

It's All for the Child: Chinese Golden Visa Migrants in  
Pursuit of a Good Enough Life in Budapest

By  
Fanni Beck

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Supervisors: Professor Jean-Louis Fabiani  
Associate Professor Szabolcs Pogonyi  
Professor Pál Nyíri

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Fanni Beck, candidate for the PhD degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 31 March 2024

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## ABSTRACT

The story of Chinese “golden visa” migration to Budapest told through the pages of this thesis is as much the story of migration as it is of the ethics of parenting and the emerging political subjectivity that lies at their intersection. The migration studied here departs from conventional pursuits of material wealth and is primarily oriented toward child-rearing instead, making it an exemplar of reproduction migration to the extent that it largely forsakes production. Yet, the migrants in this study drop out of the parenting race in China not for the potential rewards of educational choices abroad in the *future* but to escape from a detrimental environment to one that seems to be best for their child at the *present*. Instead of striving for the superior by conforming to the hegemonic definition of success by material wealth, they opt for a cheaper and slower environment and aspire to redefine success as a simple, “good enough” life.

Taking my participants’ need for escape, and their quest for a good enough life just as seriously as the economic constraints that necessitated and enabled this to be pursued in a cheaper environment in the first place, I operationalize the notion of *geoarbitrage* and Weber’s distinction between *Zweckrationalität* and *Wertrationalität*. I approach this mobility by accounting for the economic structuring of a distinctly anti-economically oriented agency as two sides of the same coin and point out how these supposedly mutually exclusive rationalities in fact play out in an inherently dialectical manner, mutually implicated upon and constituted by each other. As such, the specific orientations to time and space through which these parents carve out new meanings for the good enough life stand at the heart of this inquiry.

I argue that this self-conscious *spatial downscaling* suggests a renunciation of the norms and values of material modernity accompanying China’s swift and profound economic, political, and social reconfiguration, and is mediated through changing notions of child-rearing.

Temporally, it points to the *present* as the decisive temporality for decision-making, epitomizing a specific temporal orientation toward the basic ethical question of living a “good enough life.” In essence, it is a form of *temporal-geoarbitrage* by which migrants use their capital to opt out from the normative constraints imposed by the grinding temporal structures of contemporary urban China and instead choose Hungary as an “oasis of deceleration” to regain *temporal autonomy* over how to spend their lives.

Living decidedly simple lives in distinctly simple environments, deliberately refraining from extravagance and luxury, these parents step off the beaten track of success defined by material wealth; and derive meaning to their lives from a distinctly *postmaterial* appreciation of individual self-actualization, self-expression, and autonomy instead. Eschewing both the state-sponsored notion of neo-familism underpinning the “China Dream” and the global middle-class mandate of intensive parenting, these parents have chosen to move to Hungary to cultivate their children’s autonomy and, in a dialectical manner, to reclaim their autonomy as parents. Thus, this research seeks to elucidate the social consequences of China's rapid economic development coupled with tightening autocracy, focusing on the emergence of a novel form of political subjectivity viewed through the prism of middle-class child-rearing practices as it assumes new potential in the migratory environment. An anthropological account of the dialectical relationship by which the parent and the child form and guide each other through their new environment explores the complex relationship between migration, parenting, and evolving political subjectivities.

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## NOTE ON LANGUAGE USAGE

The typology of different cohorts of migrants and their emic categorization can be potentially confusing. The official designation of the first cohort is “new migrants” (*xin yimin*), but, by virtue of history, this group has come to be referred to as “old migrants” (*lao yimin*) by more recent arrivals. To avoid ambiguity, throughout this dissertation, I use “new migrants” exclusively to refer to this initial group. I refer to the later cohort as “golden visa migrants” or by the more specific category of “residency bond immigrants” – expressions I use interchangeably. I use “China” to denote the People’s Republic of China for reasons of simplicity, without any political intent. For the transliteration of Chinese words, I use the *pinyin* system. A glossary of all Chinese terms, names, and expressions is provided in **Appendix 1**, organized by chapter and presented in the order of appearance. The two Weberian notions central to the dissertation, *Zweckrationalität* (instrumental rationality) and *Wertrationalität* (value rationality) are used in German.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCP	Chinese Communist Party (1921-2003)
CPC	Communist Party of China (2003-present)
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FIRE	Financial Independence, Retire Early
GNC	Government of National Cooperation
HSO	Hungarian Statistical Office
NOFC	National Office for Foreigner Control
OINA	Office of Immigration and Nationality Affairs
PRC	People’s Republic of China
RBI	Residency by Investment
SU	Soviet Union
WTO	World Trade Organization

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## PRELUDE

No matter the day of the week, the time of day, or the whims of the weather, strolling across Budapest's City Park – where I spent a significant amount of my time with a puppy and two children – I could not help noticing that I bump into a surprising number of Chinese people. Unfolding to the more conventional rhythm of the day, early in the morning, I see middle-aged Chinese men and women pedaling their bikes across the park to open their small shops, their faces expressing determination to get things done – once again, day by day. Similarly resolute are the school kids zipping by on their scooters heading to the school. After school starts, and most people subject themselves to the rigid time regimes of the workplace and school, the park gets quiet – after all, this is not the time designated for leisure or recreation.

However, Chinese people whose temporal constraints are seemingly not that grinding keep appearing: a group of youth fiercely plays basketball, while Chinese men and women repeatedly jog by on the racetrack wearing sleek, brand-name sports outfits. I also catch a glimpse of a dad idly playing table football with his child in the middle of the day, wondering how they both have the time to do so. In the afternoon, when the park once again starts to buzz with life, the sight of elderly Chinese couples diligently playing ping pong becomes a characteristic scene, their back-and-forth speaking of long decades of cooperation. On warmer summer evenings, kids in their early teens recklessly ride around the park with no sign of parental control in sight, filling the air with sounds of youthful freedom. But my absolute favorite of all encounters is a middle-aged couple, who is walked around by a pair of frisky dogs, clearly turning the authoritative relationship upside down.

This gave me pause because I always felt that the particular freedom I enjoy in coming and going to the park extemporaneously at my own will, and more generally in deciding when and what to do with my time as a dissertation-writing PhD student, is an exceptional luxury. Thus, seeing so many people with a similar privilege gave me pause, even more so because they were Chinese. Chinese people have long been known for their more-than-Protestant work ethic, not only working long hours but making the most efficient use of time. The capacity and efficiency of Chinese people are among the defining elements of their contemporary stereotype: whether in academics (the “Asian success” narrative in America), China’s “gold medal factory” at the Olympics, or the breathtaking speed of constructions; the world marvels and is startled by the neck-breaking pace Chinese dictate.

Overseas Chinese are also stereotypically known as “hard-working,” often working 12-hour days, seven days a week. And, according to my own experience, this held true for the Chinese residents of Hungary until the mid-2010s. Despite their high numbers, Chinese people in Budapest were completely invisible in public leisure places. In 2010, when I started chasing Chinese people across the city for interviews for research purposes, I had a hard time finding anyone who did not feel that talking with me without any clear, palpable goal was a pure waste of time, and therefore something to reject without hesitation.

So, when I found myself approached by Chinese people inviting me to their homes for aimless friendly chats, I felt almost shocked. The excessive time surplus that made this possible did not stem from a clear existential/financial advantage over my previous interview targets: they were well-off, but by no means belonged to the elite. And anyhow, long gone are the times when Veblen (2007 [1899]) put forward his theory of the leisure class: enjoying freer time regimes no longer abides by class stratifications as neatly as they used to. Leisure classes and the elite

are just as harried (Linder 1970) as the less fortunate, making time poverty – though doubtless of a different quality – a surprisingly evenly distributed calamity, cutting across class boundaries.

## **Roadmap to the dissertation**

The migration of Chinese families through a residency bond immigration scheme to Hungary, the case study in the focus of this dissertation, subverts established migration theories and is counterintuitive to conventional wisdom in many regards. It is an investment migration, but it is not about investment, nor is it about the future or the accumulation of wealth. It is a characteristically distinct, postmaterialist migration oriented at reproduction and more precisely at child-rearing. Contrary to what might be expected from middle-class parents embarking on a journey of educational migration, this migration is not about intensive parenting and the accrual of cultural, symbolic, or educational capital. Instead, it embodies a eudaimonistic quest for a simple life that is "good enough" for parents and children alike. To underscore the distinctiveness of this phenomenon, a significant portion of the dissertation is dedicated to juxtaposing this case against all that it is not, at times taking unexpected and complex turns in the analysis. To aid the reader in navigating the spiral of examination that defines this migration as qualitatively novel, I hereby provide a roadmap.

In the first chapter, by way of an asymmetrical comparison drawn between the “new migrants” of the 1990s and the “golden visa migrants” of the 2010s, I provide the historical, political, economic, and social background of migration from China to Hungary. This comparison not only sets the structural context for the case study but also highlights the distinctly postmaterialist characteristics that set apart “golden visa” migration. I argue that a crucial distinction between the “new migrants” and “golden visa migrants” lies in how they prioritize

production and reproduction in their decisions, thereby establishing the grounded-theoretical framework for this dissertation.

