken, and the royal protocol impertinently disregarded, not by opposition parliamentary representatives or by eminent constitutionalists – for their part in agreement in affirming the monarchy’s sacredness – but by “children” (*dek*), as students of all levels are condescendingly called in Thailand (even when they are above 18 years of age).

As a matter of fact, in the traditional Thai social system, which reflects Thailand’s normative Buddhist cosmology of kingship, the term *dek* does not refer only to minors, for it can also serve as a socio-linguistic indicator of hierarchical grade and karmic merit (*bun*). However old an individual, if their interlocutor is a higher-status person (e.g. a parent, a monk, a soldier), they will be considered as though they were *dek* in that context: *phu noi* (“small people”) of a lower karmic status, who must demonstrate respect and gratitude to *phu yai* (“big people”) – the highest-level referent of whom is the monarch, who embodies *barami* (charismatic power) by virtue of his greatest karmic legacy, good deeds and accumulated merits (Bolotta, 2021b, p. 47). This relationship between *phu noi* and *phu yai* has long epitomised state–citizen relations in the modern context of Thailand’s royal fatherhood: children must interact with parents as Thai subjects are expected to relate with the king.

In spite of their different socio-economic profiles and internal tensions, all of Thailand’s youth-led activist groups are seemingly shattering this very paradigm, as the new monarch’s alleged inability to uphold the Buddhist ruler’s and benevolent father’s moral standards is opening up unprecedented opportunities for Thailand’s *phu noi* to reshape the nation.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the old and new are intertwined in this process, I argue that children’s and youth’s (online and offline) rebellion may mark the beginning of an epistemic shift in Thai studies: from “parenthood” to “childhood.”<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on vignettes assembled over a 14-year ethnographic work with young people in Thailand, as well as on current research on (online and offline) youth activism in Bangkok, this chapter examines the multi-layered meaning of childhood and parenthood in contemporary Thai society. In-depth interviews with

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<sup>3</sup>Thailand’s highly revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) – worshipped as the nation’s father – passed away in 2016, triggering a legitimacy crisis in the critical interregnum (Pavin, 2021). According to many protesters I spoke to, Bhumibol’s heir and Thailand’s current king, King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), would indeed be less worthy of veneration for his highly discussed indulgence in mundane affairs, extravagant habits and visible distance from the Buddhist ideal of the virtuous ruler.

<sup>4</sup>Childhood studies is a relatively young academic field in Thailand, as most research on childhood in the country is carried out in the natural sciences, especially pediatrics, developmental psychology and epidemiology. On the other hand, most scholars of Thailand in the social sciences, with a few highly relevant exceptions (Bolotta, 2021b; Mahony, 2018; Montgomery, 2001), have traditionally prioritised the study of what I refer to as “state parenthood” (e.g. the monarchy, Buddhism and Thai ethno-nationalism) over childhood(s) and young people’s social life.



youth activists, digital ethnography, as well as extensive periods of participant observation into young people's everyday lives in protest sites, schools, universities, NGO venues and homes in the capital of Thailand form the empirical basis for this analysis.<sup>5</sup> I will look back at history to look forward, in the effort to gain a better understanding of non-linear connections between past and present as we envision the future of Thai young people. This analytical exercise shall reveal the political nature of “childhood” and “parenthood” as entangled modes of governance that come into being with other, both local and international cultural entities.

The first part of this chapter focuses on family as a political trope in Thailand. In a country where the royal head of state is historically construed as a Buddhist saint, royal fatherhood works as a national ethos that infantilises the citizenry. In this context, childhood – as citizenship – is a derivative concept, the lower vertex of an inverted familial triangle, which has (monarchic) fatherhood and, subordinately, motherhood at its top. Yet, in an era of digital cosmopolitanism and globalisation-related transformations, this moral construction of parent–child (and state–citizen) relations is significantly challenged by alternative cultural imaginaries about the political value of family, generational hierarchy and the institutional organisation of power. The second part of the chapter highlights young people's active role in the re-making of Thai society. While youth activists are advocating for political change, I argue that at a deeper, symbolic level, they are also attempting to rework dominant tropes that sustain “age-patriarchy” in the Thai traditional social hierarchy, especially the ideas of “King as Father” and “citizens as children.” They are doing so by channelling pan-Asian, culturally hybrid and politically subversive notions of childhood, gender and nationhood in Southeast Asia's cyber space and beyond. In order to fully understand the symbolic significance of these claims, it is necessary to take a first step back, and examine the political configuration of fatherhood that today's protesters are attempting to disarticulate.

## The Father Paradigm

Prominent conservative jurist Borwornsak Uwanno stated that the Thai monarchy is not a political institution but “a social institution in the same way as the family institution [...]” (Borwornsak, 2006, as cited in [Ivarsson & Isager, 2010](#), p. 12). Thai citizens would recognise in the king the nation's Father, as well as the supreme personification of the Buddhist Dharma: semi-divine qualities, certainly extra-constitutional, which Western observers, Borwornsak, pointed out, would be scarcely able to understand. These are not new words.

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<sup>5</sup>I initially got in touch with many of my young informants as a volunteer for an international children's rights NGO. As my ethnographic work in Thailand became a decade-long endeavour, interviewees and research participants turned into friends, elder (*phi*) and younger (*nong*) siblings. The methodological, ethical and affective implications of this relational shift are addressed in some of my earlier works (e.g. [Bolotta et al., 2017](#)).

The necessity to preserve national morality (embodied by the King, an “otherworldly” and fatherly figure) from corruption, vote-buying and misgovernment – presented by the royalists as unescapable side-effects of “worldly” democratic politics – is the key argument through which the army justified the 12 successful coups that have marked Thai history since the 1932 Siamese revolution, the bloodless uprising that transformed Thailand in a constitutional monarchy. Notably, on the side-lines of the 1957 coup d’état, General Sarit Thanarat, the Americans’ anti-Communist standard-bearer during the Cold War, known in Thailand for his “despotic paternalism” (Thak, 2007), declared that the golpe rested firmly on the principle that the king and the nation are unique and indivisible, and that “the one who governs is nothing but the chief of a big family that must look at the population as he would at his children and grandchildren” (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2005, pp. 176–177). With Sarit, after decades of political invisibility following the fall of the absolute monarchy, the transfigured figure of the Buddhist ruler returned to the centre of public life in the role of the national family’s “supernatural guarantor.” Despite his limited government powers, recently deceased King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) – the world’s longest-reigning head of state (1946–2016), living symbol of “Thainess” and Buddhist morality and bastion of conservative order – played a crucial role in the following decades, endorsing several coup leaders and thus bolstering the monarchy’s influence in (military) politics (Handley, 2006).

If the king is the nation’s father, the model citizen must be aware of their filial position. In this ideological context, marked by a certain Sino-Confucian flavour, the Thai school system is traditionally a nationalistic laboratory for the infantilisation of citizenship (Bolotta, 2021a). The role of students towards teachers must reflect the duties and responsibilities of children towards their parents, and – by symbolic extension – of citizens towards the royally blessed state. The examples of this are countless.

In 2014, while I was undertaking research in a few Bangkok schools, I attended etiquette classes for primary school children. These were intended to teach pupils politeness and Thai manners (*marayat*), and involved role-playing exercises aimed at conveying to children – as representatives of the “small people” (*phu-noi*) – the correct ways to relate to teachers – as representatives of the “big people” (*phu-yai*) – also in terms of body language (postures, gestures, tone of voice, eye contact). In one of these classes, children, kneeling, moved towards the teacher, thus expressing respect and submissiveness. The difference in level between the adult (high) and the child (low) was even more pronounced when, in the role-playing, the adult was a monk. When this was the case, students had to bow three times (the same number as Buddhism’s “three precious jewels”: Sangha, Buddha and Dharma) (Bolotta, 2021b, p. 39).

In continuity with the military juntas that preceded him, Prime Minister Prayuth appears to have perfectly grasped the political implications of this paternalistic construction of childhood. A few months after the 2014 coup, the military introduced a new nationalistic ritual in all schools in the country with the aim of reinvigorating Thai children’s patriotism. Before class, “good children” (*dek di*) must recite the “twelve core values of Thainess,” the Thai national identity. Unsurprisingly, these

included injunctions to honour parents, Buddhism, the monarchy and the nation, of which the army proclaims itself supreme guarantor. At kindergarten level, 6-year-old pupils are even required to wear military-style camouflage clothing for a “patriotic activity” known as “Army Guarding the Country” programme, which aims to make children love the nation, build discipline and appreciate the country’s history ([Bangkok Post, 2022](#)). The Thai state’s post-coup pedagogy is thus an old ideological recipe for entrenching children’s (and citizens’) filial nationalism by welding royal fatherhood and military propaganda.

## Thai Mother’s Day

Whilst royal fatherhood is the overarching framework within which the child-citizen construct takes shape, motherhood too features in public rituals of national loyalty as well as in classroom activities across the country. Mother’s Day (*wan mae*) is celebrated in Thailand on August 12th, Queen Mother Sirikit’s birthday. This is a public holiday dedicated to mothers and, by symbolic extension, to the queen, who is publicly portrayed as mother of all Thai people. Her maternal exemplarity and docile devotion to His Majesty the King is what makes her an ideal Thai woman, embodiment of “moral goodness” (*khunatham*) – the gender-biased equation “good girl, good wife, good mother” is here rendered in an exquisitely royalist Buddhist fashion ([Lindberg-Falk, 2008](#)).

During *wan mae*, public spaces are covered with royal insignia, garlands and flags, all in light blue: Queen Sirikit’s astrological colour. Enormous portraits of the monarch are displayed everywhere, while national events providing visual evidence of Thai citizens’ filial reverence to the “nation’s mother” are feverishly organised, especially in Bangkok. On the morning of 12 August, a solemn procession intended to be representative of all sectors of Thai society (the army, the government, the school system, etc.) marches up to the royal palace, where flowers are presented to the queen’s delegates. Thai public media broadcasts images of jubilant crowds and deeply emotional ordinary citizens, in tears listening to the song “Mother of the Nation” ([Bolotta, 2021b](#), pp. 78–79).

Mother’s Day’s royal iconography is mingled with a highly dramatised exemplification of the ideal relationship between mothers and children. On their knees, carrying garlands made of white jasmine (the emblem of motherly love), sons and daughters bow in front of their mothers and are granted their blessing. Soon after, the same ritual sequence is jointly played out by each mother and child in front of an image of the queen, in a move that projects both as “children” relating to the “mother” of all Thai citizens. Parades of this kind are held in all public institutions, especially schools, where students are expected to behave as “good” Thai children should do. The standardised celebration of *wan mae* is not optional, nor are the modalities of its performance discretionary. Thai institutions must follow the ritual protocol as defined by the Ministry of Culture.

Years ago, while I was exploring the relationship between child poverty, humanitarianism and state education in Bangkok, I was thrust into a research setting that revealed how royal motherhood can turn into symbolic violence. I was doing

fieldwork in a number of NGO shelters for orphans in the capital's slums, and was keen to visit their school during Mother's Day. Although many of these children had never met their biological mother, they were nonetheless expected to take part in the national celebration as Thai citizens. In their case, this entailed writing poems and singing songs praising an unknown mother, and finally acknowledging their own debt of gratitude to the queen, mother of mothers. When I rather sarcastically asked the school principal whether the orphans would bow down before an empty chair, I discovered that female schoolteachers were to serve as replacements for the children's absent mothers (Bolotta, 2021b, pp. 78–79).

For Mother's Day, a row of chairs for the students' mothers was set up on a raised platform in the school's auditorium – a proscenium stage facing the audience, behind which a giant image of the queen had been placed. Students would kneel in front of their mother, as in the etiquette classes discussed above. The orphans at the school, confined to the two ends of the stage, out of the audience's sight, were visibly uncomfortable. Inscrutable, they mechanically executed the expected act of reverence before strict teachers, who acted as sort of “vice-mums.” In the middle of the stage, the mothers of the other students were smiling, trying to hold back tears, deeply moved by their children's gracious act of subordination. At the end of the ceremony, some of the orphans I knew were sitting on the side-lines, crying.

Since the 2014 coup, these tears have apparently dried as many Thai children's and youth's anger against “state parenthood” took over. Significantly, a number of youth leaders are young girls, who do not embrace the maternal model of passive femininity projected by the Queen. In the following sections, I look closer at this (mostly nonviolent) generational rebellion, which is, in many respects, unprecedented and internationally unique, for it weaves together a critical re-reading of Thai political history, global pop culture and digital capitalism in a way that speaks to both domestic and foreign audiences. Shifting cultural conceptualisations of childhood and parenthood are at the centre of this.

## Online Activism, Offline Protests: “Bad Children's” Pop Dissent

The 10th August demonstration, with which this chapter kicked off, is part of a broader wave of young people's mobilisation, civil disobedience and digital ferment that drew Thai teenagers onto the streets since the judicial dissolution of the youthful Future Forward party in February 2020,<sup>6</sup> conveying the discontent of hundreds of thousands of *dek* with the Thai nation's “putative parents”: the army and the monarchy (Bolotta, 2021a). With hashtags such as #long-life-to-democracy (sharp reformulation of the traditional motto “long live the king”), or #we-are-adults-and-we-can-choose-for-ourselves (Sinpeng, 2020), these youths

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<sup>6</sup>The Future Forward party (*phak anakhot mai*), founded in 2018 on a progressive platform that sought to restrain the military's power in Thai politics, was dissolved after a spectacular rise – particularly among the youths – in 2020, when the Constitutional Court found it guilty of violating finance rules (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020).

scornfully attacked the political paradigm of monarchical paternalism, claiming their role as conscious citizens, and reminding the military of representative democracy's basic principles.

Their protest makes use of irreverent flash mobs and digital tools, and draws heavily from globalised pop culture: Hollywood heroines, Japanese manga, "rainbow" TV series, K-pop stars. These popular memes have been brandished as virtual symbols of generational mobilisation that are capable of crossing national borders, capturing the attention of the media and international spectators. This proved to be an effective strategy – adhocistic, decentralised and largely non-partisan – which caught unprepared, at least initially, the military-royal palace's "old folks," not by chance renamed "dinosaurs" by the young demonstrators.

On the 3rd of August 2020 – to cite a meaningful example – hundreds of young people gathered in central Bangkok to cast a "democratic spell." Disguised as Harry Potter, the wizard of the popular fantasy epic, they slyly waved their chopsticks (which, for the occasion, served as "magic wands") towards the Democracy Monument: already sit-in of protests during the Yellow Shirt/Red Shirt season, following the 2006 military-cum-judicial deposition of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. "Thailand has been dominated by the dark power of the Death Eaters," as they explained (Beech, 2020). They held portraits of Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter's sworn enemy, the most powerful dark wizard of all times, described by British writer J.K. Rowling as "the one who shall not be named." Quite clearly, the reference was to the uncriticisable King of Thailand, Maha Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), who succeeded his beloved father, Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) in 2016, but never really entered the hearts of his subjects.

Taking on the features of "democracy's wizards and sorceresses," the young demonstrators then raised three fingers to the sky: a silent act of dissent that is performed in Thai public spaces since the 2014 coup, and which slowly became popular at the different latitudes of Asian authoritarianism: from Bangkok to Yangon (Myanmar), from Hong Kong to Taiwan (Farrelly, 2021). Inspired by another film saga, *The Hunger Games*, the "three-finger salute" expresses anti-golpist sentiments and conveys, according to the young demonstrators, the principles of freedom, equality and brotherhood. With the conscious aim of producing politically powerful images, the youthful crowds have here intermeshed the eighteenth-century motto of the French Revolution with Hollywood's post-apocalyptic imagery: a cultural invention that Claude Levi-Strauss would not hesitate to call "bricolage" (Levi-Strauss, 1966). In the process, their spectacularising of democratic resistance has succeeded in intercepting international media's sensationalist appetites. These *deks* are by no means naive.

Importantly, it is not only Western cinema that inspires the young dissidents' creativity. A flash mob against the Prayuth government focused, for instance, on a hamster, Hamtaro, protagonist of the Japanese manga of the same name. "We are like hamsters in a cage. Let's run Hamtaro!", thousands of high school students boldly shot out as they flocked to Twitter to shape global messages (Sinpeng, 2020). Furthermore, as Siani (2020) noted, youth activists are also co-opting the monarchy's Buddhist and astrological references, subverting their

intended symbolism through satiric parodies, as when, in October 2020, a transgender protester wearing the traditional garb of the queen strutted down a red carpet in central Bangkok, surrounded by a cheerful crowd of teenagers holding umbrellas – this was a gendered performance mocking royal processions. When they appear in public spaces, indeed, members of the royal family are usually followed by court pages who cover their head with a parasol, representing the cascade of meritorious power that descends, from the heavenly realms, onto the head and the body of the sovereign.

Through these actions, Thai youth activists did not just call for the restoration of democracy, the modification of constitutional arrangements and the introduction of strong limitations to the monarch's powers. Drawing creatively on both local and international cultural idioms, they articulated an additional series of demands: freedom of opinion, abandonment of school uniforms and haircut standards, recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, to mention but a few. With these demands, the so-called *dek* demonstrate to recognise accurately the symbolic connection between royal fatherhood and military authoritarianism, together with Thai gerontocracy's capillary ramifications in various sectors of young people's lives.