Chapter 2 provides a review of migration literature by emphatically pointing out that a crudely economic *zweckrational* perspective dominates the field. This methodological economism prevents dominant migration theories from obtaining explanatory power over the *wertrational* rationale that is just as much part of migratory decision-making and consequently leads to the “writing out of the family” from migration studies. By pointing out the specific spatial, racial, classed, and temporal presumptions on which these frameworks operate, I foreground the importance of incorporating *wertrational* logic to understand contemporary migration phenomena. After reviewing the more agentic frameworks to approach migration, I attempt to reconcile them with structural frameworks and propose a more systematic approach to aspirations, centering on an unduly neglected dimension of human life in migration studies: reproduction. Doing so, I account for both the sociocultural change that increasingly foregrounds the importance of reproduction by centering attention on children and the subsequent developments reflecting this shift in the social sciences in general and migration studies in particular.

In Chapter 3, I delve deeper into the realm of reproduction and engage with theories on the ideal of the separation between the private and the public spheres and more closely with the ideology of the modern family, evolving in the *longue durée* of transformation in Western Europe and the United States of America, and eventually leading to the emergence of child-centeredness as a hegemonic *structure of feeling*. I then explore how similar processes have unfolded in the extremely compressed transformation of the Chinese family. I conclude this



chapter by melding insights from the field of reproduction with the aspirations and capabilities framework (de Haas 2021) for migration to propose my *wertrational* theory of migration.

Chapter 4 provides the methodological underpinnings of the research, exploring what the reversal and transgression of the field-home divide entailed for the research in practice. It also provides a closer examination of my positionality as both a native and a researcher, and not the least, a mother in both the field and at home. Chapters 5 through 7 present the empirical core of the research, offering narratives and in-depth explorations of the intimate lives of three families. In the concluding chapter, I revisit the most important questions raised by the thesis and the answers it attempted to provide for them.

# CHAPTER 1: FROM PRODUCTION TO REPRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Introduction

While the opening vignette offered in the Prelude would not be a surprising scene in a major global city, say, New York's Central Park, it is rather unexpected in Budapest, Hungary. The conspicuous presence of Chinese migrants is surprising not only because of the country's peripheral position on the landscape of Western modernity but also because of the Hungarian government's vehement and omnipresent anti-immigration discourse – the backdrop against which the country became the most multicultural of its recent history (Beck and Nyíri 2021). Furthermore, the increase in the visibility of Chinese immigrants at this fraught moment in Hungary is surprising as it does not necessarily correspond to a quantitative rise in their numbers, but rather to a qualitative change in their disposition. The radical change in visibility suggested by this postcard-like vignette reflects the diversification of the social class backgrounds and corresponding aspirations of Chinese immigrants to Hungary. It is this shift that forms the central concern of this chapter.

Despite its unambiguously peripheral position in the landscape of global capitalism, Hungary hosts a surprisingly large and diverse community of Chinese immigrants (Figure 1). Ranging from traders and international students to lifestyle migrants and their children, the estimated 20,000 Chinese nationals residing in Hungary (STADAT, n.d.) not only make up the largest immigrant group in the country but also constitute the largest Chinese immigrant population in Central Europe.<sup>2</sup> Taking this heterogenous and young Chinese diaspora as its focus, the present

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<sup>1</sup> This introductory chapter builds on data, ideas, and insights I began developing in two chapters I have written for edited books (F. Beck Forthcoming; 2022) as well as on the extensive research collaboration and joint publications with Pál Nyíri (Nyíri and Beck 2020; F. Beck and Nyíri 2021; 2022).

<sup>2</sup> That data on Chinese residents in Hungary is incongruent and somewhat unreliable is not new (see Nyíri 2010, 150–51). For example, while according to the data provided by the Hungarian Statistical Office (HSO), the number of Chinese residents in Hungary by the 1<sup>st</sup> of January in 2023 is 18.192, the Address Register of the Ministry of

chapter seeks to answer the following questions: How has the present composition of the Chinese in Budapest evolved and transformed through the course of the past three decades? How have new migration pathways created the new opportunity structures that enabled different kinds of migration? What are the characteristic aspirations that animate different cohorts taking advantage of these smoother pathways? How does the transformation of the diaspora's makeup reflect China's emergence as a global superpower and accompanying changes in the narratives of a better life among Chinese migrants?

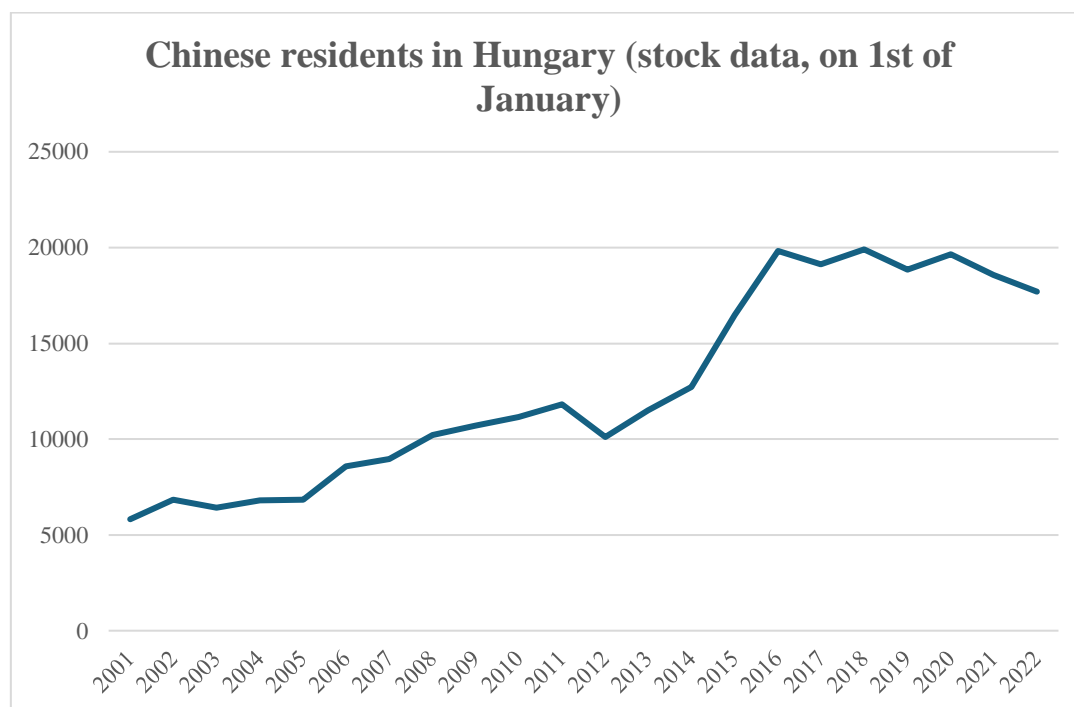


Figure 1. Chinese residents in Hungary (2001-2022). Source: HSO.

Interior registered 19,355 Chinese nationals with Hungarian address cards. The HSO statistic does not include the Chinese university students, whose number tripled between 2014 and 2021, reaching 2588 people (HSO). It is also unclear how the 19,838 residency bond immigrants feature in its statistics. Upon my request to clarify this question the HSO replied that they do not obtain data on the residence permits, therefore these migrants would fall into the same category. However, though substantial, the 1.58 times growth registered by the HSO (from 11,504 in 2013 to 18,192 in 2023), a difference of 6,688 individuals is nowhere near the almost 20,000 increase in new residence permits (about the intricacies of residence permits and actual residence later). It is also interesting, that according to data required from the Hungarian Office of Education, the number of Chinese children enrolled in Hungarian schools tripled in the same period (from 974 in 2013 to 2,510 in 2022). For lack of better, I will stick to the HSO data. See Figure 1. Chinese residents in Hungary (2001-2022). Source: HSO

In this introductory chapter, I set the historical, political, economic, and social context of migration from China to Budapest, Hungary, serving as a background for the coming chapters. Through a historical overview of migration from China to Hungary (1989-2023) based on statistics, secondary sources, and literature, I focus on how shifting economic, social, and geopolitical structures (such as China's rise, post-socialist Hungary's evolving foreign direct investment dependence, etc.), resulted in two qualitatively distinct mobilities, engendered by two clearly delineable migratory regimes: the visa waiver agreement between 1989-92 and the residency bond scheme between 2013-17. I introduce both regimes through the intermingling perspectives of China, Hungary, and the migrants themselves by way of analyzing the policies, their consequences, and their discursive contexts. The aim of this asymmetric comparison is twofold: 1) to set the structural background and context for migration from China to Hungary by exploring the political, economic, and social forces that brought about these two migratory flows, and 2) to foreground the distinctive characteristics that set apart "golden visa" migration which will serve as the guiding grounded-theoretical principle for this dissertation.