While valuing the audacious, creative and non-violent nature of such initiatives, some political commentators have raised serious doubts about their political effectiveness. According to this perspective, Southeast Asian youths' democratic aspirations would mainly draw on a virtual, idealistic and romantic imaginary, peopled by Hollywood divas, androgynous K-pop idols and cartoon superheroes: too little to worry the military in the absence of parliamentary representation and political leadership. This ethnocentric and covertly paternalistic portrait of Thai "kids" often fails to capture the profound meaning of their message. Protesters do not make indiscriminate use of so-called pop culture; rather, they cleverly manipulate its symbols to express forbidden and inarticulable truths that cannot be verbalised in Thai public contexts. Their political project is anything but detached from historical reality and local culture. Social networks are just a medium. Their aim is to break down the wall of silence on the Thai nation's origins, to digitally make their way through the folds of censorship and to give voice to a repressed past that the young dissidents have not directly experienced, but which looms inexorably over their future.

### ***Breaking the Silence, Giving Voice to the Past: "Engaged Siblinghood" at Work***

Among the most influential groups of Thailand's diverse pro-democracy youth movement is the People's Party (*khana ratsadon*). The name *khana ratsadon* is neither casual nor neutral. It is a precise reference, an emblem of Thai constitutional history. In fact, the revolutionaries who deposed King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) in 1932, marking the end of Thai absolute monarchy, were called *khana ratsadon*. Pridi Banomyong, the founder of Thammasat University, was among them. In the following decades, the Thai state's royalist propaganda attempted to

remove these pioneers' exploits from national memory, even materially: in 2017, a commemorative plaque named after them mysteriously disappeared in the centre of Bangkok. Thai youth activists reacted promptly, installing a new plaque in front of the Royal Palace. A new, astonishingly provocative engraving was carved out on it: "This country belongs to the people, not to the King." It was removed soon after by the military.

The 1932 Siamese Revolution is not the only historical fact on which the regime has imposed state silence. On the 6th of October 1976, during a pro-democracy gathering at Thammasat University, soldiers, policemen and hyper-royalist paramilitary squads cracked down on the students with unprecedented ferocity, killing several unarmed protesters. The only fault of latter was to call for the preservation of democracy. According to Thai historian [Thongchai Winichakul \(2020\)](#), student at Thammasat University at that time, survivor and direct witness of the execution, the ambiguous role played by the monarchy during the massacre has been buried under the blanket of a traumatic silence that persists unchallenged despite the courage of today's activists.

In 2018, a group of Thai youths sought to break this silence at the rhythm of rap. In a music video entitled "What Has My Country Got?" (*prathet ku mi*), which immediately went viral, the collective Rap Against Dictatorship gave voice to the frustration of Thailand's younger generations through a series of lashing rhymes, rapidly become the anti-government protest's soundtrack. Some of these lyrics said: "The country whose parliament is the playground of its soldiers. The country in which whatever you do will be intruded upon by the leader. The country in which the big fish eat the small fish. This is my country, this is my country" ([Bolotta, 2021b](#), p. 184).

In the video's background, a group of actors, many of them just teenagers, staged the 1976 Thammasat massacre: the lifeless body of a student, hanged from a tree, is beaten by a hysteric mob – it is the horrific scene immortalised by Pulitzer Prize winner Neal Ulevich with a sinisterly iconic photo, the same scene projected by demonstrators at Thammasat University on the 10th of August, 2020, before Rung took the stage. Some of the youth protesters I interviewed in Bangkok in November 2021 underscored an-often neglected dimension of their references to the Thammasat massacre:

We feel the student activists who were killed during 'the 6 October event' (*haetkan hok tula*) as our 'elder siblings' (*phi*). We feel emotionally connected to them. They show us the way as elder siblings usually do with their 'littermates' (*nong*). We have to finish the work they started.

Though in different degrees, tones and declinations, hierarchy and the language of kinship are essential dimensions of social life and political discourse across Asia, including in Thailand. Contrary to what is claimed by many Western observers, Thai youths are re-interpreting distinctively – rather than just embracing – globally circulating notions such as democracy and social equality. They refute (royal) paternalism and the political cult of *phu yai* (big people); yet

they experience the social intimacy of their activism in kinship terms, which are intrinsically hierarchical. In this respect, it is very significant that, first, they seek to undermine the father–child trope through an “engaged siblinghood” (expressed in the form of the traditional hierarchical relation between elder and younger siblings); and, second, that they are “kinning” with deceased student activists of a censored past, recognised as mentor *phi* (elder siblings) for their sacrifice and commitment to democracy. While important differences exist between earlier generations of student activists and today’s youth protesters (see, e.g. Kanokrat, 2021), a powerful emotional connection between the past’s “elder siblings” and the present’s “younger siblings” features in this scenario of inter-generational mobilisation.

While in public statements and official slogans, equality is a rallying cry for Thai youth activists, their back-stage social and affective intimacy appears hierarchically organised along *phi-nong* lines. As I have witnessed in multiple occasions while interacting with youth activists in Bangkok, convicted group leaders, experienced protesters, as well as past student activists are often addressed by newcomers as “elder siblings,” who have sacrificed themselves for their younger siblings’ collective rights. Not without contradiction and paradox, the abstract, mostly juridical *fraternité* formula – which some of the protesters have drawn on in public gatherings – can thus be privately experienced as an embodied, kinship-like reality through which Thai traditional hierarchies of seniority are reworked in subversive ways. Although it entails a status differentiation, “engaged siblinghood” is here enacted against state parenthood, heteronormativity, monarchical paternalism and related father–children/king–citizens discourses. Furthermore, it is not age difference or (male) gender the criteria according to which the roles of *phi* and *nong* come to life – as is mandatory in Thai public contexts and state educational institutions. Rather, it is an individual’s track record of activism, selflessness and courage in challenging state authorities for the common good.

In March 2021, Rung and many other *phi* activists, including several female and LGBTQ+ protesters, have been arrested under lese-majesty and sedition laws. Held in custody, some of them went on hunger strike. The pandemic has become a valuable ally of the Thai government in the suppression of dissent. But the silence was broken, even well beyond the borders of Thailand, as I shall discuss in the next section.

### ***Pan-Asian Youth Resistance to (Heteronormative) Authoritarianism***

The generational imagery that shapes Thai (cyber) activism – largely cosmopolitan, anti(hetero)normative, horizontal and post-national – has forged several allegories to refer figuratively (therefore, in a way that is, at least in theory, hardly subject to direct prosecution) to Prayuth government’s illiberal authoritarianism. Drawing satiric comparisons between the Thai and Chinese governments’ efforts to mute student activists became one of them (Bolotta, 2022).



Over the course of 2020, Beijing's final squeeze on Hong Kong and its young dissidents has not gone unnoticed. Thai demonstrators looked at it as an exemplary case of illiberal repression to be averted, the frightening paradigm of Asian authoritarianism. The sequence of events that prompted Thai youths to make of China a meme of authoritarianism is important, because it illustrates the "rhizomatic nature" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of the cultural logics that underpin youth dissent in the age of social networks.

Thai activists' growing displeasure with China's new assertiveness in the region initially took shape around a tender homosexual story, with young male students as protagonists: "2gether" (*phro rao khu kan*) – a Thai TV series that transposes the *yaoi* Japanese manga genre into the context of a college. At the top of the netizens' preferences in Bangkok, as well as in places as diverse as Jakarta, Manila, Singapore and Beijing (!), the immense popularity of the TV boys-love series across Asia signals the oppositional re-articulation of gender expressions in patriarchal contexts that are historically marked by military machismo (Welker, 2022).

When Thai actor Vachirawit Chivaaree (aka: Bright), star of "2gether," reposted an image on Twitter which listed Hong Kong as a "country," an uproar suddenly broke out. Vachirawit's many Chinese followers, including legions of trolls mobilised promptly by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security, lashed out at the actor, targeting his profile – and that of his girlfriend Weeraya Sukaram, known virtually as #Nnevy (Vachirawit is heterosexual in real life) – with ultranationalist invectives and messages of disdain. On the Chinese social network Weibo, the hashtag #Nnevy was viewed by about four billion indignant users (Griffiths, 2020). The Thai actor's girlfriend allegedly expressed virtual support for Taiwan's independence, sparking further disapproval among Chinese netizens. Vachirawit's Thai supporters didn't sit on their hands, acting in his defence; a cyber war ensued with young internet users exchanging vitriolic messages and symmetrical insults. However, when the Chinese trolls began to insult Thailand's purportedly sacred institutions (the monarchy and the army) with the retaliatory aim to offend Thai patriotism, they were confronted with a highly unexpected reaction: "shout it louder!", Thai netizens replied in amusement. After all, Thai youths took the streets against both the military and crown since the 2014 coup, thus assuming a defiant position vis-à-vis Thailand's political institutions, which is radically different from most of their Chinese peers' attitude towards the Chinese Communist Party (Bolotta, 2022). This discrepancy in nationalistic loyalty between the opposing factions, suddenly evident, marked a turning point, widening the dispute. Hong Kong and Taiwan's youth netizens joined the Thais. Activists of the calibre of Joshua Wong and Nathan Law<sup>7</sup> took the field.

In a few weeks, a new transnational actor then appeared on the scene, the Milk Tea Alliance. Under the banner of another meme (milk tea), associated with the

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<sup>7</sup>Joshua Wong, founder of the Hong Kong student activist group Scholarism, and leader of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, is currently in prison. Nathan Law, secretary general of the Hong Kong Federation of students, took refuge in the United Kingdom after the 2020's implementation of Beijing's national security law in the former British colony.

ubiquitous hashtag #Nnevy, netizens from Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Myanmar and the Philippines have teamed up to denounce Beijing's bullying and to call for democracy, gender justice and human rights in the region. Unlike in China, tea is consumed with milk in many Southeast Asian countries, as in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Milk, therefore, marks here a crucial cultural difference, which the Milk Tea Alliance's young dissidents have invested with symbolic fury: where you drink tea with milk you fight for democracy. China, on the other hand, would be the locus of (heteronormative) authoritarianism.

The cyber war has embarrassed the Thai government; the Chinese embassy in Bangkok was quick to point out that "Chinese and Thais are brothers" (*jin thai phi nong kan*), but the die was cast. Since April 2020, flags of Hong Kong and Taiwan are being waved at anti-government protest sites in Thailand; signs of the Milk Tea Alliance also appear in Yangon (Myanmar), where pro-democracy street demonstrations persist despite the mass killings of defenceless civilians by the army of Min Aung Hlang, the coup general who seized power in February 2021. The milk tea meme has thus leaked from chat boxes and peeped into the reality of street demonstrations, expanding its semantic boundaries. Through a whirling series of recursive digital iterations, China has become a nonspecific, generalised and de-territorialised symbol of authoritarianism for many young Asians. The Thai monarchical-military patriarchy and the Burmese dictatorial order are perceived by Thai and Burmese youths alike as local variants of a superordinate political-cultural configuration, which would be epitomised by the Chinese Communist Party.

As cultural signifiers, digital memes (images, actions, texts, sounds) tend to replicate, self-propagate and enrich themselves with new meanings through rhizomatic iterations that bounce on social networks. Catalysts of local and global semantic processes, the most popular memes can assemble disparate social systems, transgressing national sovereignties and ethno-linguistic gaps. In some cases, they quickly disappear in the internet's vortices; in others they favour international mobilisations and widespread political participation, trespassing into the reality of public spaces (Brown & Bristow, 2019). The Milk Tea Alliance aims to leave its mark in the region, under the banner of the symbolic equations "milk tea = democracy; China = authoritarianism," despite the fact that China's digital surveillance system – otherwise known as the Great Firewall – is generally extraordinarily efficient at filtering and blocking data that are deemed harmful.

As is well-known, media technologies both facilitate and constrain political change in the twenty-first century. There's no telling whether the Milk Tea Alliance's activists will be successful. What is certain is that Thai youth's activism and strategic use of (gendered) pop culture have already yielded impressive results, both domestically and abroad.

## **Conclusion: From Parenthood to Childhood**

Royal fatherhood and, subordinately, motherhood act historically as symbolic structures of age-patriarchy in Thailand. Since the beginning of 2020, a new generation of Thai citizens broke free from their role as "children" (of the nation's

father, The King, and mother, the Queen Mother of Thailand), vehemently protesting against the “big people” (*phu yai*) who run the country, and calling for change. In sharp contrast to local paternalistic descriptions of young people as *dek* (children), hundreds of thousands of Thai children and youths took the streets as “siblings” (*phi-nong*) joining forces against state parental abuse.

Despite internal differences and some degree of inter-group competition and disagreement, Thailand’s pro-democracy activists belong to a new generation of progressive, post-millennial netizens, unwilling to indulge old-fashioned parents’ monarchical conservatism, or unelected institutions’ paternalistic prescriptions. As [McCargo \(2021\)](#) stated: “Thai people from Generation Z, aged under 25, have radically different understandings of power, deference and legitimacy from older population groups” (p. 175). Their activism aims to culturally reframe Thailand’s traditional generational and gender order, refuting the moral principles that establish citizens’ political subordination to monarchical paternalism, as well as children’s unquestionable respect to elders. Hollywood sagas, boy-love dramas, Japanese cartoons, rap music and Korean stars – recognisable memes in the pop universe of digital internationalism – serve to transform deeply local struggles in cosmopolitan shows of youth rebellion “from below” ([Appadurai, 2013](#)). This youth-led “generational rebellion” has also direct implications for scholars, establishing the epistemic priority of “childhood” over “parenthood” as the main analytical lens through which to investigate contemporary Southeast Asia’s “engaged siblinghood” ([Bolotta, 2021b](#)). Whatever the outcome of these virtual and street fibrillations, Thai youth activism signals the return of a cultural category that had already proved decisive in the protest movements of the 1970s: generation ([Prajak, 2005](#)).

From an anthropological perspective, generation is a social construction, a relational and situational category which blurs temporal boundaries, and a key site to examine modernity and globalisation ([Cole & Durham, 2007](#)). In the hierarchical context of Thai society, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, “young people” do not necessarily belong to a defined or precisely established age group. Regardless of their chronological age, an individual can be considered “young,” even only temporarily, when he relates to a moral authority, or when she/he is engaged in “youth activities,” in a given social context. Digital activism can be definitely considered a prime example of such activities. Outside the policy-oriented domain of statistical and demographic quantifications, the notion of generation is also charged with (historically situated and culturally shaped) emotions and feelings of belonging – it can be experienced and dreamt about as a political sentiment, or collectively practiced as a social, intrinsically relational, identity formation.

Clearly, the tendency to equate generation with status is not limited to Thailand. The languages of power, age and kinship are historically intermeshed in a variety of cultural forms across the globe. The position of children within the family and in relation to parents has often served as a key locus of discursive investment for the symbolic arrangement of monarchical, authoritarian and-or patriarchal socio-political orders. Consider the triangular sacralisation of God, King (God’s representative in the world) and Father (God’s representative within

family) at the basis of *ancien régime* Europe's absolutism (Laslett, 2021). In the case of Buddhist Thailand, parenthood is epitomised by the royal family, with respect to which citizens are expected to assume the position of grateful children. In this respect, it is highly significant that unlike former generations of pro-democracy protesters, today's youth activists call for substantial reform of the royal institution. As a Thai youth recently told me: "We have not achieved anything at the level of institutional politics, but at the level of culture we have already made the revolution." Thanks to Thai young people's bravery, indeed, previously taboo discussions on the monarchy and its evaporating fatherly significance are now a commonplace.

Over the past few months, the Thai youth movement seems to have lost momentum amid state repression and judicial harassment of hundreds leading activists. Yet the mytheme of the Father, in its Buddhist, royalist, Confucian, military or communist variants, is being disjoined; new cultural formations are emerging on the horizon. An inarticulate student massacre, engaged siblinghood, milk tea and boys' love stories merge at the junction of past and present imaginaries, offering suggestive glimpses into a possibly different future.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>As I go through the final proofs of this chapter, the youth-led Move Forward Party won a landslide in the 2023 Thailand general election, held on 14 May 2023. Thai voters said a resounding no to military-royalist elite, trouncing General Prayuth's United Thai Nation Party (Rasheed & Wongketjai, 2023). While the victorious youth's party faces now an uphill struggle to form government, its impressive success gives a clear sign of a turning point.

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## Chapter 14

# Refusing the Mobility Imperative Among the Left-Behind Generation in the Northern Philippines

*Elizer Jay de los Reyes*

### Abstract


The production of the ‘good life’ or the ‘less bad-life’ (Berlant, 2007, 2011), especially among generations of the Marcos dictatorship and the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue revolutions (henceforth, EDSA revolutions) in the Philippines, is animated by the ‘mobility imperative’ (Farrugia, 2016). The mobility imperative includes processes that encourage or demand mobility (Farrugia, 2016) for individuals and institutions. It figures in various ‘systems of practice’ (Levitt, 1998, 2001) among families in migrant-sending communities, government and corporations that magnify how migration is the ticket to better life (McKay, 2012) or its glorification as a heroic act (de los Reyes, 2013, 2014). Among the generations of the Martial Law and the EDSA revolutions, therefore, the ‘good life’ is hinged upon departure as professionals (e.g. nurses and engineers), workers in elementary occupations (e.g. construction and domestic workers) or mail-order brides or pen pals. Put simply, the good life in these generations is a function of remittances.

This chapter examines how the contemporary generation of young people construct the ‘good life’ in differential and new terms (de los Reyes, 2023; McKay & Brady, 2005) from previous generations. Using interviews and vision boards of left-behind children (15–18 years old), it argues that left-behind children critically appraise the ‘mobility imperative’. The chapter shows that there is a growing imagination of alternatives to the migration-induced good life among left-behind children, and therefore, they gradually refuse the ‘mobility imperative’. For them, the aspired good life

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consists of potentially being employees or entrepreneurs in their own villages and living a life with their own families (de los Reyes, 2019, 2020).

*Keywords:* Left-behind children; mobility imperative; children's agency; youth aspirations; Overseas Filipino Workers; transnational families

## Introduction

In 2016, Western Union, an American financial services company launched an advertising campaign to ramp up their engagement with the younger and tech-savvy remittance-sending immigrants in Canada. According to the company's research, these tech-savvy immigrants perceived the Company as conventional (Harris, 2016)<sup>1</sup> rather than embracing digital connectivity through the use of mobile applications to send remittances. The campaign involved encouraging immigrants to take a selfie and use a frame that bears the phrase 'moving money for the better to [country of origin of the selfie taker]'. One of the faces that were used in the marketing campaign was a Filipina immigrant named Jojie who was photographed wearing a traditional *Filipiniana* dress and a flower in her right ear. Less than a decade before the Western Union campaign, back in the Philippines, the remittance company M Lhuiller in one of their music videos used the metaphor, '*tulay ng Pilipino*' (bridge of the Filipino) and suggested that '*matutupad ang lahat ng hangarin mo*' (all your aspirations will come true) through the company.<sup>2</sup> In one of their Christmas campaigns years later, they had Ogie Alcasid, one of the Philippines' top singers and songwriters sing these lines as chorus of the song 'Send My Love Home'<sup>3</sup>:

Away from home;  
I'll send it home  
Send my love home  
for Christmas

Surrounding the central concept of remittances are other key words that could be picked up from the advertising campaigns of these financial services companies which include 'better', 'come true', 'love' and 'home'. What this suggests is that the remittance economy overflows with so much positive emotions in everyday practices not only by the domination of love as the MLhuiller song explicitly says but also by emotions such as making up for absence or being away (McKay, 2007), and doing good for the family and the community (Mosuela, 2018; Opiniano, 2005; Salazar, 2012) as also explicitly suggested by the Western Union campaign in Canada. Therefore, remittances play a significant role in the emotional vocabulary

<sup>1</sup>See <http://marketingmag.ca/advertising/western-union-finds-newfaces-for-the-brand-183329/>.

<sup>2</sup>See the music video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrfItkgeIUc>.

<sup>3</sup>See the complete music video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyP0UDXW8xg>.

of Filipinos because of the attribution or attachment of positivity to it, and as such, a central role in the shaping of people's imagination of the future.

The centrality of these positive emotional vocabulary in everyday media experiences of Filipinos about remittances reveals a long history of the country's participation in transnational labour migration. On the one hand, it could be surmised that migration was induced by severe socio-economic conditions that Filipinos experienced or their need to flee for safety and seek better opportunities for their families (Laguatan, 2011) especially during the Marcos dictatorship. On the other hand, it is the states' brokerage for external labour markets, oftentimes, launching campaigns for Filipino workers to be employed in other countries such as those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Asis, 2017). But going back to the central role of mobility-induced positive emotions in the Filipino imagination of the 'good life' or the 'less-bad life' (Berlant, 2007, 2011), this has also been a resource that the Philippine government had tapped into (de los Reyes, 2014). The government has drummed up the glorification of transnational labour migration through participation with the private sector in the 'Bagong Bayani Awards'<sup>4</sup> and the *Balikbayan Programme*<sup>5</sup> (Returnee Programme) (de los Reyes, 2014, p. 200).

In my earlier work (see de los Reyes, 2020), I described how towns like To'to (not the real name), where the first cohort of left-behind children I worked with in 2017 was located, became sites of ostentatious display of transnational connections, and as such, the site for the reproduction of the imaginary of transnational mobility as a way to the 'good life':

...The establishment where I usually 'hung-out' with Carlo, Gigi, Tina, Damien, and Louie is called 'Texas Minimart' because the owners have relatives who are based in Texas. Inside, one of the walls is decorated with car plates from different states in the U.S. Another side is full of pennants from different provinces in Canada. The centrepiece of the widest wall are the flags of the Philippines and the United States hung parallel to each other, emphasising the establishment's US-Philippines connections. In one of our afternoon walks, we passed by a house where a U.S.

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<sup>4</sup>This award-giving body recognises outstanding and exemplary Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Literally, *Bagong Bayani* means 'new heroes' which equates migration as an act of heroism. This award-giving body was originally set up by Ramon Fuentes but was transferred to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) in 1983. Eventually, it was passed to the Bagong Bayani Foundation incorporated in 1989. (Bagong Bayani Foundation Incorporated, 2019). According to the Bagong Bayani Foundation (2019), there are now more than 200 OFWs who have received the award.

<sup>5</sup>The word *balikbayan* is composed of two Filipino words: *balik* which means return and  *bayan* which means country or homeland. Put simply, *balikbayan* means a returnee. The Balikbayan Programme was implemented in 1989 to encourage OFWs to visit the Philippines by providing them certain privileges such as travel tax exemption, visa-free entry if they have become holders of foreign passport and duty-free shopping up to 2,000 USD (Philippine Consulate General, Los Angeles).

flag was hoisted. Damien explained that the woman who owns the house is married to an American man. Three Western Union remittance centres are also strategically positioned in the town making the sight of people claiming remittances rather common. Also, the LBCs [left-behind children] tell me how the opening of the balikbayan box that facilitates influx of consumer goods that would not be easily accessible from To'to, is a big family event during the holidays.

(de los Reyes, 2020, p. 170)

Therefore, it can be surmised that the notion of the 'good life' as revealed by the 'systems of practice' (Levitt, 1998, 2001) in the villages where left-behind children live is hinged upon familial investments and affirmative response to the mobility imperative (Farrugia, 2016; Yeoh et al., 2020).

## State of Childhood or Youth Studies in the Philippines

This chapter, while contextualised in the Philippines, engages with two wider fields. On the one hand, youth studies and on the other, migration studies. For this section, an overview of youth studies in the Philippines is provided and then followed by a brief outline of the place of children or young people specifically among transnational families. This is important in so far as understanding left-behind children's responses to the mobility imperative as a differential and new mode of engagement with transnational migration is concerned.

In a 2004 article written by Gerry Lanuza in the journal *Young*, he argues that generally, there are two characteristics of studies about the Filipino youth. On the one hand, there is the dominance of the functionalist paradigm. On the other hand, there is the marginal influence of critical theory (Lanuza, 2004). For the former, the objective is 'to reveal the structural patterns' (p. 363) of youth life in order to take stock of how youth culture fits within wider society and to assist young people to transition into adulthood (pp. 363–364). For the latter, it aims to reveal the agency of young people. Unfortunately, Lanuza (2004) claims that Marxist and neo-Marxist thoughts, which are believed to highlight young people's will, are seldom used in studies about young people in the Philippines.

In relation to the place of young people in migration studies, de los Reyes (2019) argues that young people are heavily implicated by the pronounced 'mobility-centrism' and 'adult-centrism' of migration studies in general. For example, de los Reyes (2019, p. 37; 2020, p. 169) notes that there is a plethora of scholarship that take stock of the experiences of Filipina migrants in various destinations such as Hong Kong (Constable, 2007), Rome (Tacoli, 1999), Barcelona (Zontini, 2004), Taiwan (Lan, 2006, 2008), France (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009), Malaysia (Gan et al., 2015), Denmark (Dalgas, 2015), Canada (Palmer, 2007; Vahabi & Wong, 2017) and China (Mendoza et al., 2017). However, he observed that not only are children rarely accounted for. When they are, these are usually children who are also on the move (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; de los Reyes, 2019, pp. iii, 37; Graham, Jordan et al., 2012; Martin, 2015). Aside from these proclivities in migration studies along

with the tendency of youth studies in the Philippines as described by Lanuza (2004), research also shows that in terms of parent–left-behind children relations, the latter are usually put in a marginal position of power in relation to adults (Nagasaka & Fresnoza-Flot, 2015). This also aligns with wider studies of young people in other contexts. These include how young people’s voices are treated as secondary or accessory (Fassetta, 2011) to their parents’ within Ghanaian transnational families; as victims of their parents’ hunger for money in the case of Poland and Ukraine (Lutz & Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2012); or as a group in need of saving in the context of China (Gu, 2022).

The place of left-behind children and their aspirations for the future in the context of Filipino transnational families is heavily shaped by the changing arrangements of domestic life as well as wider global labour arrangements and conditions. In the region where I did my fieldwork at in the Philippines, the number of women leaving were twice the number of their men counterparts for years (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a). This gendered nature of emigration also has had serious implications to labour conditions in migrant’s host countries as well as potential for social mobility of sending families. In 2018, 59% of women emigrants, compared to 10% of men, were deployed in elementary occupations (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2019b) that reproduce gendered imaginaries of work, and also gendered inequality in terms of pay. Gendered migration has also serious consequences in terms of family relations. While traditionally, men were considered as breadwinners and women as caregivers, the increase in number of women migrants has changed family arrangements (Yeoh et al., 2020). As a result, face-to-face child-rearing is often left to the father or some relatives. Migrant women, however, continue to participate in taking care of their children remotely through the use of mobile phones, or in the earlier days, letters and cassette tapes (Madianou & Miller, 2011). The social remittances (Levitt, 1998) sent by migrant Filipinas as argued by Hoang and Yeoh (2015) also affect migrant women and left-behind children relations. As an example, Hoang and Yeoh (2015, pp. 191–192) mention that Filipinas in Hong Kong send photographs of themselves having a great time (e.g. wearing nice clothes) which construct a positive narrative of migrancy. Because of this, their left-behind children tend to have a sense of resentment against their mothers (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015). Therefore, an analysis of left-behind children’s reaction to the mobility imperative needs to account for these domestic and economic relations. In doing so, this chapter, as will be argued in the next section, attempts to add to a number of other studies that highlight the views of left-behind children about their family’s investment on mobility projects and their views of what constitutes the ‘good life’.

## Objectives and Perspectives

As already alluded to in the preceding section, this chapter responds to the two salient proclivities of migration research, namely, *mobility-centrism* and *adult-centrism* (de los Reyes, 2019) on the one hand. On the other, it also intervenes in the state of Philippine youth studies by adding more analyses of young people in ways that highlight their agency as this is wanting as argued by Lanuza (2004).

In the context of the Filipino diaspora, mobility-centrism is characterised by an obsession with Filipinos who are geographically on the move. Adult-centrism on the other hand privileges the view and experiences of adult migrants (Robertson et al., 2018) as primary objects of study. Scholarly attention has been mostly directed towards experiences of immigrants in their places of destination and when children are included, they are usually those who are either born in the Philippines but eventually moved to their parents' host countries and are referred to as '1.5 generation' (Nagasaka & Flot, 2015) or second-generation immigrant children's challenges such as well-being or mental health and their ways of navigating home and away. Therefore, this chapter's positioning of left-behind children as full subjects who are capable of being informed and making sound imagination of their own futures is a deliberate response to and intervention to the proclivities of both migration and youth studies in the context of the Philippines.

In relation to the deliberate highlighting of young people's agency, this chapter is informed by the sub-discipline of *Geographies of Children, Youth and Families* (GCYF) in human geography. This area of study holds as its core assumption the notion that 'children and youth are competent social actors' and aims to 'make visible a group who were relatively absent from academic accounts, and whose views were often overlooked in politics and society' (Holloway et al., 2019, p. 458). As James (2010) argues, children 'should be regarded as social actors. . .and that childhood. . .should be understood as a social construction' (p. 216). In this case, given that migration studies have tended to emphasise on adult migrants in making sense of migration (Robertson et al., 2018), this chapter's aim to intervene in the domination of scholarship on adult migrants on the move reflects GCYF's core value. This chapter also positions itself along with earlier call within migration studies for more scholarship that account for children's lived experience and agency such as their knowledge and awareness of the migration process and their ways of navigating through tailoring their aspirations (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015).

Despite this chapter's aim at highlighting young people's agency, it is also informed by a nuanced view of young people's agency and is tempered by the recognition that there are limits to young people's agency. As Langevang and Gough (2009) argue, young people's agency can be conceptualised as 'tactic'. For them, young people's agency is 'more a matter of continuously adjusting to a changing situation than having complete control over their lives' (p. 752) (see examples of young people's tactical responses in López & de los Reyes, 2022). Or, in other instances, can be formed or exercised by young people because of their specific knowledge or experience of certain circumstances (for children's aspiration among transnational families, see Somaiah et al., 2020, p. 252).

It is inevitable, therefore, that part of engaging with the concept of the 'mobility imperative', forces that encourage or force mobility (Farrugia, 2016), is engaging with the concept of 'aspiration'. This is because responses to the mobility imperative on the one hand is constructed as a desirable act that might happen in the future (McKay, 2012) and therefore, is one that is aspired for. On the other hand, the aspirational aspect of mobility shapes the behaviour of individuals and families as seen in the account of McKay (2012) of sending

communities in the Cordillera region of the Philippines. McKay (2012) argues that in the case of thinking of migration as the ‘ticket to better life’, people’s desires for better life ‘are what create change in their world through their lived lives’. In the case of migration projects, it shapes the educational investments made by left-behind children and their families and obviously, in education policy too (de los Reyes, 2013, 2020). In the context of this chapter, the social practices that reinforce the desirability of mobility in the villages where young people are based at heavily shape their aspirations for mobility. In other words, their experience of gendered mobility, either directly through their mothers’ emigration to take part in what Parreñas (2000) calls ‘international transfer of caretaking’, or vicariously through witnessing other families’ experiences with it, forms part of their ‘archive of memories’ (Appadurai, 2013, p. 288). These memories, both tangible and abstract, provide some rules of thumb or as resources that guide young people’s calculation for alternative possibilities of their futures. Echoing Appadurai in his ideas about aspiration as a form of navigational capacity, Cornelio and Calamba (2022) state:

In his [Appadurai’s] view, aspirations are ambitions or possibilities that drive people to behave in practical and feasible ways to achieve them. But he [Appadurai] also notes that what is possible for people is shaped by their current social conditions. The capacity to aspire, in other words, is not the same for everyone.

(Cornelio & Calamba, 2022, p. 3)

This chapter takes Appadurai’s view by taking into account how left-behind children negotiate the tension between pre-existing imaginaries of the good life and their own version of the imagined good life under circumstances of disadvantage. This is done by highlighting young people’s imagination of living other possible lives as ways of increasing what Appadurai (2013) calls the ‘horizons of hope’ (p. 295) with a view to changing their lives in the future.

## **Methodology**

The data used for this chapter emerged from various months of working with young people in To’to (not the real name of the town), Cordillera Mountains, the northern Philippines. The first source are interviews and observations done with April, Brian, Judith, Mark and Michael (not their real names), five left-behind children (15–18 years old) who were Grade 11 students in To’to High School (not the real name of school) in 2017. The 2017 fieldwork involved participant observations in school, at home, at places of work and leisure. Activities observed included having lunch, karaoke, watching movies at home, walking home in the afternoon or visiting the mining tunnels where some of the male left-behind children worked. Focus group discussions, individual and pair interviews and incidental go-along interviews were also conducted over several months. Some

vision boards used to elicit responses from the left-behind children in 2017 are also used in this chapter. These participants were recruited from To'to High School with approval from the Principal and assistance from the Grade Level Adviser. The second source of data is online interviews conducted in 2021 with three left-behind children John, Xyra and Lara (15–18 years old). The three were recruited through their mothers from the northern Philippines who were based in Singapore as Foreign Domestic Workers (FDW) and have agreed to be interviewed first. Eventually, through the mothers' help, the researcher was connected to their children via Facebook, WhatsApp, or Instagram. Because fieldwork coincided with travel restrictions in 2021 and 2022 while the author was based in Singapore, there were limited face-to-face engagement with the second cohort of participants from the northern Philippines. In both instances of fieldwork, ethics approvals were obtained from the different institutions where the author was affiliated with. All participants were provided with information sheets and their informed consent was sought prior to interviews.

## Results

### *Making Sense of Mobilities and the Good Life*

There are striking differences in left-behind children's experience of the mobility-induced 'good life'. There are some who clearly acknowledge the radical positive changes in their family's socio-economic status. In contrast, there are those who feel their lives have worsened when their family affirmatively responded to the mobility imperative. Lara, 18, whose mother had been working in Singapore for 14 years as an FDW, believes that her mother's decision to leave has changed their life forever. When I asked her in an interview in 2021 how her mother's work impacted them, she said:

Aaaw! It's a lot. It's really helped us relieve ourselves from our troubles when she decided to go to Singapore. She was able to build our house. You know? It's so surreal. Like it feels so great that we have our own house. She's also able to buy so many things. Whatever we want, she provides. Unlike before, I remember she once gave us cell phones, the ones with a keypad. Of course, we can't talk to her using them. It's the Nokia phone with a keypad. Each of us [siblings] had one but we cannot talk to her using that but only if we use her roaming number [for texting].

April, too, whose mother had been working in Cyprus for four years at the time of interview in 2017 affirmed what Lara thinks. Below, April explains how her mother's emigration has positively changed their status in life:

Jay: Is your life better than your classmates' whose parents are not abroad?

April: Yes. Because even if my mother is very tight with money, she manages to provide for our needs. Look, she came home now [on vacation from Cyprus] and she only gives me 30–40 Php as daily allowance. But when I ask her for extra money for bookbinding or printing, she yields. I have other classmates whose parents hand them 100 Php per day. Others don't have enough. Some others don't have lunch.

Jay: How do you feel about them?

April: It's like, I pity them.

Simultaneously, there are also other left-behind children who are critical about the circulating imaginary of the mobility-induced 'good life'. For example, Michael and Mark, boys I have interviewed in 2017, seemed to have experienced a stark contrast from what April and Lara narrated.

Mark, who was 17 during my interview in 2021, complained that he needs to work to provide for himself even if his mother in Kuala Lumpur sends remittances regularly. This is because according to him, his father is mismanaging the funds. Michael, 18, whose mother recently returned to their village from Hong Kong recalls how the remittances sent for the repair of their decrepit house was spent by their father on women and alcohol. Worse, Michael was often physically harmed by his father when he was drunk. The father has left for another province since Michael's mother returned. And now that Michael's mother is back, she resorted to borrowing money most of the time.