## **1.2 Visa waiver agreement between 1989-1992: "New migrants"**

The years 1989-1990, when migration from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Hungary first gained momentum,<sup>3</sup> was a landmark period in the histories of both countries. For the PRC, this moment came in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, which sharply marked the halt of a decade of high hopes for democratic transition that initially accompanied the country's integration into the capitalist world-system. In Hungary, this moment coincided with the beginning of its transition to a market economy and opening to the

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<sup>3</sup> While limited and sporadic attempts to enhance diplomatic relations between the two countries during the Cold War era did result in a few initiatives of university exchange programs, these endeavors were consistently exposed to the whims of the PRC's conflicted relationship with the SU to which Hungarian foreign policy surrendered by default and thus did not produce permanent mobilities.

world, along with the not-yet-defeated hopes that economic transformation would eventually bring democratic changes as well. This historical, economic, political, and social context played a fundamental role in framing both the *capabilities* and the *aspirations* (de Haas 2021) that gave rise to a relatively large-scale migration from the PRC to the thus far marginal destination of Hungary.

### 1.2.1 “New migrants:” Patriotic expatriates

The “new migrants” (*xin yimin* 新移民) of China embodied a newly cultivated entrepreneurial spirit in the wake of the 1978 reforms. They were either dismissed from or voluntarily gave up state employment to “jump to the sea” (*xiahai* 下海), trying their luck in the rapidly growing market sector (Benton and Pieke 1998, 2). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also actively encouraged Chinese citizens to look further beyond the national borders not only by removing legal and policy barriers on emigration in 1985 (Xiang 2003) but also by discursively applauding “new migrants” who pursued their (Chinese) dreams abroad as patriotic subjects (Nyíri 2001).

The fall of the Soviet Union created a grand economic *niche*, with low-income post-Soviet countries offering barely regulated markets and high demand for cheap consumer and industrial goods, which attracted tens of thousands of Chinese migrants who utilized the Moscow railway and favorable visa conditions to spread across Europe (Benton and Pieke 1998; Nyíri 1999). From a grand political economic perspective, the opening of post-Soviet markets served well one pressing teething problem of China’s capitalism, the overproduction crisis. The Chinese government endowed “new migrants” not only with an entrepreneurial mindset via governmental subject-making practices (Anagnost 1997; Greenhalgh 2010, 26) but also with goods at advantageous, state-subsidized prices, resulting in an excessive volume of

outmigration dubbed as the “leave the country fever” (*chuguo re* 出国热) (Benton and Pieke 1998, 2).

Although the *chuguo re* coincided with the Tiananmen Square massacre, according to Nyíri (1998, 352) most migrants were “unaffected by political or moral considerations” and were “new gold prospectors” instead, driven overwhelmingly by a fear of an economic reversal concerning private property rights, hoped to find better business opportunities abroad. Rather than escaping abject poverty or persecution, “new migrants” were beneficiaries of the flow-on effects of economic reforms during China’s “opening up” and represented a better-educated and more skilled counterpoint to earlier waves of unskilled labor migrants (Kuhn 2009). The “new migrants” from diverse occupational and educational backgrounds integrated into this specific economic *niche* and refashioned themselves as entrepreneurs (Nyíri 1999).

When Chinese migrants first arrived via the Moscow railway route to Hungary, they were greeted by a warm welcome. The *zeitgeist* of the 1989 democratic transition in Hungary embraced the notion that all things new and foreign were inherently desirable. According to Nyíri’s research, popular sentiment took pride in the growing presence of the Chinese in Hungary, to whom, “we [Hungarians] are already the West.” And, to some extent, Chinese immigrants returned this sentiment (Nyíri 2014a). Mr. Shen, for instance, an entrepreneur in his late 50s at the time of our interview, exemplifies the paragon of the “new migrant” having established his own sports clothing brand and even expanded into Western Europe. He reflected on his arrival, three decades later, as follows, “You know, I always wanted to be a painter, an artist. So, when I got on the train [in Moscow] I thought I would not stop before France or Italy. But when I got off the train in Budapest, I thought this city was so beautiful, the people were

so cheerful that I had this impression that I didn't need to go any further – I'm already in Western Europe.”<sup>4</sup>

### **1.2.2 Opening the Hungarian borders: the visa waiver agreement**

Hungary's appeal among Chinese immigrants reached its zenith in 1992 when their numbers were estimated to peak at 40,000 (Nyíri 2010). But what made Hungary particularly attractive among Chinese immigrants was not solely a consequence of the favorable economic conditions but largely due to a legal arrangement that provided PRC citizens with an exceptionally smooth pathway to the country. Although immigration pathways are usually scrutinized as barriers, obstacles whose primary purpose is to curb immigration, as this example shows (along with the residency bond scheme), particular opportunity structures might as well be so enticing that they can trigger migration flows to rather unconventional and unexpected destinations – without that being a calculated consequence of the policies in the first place (Beck forthcoming).

The visa-waiver agreement with the PRC was initiated by Károly Grósz in 1989, who succeeded János Kádár as the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (a position he held for 32 years). This move was in accord with Kádár's reform-era foreign policy project (Földes 2015), which laid the groundwork for opening Hungary to the world. The Kádár era led up to the landmark year of 1989 that marked Hungary's departure from the Soviet bloc and its systemic transition from being a socialist one-party country into a democratic multi-party one, aspiring to integrate into the global capitalist economy, saw János Kádár's profound reforms that defined the final decades of Hungarian socialism. With a pronounced emphasis on initiating and fostering international engagements across the world culminating in Hungary's joining the IMF and the World Bank in 1982, Kádár's foreign policy since the 1960s aimed to

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Mr. Shen, conducted by Linda Szabó with my help as an interpreter. 13. 12. 2013.

mitigate Hungary's isolation resulting from over four decades of seclusion behind the Iron Curtain (Sipos et al. 2002, 153–54).

Daily papers between 1988 and 1990 reflect great popular interest in what was perceived as the “slow expansion of borders,” enthusiastically communicating new agreements about visa waiver agreements between Hungary and a host of countries as different as the PRC, Nicaragua, South Korea, or Canada.<sup>5</sup> These agreements almost exclusively took the perspective of *emigration* as their main point of interest, and basically, none considered *immigration* to Hungary as a potential consequence. With the introduction of the world passport in 1988, the public's preoccupation with emigration after long decades of forceful immobility behind the Iron Curtain took on new significance.<sup>6</sup> For example, an influential daily newspaper, *Népszabadság*, devoted an entire page to the opportunities opening up for would-be Hungarian emigrants, without a single mention of incoming migrants (Rózsa 1990, 18) – who, by this time, should have been difficult to ignore in the capital.

Public discourse on immigration, or rather the lack thereof, in a sense reflected the general unpreparedness of the government, which had not moved beyond the socialist regime of immobility and its heritage of associating migration with outmigration. For example, the independent Border Patrol was a predominantly emigration-prevention-oriented entity and barely concerned itself with immigration (Haraszti 2020). The National Office for Foreigner Control (NOFC), after its inglorious involvement in the expatriation of German citizens in the aftermath of World War I and identification of Jews during World War II, continued to embrace a markedly suspicious attitude toward “foreigners,” but had relatively little experience with

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<sup>5</sup> For an exhaustive list of countries with which Hungary waived visas, see Verebélyi 2021, 335–39.

<sup>6</sup> Until the introduction of the world passport, Hungarian citizens had to apply each time for leaving the country through the local police, and their applications were judged by the Ministry of Interior on an individual basis based on the political reliability of the applicant.



them in the socialist regime of immobility. As such, the first freely elected government was left without any legal or political precedence, experience, or framework to deal with this qualitatively novel form of immigration.<sup>7</sup>

### *1.2.2.1 Turning Public Opinion*

After this initial period that was characterized by a mix of enthusiasm, confusion, ignorance, and preoccupation with new opportunities for Hungarians, by 1993, both popular opinion and official political discourse took a turn and began to harden against Chinese immigrants. Although the first freely elected government had kept the visa waiver agreement between the PRC and Hungary in place after its election,<sup>8</sup> a decision to cancel it came soon after in 1992. While this made would-be immigrants from the PRC less willing to embark on the journey, the introduction of a new institution, tellingly entitled Alien Policing, along with the first law that regulated migration,<sup>9</sup> made the lives of those already in Hungary thoroughly bitter.

Regular crackdowns on presumed illegal activities and the increasing association of the Chinese with illegality and international organized crime (such as the “snakeheads” specializing in human trafficking) along with pettier crimes such as tax avoidance, made public opinion increasingly hostile toward the country’s new cohabitants. As an analysis of media reports in 1996 (Tóth) about the Chinese in Hungary showed, the new, purely control-oriented institution successfully introduced the term “illegal migration” to the vocabulary of Hungarian

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<sup>7</sup> Refugees fleeing Ceausescu’s Romania between 1987 and 1991 and later the Yugoslav Wars beginning in 1991 posed the first significant challenge to this underdeveloped and unprepared system. However, these migrants differed from the Chinese newcomers of the same era in two significant ways: 1) the majority of them were ethnic Hungarians (and belonged to the kin minority) and therefore were visibly and linguistically closer to the majority population, and 2) as refugees, they belonged to a different legal category, which was stipulated by international covenants and not national law (Haraszi 2020).

<sup>8</sup> A Magyar Köztársaság Kormánya és a Kínai Népköztársaság Kormánya között, a kölcsönös vízummentességről szóló Megállapodás" (Agreement Between the Government of the Hungarian Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Mutual Visa Exemption), 1992, Government Decree 128/1992 (IX. 1.), <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99200128.kor>

<sup>9</sup> Törvény a külföldiek beutazásáról, magyarországi tartózkodásáról és bevándorlásáról" (Law on the Entry, Stay, and Immigration of Foreigners in Hungary), 1993, Act LXXXVI of 1993, [https://jogkodex.hu/jsz/idtv\\_1993\\_86\\_torveny\\_7706075](https://jogkodex.hu/jsz/idtv_1993_86_torveny_7706075)

public discourse which quickly became associated with the Chinese who made up the largest visible immigrant group in markedly monoracial Hungary. From this period onward (up until the Orbán government's Opening to the East, see 1.3.3), mainstream Hungarian media conveyed an image of the Chinese as incriminated and exoticized oriental subjects (Figure 2) as described by Tóth (1996). According to Nyíri's research (1993), these events culminated in a sharp decline in the number of resident Chinese population: after peaking at 40,000 in the autumn of 1991, a large proportion went back to China either voluntarily (10%) or involuntarily (20-30%) and an estimated 10,000 left for presumably Eastern European destinations.



Figure 2. Chinese Crime Export: Gang member with young prostitute. Source: Nagy T. (1993).

### 1.2.3 The “new migrants” of Hungary

Those approximately 10,000 Chinese who continued to stay (with a relatively low fluctuation according to the Hungarian Statistical Office (HSO) (STADAT))<sup>10</sup> embarked on the path of economic and social consolidation in Hungary. They developed a sophisticated organizational structure and a thriving press (Nyíri 1999), and thereby formed possibly the first Chinese community in the Central European region that went beyond being a mere “foreign outpost of the rapidly commercializing Chinese economy” (Benton and Pieke 1998, 8). Migrants in this cohort subscribed to the independent entrepreneurial mindset to a great extent. Nyíri’s research tells of people from all walks of life, academics, artists, and other intellectuals, who refashioned themselves as entrepreneurs having wealth accumulation as their primary goal in Hungary.

The entrepreneurial activities had a tangible impact on the spatial texture of the city, with the mushrooming of Chinese shops, restaurants, and markets (Szabó L. 2010; Chuang 2020). Indicative of their aspirations, Hungary was commonly addressed in their narratives as “the ideal gold mine of the Chinese” or the “treasure land” (Nyíri 1998, 366, 352). Most Chinese immigrants started businesses specializing in import, wholesale, and retail trade, with strong affiliation to PRC enterprises, for reasons hinted above. The prevalence of economic accumulation as the primary drive behind this migration (Várhalmi 2010; Guo 2011) was also manifest in characteristic demographics: most migrants were single men, whose families tended to follow later.

For them, Hungary was a site of production; their consumption took place in China in the form of real estate purchases, feasting, shopping, and donations (Nyíri and Beck 2020). Their

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<sup>10</sup> As noted in Footnote 2, this number is debatable. Informal estimations greatly vary between a few thousand and tens of thousands. Assuming that most Chinese citizens in Hungary are related to business, Pál Nyíri estimated this number based on company registrations to fluctuate around 15.000 people (Nyíri 2010).

arduous work in Hungary was a means to achieve a better life in the future, elsewhere – either in more alluring destinations or in China, against which reproduction-related responsibilities (i.e., caring for the young and elderly) were seen as an obstacle. These responsibilities tended to be outsourced and displaced spatially, either within Hungary by hiring Hungarian nannies to take care of children in a boarding manner during the weekdays (Pataki 2009) or by sending back young children to China to the care of grandparents or other relatives (Feischmidt and Nyíri 2006) until the children reach a certain level of self-care (being able to come and go to school, feed themselves, etc.).

Demonstrating the success of their productive activities unhindered by reproductive burdens, Hungary became established as the region's wholesale center. The community's consolidation also found spatial representation in the transformation of Budapest's urban landscape. In 1994, the first established Chinese street market appeared on the ruins of the Ganz Wagon and Machine Factory in the rust belt zone of the 8<sup>th</sup> district, boasting the ambitious name “Four Tigers” – harkening to the “Four Asian Tigers” model of economic growth (Chuang 2020, 5). Two decades later, Chinese entrepreneurs associated with the Four Tigers market emerged as significant actors in the Hungarian real estate economy and effectively transformed the city's rust belt zone in the 10th district into a center specializing in wholesale trade.

The latest stage of this transformation was the appearance of “Budapest Chinatown” (Irimiás 2009; Szabó L. 2010), which, unlike the Chinatowns known in the West, is not a result of residential segregation – in fact, Chinese people rarely dwell here, but live scattered across the city, as shown in Figure 3 – but an investment that was conceived not only to provide a place of work and consumption for the Chinese but also to represent the Chinese community to the Hungarian public (Chuang 2020). Building on the universal knowledge that the way to the heart is through the stomach, the team of Budapest Chinatown started organizing a street food

night market alongside the public staging and celebration of otherwise private “traditional” Chinese festivities such as the New Year (Yeh 2008), with intense public media campaigns targeting the Hungarian public. On the spot, the “second generation,” the grown children of “new migrants” is put on the front line to act as both linguistic and cultural translators between the hosts and the guests who show increasing interest in Chinatown.<sup>11</sup>

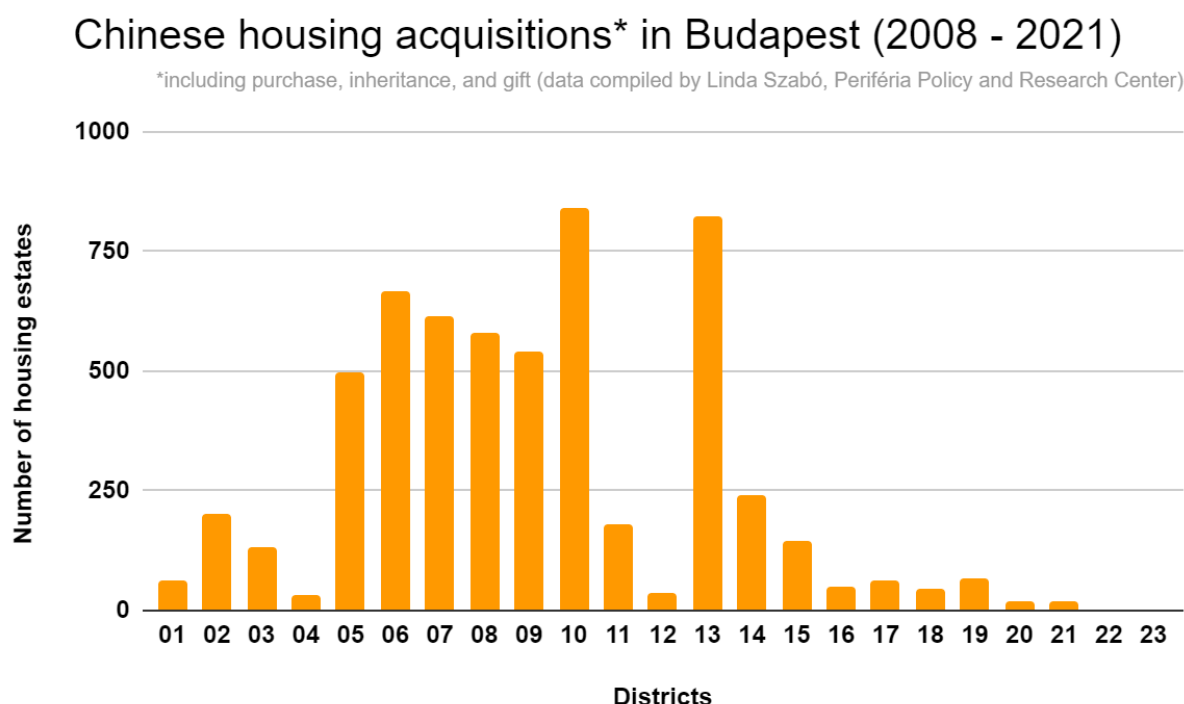


Figure 3. Chinese housing acquisitions in Budapest (2008-2021). Source: Linda Szabó, Periféria Policy, and Research Center.

Its function as an institutionalized meeting point with the Hungarian public is all the more significant, taking into consideration that Chinese people living in Hungary – much like elsewhere around the world – are thought of as a notoriously closed community: public discourse tends to depict the Chinese as aloof and self-contained, showing close to no inclination toward integration (see for example Csurgó and Előd 2018; S. Töttő 2010).

<sup>11</sup> For example, in 2024, the two weekend long Chinese New Year festival celebrating the Year of the Dragon attracted over 7000 people who expressed their interest in the Facebook event, and the actual turnout was also numbering in the thousands.