The contrasting narratives suggest that affirmatively responding to the 'mobility imperative' brings forth radical and positive changes to a family's socio-economic status, allowing various opportunities for the second generation to break the chain of poverty through potential for university schooling and many more. However, the narratives also show that to some, familial investments on mobilities sometimes fail and when they do, children are mostly implicated as seen in the experience of Michael and Mark ([de los Reyes, 2019](#)).

### ***To Leave or Not to Leave?***

It is important to emphasise that because of the contrasting experiences of the families of left-behind children, whether directly or indirectly, left-behind children are now taking stock of the mobility–good life nexus more critically. In my interview with John, who in 2021 was 18 years old and whose mother has worked in Singapore since 2007, I asked him the question, 'do you think that you will leave your town in the future? Will you also go abroad? Do you see that happening to you and will you have a choice?':

John: If there is ever that choice, I will choose to stay closer [...] because I don't want to be too far from them. I really want to be close to them (parents and siblings).



Jay: Is this because of your experience (mother leaving for work abroad)?

John: Because when there are problems, it would be easier to go to them, to see what's going on. Something like that.

Jay: Oh, so you're saying you're really close to your father and mother?

John: Yes.

Lara, on the other hand, says that she is seeing the possibility of going abroad in the future but in a different way from how her mother did it:

Jay: What if eventually, you'd have a family, kids etc., will you also go abroad? Like put yourself in your mom's situation when she left?

Lara: For me, yes.

Jay: Why?

Lara: Of course, in situations like that, it's only challenging in the beginning. We'll get used to it. But I will not be like her who sort of 'ghosted' us. All of a sudden, she's gone! For me, I really want connection among all of us on a daily basis. Or even if it's not every day as long as we talk, and we give updates. Just like that. Unlike how she was just gone and we did not know if she was still alive or not. I still want real updates about...being updated with what's happening with one another. If ever I will go abroad.

In my continued conversation with Lara, aside from the emotional effects of how her mother left, she also emphasised so many layers of considerations related to employment both in the Philippines and abroad before deciding to leave.

Lara: [...] Because I am seeing others, like our neighbours, they are working in Japan. I see that they are earning well. It's enticing but I am also considering that it is really challenging because I will be away from family. That is why I kind of prefer to just, like, stay here in the meantime when I do not have a job. I prefer to not rush things. It's not like an easy job. I don't wanna just leave and go abroad. I want to wait. I will study and wait and then...

Jay: So, it's like you're saying you will go abroad if? Like you have a condition?

Lara: Yes.

In my earlier conversations with Mark in 2017, he also alluded the same attitude that John and Lara exhibited:

Jay: Are you willing to leave?

Mark: Yes, because... when you see the situation and you really need to, then push through. When I need to leave, I will leave.

Jay: What will make you stay?

Mark: I get homesick easily. Even if life here is more challenging, I like it because we have neighbours. It's really different when you stay at the place where you were born and raised at.

The outright display of choosing to stay as seen in John, imagining alternative ways of being away exhibited by Lara, and the 'as needed' approach of Mark echo the GCYF's assumption that young people are social actors who are able to constantly adjust their views of things based on shifting life conditions (Langevang & Gough, 2009) or depending on what is contained in their 'archive of memories' Appadurai (2013). This also aligns with what I have previously argued about young people's views of local–global 'spatiotemporalities' where young people understand their locality both in temporal and spatial terms through the lens of difference (de los Reyes, 2019, 2023) and as such perceive it as a new form of place (McKay & Brady, 2005). In my 2017 fieldwork, Judith, whose mother works in Cyprus like April's mother, justified why she prefers to work in the village eventually by comparing the experience of time between her and her mother in Cyprus. For her, time in Cyprus is 'running' and her mother always has to exhibit 'military moves' in order to cope (de los Reyes, 2019, p. 154; de los Reyes, 2023). Because of these distinctions, the desirability of the mobility-induced good life is also diminished. This is most evident in Mark's thinking about leaving as only when needed and not because moving away always guarantees the good life.

Based on the preceding discussion, we are gradually seeing how the contemporary generation of left-behind children by emigrant women domestic workers are being trepidatious around the mobility imperative and are able to imagine not only other ways of leaving but even being moored. We will return to this but for now, let us take a look at what for these young people makes up the good life.

### *The Future Good Life*

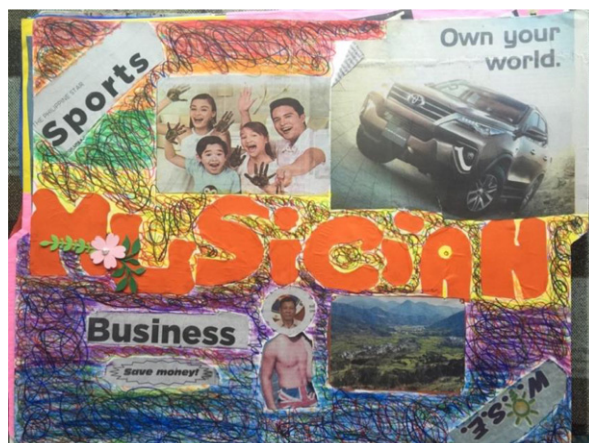
In what follows, I explore the left-behind children's visualisation of the future through a vision board activity. This activity was done in 2017 to have a sense about how left-behind children are imagining their future in relatively concrete terms. Each of them was handed a newspaper (same date of publication), scissors, glue, colouring pens and coloured papers. They had an hour to paste cut-outs that reflected what they wished for in the future. I present the vision boards of April, Michael and Brian. Below each vision board are brief explanations they shared with me (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

There are four key themes of the imagined good life from the visualisations and descriptions that April, Michael and Brian made. First is the centrality of family that is intact, complete and growing which is, on the one hand, a reflection of the traditional notions of family as primarily nuclear. On the other hand,



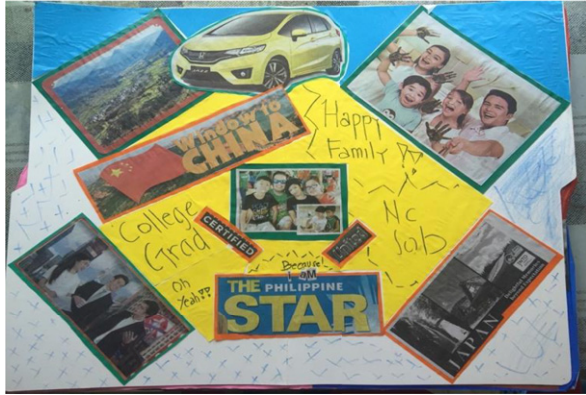
'It is so beautiful [...] (Pointing at the phrase 'own your world') It's because you are the only one who will *agkwa* (linguistic filler) for yourself, for your future. Whoever you will become someday. 'For all lives you live' so just enjoy it. Then, like that. 'Feed your mind' because that is where... 'Let's grow together' with family... (Referring to the phrase 'behind a good plot is a prolific scriptwriter') It's because in your life, it's like you are its sole scriptwriter. You are the one who is running it, whatever future you may like.

Fig. 1. April's Vision Board.



I only desire simple things. Just simple. I have a family that's great. I have a business too. I am able to save money. And perhaps, I'd be able to get a car so that ... I want to live in a place like this, mountains *ngay* (pointing at the image of the mountains) ... That's where I will live ... I want to be a musician. If I can. But ... If I have time, I can.

Fig. 2. Michael's Vision Board.



The first one is relationship with family. Happy. Complete family. Nobody is... Complete and then happy. *Dyay lang met* (just that) ... There is sharing between the two of them... *Kasjay* (just like that). This is work [points to the image] ... They are like discussing about *dyay* (something). What's this? It's a job for a business administration person... I could not find a picture of a graduate that's why I just wrote it ('College Grad') ... For travel, these will be the places (Japan and China). I will be travelling to these places. It's like they have respect that is why it is good.

Fig. 3. Brian's Vision Board.

because the images used for the vision board activity were drawn from a local daily newspaper, this also reflects media and advertising companies' subscription to traditional notions of family. These views are seen in April's use of the line 'let's grow together' and Michael's and Brian's choice of the image of a happy nuclear family. For them, the good life is characterised by simplicity, of desiring less. As Brian and Michael say, '*dyay lang*' (just that) and '*simple lang*' (just simple), respectively. Second and in relation to mobility, the idea of leaving for family did not stand out. Instead, travel to places like China and Japan were striking. Brian, for example, wants his future family to travel to China and Japan. He says, '*kasla gamin adda ti respect da isu nga mayat idjay*' (they seem to have respect/are respectful that's why it is good there). Third is entrepreneurialism as seen in Michael's wish to have his own business or April's desire to have her own restaurant or café as seen in their vision boards. Fourth is a demonstration of an imagined agency in so far as they are able to exercise self-determination. This is most pronounced in April's line, 'it's because in your life, it's like you are its sole scriptwriter. You are the one who is running it, whatever future you may like'. In relation to mobility and agency, my more recent conversation with John and Lara in 2021 also affirm the visualisations of April, Michael and Brian. For example, John explained that he did not really want to leave because the job he wants is in the village:

- Jay: So even if you'd have a family and a house built close to your parents, you wouldn't think of going abroad?
- John: No.
- Jay: Why?
- John: What I can only say is that the job that I am looking for is here in our town.
- Jay: So, you think that it's fine to be a policeman here because they are paid quite well?
- John: Yes.

In contrast, Lara acknowledges the difficulty of going abroad and explains that this is the reason why she is having second thoughts:

- Jay: So, if you are ever going abroad, what job do you see yourself doing? Let's say you've finished university already?
- Lara: Maybe... I was told, well, I've only heard it and it's been enticing to do farming in Japan according to some. They say the pay is good. Like...
- Jay: So, you want to do farming?
- Lara: Yes. But from what I am seeing, I think it is also a tough job. It's not that easy. Because when you say farming, people think you're just planting, like... Or just looking after animals. But what I am seeing them do can be tough too. It's not like it's an easy and straightforward job. That's why I am having second thoughts.

What is noteworthy at this point is that when the left-behind children imagine having to face and respond to the mobility imperative, some of them are able to outrightly refuse it. This is evident in John's choice to be a policeman and Judith's dream of becoming an accountant in their town hall. Both jobs allow them to stay in their town. However, for others, when put in an imagined encounter with the mobility imperative, left-behind children resort to calculative tropes and use of conditions to justify their decision. This is seen in Lara who uses the experience of their neighbours who work as farmers in Japan and concludes that even if it is financially rewarding, it is not an easy work. In the end, she decides that it is better to not rush things. For her, it is better to wait for the right opportunity. On the other hand, Mark says that responding affirmatively to the mobility imperative should only be when it is really necessary. He says, 'when I need to leave, I will leave'. These clearly affirm what [Langevang and Gough \(2009\)](#) make of children's agency as tactical in so far as it is not about having complete control over their lives, but being able to adjust their responses depending on the situation. In this case and on the question of emigrating in the future, they respond by waiting, cost-benefit analysis and thinking through contingency.

## Concluding Thoughts

The documented attitudes of the left-behind children in my interviews with them as well as through their vision boards surface important lessons in thinking about familial responses to the mobility imperative. The left-behind children's responses to the mobility imperative as discussed in this chapter suggest that the systems of practice such as the glorification of migration through the media and villagers' ostentatious display of transnational connections, along with worsening social conditions, and previous generations' motivations for transnational migration do not always elicit an aspiration to leave. More importantly, there are instructive implications in thinking about young people's agency in relation to the mobility imperative.

First, the left-behind children's outright, conditional and calculative attitude towards the mobility imperative demonstrate young people's 'tactical' agency, in so far as they are constantly recalibrating their responses (Langevang & Gough, 2009) or as a 'make-do' response by tapping into their knowledge of migration through their experience of it and potential opportunities in the village for them. Despite the efforts of the remittance economy through companies such as MLhuiller and Western Union to produce and circulate positive emotions, or even when they are bombarded by material display of transnational connections in the villages (de los Reyes, 2019), the left-behind children instead use the experiences of their mother and their kin to inform their decisions for future mobility. This is best seen in their use of conditionalities such as need (I will leave when needed) or even doubting the move to leave (I am having second thoughts). As such, their agency is seen through their capacity to widen their 'horizons of hope' (Appadurai, 2013) beyond what their immediate milieu makes available for them.

Second, the left-behind children are imagining alternative responses to the mobility imperative that is characterised by willingness to wait for the right opportunity and capacity to make opportunities happen through education and entrepreneurialism in the villages. Their desire to finish their university education as a policeman, accountant, engineer or as a nurse and their weighing of possible options and contrasting it with their status quo show a more critical and active alternative approach to the mobility imperative. This stands in sharp contrast with earlier generations of migrants that either left because of extremely difficult circumstances to find safer places because of the dictatorship (Laguatan, 2011) or in search of greener pastures that are not available domestically. This is evident in their awareness of rewarding opportunities in the village (policemen are paid well) or the potential to venture into new businesses related to food and tourism as shown by fellow villagers who have put up small businesses such as computer shops, grocery store and cafes. These are increasingly seen as viable alternatives from the declining rewards and precarity of working in the small-scale mines which was the predominant source of income in their community. This is also affirmed by other cases such as Indonesian women's aspiration to stay because of their accumulation of educational capital funded by remittances and their

awareness of the social risks of migration (Somaiah et al., 2020; Hoang & Yeoh, 2015).

Third, by offering alternative responses to the mobility imperative, left-behind children are also changing the ‘politics of recognition’ (Fraser, 2005, 2008) between home and away, the local and the global. What they are doing is highlighting the equal weight and value of building a future in the village as opposed to leaving for another country in search of opportunities. Their choice to stay and thinking of their dreams (e.g. having a complete family) as *dyay lang* (just that) or *simple lang* (just simple) rebuke the normativity of the mobility-induced good life. For them, leaving is no longer the only ticket to the good life. This resembles to some extent what Somaiah et al. (2020) found from their Indonesian women participants’ use of the concept of *cukup* (enough) in relation to their aspiration to remain. For them, *cukup* can be considered as an alternative to ‘excessive migration and development’ which also parallels the To’to left-behind children’s social context of romanticised migration.

Overall, the left-behind children’s demonstration of conditional and calculative approach to the mobility imperative and their refusal to potentially leave prove what Cook and Cuervo (2020, p. 72) argue about choosing to remain:

...the decision to either remain in or return to rural areas should not necessarily be perceived as a coerced choice or be associated purely with a deficit of opportunities, especially when it is informed predominantly by non-economic motivations.

I conclude this chapter by arguing that the imagined refusal of the mobility imperative and its important place in left-behind children’s notions of the good life must be understood in relation to other factors. This include left-behind children’s attitudes as produced in relation to their location in particular classes and regions (McLeod, 2000) and changing labour market conditions (Cornelio & Calamba, 2022) as important structural limits in young people’s agency. When thought this way, not only is the refusal of the mobility imperative a decision that is continuously being adjusted depending on the situation (Langevang & Gough, 2009). It is also nuanced by the awareness that other left-behind children from relatively more privileged classes (e.g. children of IT professionals and nurses) might not behave in similar ways as the ones reported on in this chapter. Overall, what we are seeing from the cohort of left-behind children reported in this chapter is that there is a move away from the notion of the good life as a function of remittances.

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## Chapter 15

# Social Relatedness and Forenaming in ‘Mixed’ Families: Valuing Children of Filipino-Belgian Couples

*Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot*

### Abstract


The literature on ‘mixed’ families (in which members are socially viewed as ‘different’ due to their varying ethnicities and/or nationalities) identifies several stakes of mixedness. One of them arises from childbirth, after which parents need to give name(s) to their offspring. How does the parent–child dyad understand the giving of names in their mixed family? What does naming children unveil regarding interpersonal interactions and the value of children within this social unit? The chapter delves into these questions through a case study of forenaming children in Filipino-Belgian families in Belgium. Interview data analysis reveals two modes of forenaming in these families: individualisation through single forenames and reinforcement of collective affiliation through compound forenames. Through the analytical framework of social relatedness, this chapter uncovers the way the act of naming a child bridges families based on biological and social ties, generations, and parents’ nations of belonging in their transnational spaces. The complex process of naming reflects the power dynamics not only within the parental couple but also within the wider set of social relations. Although the use of forename(s) in everyday life and in legal terms differ, the value of children in the mixed families studied lies in their symbolic role as social bridges linking generations and non-biological relationships, the then and now, and the here and there.

*Keywords:* Social relatedness; forenaming; ‘mixed’ families; value of children; individualisation; collective affiliation; Filipino-Belgian couples; Belgium

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## Introduction

The studies on transnational families in which the members keep cross-national border social relations (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002) has increasingly brought to the fore children's experiences and points of view (e.g., Dreby, 2010; Nagasaka & Fresnoza-Flot, 2015; Ní Laoire et al., 2011; Parreñas, 2005). In this growing literature, the situation of children of 'mixed' couples – a social unit in which the partners have socially viewed differing nationalities and/or ethnicities (Collet, 2012; de Hart, 2019; de Hart et al., 2013) – is most often overlooked. In many cases, these young people are generally considered as part of the so-called 'second generation'. In studies on mixed couples/families, their experiences are also underexplored despite the growing interest in the stakes involved in mixed family lives. One of these stakes concerns the giving of forename(s) and surname(s) to children born of mixed relationships.