Statistical data also served to confirm this popular impression: Chinese immigrants' presence in the labor market is insignificant (Guo 2011), since they tend to work in ethnic enclaves (Várhalmi 2010); and interracial marriages are rare to come by (Kovács 2020). Yet, except for a small handful of NGOs, neither the public nor the political discourse opened the question of integration or initiated projects or policies that would facilitate or assist immigrants' integration in any way (Nyíri 2003a, 166–70).

#### 1.2.4 In between two countries: the politics of exclusion and inclusion

Ever since the inception of the institution for Alien Policing, the migrant has remained an unacknowledged social category in Hungary. Successive governments embraced an ever-increasingly fervent politics of exclusion, that matched up with popular xenophobic sentiments (Nyíri 2003b). Discrimination has been keenly felt by the *xin yimin*. In a 2010 survey that measured perceptions of discrimination among different immigrant groups in Hungary, the Chinese population felt most discriminated against (Örkény & Székely 2010). High literacy among “new migrants” and the presence of the vigorous Chinese press (Nyíri counted nine newspapers for a community of 10,000), and the thriving organizational infrastructure notwithstanding, these migrants rarely engaged in any political activity to represent their needs to the host society.<sup>12</sup> Instead, they chose to look further afield and found psychological relief, economic subsidy, and political support as “global Chinese.”

Recognizing the benefits of maintaining good relationships with its expatriates both in economic and political terms, the government of China has been an effective contributor to the imagination of a transnational community in the Chinese diaspora since the era of reform and

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<sup>12</sup> One outstanding exception was a short-lived initiative to achieve legal status as a Hungarian national minority, which failed quickly as eligibility for such status requires the nationality to be continuously present in the country for 100 years (Csurgó and Előd 2018).

opening (Barabantseva 2005). As Sun and Sinclair demonstrate (2015), the Chinese government has been engaging in a fervent “external politics of belonging” (Yuval-Davis 2006) and has taken an active role in imagining its diaspora into being through the construction and dissemination of a “global Chinese identity.” The requisition of a hegemonic diasporic Chinese identity is seen as an important asset in China’s “going global” initiative, which aims to reappropriate the discursive hegemony over China’s global image. By discursively reconstructing the “treacherous migrant” as the “patriotic new migrant,” who is “bound to China not only by ties of blood and culture but by sharing the modernizing goal of the state” (Nyíri 2001, p. 638), the CCP effectively realigned migrants’ personal goals of economic enrichment with that of the motherland, thereby bestowing migrants with a strong sense of belonging to the PRC.

As Nyíri’s (2001) research shows, the PRC’s extraterritorial nation-building has been particularly effective in Hungary, where it successfully co-opted the evolving diasporic organizations and press for its Global Chinese project. As excluded and marginalized members of their host society, Chinese migrants were eager to belong to a prestigious community – the celebrated diaspora of their loving motherland. While quasi-political hometown organizations channeled the economic benefits migrants could reap by “serving the country abroad,” the press served to disseminate a global Chinese identity that offered an alternative to local labels of subalternity. As Nyíri (2005) observed, this dual sensibility—marginalization in Hungary and high esteem in the PRC—has been amplified by both Hungarian media on Chinese immigrants and local Chinese media, giving rise to two parallel and opposing narratives of the social position of the Chinese in Hungary. While migrants’ own media portrayed them as “pioneering global modernizers,” Hungarian media depicted Chinese migrants as “semi-criminal marginals.” Thus, the continued intensity of their transnational practices was fostered and maintained not only by the hostility of Hungary as a receiving state but also by the PRC’s



heightened effort to engage with its overseas population via exercising an all-inclusive politics of belonging.

### 1.2.5 Summary

The emotional, political, and economic support by the Chinese state served the around 10 thousand Chinese well who have been conducting entrepreneurial activity in Hungary against all odds in the upcoming years. As noted, these migrants were generally described and self-identified as entrepreneurs, whose primary purpose in Hungary was the accumulation of wealth. In other words, this was a primarily production-oriented migration. People from all walks of life refashioned themselves as ethnic entrepreneurs, and very much conformed to theories of the ethnic enclave (Wilson and Portes 1980), or the middleman minority (Bonacich 1973).

For example, the thriving businessman, Mr. Shen, who launched his sports brand started out as a painter and arrived in Europe in pursuit of artistic dreams. When I asked how his conversion happened, he said, “It was rather simple, you know. After a few years, my wife followed me from China, and upon her arrival, she said: It was enough playing around, it’s time to make some money. So, we did.”<sup>13</sup> Trained as an oil painter in one of China’s famous Fine Arts universities, driven by a romantic idea of living an artist’s life in Europe, Mr. Shen told this story with a smile difficult to decipher. It seemed to be sarcastic and ironic both at his youthful idealism as well as at her wife’s blunt materialism.

To some extent, Mr. Shen managed to reconcile both aspirations. Aligning with the peremptory call to start a business, he launched his sports brand, the first of its kind in Hungary that managed to rip off the cheap-and-fake label accompanying most Chinese goods and achieved

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mr. Shen, conducted by Linda Szabó with my help as an interpreter. 13. 12. 2013.



a decent mid-level status. Attesting to its success, Mr. Shen soon spread out of the tiny market of Hungary and launched a European chain of shops, currently operating in five countries outside of the Hungarian headquarters that is still located in Budapest Chinatown. We conducted the interview in the spacious meeting room of this office, which is adorned by a few original oil paints signed by Mr. Shen himself. As it turns out, the same year when he started the business with his wife, he also joined the Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists. But, as he says, with a wife like his, he hardly found time to paint in the past decades... But business is still thriving.

### **1.3 Residency bond immigration scheme between 2013 and 2017: “Golden visa migrants”**

After the eventful years of vast fluctuation in the 1990s, between 2000 and 2014 the number of Chinese immigrants residing in Hungary stabilized between 6.000 and 10.000 people according to official HSO data.<sup>14</sup> Compared to this period of relatively low fluctuation, in 2014, the number of Chinese citizens rose steeply, effectively doubling the resident Chinese population in two years (see Figure 1). Just like in the case of the “new migrants,” the remarkable popularity of Hungary as a destination was due above all to the opening of an immigration pathway: a residency bond immigration scheme, that offered extraordinarily smooth entry to the country.

However, as the present section will show, its social, political, and economic roots and the resulting socio-economic and political contingencies are starkly different, making up for a migration cohort that is qualitatively distinct both in terms of its capabilities and its aspirations.

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<sup>14</sup> See Footnote 2 and 10.

If the 1989-1992 visa waiver agreement signified an upsurge of democratic dreams endorsing a liberal ideal of connectivity, the residency for investment scheme attests to a neoliberal refashioning of conceptions of citizenship that prioritizes economic contributions over traditional notions of engagement with the host country's society such as labor and place-and-community involvement (Santos, Castro, and Guerra 2020). In the following sections, I first contextualize the residency bond immigration scheme within the broader framework of “golden visas.” Subsequently, I locate the Hungarian scheme within the context of political-economic developments in both Hungary and China, exploring their intersections that have given rise to a unique form of migration, which serves as the central focus of this dissertation.

### **1.3.1 The global political economy of upward concentration in migration: “Golden Visas”**

Hungary’s residency bond immigration scheme fits the more general pattern of residency by investment schemes (RBI), commonly known as “golden visas” that began to mushroom in the European Union in the wake of the 2008 economic recession (Surak 2020, 6). RBIs operate in a wide range in terms of the scope and amount of investment and physical presence they require in the host country (for an overview see Hooper 2014; Džankić 2018; Surak 2020), unified by the aim of attracting foreign capital. Not deterring from phrases like “no-strings-attached foreign capital,” these schemes are explicitly dissociated from migration and are more often discussed in the field of economics, while, either deliberately (by populist politicians) or inadvertently (by scholars), rendering their implications toward migration insignificant.

By focusing on the legal and/or economic dimensions of such schemes, research to date tended to reinforce the neoliberal and/or anti-immigrant narratives embraced by official discourses that emphasize the economic consequences of these schemes over the human ones (for an

exception see Consterdine and Hampshire 2023; Santos, Castro, and Guerra 2020). Most prone to this discursive maneuver are programs like that of Hungary which require a single shot of passive investment while posing no meaningful residency requirements (Hooper 2014, 15–17). These schemes are designed for ‘migration without settling’ (Liu-Farrer 2016, 501), construed to attract foreign capital without “facilitating accompanying migration flows,” that is, without attracting foreigners. As Džankić argues, states that operate such programs “compete for ‘long distance migrants’ who are fiscal residents, not actively engaged in the polity” (2018, 75). Nonetheless, contrary to the concerted efforts to represent them otherwise, RBI schemes are legal instruments that regulate the conditions for entering, residing in, and exiting from a country. As regulatory instruments, they effectively fall within the domain of citizenship regimes, endowing particular migrants with particular citizenship rights and duties (Santos, Castro, and Guerra 2020).