In this chapter, I aim to address this overlooked dimension of naming children in mixed families by considering the voices of both parents and children. How does the parent-child dyad understand the giving of names in their mixed family? What does naming children unveil regarding interpersonal interactions and the value of children within this social unit? Inscribed in the phenomenological tradition (see Zahavi, 2001), my study adopts the analytical lens of social relatedness – linkages encompassing beyond-biological interpersonal, intertemporal, and interspatial relations that individuals deem and feel important to their lives. This lens draws from the term 'relatedness' (Carsten, 2004), which means 'the ways in which people create similarity or difference between themselves and others' (p. 82). Although 'relatedness' when used 'in a more general sense' can lose its analytical effectiveness, it has the potential to capture 'other kinds of social relations' (Carsten, 2000, p. 5). Framing the dynamics of naming children through the optic of social relatedness can reveal not only the myriad ties parents or other kin members maintain, reinforce, and value but also the interpersonal links they (un)intentionally overlook or set aside. It can unveil the place children occupy and the role they are expected to play within a wider set of social relations. Besides, names can indicate an individual's social class belonging (de Singly, 2012) and other social affiliations.

As a case study, I analyse in this chapter the perspectives of parents and children in Filipino-Belgian families in Belgium. 'Filipino' and 'Belgian' refer here to persons born and brought up in the Philippines and Belgium, respectively. The choice of this case study is rooted in the fact that many Filipino migrants, notably women, are in couple with Belgian men – a phenomenon that became massive starting in the 1990s, during which Filipino women formed part of the dynamic feminised migration inflows to Belgium. Their case appears empirically interesting as they generally share the same Christian background and affiliation as their Belgian partners. Having this point in common, giving their children names may be straightforward unlike in the case of mixed interreligious couples (e.g., Cerchiaro, 2019; Odasso, 2016; Puzenat, 2008). Nonetheless, given that the Filipino migrants and their Belgian partners come from two socio-cultural contexts, their decision-making surrounding name-giving may involve a series of interpersonal negotiations, which may lead to individualisation

(Bühler-Niederberger, 2013; Elias, 1991) or reinforcement of collective affiliations (Cerchiaro, 2019; Edwards & Caballero, 2008).

To find out the realities of these suppositions, I examine my interview data from 60 individuals of 16 Filipino-Belgian families: 28 offspring, 12 fathers (10 Belgians and 2 Filipinos), and 16 mothers (14 Filipinos and 2 Belgians). I only included in this chapter the families in which I interviewed one or both parents and their child(ren). What I excluded here are the data from one family with a child born from the mother's previous partner and two families in which I did not interview their children because of their very young ages. It is important to take note that drawing from a larger study not centred on the naming dynamics in mixed families, this chapter mainly mobilises data on the awareness of children and their parents' stories regarding the origin and signification of their forenames. I met my informants through snowballing, and I adopted Bushin's 'children-in-families' approach (2009) – interviewing all members of the family if possible. As I explained elsewhere (Fresnoza-Flot, 2018a; Gonzalez Alvarez & Fresnoza-Flot, 2020), the interviewed children of Filipino-Belgian couples were aged between 9 and 27 years, and most of them possessed single (Belgian) nationality. Their parents were mostly in educational homogamy – having the same educational background. Although it is possible to use the mother's surname or both parents' surnames in Belgium, Filipino-Belgian couples opt for the father's surname for their children. Considering this similarity, my chapter specifically focuses on the forenames of Filipino-Belgian couples' children. I used pseudonyms close to the real forenames of all the study informants: for example, replacing Spanish forenames with other Spanish forenames.

In the following sections, I revisit the literature on mixed families in the context of migration to understand how children are viewed in this corpus of works. I then review the body of works on naming children to highlight the originality of my study, examine the place of children in the literature on families in which one parent is Filipino and the other non-Filipino (i.e., a person born and grown up in a foreign country), and provide a short background about the politics of naming in Belgium and the Philippines. The main sections of this chapter delve into the dynamics of naming in Filipino-Belgian families and focus on the following aspects: individualisation of forenames, the emphasis on collective affiliations in forename-giving, and the children's making use of their forename(s). I end my chapter by turning back to my initial questions and suppositions.

## **Children in Mixed Family Scholarship**

The literature on the progeny of mixed families is continuously burgeoning in the last decades (e.g., Edwards et al., 2012; Haritaworn, 2016; King-O'Riain et al., 2014; Rocha & Fozdar, 2017; Song, 2015; Törngren et al., 2021). One part of this literature concentrates on the context of migration, which mainly focuses on the migrant partners in mixed couples (e.g., Cole, 2014; Constable, 2003; Fresnoza-Flot & Ricordeau, 2017; Ishii, 2016). When children are tackled, the views of parents are generally highlighted in the qualitative and/or quantitative analysis (e.g., Dumănescu, 2015; Gaspar, 2012; Le Gall & Meintel, 2015; Varro, 1995). In recent

years, scholars have been progressively departing from this tendency by including or exclusively focusing on the perspectives of mixed couples' children.

In the literature on these individuals, 'children' can refer to one of the following categories: first, the progeny of mixed couples encompassing all age groups: minors, young adults, and adults (e.g., [Unterreiner, 2015](#)); second, the minor and young adult children of these couples (e.g., [Celeró, 2022](#); [Fresnoza-Flot, 2019](#); [Rodríguez-García et al., 2018](#); [Seiger, 2019](#)); third, the couples' children aged below 18 (e.g., [Kalmijn, 2015](#); [Kamada, 2010](#); [Slany & Strzemecka, 2017](#)), and fourth, the couples' adult children (e.g., [Zulueta, 2012](#)). In most cases, scholars combine two or all age groups in their studies, allowing them to present heterogenous accounts of mixedness. Interestingly, many studies have been conducted in Europe and Asia where marriage migrations have been largely documented in recent years. Works on mixed couples' children also appear to be more qualitative than quantitative or mixed, which stems from the specific themes explored in the field.

One of these themes includes the identity construction of mixed-parentage children. For example, [Seiger \(2019\)](#) shows that Japanese-Filipino individuals in Japan use several labels for themselves – '*haafu*, "mixed roots," Filipino, and *Firipin-jin*' – to adapt to Japanese multiculturalism that recognises 'diversity while maintaining ethnic and racial boundaries' (p. 404). The experiences of these individuals of Japanese and Filipino parentage are also analysed in other studies ([Celeró, 2022](#); [Suzuki, 2015](#)). These works reveal the salient impact of national context in which mixed-parentage people live and the effect of migration as many of them spent their early childhood in their migrant mothers' country of origin. Similarly, Thai-Belgian young people adopt multiple self-positioning strategies in Belgium and Thailand, where they are socially treated as racialised 'others' ([Fresnoza-Flot, 2019](#)). Considering the social 'othering' of mixed-parentage people, it is not surprising that they embrace non-homogamous identities. In Europe, for instance, [Unterreiner \(2015\)](#) observes that mixed-parentage individuals in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom adopt one of the following identities: heir identity (*identité d'héritier*) with equal identity imprints from parents, rooted identity (*identité d'enraciné*) with orientation to the country of residence, foreigner identity (*identité d'étranger*) with an orientation towards a country outside of the residence country, and beyond-nation identity (*identité au-delà du national*) encompassing the identities non-anchored to national origins. Exceptionally, [Slany and Strzemecka \(2017\)](#) remark in Norway that children of Polish-Norwegian couples 'rarely have trouble with identifying their national belonging' – that is, to Norway – compared to the offspring of Polish-Polish couples.

Considering the above few studies on mixed couples' children in migration context, it is time to valorise children's points of view in the analysis. The chapter contributes to this valorisation by underlining the standpoints of parents and children regarding name-giving.

## Researching Name Giving in Mixed Families

Since 'names are a core marker of an individual' ([Finch, 2008](#)), scholars interrogate the dynamics of naming children in mixed families, notably in

migrant-receiving countries in Europe and beyond. Their studies mostly examine the socio-cultural dimension of naming, encompassing issues on intergenerational transmission and parental strategies.

In Europe, studies abound on naming children in mixed couples. Analysing the significations of forenames for parents of individuals with different racial, ethnic, and faith backgrounds in the United Kingdom, [Edwards and Caballero \(2008\)](#) observe that although parents give forenames that they liked to their children, 'draw on popular culture, or adapt or construct names in an idiosyncratic fashion, they also wanted names that symbolized their children's heritages' (p. 55). Other studies show that these children's heritages are at the core of naming dynamics within mixed couples and an indicator of their identity. As [Odasso \(2016\)](#) remarks among mixed couples with an Arab partner in Alsace (France) and Veneto (Italy), forenames are one of the main identity markers of these couples' children. They suggest how mixed couples come to terms with their differences and residence country. For instance, compared to a few cases in which the children have Islamic forenames, most French-Maghrebin couples in Puzenat's study (2008) choose mixed forenames that would allow the 'best possible' social acceptance of their children's ethnic origins in France (p. 122). [Streff-Fénart \(1989\)](#) previously observed this 'neutralisation' among French-Maghrebin couples in the same country. More recently, in Belgium and the United Kingdom, [Ducu and Hossu \(2016\)](#) noticed the neutral approach among binational couples with a Romanian partner in forenaming their children, that is, 'in function of the country in which they are born and not the country of origins of their parents' (p. 141). Another neutral approach is choosing international names for children ([Slany & Strzemecka, 2017](#)).

There are other parental strategies for forenaming children, reflecting other realities of mixed couple's lives. For example, in her studies in France of mixed couples in which a partner is a Muslim Arab migrant or descendant of a migrant from Turkey, from a Maghreb country, or from a country in Sahelian Africa, [Collet \(2019\)](#) argues that children's forenames stem from parental intercultural adjustment strategies: highlighting the majority culture of the residence country, emphasising the minority culture, or promoting mixed family culture (see p. 159). Likewise, [Cerchiaro \(2019\)](#) identifies three parental strategies to confront family pluralism among mixed couples in Italy in which the male partner originates from 'majority-Muslim countries' (p. 52): giving double names as a "'pact of equity" between the partners' cultural heritages' (p. 56), alternating names reflecting 'the couple's "mutual migration" over time' (p. 59), and passing the father's name to children to transmit 'minority ethnic and religious identity' (p. 61). Likewise, there are Christian-Muslim couples in Greece in [Papadopouou's](#) research (2016) that give double names to their children for 'choice, flexibility and adaptation in identity management' (p. 159). Other mixed couples in Greece and Turkey prefer names for their children 'consistent with the local traditions and acceptable for the ethnic majority' ([Nazarska & Hajdinjak, 2011](#), p. 219).

Outside of Europe, [Le Gall and Meintel \(2014\)](#) investigate in Quebec (Canada) the cultural and identity transmission of three groups of mixed couples: Quebec-immigrant, immigrant-immigrant with varying origin countries, and partners with migrant parents of different countries. They observe that these



couples opt for plural forenames and surnames for their children to give them the choice of how to deal with their multiple origins later in life. In Japan, examining the legal dimension of surnaming children, [Mori Want \(2013\)](#) points out that children of mixed couples ‘cannot claim their ethnic/racial heritage of both parents in their names’ (p. 6). When children choose their non-Japanese parent’s surname, they will have a family register separate from their Japanese parent’s register. To pass their surnames to their daughter, a Filipino-Japanese couple challenged this law before the court and succeeded ([Mori Want, 2013](#)).

The above literature reveals the multiple parental strategies of naming children; their religious, ethnic and gender dimensions; and the impact of social context (notably if the residence society negatively views the mixed couples in question or if its law favours only one parental heritage). It also unveils that naming children is part and parcel of parents’ larger strategies of incorporation into their residence country on the one hand and interpersonal adjustment within their ethnically and socio-culturally mixed family lives on the other hand. Given that migration factors and mixedness intersect in intricate ways in the everyday lives of mixed families, drawing the border line between parental strategies of adjustment to migration context and those to a mixed family setting seems difficult to carry out. What is evident is that at present interreligious couple-focused and adult-centric analyses appear to be the mainstream tendency. There is only one study so far that focuses on the perspectives of mothers and their children in a mixed and mobile family setting as regards forenames – that of [Balode and Lulle \(2018\)](#). In this study, the authors notably bring to light children’s perspectives: for instance, protesting about their forenames or correcting their peers in pronouncing their forenames. They ‘encourage other researchers to engage with name investigations in different migration contexts’ (p. 83), which the chapter follows by focusing on the case of ethnically mixed, single-faith families including their children.

### **Children in Filipino–Non-Filipino Families**

In the context of migration, studies on mixed couples and families involving Filipinos and non-Filipinos notably from economically developed countries abound (e.g., [Constable, 2003](#); [Kim, 2008](#); [Piper & Roces, 2003](#); [Suzuki, 2003](#)). These works focus either on the individual partners (specifically, Filipino women) or on the couples. Compared to their counterparts growing up in Filipino migrant or transnational families (e.g., [Nagasaka & Fresnoza-Flot, 2015](#); [Parreñas, 2005](#)), children born and growing or grown up in Filipino–non-Filipino unions are rarely studied.

Most of the works about them can be found in Japan where a dynamic Filipino immigration has been taking place since the 1980s. For instance, Filipino-Japanese children’s biological ties with a Japanese citizen (i.e., mostly the father) can open possibilities to them and to their Filipino parent to immigrate, stay and work in Japan ([Celero, 2022](#); [Seiger, 2019](#); [Suzuki, 2015](#)). Their ‘consanguinity as capital’ ([Seiger, 2017](#)) that most often opens socio-economic mobilities for their family members

highlights their important place in their nuclear family. Nonetheless, some children underwent difficulties in Japan when their Filipino mothers ‘act counter to the moral ideals of motherhood’ (Suzuki, 2017, p. 122) and when they experience social discrimination (Suzuki, 2015). In other countries, the children of Filipino–non-Filipino unions encounter difficulties for overlapping reasons including the limited economic resources of their parents (e.g., Stickmon, 2014) and the separation or divorce of their parents (Fresnoza-Flot, 2021). In Belgium, recent studies examine the transmission of languages, nationality, and food practices from Filipino–Belgian parents to their children (Fresnoza-Flot, 2018a, 2018b; Gonzalez Alvarez & Fresnoza-Flot, 2020). They suggest how children are valued in the family as preserver of selected socio-cultural traditions from one or both of their parental lineage.

The above studies indicate how the national contexts in which the children of Filipino–non-Filipino couples live and how parents view and treat their offspring shape the latter’s experiences. There are no studies yet analysing the practice of giving forenames to these children, which may further illuminate the place they occupy in their respective nuclear families and/or larger kin networks.

## The Politics of Naming in Belgium and the Philippines

In the two countries where Filipino–Belgian families are enmeshed, we can find a diversity of forenames and surnames. This diversity stems from their historical pasts and laws regulating name-giving.

Before 1987, the Napoleonic law of 1 April 1803 (*11 Germinal an XI*) was the basis of name-giving in Belgium. This law only permitted forenames that appeared in calendars (Saints’ names) and those of known persons of ancient history. The law on 15 May 1987 ended this rule and allowed parents to give forename(s) of their choice to their children. Since the 1st of June 2014, the surnames children acquired at birth are no longer automatically those of their fathers. Children can acquire the surname of one of their parents, the co-parent of their parent(s), or those of both parents. They can also have one or more forenames.

In the Philippines, no legal system of surnames existed before the colonial period. Surname-giving only started in 1849 when Narciso Clavería (Spanish governor of the country) introduced a decree (*decreto de cambio de apellidos*) proposing 60,662 Spanish surnames to Filipinos (Talaván, 1997). On the other hand, the use of a middle name can be traced back to the colonial rule of the United States of America from 1898 to 1946. Nowadays, Filipino names are written starting with the forename(s), middle name/initial (the mother’s surname), and surname of the father. There is no legal rule so far regarding what forename(s) – foreign-sounding or not – should be given to children.

The above specificities of Belgian and Philippine contexts as regards name-giving may influence Filipino–Belgian parents’ choice of names for their children. This influence may also interact with factors at the individual level, such as gender and social class background of parents.

## Individualisation in Naming Children: The Value of a Single Forename

Asuncion: Your name is Julian?

Julian: Yes.

Asuncion: Do you know the meaning of 'Julian'? Why 'Julian'?

Julian: Because my father wanted a name that would equally be accepted in the Philippines and Belgium.

Asuncion: That is why it is 'Julian'. You do not have a second forename?

Julian: No.

Among the 28 interviewed children of Filipino-Belgian couples, 12 have single forenames like Julian in the above vignette. Practicality, child's birth order/place, and specific affective relation overlappingly shape Filipino-Belgian parents' choice of their children's forenames.

Filipino-Belgian parents mostly choose an international forename they came across through films or television programs. For example, the eldest child of one couple interviewed suggested the forename 'Frank' for his newly born brother, the name of the leading actor in a Hollywood film their family watched. Likewise, the eldest child in another family interviewed came up with a name for his sibling, the name of the leading actor in a famous television series. The Filipino mother of this family remarked: 'At that time, there was an American (television) series, action, (there was an actor) half French, half Asian and half American, I think. His name was Nathan Rumbaut'. As [Slany and Strzemecka \(2017\)](#) observe in their study of Polish-Norwegian couples in Norway, these couples prefer international names as a neutral approach to naming children.

The two families in which their eldest child influenced the parental choice of forename for subsequent sibling highlight the key role of proximate nuclear family members in naming children. Two siblings interviewed mentioned the influence of their Belgian grandparents on her Filipino mother's choice of forenames for them:

[...] my mother wanted to call us not Anthony and Dirk; she wanted [...] English name(s). But then, my grandparents told her that Anthony and Dirk (are) better because you can tell (them) in English, Dutch.