Analyzed as migration policies, the growing presence of RBI schemes across the globe<sup>15</sup> attests to and is constitutive of the general trend of upward concentration in migration. This trend is the function of both immigration policies in Europe (Consterdine and Hampshire 2023) and emigration policies from the PRC (Xiang 2016), which became highly selective and stratified over the past two decades (Lutz 2023) aiming at “courting the top, [while] fending-off the bottom” (Joppke 2021, 68). As Consterdine and Hampshire (2023) show in a comparative study on EU countries’ migration policies, admissions criteria for investor immigrants are less stringent while rights are more expansive when compared with both skilled and labor migration. As Bauman aptly observed, these regulations indicate that mobility indeed “climb[ed] to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values – and the freedom to move, perpetually a

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<sup>15</sup> Gamlen et al. (2019) counted 60 different investor immigrant programs operating across 57 countries by 2019.

scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times” (2009, 2).

Further underscoring the significance of mobility are discussions on the “birthright lottery” (Shachar, 2009) and “citizenship penalties and premiums” (Milanovic, 2018). These discussions draw attention to how one’s citizenship is the single greatest determining factor of one’s life chances (Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009; Surak 2023). This call for reframing the debate on economic justice within a comprehensive, world-historical context postulates that citizenship disparity holds across all income levels. Yet, by way of residency or citizenship by investment programs, those with more financial means have significantly more options to take the matter of their citizenship into their own hands.

As Xiang Biao shows, the era of reform and opening between the 1980s and late 1990s that served the PRC’s capitalist restructuring and incorporation into the global world economy also entailed substantial liberalization of emigration policies, turning citizens of state socialism – a regime of immobility – into legal mobile subjects. However, just like in the case of immigration policies, the liberalization of various policy constraints against mobility is unevenly distributed within the increasingly stratified society, mediated by the newly formalized and centralized migration industry. Contrasting ‘point-to-point labor transplant’ with investment-based migration, Xiang (2015; 2016) shows that while rich migrants enjoy ever-greater freedoms of transnational mobility, unskilled migrants are subject to increasingly tight controls, and complicated and expensive procedures, thereby reinforcing and reproducing existing social inequality – instead of mitigating it.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Chinese citizens historically dominate “golden visa” markets, especially within the EU, where they account for over half of the applications (see

Figure 4., Surak 2020). Chinese accounted for more than 80% of the applications in Hungary and Ireland, nearly 70% in Greece, and over 50% in Portugal (F. Beck and Nyíri 2022; Surak 2020). The Hungarian scheme, attracting over 18,000 Chinese applicants (including family members), was highly competitive. Its success was not primarily due to the promise of symbolic or material returns from the investment. Instead, it provided something distinctively appealing to would-be migrants: a simple, relatively cheap, and, most importantly, quick route out of China, unmatched by any other country's investor immigration scheme (Nyíri and Beck 2020; for an overview, see Surak and Tsuzuki 2021).

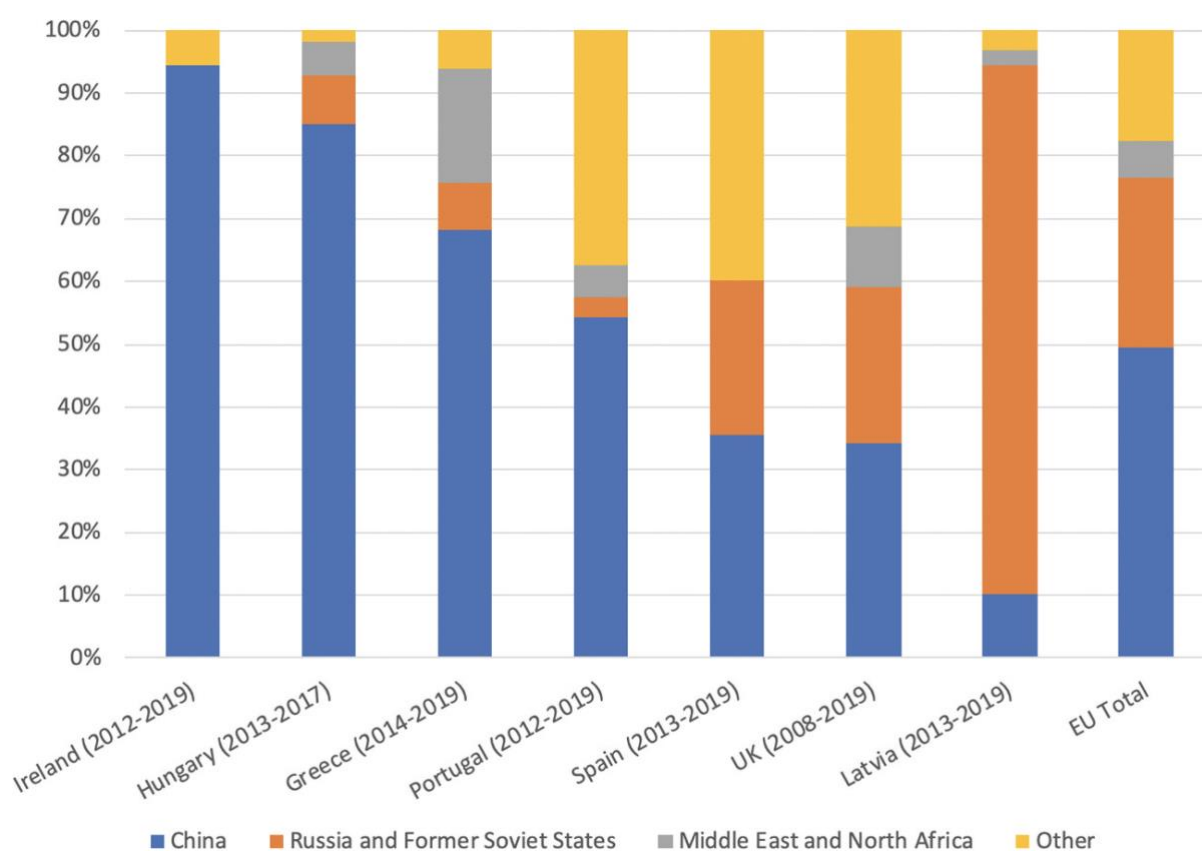


Figure 4. Approved "golden visa" applications by country and region of origin. Source: Surak (2020)

### 1.3.2 The origins of the Hungarian program in the global economy context

The common denominator of the extensive utilization of investor visas in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis was the goal to boost economic growth. However, the objectives and designs

of these investor policies mirror the preferences of the economic elites concerning the types of investments that best align with their nation's “growth model” (Baccaro, Blyth, and Pontusson 2022) and its predominant sectors (Consterdine and Hampshire 2023). The growth model developed by late Soviet and post-Soviet Hungary is typical of countries situated on the periphery of the global economy in heavily relying on capital inflows in the form of foreign direct investment (FDI). In this context, the residency bond scheme was not a novel concept.

Since the late Kádár era, Hungary's economic model has been oriented at FDI-dependent accumulation. With the systemic change in 1989, Hungary officially entered the capitalist world-economy. As the country transitioned into capitalism, its prevailing economic model — marked by an emphasis on low-value-added manufacturing, largely under the control of foreign corporations like the German automotive industry and geared towards duty-free export zones — became entrenched (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). The liberal political and economic paradigm encountered a critical juncture during the 2008 financial crisis. Subsequently, austerity measures, rhetorically attributed to “liberalization,” paved the way for the national-conservative Fidesz party to secure a constitutional super-majority in 2010. This electoral triumph heralded the inception of the “Government of National Cooperation” (GNC) that has governed the country with constitution-making super-majority ever since.

With this consolidated power, the GNC was able to successfully recalibrate the relationship between the domestic capitalist class<sup>16</sup> and international capital. This strategic alignment was particularly evident in the banking sector and international finance, where channels for external

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<sup>16</sup> An important caveat to be made here concerns the limits of the applicability of Marxist terminology to this case. While “capitalist class” implies power and a capacity to impact on politics and economics, the Hungarian capitalist class possesses none of these. Their power lies in legitimization: in exchange for their affluence, they maintain the rule of the GNC and Fidesz in the form of votes or often corrupt financial maneuvers. Other than that, they have no impact in outlining the general directions of politics and economics. For an alternative interpretation, see: (Scheiring 2020, 74–77)

funding could be adeptly merged with the capital interests of domestic classes. (Gagyí and Gerőcs 2022). The introduction of the residency bond immigration scheme in 2013 was a particularly illustrative case of the wedding of FDI with domestic capitalist interest. The mastermind behind the idea was Antal Rogán, who served as the Fidesz Chairman of the Economic Committee and as of the Hungary-China friendship group at the National Assembly of Hungary. Notably, the blueprint for the program came from resident Chinese businessmen with close connections to the Chinese chemical company *Wanhua* (Bita, M. László, and Pető 2015), which also constitutes the first major Chinese FDI stock in Hungary (McCaleb and Szunomár 2017).