In a separate interview, the mother of these children evoked the practical aspect of a single forename. She imagined the complication of long names if her family went to the Philippines, where the mother's maiden name is included in naming children: 'when it is necessary to put my name, then it is already very long. Anthony (her son's forename) Rosales (her maiden name) van Limbergen (her husband's surname)'. This narrative suggests that when a family name (i.e., that of the husband) is particularly long, some parents turn to easy-to-write forenames for their children.

Interestingly, among the young people interviewed with single forenames, three were born in the Philippines: two have forenames in Tagalog (Amihan and Mayumi) and only one in Spanish (Roberto). The other interviewed children of Filipino-Belgian couples born in Belgium have Belgian French, Belgian Dutch, or international sounding forenames. This birthplace effect may intersect with other factors in naming children. For instance, when asked about the story behind her forename, Amihan replied, 'a woman helped my father when he was sick, and her name was Amihan'. Amihan's Filipino father confirmed it during a separate interview: 'When I was working in an association in the (rural) area, I met a woman named Amihan. I got sick in that area, and she took care of me'. The Belgian mother accepted the name 'Amihan', saying that 'it was a name that can also be pronounced here (in Belgium). (...) if you make a very difficult name, then it's going to have a connotation here'. Like Amihan and her parents, many young informants in the present study only received basic information about their forenames from their parents. The vivid details and stories behind their forenames remain in their parents' memories.

The case of Amihan also indicates that the birthplace effect intersects with parents' intention to remember an important person in their lives. This latter factor appears salient in two families. A Filipino mother explained that she and her Belgian husband passed the forename of the latter's mother to their daughter. An adolescent interviewed unveiled the meaning of her forename: 'the first name of my grandmother in Belgium was Emilia, and the first name of my grandmother in (the) Philippines was Marie, so they call me Emilie'. It is evident that daughters usually take the name of the female members of their extended family, notably the forename of their grandmother, maternal, paternal, or both. This gender dimension suggests the essential place of these women in the larger family circle.

In terms of decision-making, giving one forename to children has both ethnic and gender dimensions. Ethnically speaking, it reflects the widely adopted approach of single forenaming in the Philippines, which suggests, on the one hand, the consideration of the Filipino partner's natal country in name-giving and, on the other hand, the convergence of parents towards a more neutral mode of forenaming. Regarding gender, both parents of half of the informants with single forenames decided together how to name their children. Among the rest of the informants, it is mostly the fathers (three Belgian, one Filipino) who chose the forename of their children, notably that of their son and first child. This tendency is probably a remnant of the traditional Catholic-fashioned patriarchal societies of Belgium and the Philippines. The minority case of the four fathers above unravels how valuable the figure of the male first child is for the father in the mixed families studied, which can be attributed to 'the historically symbolic role of sons continuing kin lines' (Balode & Lulle, 2018, p. 75). Such a practice is usually the case of interreligious (Cerchiaro, 2019) or Muslim mixed couples (Nazarska & Hajdinjak, 2011).

## Collective Affiliation as Reflected in Compound Forenames

In Belgium, we often have three forenames. Me, I also have three. [...] because the first forename [...] it is the one we received from birth. The second (forename), it is that of the godfather, and the third (forename), (is) normally that of the godmother. (Claude, Belgian father of one)

The impact of the above traditional way of naming in Belgium can be observed among 16 interviewed children of Filipino-Belgian couples. Seven of them have three names, six have four names, and three have two names. These compound names of Filipino-Belgian children can indicate their parents' interpersonal/spatial ties, religious belonging, and social class background.

Fig. 1 illustrates the social ties that are considered in naming children in Filipino-Belgian families. Generational connections (notably with grandparents) and social relationships beyond biological (specifically with godparents and friends) are highly valued. This social relatedness is spatially situated within the transnational spaces of the families linking Belgium and the Philippines. Interviewed children of Filipino-Belgian couples are mostly aware of this aspect of their compound forenames, as the vignette below illustrates:

Jesusa, it is a little girl that my mother knows in the Philippines [...]. It is the name of a little girl: Jesusa. Solange, it is my father who liked it well. [...] Sarah, it's the name of my godmother (in Belgium).

Despite the awareness of the informant as regards the origin of her name, she could not give vivid details about it, unlike her mother in a separate interview:

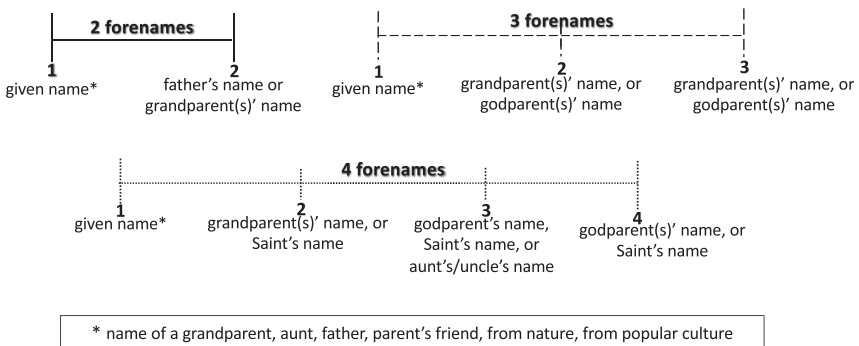


Fig. 1. Social Relatedness in Forename-Giving.

[...] my brother who passed away, he was a driver of a little girl named Jesusa. [...] (If) I would have a daughter, I would call her Jesusa, and because Jesusa, it is also Jesus [...]. That is why I said 'okay, we will call her Jesusa'.

The Christian religious background of Filipino-Belgian parents generally makes naming children a tension-free process, as parents could easily agree on choosing a Saint's name in the Catholic calendar. One Filipino mother remarked:

Cécile Marie, it was really me who chose this forename. I told him (husband). We did not have any problems. [...] why Cécile? It is because I like Saint Cécile. Why Marie? It is because of Virgin Mary. What I like for my children are forenames of Saints.

Nonetheless, when this mother gave birth to another child, her Belgian husband did not like what she proposed as Saints' forenames for their offspring's first and second forenames. Her Belgian husband chose different Catholic forenames and accepted her suggestions instead as their child's third and fourth forenames. In this case, the child's four forenames are the outcome of parents' negotiations and positioning vis-à-vis each other. It is akin to a neutral approach to naming (Ducu & Hossu, 2016; Slany & Strzemecka, 2017; Streiff-Fénart, 1989), as another case below illustrates in which the father opted for three German names 'Jürgen Hans Tobias' for his son:

I can't give a Flemish name to a half Filipino. I can't give a Filipino name because (my child is) half Belgian. So, I give German names... maybe crazy, I understand. Of course, she (Filipino spouse) doesn't complain about the names because we were just married. Lucky for me. But always, what I like (about) the names, they were really special.

In one case, parents constructed compound names not only by merging two or more forenames but also mixing up some letters extracted from two individual forenames. Their daughter has two forenames – Elise Joana. the first one is the forename of the Belgian father's mother, whereas the second one is a chimeric forename as the Filipino mother explained below.

The second forename (of my daughter) is the half of (my husband's forename) 'Johnny' and the other half of (the forename of her grandmother in the Philippines. Since my mother's name is Mariana, we took 'ana' from it. Like this, she becomes Joana.

All the young people interviewed with four forenames belong to either an upper-middle-class family (two cases) or a strong Catholic believer family (one case). The parents in upper-middle-class families are either entrepreneurs or have a socially valorised profession. The forenames of their children reflect their valued

familial relationships in the Philippines and Belgium (maternal/paternal grandmothers and godparents), which resembles the interviewed families in which the children have three forenames. In the second case, the parents (specifically the Filipino mother) are practising Catholics, and the forenames of their son came from the Saints' forenames.

Regarding decision-making, although both Filipino-Belgian parents had mostly a voice in the name-giving process, the Belgian father gave their children the first forename in half of the 16 cases of young informants with compound forenames. Only four Filipino mothers were the ones who provided the first forename of their children. Compared to their husbands, whose impact on name giving is evident in the 16 cases examined (as the initiator of the first forename or as a collaborator of their spouses in finding forenames), the interviewed mothers' influence in the choice of forenames is completely absent in five cases.

Such gender inequality in naming children in Filipino-Belgian families occurs alongside inequalities between the natal families and countries of parents as well as between their social circles. In most cases, the forenames of proximate family members accorded to children are those from the Belgian father's natal families who reside in Belgium. Likewise, the forenames from godparents, who are usually the couple's friends in Belgium, are mainly Belgian-French or Belgian-Flemish sounding forenames. Inequalities in forenaming can be partly attributed to Filipino mothers' long-term projects regarding their children's well-being and security. As I explained elsewhere ([Fresnoza-Flot, 2018b](#)), most of them opted for Belgian nationality for their children as a 'mothering technique', aiming 'to protect' them 'as much as possible [...] from experiencing the social insecurities they knew were present' in the Philippines (p. 286). Letting their husbands decide the naming of their children appears inscribed in this mothering technique.

### **Children Making Use of Their Forename(s)**

Regardless of the number of forenames (single or collective) they have, the interviewed children of Filipino-Belgian couples generally utilise one forename in their daily life. In the case of those with collective forenames, they mostly use their first forename, that is the one they uttered when I asked their name at the start of my interview. The majority of these informants like their forename(s), notably what they can convey to other people.

Asuncion: Do you like your forename?

Elise: Elise, yes. It is nice and what I also like is my second forename, Joana. It is also a bit exotic. It is not really a Belgian forename. (But) it reminds (me) a bit of both sides (paternal and maternal) so often.

Asuncion: So, there is a dash in the middle (of the two names)?

Elise: No, there is nothing on my identity card but when I present myself to somebody, I say often the two forenames. [...] Like this, it also brings a bit of originality. It is not only Elise, but there is also Joana.

The above informant's narratives suggest how she acts through her compound names as a bridge linking her paternal and maternal sides. Likewise, the awareness of the origin of one's forenames and the very act of uttering each forename accentuates and valorises the informants' biological and affective ties to the persons represented in their forenames, as illustrated in my interview with an informant below.

- Asuncion: What is your full name?  
Peter: Peter Arnaud Junior Jean.  
Asuncion: Ah there's a third name (Junior)?  
Peter: Because my father is Peter too.  
Asuncion: Peter the second. So, you're Peter the 3rd?  
Peter: ah twice, Peter the second.  
Asuncion: And the Jean is what?  
Peter: Because it's, it's part of the name of my mother, Jeanne.

Among the informants, only two appear exceptionally not liking their forename(s). The first one is the informant with three German names that his Belgian father gave him. When I asked him about his German forenames, he appeared uncomfortable about them, notably regarding his first forename: 'French people and English people, I prefer them to call me James because I hate my name when they pronounce (it) in different way'. Using a forename of his choice without his parents' knowledge, this informant came to terms with his first forename. His chosen unofficial forename underlines his individuality or the 'I in Elias' sense (1991). His case is an exception from the other informants with compound names who did not express their dislike of their first forename. The second exceptional case is that of Jesusa Solange Sarah who likes her two first forenames but not her third forename: 'unfortunately, I did not like (the name "Sarah") but it was her (godmother's) name'. Like other informants, this young woman only uses her first forename in her daily life.

Whereas complete forename(s) appear in official documents no matter how long they are, only the first forename is usually used in everyday life. Both interviewed parents and their children in the present study follow this norm, which suggest their pragmatic, individualised approach to forename(s). This practice may sometimes lead to forgetting of the silenced forenames. For instance, an interviewed adolescent did not remember any more the exact number of his forenames and what are his unused forenames: 'I think that I have three or four forenames, but I cannot say the others (except his first and second forenames)'.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The chapter demonstrates that parents and children in Filipino-Belgian families in Belgium have a relatively similar understanding as regards the stories behind forename-giving in their respective families. Children's forenames (single or



compound) suggest which interpersonal interactions are privileged and how children are valued within these families.

Through the prism of social relatedness, this chapter unveils that forenaming a child in Filipino-Belgian families bridges individuals and families based on biological and social ties, generations, and parents' nations of belonging in their transnational spaces. The 'social' in this plural form of relatedness points to interpersonal, intertemporal, and transnational aspects. In short, the value of children in the mixed families studied lies in their role as social bridges linking generations and non-biological relationships, the then and now, and the here and there. Indeed, through name-giving, parents anticipate the 'investments' they wish to realise in their children (de Singly, 2012, p. 30).

Interestingly, the complex process of naming children reflects the power dynamics not only within the parental couple but also within the wider set of social relations. Within the couple, gender inequality in forenaming children exists in a minority of families. In these cases, the father took the lead in naming children, reflecting the traditional gender ideology in Belgium and the Philippines, where the father fulfils the breadwinning role, and the mother accomplishes a reproductive role. Within the wider social relations of the couple, inequalities are observed between natal families, countries, and friends. In the case of compound forenames, the forenames of the Belgian parent's kin and friends in Belgium are considered more often than those of the Filipino parent's social ties in the Philippines. Inscribed in their mothering technique of facilitating the full incorporation of their children in the Belgian nation (Fresnoza-Flot, 2018b), most mothers appear to take a secondary or minor role in giving forenames to their children. As Edwards and Caballero (2008) argue, children's forenames 'symbolize parents' hopes and aspirations for who' these young people 'are and will be, to whom and what they are connected, as well sometimes as what they hope will be left aside' (p. 56).

Coming from two socio-cultural contexts, Filipino-Belgian partners did discuss and negotiate with each other in choosing forenames for their children like other mixed couples, as their naming process is not completely free from disagreements. The contexts which the interviewed families inhabit shape their choice of forenames, such as the single forenaming and middle naming traditions in the Philippines, the giving of compound forenames to children in Belgium, and choosing from a repertoire of Saints' and kin's forenames in both countries. Their social class belonging also influences forenaming, with upper-middle-class or Catholic practising families giving many forenames to their children compared to other families.

The fact that most interviewed families opted for compound forenames attests to their conformity to the Belgian tradition of naming and their individuality by choosing non-classical forenames from popular culture. On the children's side, only one seems uncomfortable with his first forename, whereas another one does not like her third forename. While the usage of full forenames remains in vigour in legal terms, in practice, interviewed parents and children alike use only one forename in daily life. Nonetheless, all of them except one are aware of and keep in their memories the significations of their forenames linking them to different

people, generations, and places. Hence, individualisation (Bühler-Niederberger, 2013; Elias, 1991) and collective affiliation (Cerchiaro, 2019; Edwards & Caballero, 2008) appear occurring side by side not only in the forenaming process of Filipino-Belgian families but also in their everyday lives.

What is specific in the families studied is that their forenaming is more straightforward or less problematic than that observed among mixed interreligious couples, which stems from the fact that they share a common religious background. Hence, the initial suppositions of the chapter are verified, enriching the understanding of the naming dynamics in mixed families. Future studies can further explore this aspect by investigating how adult children of mixed families name their children. Would there be a perpetuation of their families' naming tradition? How would they strategise to pursue individuality and/or collective affiliations?

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## Chapter 16

# “In This Way My Parents Could Really Develop.” Individualized Interdependence in Viet-German Families

*Jessica Schwittek, Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Kamila Labuda*


### Abstract

This contribution explores intergenerational relations and negotiations in Viet-German families. Due to family members' diverging socialization experiences in Vietnam and Germany as well as social ties in both societies, we assume that different ideas of intergenerational relations and mutual obligations may be found in Viet-German families. We distinguish between interdependent and independent intergenerational patterns of solidarity. Based on interviews with young adults – the descendants of Vietnamese migrants – four thematic areas are identified, in and through the shaping of which intergenerational relations are continuously negotiated at the face of migration-related challenges. These are (1) a childhood for the future, (2) reciprocal support, (3) individualization of family members and intimization of the family and (4) boundaries against kinship and the Vietnamese community. Our analysis reveals the emergence of a new, hybrid pattern of intergenerational solidarity, for which we suggest the term “individualized interdependence.” The role of young adults in the elaboration of this new family order stands out.

*Keywords:* Intergenerational solidarity patterns; generationing/generational order; independence; interdependence; negotiations; Vietnamese community; Vietnamese migrants

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## Introduction

Discourses on Asian minority youth in Western countries partly revolve around attributes of “invisibility” – both in public discourse as well as in scientific debates (cf. Kocatürk-Schuster et al., 2017).<sup>1</sup> This invisibility is linked to “the model minority stereotype [which] highlights their academic successes, with the implicit assumption of all-around well-being” (Luthar et al., 2021, p. 653), rendering further (scientific) attention seemingly unnecessary. While Asian immigrant youths have long been a topic of research in the United States already (see, for example, Kibria, 1990; Zhou & Bankston, 1998), they have gained little scholarly attention in other Western countries, and this is especially true in Germany. However, this negligence has been criticized throughout the last years, and research has also started to emerge on Vietnamese Germans<sup>2</sup> (for an overview cf. Schwittek & König, 2021). On the one hand, research in the field has pointed to the struggles of young Viet-Germans with both positive and negative forms of stereotyping in public and institutional spaces (Hoang, 2020; Suda et al., 2020). On the other hand, challenges within the private space of the family have been brought to the fore (Röttger-Rössler & Lam, 2018). With our study, we add to this research field by taking patterns of intergenerational relations, their consolidation and modification, as an analytical lens. In doing so, we wish to go beyond simplistic interpretations of Viet-German “success stories” and to abstain from culturally essentializing views on the ‘Vietnamese’ family. After providing an overview of current research on young Viet-Germans, we will introduce our methodological approach. Our empirical chapter presents reconstructions of the mutual expectations, obligations and negotiations thereof in Viet-German families. Finally, we will discuss our results against the background of families’ adaptive strategies in a (transnational) migration setting.

## Young Viet-Germans in Light of Current Research

According to federal statistics, Vietnamese migrants and Germans of Vietnamese origin are the second largest Southeast-Asian minority in Germany (183,000 people, 117,000 of whom have own migration experience, DeStatis, 2020), characterized by high diversity in terms of both migration reasons and conditions of arrival in the present and the past. Predominantly Southern Vietnamese people migrated to the Federal Republic of Germany as the so-called “boat people” (Beuchling, 2003) after the reunion of the two Vietnamese republics in 1975, to avoid political persecution, military conflicts with neighboring countries and socioeconomic hardships (Su & Sanko, 2017). From the late 1960s, young Vietnamese came to the German Democratic Republic for vocational training and university studies, and from the early 1980s onwards also as “contract workers”

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the journal *American Psychologist* has published a Special Issue titled *Rendered Invisible: Are Asian Americans a Model or a Marginalized Minority?* in 2021.

<sup>2</sup>In the following, we use the term “Viet-Germans,” a frequently chosen self-designation of descendants of Vietnamese migrants in Germany.

to German factories after a bilateral agreement had entered into force (Weiss & Dennis, 2005).

Different strands of research on the children from Viet-German families can be identified (cf. Schwitek & König, 2021). The first strand relates to their exceptional educational success, which was also reflected, for example, in the school performance measures of the PISA studies (Walter, 2011). With a rate of 58%, children of Vietnamese origin are more likely to visit the highest secondary school form in Germany (the *Gymnasium*, which provides university access), than Germans without migration background (El-Mafaalani & Kemper, 2017, p. 222). Research has focused on this school success “against all odds” (Nauck & Schnoor, 2015), as Vietnamese migrant families often match characteristics which are usually associated with underachievement: a scarcity of cultural, economic and social capital, parents’ poor knowledge of the German language and low participation in school activities (Nauck & Schnoor, 2015; Nauck et al., 2017; Walter, 2011).

We can identify studies that provide an in-depth look at intrafamily dynamics as a second strand of research. These studies, which are close to our own project, show the very high expectations of parents, which burden the offspring. While feelings of strong solidarity with parents and thankfulness for their sacrifices are voiced by young Viet-Germans (NhuMi, 2020), parents’ pressure to study hard and to bring home only the best marks is also a shared experience for many of them (Beuchling, 2003; Röttger-Rössler & Lam, 2018). However, parents acknowledge that a greater effort must be made in the majority society to be successful: this is a belief that stems from parents’ personal migration situations, where they experienced a loss of professional and economic status (Schmiz, 2014). Parents may as well expect their children to pay respect and obedience toward them and to contribute to family routines in different ways, for example, by helping out around the house, caring for younger siblings, working in the family’s own business, or providing language brokering tasks (Röttger-Rössler & Lam, 2018, pp. 80–82). Additional tensions may arise at the threshold to adulthood as children’s and parents’ future perspectives and ambitions regarding upward social mobility may diverge. The study by Röttger-Rössler and Lam (2018) shows that it makes an important difference whether young Viet-Germans have spent part of their childhood and youth in Vietnam or have been born and raised exclusively in Germany. Members of the so called 1.5 generation, i.e. young people born in Vietnam and living there for the first years of their life (as opposed to the second generation which has been born and raised in the migration country), are more understanding toward their parents’ strict education and position themselves as “‘bridge builders’ between Vietnamese and German lifeworlds” (Röttger-Rössler & Lam, 2018, p. 80). In significant contrast, the members of the second generation tend to criticize their parents’ attitudes and complain about their (strict) educational practices, and this results in experiences of tension and conflict in the relationships with parents.



A third strand of research are studies on young Viet-Germans' perspectives and lifeworlds, focusing on questions of identity formation and positive and negative experiences of being read as 'Asians' (e.g. contributions in edited volumes by [Ha, 2021](#) [2012], [Beth & Tuckermann, 2012](#); [Kocatürk-Schuster et al., 2017](#); [VLab, 2020](#)). Through ethnographic and biographic accounts, this research points to the impositions of both the positive stereotype of the 'successful Asian' and the rather negative stereotype of high inner-familial pressure to succeed ([Hoang, 2020](#); [Nguyen et al., 2020](#); [Trần, 2017](#)). Taken together, existing research draws a complex and ambiguous picture of Viet-German experiences, consisting of both success stories as well as fundamental struggles in which migration-related processes seem to be closely interconnected with intergenerational dynamics in the family.

### **Theoretical Lens: Generationing and Intergenerational Solidarity Patterns**

Our theoretical perspective takes off from the importance of intergenerational relations which were pointed to by several of the research findings summarized above. To the existing body of research, we add a study with a deliberate focus on children's active role in (changing) family dynamics. Based on [Alanen and Mayall's \(2001\)](#) concept of generational order as a fundamentally relational one, relations between age groups are rather to be understood as processes of continuous "generationing," i.e. of constant revision of expectations and evaluations of entitlements, exchange and solidarity ([Bühler-Niederberger, 2020](#)). In the sense of a relational sociology ([Emirbayer, 1997](#)), there is no (merely) one-sided direction of influence in these processes, rather all entities involved (groups, individuals) are simultaneously formable and effective. In keeping with this volume's focus on children and young people, and as a contribution to a hitherto preponderantly adult-centered research, it is now primarily the (possible) contributions of young people themselves to the shaping of the family that will receive attention.

Although relations between age groups are in constant inner-familial negotiation, they may be oriented to patterns of intergenerational exchange that are valid beyond the individual family and its specific situation. It can be argued that societies follow different (relatively stable) notions of these intergenerational patterns: ideal-typically, and as a rough heuristic, two patterns can be distinguished, in which the relationship and exchange between children and parents are conceived differently, both when the children are still young and when the children are adults ([Bühler-Niederberger, 2021](#), pp. 57–58). An *interdependent* intergenerational pattern of solidarity is characterized by a normative idea of "filial piety" ([Hashimoto & Ikels, 2005](#)), as it is known in many Asian societies, requesting children's obedience and respect toward their parents and following a norm of reciprocal support between family members. In contrast, the *independent* pattern – to which the countries of the Global North are oriented in both social policy and family practices – emphasizes an individualized childhood as a "good

childhood.” The latter pattern calls for the support of the older generation by the young only in situations of special need; the independent life plan of the young adults takes precedence (Bühler-Niederberger, 2021). In the case of Viet-German families, we assume that the socialization experiences of parents and children are different: with our respondents growing up in a society (mostly) adhering to the independence model (Germany), while their parents grew up in a society which was and still is predominantly characterized by an interdependence model of intergenerational solidarity (Vietnam). The latter may affect the migrants’ own position in the generational order, entailing expectations to support their family of origin in Vietnam, adding a transnational dimension to Viet-German families and their intergenerational responsibilities. The plausible assumption is that processes of generationing can be more demanding and conflictive in this field of tension between different patterns of orientation. And it is interesting to see which of these patterns these processes are oriented to or whether new patterns emerge in this hybrid situation.

### Methodological Approach: Narrative Interviews With Young Viet-Germans

For our analysis, we draw on two explorative interview studies which were motivated by the objective of reconstructing young Viet-Germans’ perspectives and experiences. The first study, conducted by Kamila Labuda, had its focus of interest primarily on the conditions of educational success, but surveyed the biographical experiences of young Viet-Germans very broadly.<sup>3</sup> The second study, conducted by Jessica Schwittek, was focusing on processes of generationing within the families. It placed a particular emphasis on negotiations at the transition to adulthood which stretched across transnational spaces.

The combined sample consists of nine young Viet-Germans (six males and three females), with whom we conducted 11 interviews.<sup>4</sup> All interviewees had grown up and were living at the time of the interviews in different parts of Germany. However, we obtained information about a much larger circle of young Viet-Germans in this way: all but one of the interviewees had siblings and reported on how they had fared at important points in their growing up. We will include this information here, as far as it concerns the proof of our assumptions or deviation from them. The interviewees were heterogenous regarding their parents’ migration situation (both “boat people” who had migrated to Western Germany and contract workers or exchange students who had migrated to the former German Democratic Republic). They were born between the mid-1980s and

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<sup>3</sup>The study was conducted as part of Kamila Labuda’s Master’s thesis (submitted under the title *A-sian, not B-sian: Educational Advancement of Children from Vietnamese Family Households* (supervised by Prof Aladin El-Mafaalani & Prof Jannis Panagiotidis).

<sup>4</sup>Two participants were interviewed twice in order to further develop our emerging theoretical concepts, referring to the strategy of “theoretical sampling” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) based in Grounded Theory Methodology.

mid-1990s; most of them in Germany and one of them in Vietnam but who had joined his parents in Germany as a very young child. All but one interviewee held a higher education degree (or were enrolled at university) and were working as employees; one was running her own business. One interviewee had completed vocational training. Appendix A gives an overview of respondents' basic information. Field access had been established by the researchers through social media, private networks and snowballing strategies. Participants were informed about the objective of the respective study and consent was obtained.

In both studies (although with different main focuses), the interviews covered a variety of topics such as childhood and youth memories, the family's educational and language practices, the importance of the Vietnamese community, experiences at school and with teachers, peer and friendship relations and biographical decisions (such as study subject, occupational choice and marriage partner if applicable). The interviews lasted between one and two-and-a-half hours – while Kamila followed a guideline, Jessica's interviews were strongly explorative – and they were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. The analytic strategy followed principles of Grounded Theory Methodology, such as open and thematic coding and condensed around the core category of generationing as a relational phenomenon. As subcategories, we identified four thematic areas, in the shaping of which generational relationships are (re)negotiated.

## **Results: Intergenerational Negotiations Toward Individualized Interdependence**

### ***The Story of Lien: “At Some Point Daddy Realized ‘Okay, I Have to Change Somehow So That I Don’t Lose Contact With My Children’”***

We start with the story of Lien, in which all four thematic areas in which generationing is ongoing are addressed in detail and the negotiation processes are clear to see. In this way, Lien's story can be considered especially illustrative for the theoretical model which we have extracted from the interviews. At the time of the interview, Lien is 30 years old and married, about to give birth to her first child. She has a sister six years younger, whom she also talks a lot about and whose negotiations with parents are very similar to hers. With her Polish husband, she runs a restaurant – very stylish, she proudly tells – where Vietnamese and Polish dishes are served. In addition, she also works in her parents' business; she says, “we help him (meaning: Dad) a lot when we are at home, my sister and I.” Lien has great respect for her parents' achievements. They came to the (former) German Democratic Republic as contract workers from poor backgrounds in Northern Vietnam. Unlike many of their compatriots, they did not return to Vietnam after the fall of the Soviet Union. Rather, they went into business for themselves, selling clothes they purchased from Vietnamese wholesalers. They sold them first in the market and then in one of those “typical Vietnamese stores,” as Lien calls it. Later, they imported handbags from overseas, supplied Chinese products to Indian restaurants, set up catering businesses. Lien comments, “So they really did everything, really. It all went very well, too (. . .) So I was doing

very, very well as a child (. . .) I really didn't want for anything"; she also got her own car when she was 18. Her parents now own several stores in town, and Lien is "super grateful" to them and admires how much they worked – "from Monday to Sunday" – and what they accomplished.

*Educational success and preparation for professional future:* Lien was brought up very strictly: "Well, my dad was very strict. What distinguished us from German children was that I was always picked up after school. That is, I was not allowed to go out. That sounds bad now, but it was very important to him that we did well in school." In this, Lien also recognizes a caring attitude: "I think that's the most important thing that all Vietnamese parents have: you have to be good at school so that later you can work with your head and not with your hands, like 'You have to do better than us.'" She is grateful for this now in retrospect, but as a child she often found it hard: "that you say, okay, why are the others allowed to go to the movies now, why are the others allowed to go to town and I have to study, study, study at home. No computer, no cell phone . . . You were also often sad about it and thought: unfair, unfair. Why are the others allowed and I'm not?" When Lien goes to university in another city, she takes her studies seriously and the parents also acknowledged that. She opens her own online shop for fashion articles while still a student, successfully completes her degree, runs her own restaurant and works in a responsible position in her parents' business. When reading her interview together, we researchers discussed the fact that we lacked the know-how and courage at this age to manage all of this.

*Support of the family by the children:* As a child, Lien was expected to spend most of her time studying and helping around the house. When she was a university student, a situation arose in which Lien was a great support to her family. She refers to it as a "cutting-in experience": "My dad had a very bad accident. He had a restaurant in the old town and it was destroyed by a flood. He was severely injured when trying to enter it and needed to go to a clinic and was out of action for months." Lien then took over quite a bit. She sold the destroyed business "really sold it for good money even though it was destroyed and it wasn't open. And that was, I think, this crucial point (she means: for her father): 'My daughter, I can trust her! She did a great job.'" She was taking care of her father, continuing to do her own work and she was stretched to the limit. "So, I lost an enormous amount of weight during that time, had an enormous amount of pressure and responsibility because I was the oldest at home and I didn't sleep for days."

*Individualization, self-realization, intimization:* Lien rebels when she becomes a teenager: "I wish I had German parents. . . Because you could see that the German parents were really, um, more interested in the welfare of the child and our parents, yes, they were just workers. They came to Germany and focused on earning money. I really didn't have such a good relationship with my dad between 15, no, 14 and 17, he was so strict and you were also pubescent and you just didn't understand the world. Everyone else was allowed." Lien invented excuses and white lies to be allowed to go to town with her friends. She also had a boyfriend at the age of 16, as she says, "very early," which she had to hide. Having a boyfriend so early was "a disaster for Asians," and besides, her boyfriend was not Vietnamese, but Polish. She started forging letters saying she had to do an internship

over the weekend. This allowed her to meet her boyfriend, but she felt guilty because she “took advantage” of her parents’ poor German skills. Eventually she moved to another city for her studies to be out of her parents’ direct control. Lien’s efficiency, the help she gave her parents in the situation that she called the “cutting-in experience,” led to the fact that now she also has “the right to speak,” as she puts it. The father also took her boyfriend, whom he knew from her school days, to his heart, so he accepted her decision to marry him. Lien expects her parents to accept their children’s own decisions. But she also expects – and sees this as connected to – that the parents, for their part, engage in a bit of self-realization. They should become more “open” and “relaxed,” and according to her, they are making good progress: “Well, I think my dad has really made a leap in the last few years. He has become totally open-minded.” This also includes treating themselves to something, and parents and children enjoying time together on vacation. Lien has also already planned for her parents to be grandparents who will one day retire and take their grandson to soccer practice. They could also enjoy living in the same house. Those are her dreams for the future, which she confides to the interviewer. What Lien has in mind, then, is not a loosening of relationships in the family. It is rather a new and especially intimate cohesion among family members who make their individuality accessible to each other and mutually accept it. We refer to this process as “intimization”.

However, Lien is left with some ambivalence toward the individualized life, the life of self-realization. Looking at herself and her generation of young Viet-Germans, Lien says somewhat pejoratively: “At 30, I’m still just a child, that is, of my parents,” and about one of her peers: “He’s in his mid-30s by now, and he has also remained super young, and we don’t have the kind of responsibility our parents had at that age. Because we focus on our own life here. Our parents are happy when we get our own lives in order.” She contrasts this immaturity to the situation of her parents who had been taking care of three families (their own and their families of origin in Vietnam) when they were in their 30s.

*Vietnamese community and extended family:* The hard and unremitting work of the parents is (also) a consequence of their involvement with the Vietnamese relatives. A normal job in a company (with regular shifts and time for themselves and the family) would not have been enough, as the parents had to send money to Vietnam – both for the father’s and the mother’s families. But now – according to Lien – they also have to think about themselves. The family is now taking a vacation from time to time and has earned it, at least that is Lien’s clear opinion. This implies that not all the money should be sent to Vietnam, that “those in Vietnam should also get going”. Vietnam is also no longer so poor, she tells her parents, and so the relatives should not get all of the money for which her parents work so hard. She sees the Vietnamese community, and here especially the one in Germany, as an obstacle to self-realization. The first question at parties with them would always be about school success, and everyone is concerned with the “good reputation” (as a decent child/youth), otherwise there is “gossip”. According to Lien, many parents do not even know what their children are studying and they

lack interest in their children's personalities. There is no doubt that this is contrary to her idea of a good family.

Lien believes that her family – she, her sister and her parents – should continue on this path, and she also sees herself essentially as the architect of this reconstruction. She notes with satisfaction: “In this way my parents could really develop.” However, it is ultimately also the efficiency of all family members that has made this possible: the efforts of the parents, who created the economic basis, but also Lien's own contributions, which have earned her the recognition of her father and with which she helped the family in difficult times. In this way all of the struggles and solutions that were found between children and their parents can be seen as steps on a path to what we may call an *individualized interdependence* characterizing her family, not yet fully, but more and more – thanks to her tireless efforts. However, this interdependent entity draws narrow boundaries: against the extended (transnational) family and against the local Vietnamese community.

#### ***Four Thematic Areas of Generationing***

We have not simply told Lien's story chronologically, but already arranged it according to four thematic areas that become relevant and require working out as children grow up. The respective solutions in these areas directly concern the relationships between generations – between parents and their still young, then pubescent, and finally adult children. Therefore, we may speak of four thematic areas of generationing, which we analytically distinguished in our material, and through which we can trace the working out of a new intergenerational arrangement. The path toward *individualized interdependence* is evident for all of the young people interviewed at least as a guiding concept of the young generation. However, families differ in the extent to which they approach this goal and in the nature of the trade-offs they make in doing so. Along the four areas of generationing, we now want to present selected material from the other interviews and give more differentiated insight into the processes of generationing.

#### **Claiming Childhood for the Future**

Educational aspirations and professional goals were topics which were taken up in all interviews, but discussed to different extents and detail, depending on the importance the topic had for the interviewee. In general, high expectations of educational success can be identified as prevalent – be it as a self-formulated goal and/or as imposed by parents, as it became already visible in Lien's case. Six out of nine interviewees mention experiences of being pressurized by parents in one or multiple ways: by controlled leisure time to secure children's efforts for school (four interviewees), by being grounded or punished for bad marks (five interviewees) and by an unquestioned expectation to accomplish the Abitur successfully and to enter university (five interviewees). Their evaluations of these parental practices are multifaceted, containing both critique (for being “too harsh”) but also thankfulness and appreciation (for “taking care”). Nevertheless, even where interviewees describe their parents' pressure as strong, they present

themselves as the ones carrying the responsibility. As in Juan's case, where an interplay of his own and his parents' claims becomes apparent:

JUAN: My grades were getting worse and worse, and then in grade eight, I kind of made a cut where I realized that it wasn't working that way. Then I improved my grades, I think, by a whole average grade. I don't know exactly what the trigger was, but I think I had just gotten in extreme trouble at a time where I had been bringing home a lot of Ds. And then I just improved.

Although his parents gave him trouble for bad marks (as he "thinks"), Juan claims the active and responsible role for himself; it was him who "realized" the problem and who "improved" his grades considerably. There are also three respondents who explicitly stated that their parents were very relaxed regarding their success at school and content with average marks, only interfering in a "motivational" manner when the child's transfer to the next grade was insecure (which happened in two of the three cases). Those three emphasized their own motivation to study either when they found the content interesting enough or, in Mai's case, due to a desire to become "better":

MAI: Because I thought, it can't be that hard. Why do the others get it right? Why can't you get it right? So, and yeah okay, maybe a tutor will help you with that. And that actually helped me to improve. But I just wanted to get much better than what I could already improve. But somehow, I don't know, there seemed to be a limit for me. I met with friends to study for exams. And they also saw that I wanted it so badly.

The respondents' educational pathways suggest that they come up to their own and/or their parents' expectations: all but one interviewee have a university degree or are studying in their final semesters. However, this success cannot be interpreted as a solely one-sided dynamic of the parents' high aspirations and pressure to which the children submit (more or less readily). Rather, respondents present their school performance as their accomplishments into which they have invested a lot of time, energy and discipline, while at the same time acknowledging their parents' support. The children's success becomes visible as a collective process to which contributions from both the parents and the children are geared. However, three respondents do not present their success as part of a family project. Actually, they do not even present themselves as successful, although their current educational situation is respectable – they are in their last semesters at university or have just completed it – but they are unhappy with it. For example, they speak about their discontent with their choice of study subject, their struggle with the demands of university and how their graduation is long overdue. Furthermore, their parents are subject of their dissatisfaction: all three criticized their parents for applying too much pressure and being "too harsh."

### **Children's Contributions to the Family and Reciprocal Support**

Mai's brother, Thao, had been a "model student," she said in the interview, and although he had learned German only after his migration at age 10, he even jumped a grade at school and had very promising educational perspectives. However, his parents asked him to drop out of school in order to help them in their restaurant which during that time required more manpower for accounting, administration and delivering orders. Thao complied with his parents' wishes. With Lien and Thao, we have presented two cases of young people who sacrificially support their parents and put their own (private and professional) projects on the back burner. Reciprocal support – entirely as the situation demands – is probably the most impressive area in which generational relations are negotiated. The example of Thao shows that this is even more important than educational success.

Besides these far-reaching solidarities, all except for one interviewee have talked about supporting their families routinely through care- and language brokering services, such as taking care of parents' paperwork or tax declaration, accompanying parents to appointments, babysitting younger siblings and taking care of their school-related issues, helping out at the parent's store, or serving in their restaurant. Regardless of the kind of support, be it as extensive as in Lien's or Thao's cases, or be it on the level of everyday routines at home or in the family's business, respondents view it as a matter of course. However, they chose different explanations for it. Ha sees it as a response – and duty – to the support that the parents have given her, which she wants to live up to:

HA: There is no real German translation for it, but generations (...) so, my parents' generation gave me something and I give them something back, that is a kind of duty of care, (...) that I also fulfill it. (...) So family values.

While Ha – in a somewhat abstract way – refers to the normative idea of "filial piety" which obliges children to obey and care for their parents, other respondents attribute their support for parents more individually, for example, to their generous and helpful character.

The retrospective view of the interviews is revealing, showing that contributions to the family by both the older and the younger generation are adhering to a reciprocal norm. Children benefit from their parents' support regarding numerous things: for example, when parents buy them the best equipment and finance tutoring. The young can also rely on their parents for support when setting up their own business; they count on them to take care of grandchildren in the future, or to share their economic capital to buy a condominium together. Based on this mutual support, the families build and reproduce a rather tight web of interdependence.

### **Individualization, Self-Realization and Intimization of the Core Family**

In Lien's case story, we have worked out what we call the "intimization" of relationships with her core family members, which is essentially a process of



making their individuality accessible to each other, and of mutually accepting and supporting it. Questions of individuality and the individual interests of the respondents and those of their parents become especially apparent when interviewees talk about age-typical status passages such as choice of study subject or (marriage) partner. Although not directly asked about it, three interviewees mention that their parents used to express a strong wish for their children to find a partner either in Vietnam or within the local Vietnamese community. However, all three declined this wish. Indeed, it was exactly the parents' strong interference that respondents feared in case they chose a partner from the Vietnamese community. Tuyen imagines such a scenario:

**TUYEN:** Let's assume that I had a partner from a family of friends, and we quarrel, then that also has an impact on the parental relationships. That would be stupid, I think. It gives the impression of arranged friendships or relationships, if you are too much within that group. And my parents have often tried to, when I was still a teenager or even in my 20s, they always wanted me, at every party, they pointed to this girl and that girl and tried to make me talk or flirt with the girls from the Vietnamese families. But that was never my idea.

Like Tuyen and Lien, Mai also speaks about her struggle – and her success – to gain her parents' acceptance for her self-chosen partner. For example, she refuses to visit Vietnam before she is engaged because she fears being married off there, after having experienced how her older sister had been pressured to marry a friend of the family. When Mai eventually presents her German boyfriend, her worries that her parents wouldn't accept him didn't come true, to her relief. But still, she says, her mother sometimes tells her about the success of young men with whom they would have liked her to be engaged. But Mai's credo is different: "The main thing is that I am happy. And I'm also happy when I don't have so much money," representing an orientation toward romantic love, happiness and self-fulfillment.

In addition, professional choices are arenas of intergenerational negotiation and the balancing of individual and collective interests. Two respondents speak about their strong interests in creative subjects. One wanted to become an actress but eventually dropped her studies at a prestigious arts college to go into a more conventional professional field which was closer to what her parents wished for her. One young man wanted to study design, but felt discouraged by his parents when applying. Likewise, two others would have liked to do a gap year after their Abitur to make up their mind and get to know a couple of fields through internships, but their parents demanded that they enter university right away. In total, six respondents reported about struggles regarding their partner or professional choices.

This striving for individual freedom and personal choices may seem obvious in Germany which is considered an "individualized society" with a normative ideal of childhood (and youth) as life phases fostering young people's uniqueness and independence, as it was sketched out in the theoretical section of this chapter. It is noteworthy that this process is not exclusive for one age group in the respondents'

families. Not only the young people but also their parents are expected to individualize, to be sensitive to their own needs, and to make sure to do themselves some good every now and then. Lien, for example, encourages her dad to buy himself a nice car that he likes (and she adds: for him to come and visit her and his soon-to-be-born grandchild more often), and she persuades her parents to go on vacations together to ‘typical German’ holiday destinations such as Italy or the Netherlands. But these encouragements of parents’ individualization go far beyond matters of material treats and exclusive quality time with the family. Juan, for example, also says he supports his mother’s emancipation and improving of her position in the family, which also helped to stop the physical disciplining that had been common in the family before:

JUAN: My mother has become emancipated over the years. I think I helped her a lot with that. And she then became extremely involved with my little brother. She was very young when she had my big brother. I think only 18 or 19 and then I was born four years later. And she wasn’t emancipated. She just didn’t know, she was just the wife. With my little brother, that changed. He didn’t get physical violence.

This quote hints at the difficult conditions in which Juan grew up, characterized by harsh conflicts and physical punishments. His interview reveals his tireless efforts to modify the relationships in his family toward more mutual acknowledgment and closeness. Not only did he support his mother’s more equal position in the family but also he praises her for becoming “extremely involved” with his little brother – an involvement which eventually led to a less violent childhood for him. Juan also imagines his future family life to be based on these intimate, close and accepting relations between parents and children: “What I want to have, (...) what I want my children to have, [is] something like unconditional love maybe.”

### **Demarcation From the Vietnamese Community and Extended (Transnational) Family**

As mentioned above, the Vietnamese community<sup>5</sup> and networks are of central importance to the parent generation. All interviews contain reports on this, describing the parents’ dense web of contacts (at least in earlier days) and mutual support in private and professional domains. In Lien’s case, a somewhat critical or ambivalent attitude toward the Vietnamese community in Germany became visible. She is annoyed by the “gossip” and all too traditional viewpoints, which according to her are shared among Vietnamese people in Germany, e.g. regarding gender roles.

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<sup>5</sup>Note that we use the term “community” in a rather operational way, referring to different forms of relations within the ethnic group. These may be circles of friends and acquaintances, professional networks related to ethnic economies, or more institutionalized entities such as officially registered associations with cultural, political, or religious agendas and activities.

Lien is also skeptical toward her parents' financial commitments to family members in Vietnam and advises them to reduce remittances – and instead to invest the money in an apartment where she plans to live together with her parents in the near future. This “demarcation” from the extended family members in Vietnam and the local Vietnamese community can be interpreted as a consequence of an intensification of nuclear family relations and commitments. In two other cases, conflicts with parents' siblings in Vietnam and inheritance issues were incidents which led to a loosening of obligations with family abroad, at least regarding financial matters.

For Thien and his family, negotiations do not revolve around transnational family relations, but rather around the family's position in private and professional networks with fellow Viet-Germans. His girlfriend is also a Viet-German (whom he got to know through university and whose parents were not acquainted with his own), and the two are planning their wedding:

THIEN: And then just with planning of the wedding it is just still a bit slow because her father is just very well connected, he is a wholesaler, food wholesaler, so in the area of [CITY] he supplies everyone. He is very well connected throughout Germany, but we don't feel like having a big wedding. So, we're talking about 500–700 guests, of which we actually know maybe a fifth. And we don't really feel like doing that.

Thien goes on to explain that inviting all of the business partners is a matter of securing the family's face and honor for his designated father-in-law. However, he and his girlfriend are quite reluctant to have such a large and expensive wedding. Like in the cases presented above, Thien and his girlfriend pursue goals which can be classified as more individualistic: they would rather spend the money on a special honeymoon trip, or save it up for a condominium. Still, despite their individualistic orientation, they could well imagine living together with their parents in the future, quite similar to Lien. Also here, a certain distancing from community/collective orientations are apparent. Thien and his girlfriend consider investments in the ethnic networks “senseless”, but to the parents, a large wedding remains necessary to save the family's face in the community. It is remarkable how persistent the family's negotiations are: Thien points out that negotiations have been going on for a long time already and that the topic has led to discord within the family. However, the young fiancées neither give in, by having the wedding done in the way that their parents would desire, nor do they decide to do the wedding “their own way” without the parents' consent. Instead, a “compromise” is being worked on, indicating everyone's readiness to continue negotiations until a viable solution is found:

THIEN: I think her mother is working on a compromise, she said she has already tried to write a guest list, the most necessary contacts and then to narrow it down a bit more. But that's just still quite a current issue; I don't know what's going to happen now.

The examples of Lien and Thien were chosen to show how much the Vietnamese community in Germany and (transnational) relations with family in Vietnam present an arena of negotiating individual and collective identities. Processes of a demarcation from family members in Vietnam, at least in financial terms, and of the (professional) ethnic networks in Germany can be observed.

### **Conclusions: A Rocky Way Toward a New Family Order – Scopes and Limits of Negotiation**

We started out from the assumption that Vietnamese migrant families in Germany are influenced by both interdependent and independent patterns of intergenerational solidarity, due to their members' heterogenous socialization experiences in both societies and transnational social ties. As an empirically based answer to our research question, we propose the concept of *individualized interdependence* – as a new and hybrid pattern of intergenerational solidarity, which is co-constructed by both generations in Viet-German families in long and complex negotiation processes. We identified four areas, in which these intergenerational negotiations take place: (1) the claim of childhood in the service of future success, (2) mutual intergenerational support, including the contribution of the children already during childhood, (3) individualization, self-realization of individual members and intimization of the family and (4) boundaries against kinship and the Vietnamese community.

This hybridization process is in itself very specific for each family. It is influenced by different aspects, such as the context and conditions of the parents' migration, the economic and social capital available to the family, their relations within the local ethnic community as well as their transnational ties and obligations. The nine families into which we were given insights by our interview partners can be considered to be at different points when observed through this proposed lens of such a hybridization process. Six families can be regarded as having – more or less – arrived at such a new, hybrid order, which is characterized by high efforts on the aforementioned negotiation areas: the young generation's childhood is claimed for success and upwards social mobility, and children and parents engage in acts of considerable mutual support. It is exactly through these mutual acts of help and solidarity that individual needs gain legitimacy: individual investments of time and effort into the family's or its members' well-being give an entitlement to take care of oneself as well, and to cater to personal wishes. This individualization and intimization of the family and of intra-familial relationships can be viewed as a "contraction" – as drawing the circle of significant others closer and limiting it to the nuclear family. This is connected to the fourth area of generationing: a certain loosening of interdependencies with the ethnic community and (extended) family in Vietnam, or at least its re-interpretation toward a more emotional (and less functional) connection.

Our findings bear some similarity to what Cigdem Kagitcibasi has called "psychological-emotional interdependence" (Kagitcibasi, 2007, p. 20), a form of family relations she found emerging in the Turkish society, which is

characterized by a decline in economic interdependence while at the same time emotional relatedness is maintained and emphasized. While Kagitcibasi interprets this transformation of family relations in Turkey and other traditionally “collectivist” societies against the backdrop of modernization and urbanization processes, migration contexts such as the one discussed in this chapter can be considered even more complex. In the latter, the multiplication of “moral orders” of the country of origin *and* the destination country, as well as migration-specific processes such as migrants’ integration into the local ethnic communities are relevant. These adaptive processes, at least for the here-discussed group of Vietnamese migrant families in Germany, do not resemble a mere assimilation to the model of family solidarity that is predominant in the destination society. Viet-German families do not move toward an independent form of intergenerational relations, but with *individualized interdependence* develop a specific hybrid form, drawing from both the independence and the interdependence pattern.

For this hybrid form to emerge, families engage in negotiation processes to arrive at viable solutions, and this process may be time-consuming and contain episodes of tension and conflict. Our analysis indicates that parents, their (young as well as adult) children, and family members in the transnational space are involved in these negotiations, drawing from both interdependent and independent ideas of intergenerational solidarity patterns in the migration context. This points to what König et al. call “adaptive capital,” enabling families to “break through the usual mutual expectations and benefits that apply in families and are structured according to gender and generation” (König et al., 2021, p. 217). Viet-Germans’ families, and especially the members of the younger generation, generate this sort of adaptive capital by carving out new intergenerational arrangements through both embracing *and* changing mutual expectations and duties. However, this process is conditional: an economic basis, as achieved by the parents is a prerequisite, and a certain achievement of success by the children is needed for the negotiations to progress. In short: this adaptive process works well when all family members are successful in generating capital (economic, social and cultural) to fuel negotiations, and when mutual support bears fruit.

However, even when resources are available and negotiations are progressing, arriving at a new family order resembles a “rocky road,” on which detours are taken and obstacles navigated. Three families in our sample appear to have “stalled” in their negotiation process, paralyzed by the burden of “constant negotiation conflicts” as one respondent puts it. No success story is told to present the family’s mutual efforts and cohesion. Rather, withdrawal and reduction of contact and communication between parents and children are prevalent. But this interpretation may also in part be due to the methodological approach of this study, with individual single interviews offering only “snapshots” in time of what has been shown to be a rather long-term process. It is well possible that episodes of withdrawal and separation mark turning points in these processes, urging everyone involved to look for new ways of connecting and relating. In this way, the quote used in the title - “In this way my parents could really develop” - can also be considered to hint at such a turning

point. Further research needs to investigate the conditions and dynamics of these processes with longitudinal approaches, and by including not only the young generation's perspectives, but also those of the parents to gain a more comprehensive picture of families' creative processes of adapting their intergenerational arrangements in migration contexts.

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## **Appendix A: Overview of Respondents' Basic Information**

**Duc** (33 years, male), born in Western Germany, works as an engineer in a large company.

**Ha** (30 years, female), born in Eastern Germany, just about to finish her university studies in the humanities.

**Hao** (26 years, male), born in Western Germany, in his final semester of his university studies in the natural sciences.

**Juan** (30 years, male), born in Western Germany, holds an academic degree in accounting and works as an employee in a large company. He talks in his interview also about his younger brother (18 years) and his older brother (34 years). Two interviews were conducted with Juan.

**Lien** (30 years, female), born in Eastern Germany, holds a university degree in business administration and runs her own restaurant. She talks in her interview also about her younger sister (24 years).

**Mai** (36 years, female), born in Western Germany, did an apprenticeship and works as an employee in a small company. Talks also about her brother Thao (47 years) and her sister (45 years) in the interview.

**Nam** (26 years, male), born in Western Germany, in his final semesters of his university studies in educational sciences.

**Thien** (29 years, male), born in Eastern Germany, holds an academic degree and works as an employee in a research institute. Two interviews were conducted with Thien.

**Tuyen** (37 years, male), born in Vietnam and joined his parents in Germany at age 3, works as an engineer in a large company.



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