Rogán was not merely the architect behind the bill's introduction; he also meticulously oversaw its progression from initial design to final enactment. A prominent and frequently criticized feature of the Hungarian program was the monopolistic market rights granted to certain intermediaries. These companies, handpicked by Rogán, served as intermediaries between the state and the applicants, and were endowed with geographically specified, monopole markets rights. This set up, besides introducing an unnecessary intermediary, also eliminated competition in price setting, and as such, instead of serving the state's budgetary interest, exclusively served the private interest of designated companies. As several investigative reports revealed, the program was therefore designed to realize extra profit by the designated companies – most of them registered in the tax haven of the Cayman Islands, while the state not only has not realized significant benefits from the enterprise but, indeed, incurred marginal financial losses (Szalai 2015; B. Nagy, Ligeti, and Martin 2016).

Besides the capitalization of domestic classes, another major pursuit outlined in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis by the GNC was a need to diversify away from the full dependence on European funds that bound state practices to neoliberal EU policies throughout the preceding

decade. Building upon the legitimizing effect of popular discontent with neoliberal austerity, the Fidesz government framed their strategy as a fight against the domination of Western capital and ideologies by way of opening to the East (Gagyi and Gerőcs 2022). As domestic capital's accumulation largely depends on EU transfers and their favorable redistribution controlled by the state, efforts to diversify financial dependence from the EU compelled the regime to seek new deals with Chinese and Russian capital, effectively integrating the impacts of global multipolarization into Hungary's dependent development (Gagyi and Gerőcs 2022).

### 1.3.3 Hungary opens to the East

The Eastern Opening, which has been declared as the country's official foreign policy since 2012, implies a turn away from the West in general and the EU in particular to pursue trade relations with China, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. Under these developments, Hungary became the representative of Russian and Chinese geopolitical interests in the European Union on several sensitive issues from the war in Ukraine and the South China Sea to human rights.<sup>17</sup> The Eastward reorientation of Hungary's entire foreign policy and the offering of political gestures have been complemented by concerted efforts in the broader field of soft power, notably in the fields of tourism, technology, and education (Karásková et al. 2020; Nyíri and Beck 2020) to make the red carpet for Chinese investment stainless.

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<sup>17</sup> For example, in July 2016, Hungary and Greece — major beneficiaries of Chinese financing and investments in recent years — fought hard to avoid a direct reference to Beijing in an EU statement about a court ruling that struck down China's legal claims in the South China Sea. Further on in March 2017, Hungary prevented the EU from signing a petition protesting that lawyers being detained in China were tortured. In April 2018, the EU External Action Service attempted to issue a joint statement asking China to adhere to human rights and international law. The draft statement also required member states to leave out propagandistic expressions pressed by China from any kind of future bilateral agreements with the Communist country. Hungary first threatened with a veto, then refused to sign the document. In the Hungarian ambassador to China refused to sign an EU declaration highlighting the pitfalls of the Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese foreign policy in general. In this case, Hungary was the only member of the EU not to endorse the statement.



The foreign policy of Eastern Opening was underpinned by the country's domestic ideological transformation into an "illiberal democracy." Backed by the power of a constitution-making super majority, Prime Minister Orbán views the economic achievements of China, Russia, and Turkey as evidence that their prosperity stems not in spite of, but precisely because of their illiberal structures. Therefore, he argues these are tried and tested models to emulate (Molnár Gergely 2014; Orbán 2015). Subsequently, the country's democratic institutions - including the media, the electoral system, the Constitutional Court, and the system of ombudspersons – have been systematically dismantled and reconfigured to ensure the power of the leading government (Scheiring 2020). The "illiberal democracy" embraced by the GNC headed by Orbán has become closely associated with institutionalized Euro-skepticism, Islamophobia, and corruption (Juhász et al. 2017).

As a self-proclaimed champion of "illiberal democracy," the Hungarian government asserts that Hungary's values diverge from the individualistic ethos of the West, underscoring the importance of its national and Christian religious identity. Consequently, it argues that Western European legal standards should not apply to it; and yet it fashions itself as the guardian of Europe's genuine (Christian conservative) values – unlike Western European liberals. The fight Hungary put up against immigration, which became the defining issue of the 2014–2018 term in Hungarian politics (Bíró-Nagy 2022), was also framed as protecting collective European interest by serving as the "shield and bastion against attacks outside of Europe" (Orbán 2021). Emblematic of the GNC's staunchly nativist and anti-Western posture, in 2017, Orbán said: "Of course we can give shelter to the real refugees: Germans, Dutch, French, Italians; scared politicians and journalists; Christians who had to flee their own country; those people who want to find here the Europe that they lost at their home" (*Euronews* 2017). The cynical image of Orbán's ideal refugees – those seeking sanctuary from the liberal policies of Western Europe

– casts a long shadow on those who were denied entry at the border fence erected in 2015, seeking refuge from the war in Syria.

### *1.3.3.1 Friendly relations*

All in all, the conspicuous amicability that defines its broad relationship to China along with its ideological turn to an “illiberal democracy” in addition to its optimal geographical position in Central Europe, have rendered Hungary an ideal political ally for the PRC. Against the backdrop of the current geopolitical environment increasingly pitting China against the global West (Sun 2021) that makes the outward flow of excess capital accumulating with China’s economic ascend increasingly difficult, such friendship assumes great significance. Chinese interest in the Central European region was formalized in 2012 when then-Prime Minister Wen Jiabao launched the “16+1”<sup>18</sup> initiative in Warsaw, which aimed to improve relations between China and Central and Eastern Europe, the flagship project of which is the Budapest-Belgrade railway.

Having acknowledged as Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative’s (BRI) most important European project, the Budapest-Belgrade railway also adds to the explanation of why Hungary has been the only country in the continent that earned a separate chapter in Xi Jinping’s seminal “The Governance of China Volume II” (‘Avenues to Europe: China’s Relationship with Hungary’ 2019). Relative to its overall geopolitical importance, Hungary indeed occupies a disproportionately significant profile in China’s foreign policy, leading some analysts to argue that Chinese FDI into Hungary is more “politically induced” rather than “market-driven” (Rogers 2019). Others question the remunerative qualities of these pursuits, pointing out that other countries in the region such as Poland, the Czech Republic, or the Balkan were more successful in attracting Chinese investments (Matura 2018).

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<sup>18</sup> It was later expanded to the 17+1, with the addition of Greece.

Nonetheless, the Hungarian government discursively fashions itself as the guardian of European interest in assuming the pivotal role of mediating between Chinese and Western capital, while government-owned media unanimously portrays Chinese FDI as a “national interest” (e.g. P. 2023). These media outlets began to foster a generally positive image of China and the Chinese, marking a sharp departure from the general vilification of Chinese characterizing the 1990s and early 2000s. Articles today tend to focus on the general economic situation of China avowing its achievements, its role in world politics and economics as a cool-headed superpower, and the development of Hungarian-Chinese relations, while carefully avoiding “sensitive” topics like human rights, Tibet, internment camps in Xinjiang, or the protection of intellectual property rights (Chinfluence 2017). Simultaneously, the shrinking segment of independent media – which self-identifies with liberal, multi-cultural political values – assumed the position of a China watchdog, resulting in a bifurcated, black-or-white media scenario depicting China and the Chinese.<sup>19</sup> In a counterintuitive manner, the same independent media outlets (along with the opposition parties) that criticize Orbán’s exclusionary migration politics from a multiculturalist stance are the ones that publish articles with headings like “Orbán turned Hungary into a country of immigrants” (e.g. Hargitai 2019) and end up discussing immigration to Hungary as a problem (see Figure 5, right).

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<sup>19</sup> A good illustration confirming this trend is the opposition-lead public debate on the plans of opening a Fudan University campus at Budapest. Generally introduced as a “Marxist, spy training institute of the CCP,” Hungarian opposition parties pulled an exceptionally unified act of resistance against the plans. As part of the demonstrations, streets surrounding the planned campus area were renamed to “Dalai Lama Street,” “Uygur Martyrs’ Road,” “Free Hong Kong Street,” and “Xie Shiguang Bishop Street.” While there are indeed important questions to be raised against the lack of transparency and the faith of the originally planned project of a student district that would have provided accessible accommodation for emphatically local students, it is striking that in the non-government political sphere there was no single voice that would treat the issue with negotiating different viewpoints. (e.g. Pintér and Bödey 2021; Panyi 2021; ketfarkukutya 2021)

### 1.3.4 The birth of an anti-immigrant destination of immigration

Against this discursive background, interpretations of the residency bond immigration scheme are also disjointed: while official government discourse stresses the economic benefits of the program while emphasizing that “no migrant has settled in the country” (‘Jegyzőkönyv’ 2017), independent media is busy publishing a series investigative reports on how the kleptocratic elites of the East exploited this opportunity to settle in Hungary to evade legal prosecutions in their home countries (Matyasovszki and Szőke 2022). What gives a particular piquancy to the governmental communication about the scheme is its simultaneous nativist-populist preoccupation with a full-frontal assault against immigration. In a rather surrealistic manner, the significant proportion of state budgetary spending spent on a great variety of campaigns against refugees – strategically misnamed first as “economic migrants” and later as “illegal migrants” before arriving simply at “migrants”<sup>20</sup> (See Figure 5, left), was indeed at least partially funded from the residency bond scheme that offered residency rights to third-country nationals (Albert 2016; Kiss 2016.; Goździak and Márton 2018). As an illustration of this uncanny undertaking, Antal Rogán said the following in the National Assembly in response to questions from representatives of opposition parties regarding the scheme:

I would like to emphasize that, contrary to your claims, programs like this exist everywhere across the globe and basically, what we grant are residence permits and not passports or citizenship in Hungary, and practically no one has utilized these settlement opportunities. While permits were indeed obtained, *personally, I am not aware of anyone who has received a settlement permit and currently resides in Hungary*. In contrast to the *immigrants who have inundated Western Europe* in the millions and would also be here in Hungary if it were up to you. And this is a crucial distinction. One is an *economic investment* program, from which, I believe, the country benefits, and it was enacted by the Hungarian National Assembly based on its *sovereignty*. The other is a program that was being *imposed* on us from *Brussels* - or, let's say, from *George Soros* - with the potential outcome of fundamentally altering the demographic composition of this country especially when considering family reunification

<sup>20</sup> These included billboard campaigns advertising nativist populist slogans like “If you come to Hungary, you cannot take away our jobs” to so-called “national consultations” posing questions the citizens of Hungary whether they like to have terrorists in their midst (see Figure 5, left).

procedures and various expedited programs that have been discussed here. (‘Jegyzőkönyv’ 2017, emphasis added.)

The main lines of Rogán’s argumentation are 1) the program is not unique to Hungary but aligns with globally accepted norms 2) it does not lead to migration (so it is not in conflict with the government’s anti-immigration stance) and 3) it only has economic benefits. While this description of decoupling inflows of capital from inflows of people aligns with the common discursive framework of “golden visas,” what sets the Hungarian residency bond immigration scheme apart is its integration into the distinctively Hungarian context characterized by anti-migration and nativist sentiments. In the quoted speech, Rogán explicitly distinguishes between beneficial capital inflows and unwanted migrants who “inundated Western Europe,” portraying the former as a result of Hungary’s national agency and the latter as a forceful intervention in the country’s autonomous operation either “from Brussels or, let’s say, from George Soros.”

By this discursive maneuver, Rogán portrays the Hungarian investment immigration scheme as a weapon in Hungary’s incessant fight for independence from the yokes of the EU and the helplessly progressive values of George Soros (Witte 2018). As the concluding remark makes it clear, this fight is not constrained to the dimension of ideologies but is indeed crucial to the survival of the Hungarian nation, since if the plans of Soros and the EU unfold without resistance, the demographic composition of the country would be irreversibly transformed. However, the antagonism inherent between practice and discourse has not evaded the attention of the right-wing political party Jobbik, which successfully forced the government to suspend the program in 2017 (Előd 2017).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> As I am writing these lines, history seems to repeat itself. With a mere 5 days after President Orbán empathetically asserted that “migrants must not be let in” in a public speech (Orbán 2023), the government announced its plan to introduce a new RBI scheme (Szabó D. 2023).

Be that as it may, the country that proudly proclaims that "diversity is not a value" has never been home to so many immigrants in its modern history (Szabó A. 2020) – as opposition media outlets and politicians aptly point out (see Figure 5). Despite the extraordinarily vocal anti-immigration discourse it embraces, the Orbán government realized the most active immigration politics of modern Hungary's history. In the 25 years following the regime change, the immigration policies of all Hungarian governments were characterized by an unspoken but effectively implemented exclusion, with partial exceptions for ethnic Hungarians (Tóth 2010). In contrast, the subsequent period of the GNC is marked by explicit anti-immigration sentiments (Simonovits et al. 2016; Messing and Ságvári 2018) and real, albeit selective, relaxation.



Figure 5. Left: National consultation campaign: "If you come to Hungary, you can't take away Hungarians' jobs" 2015.

Source: 24.hu; Right: "Migrant Tracker" set up by the united opposition parties in the 2022 elections. Source:

<https://migransszamlalo.hu/>.<sup>22</sup>

In the past decade of the GNC (2013-2023), the spectrum of immigration has become more diverse than ever before. While government discourse claims these flows to be either not present or only temporary, inner districts and outer skirts of Budapest all point to a different scape: East Asian food delivery couriers crisscrossing across the city, the steeply increasing foreign property ownership in the city's real estate market, or the sharply rising number of non-Hungarian pupils enrolled in Hungarian educational institutions all suggest that the almost

<sup>22</sup> The table mimics the government's anti-immigration billboard campaign by asking the onlooker: Did you know? It is only the Fidesz who brings immigrants to the country. The message was controversial and received harsh criticism from the "united" opposition.

Western-Europe-like multicultural diversity the capital experienced in the past years is the result of more permanent presence of migrants – and not tourism, as the government would like to present it (F. Beck and Nyíri 2021).

Not only has there been a steep increase in the number of guest workers, who live with restricted rights isolated from society, but there has also been a substantial rise in the number of foreign students and elite migrants targeted by the residency bond program. These migrants, however, seem not to show up in official statistics. The introduction of different immigration relaxation policies skillfully removed entire groups from the category of the “migrant,” enabling official statistics to mask the steep rise in the number of immigrants, which in the present appears to only slowly approach the volume of pre-GNC immigration (Figure 6).

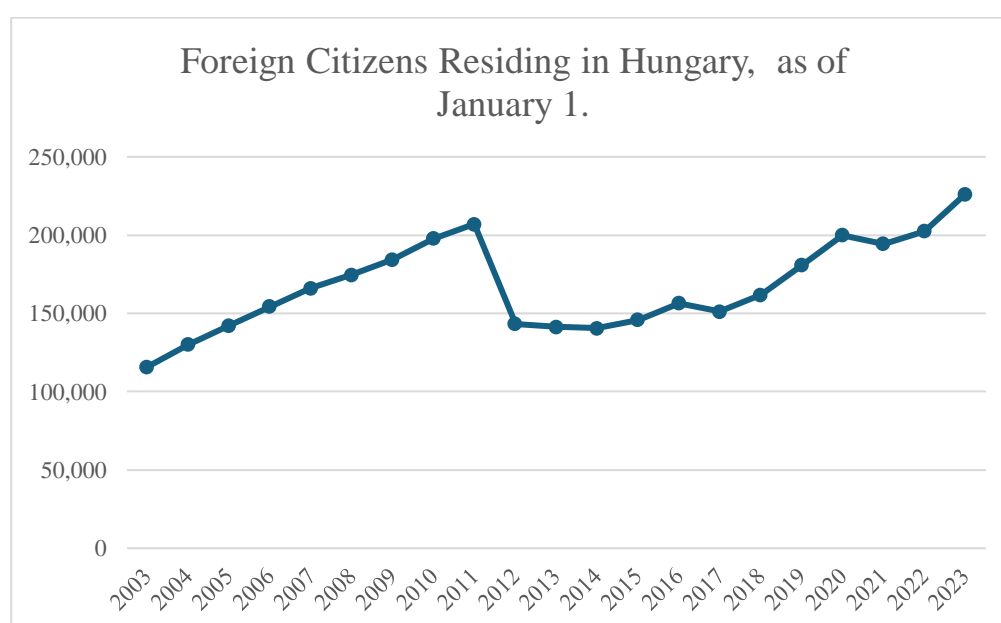


Figure 6. Foreign Citizens Residing in Hungary (2003-2023). Source: HSO.

Transborder kin-minorities, who traditionally constituted the largest body of immigrants (Hárs and Tóth 2010), simply ceased to be migrants by way of the introduction of dual citizenship in 2012. In addition, the approximately 75,000 Ukrainian guest workers disappeared from statistics in 2017 when the government removed administrative barriers to the employment of

foreign workers – largely recruited from Ukraine – by relaxing the law on their employment. From this point onwards, non-EU workers from neighboring countries did not need to obtain a residence permit; it was sufficient for the employer to register the employee (Kálmán 2020). While guest workers are habitually characterized as temporary flows, the Ukrainian colony of 4,000 at Székesfehérvár suggests a more permanent presence (Hargitai 2019). Via the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship program,<sup>23</sup> the government opened the door for approximately 5,000 young people from outside the EU annually, who, as international students – another supposedly temporary category – also do not show up in statistics about immigration. Lastly, the residency bond program granting approximately 18,000 affluent immigrants permanent residence permits (hvg.hu 2019) also seems to evade official migration statistics. However, based on data acquired from OINA, among those who acquired permanent residency rights in Hungary via this scheme, Chinese citizens once again prevail.

Counterintuitively, the Hungarian government's vehement anti-immigrant nativism, instead of making them wary, struck a chord with many wealthy Chinese migrants as the empirical chapters make it abundantly clear. As we explore elsewhere (Nyíri and Beck 2020), these wealthy migrants are drawn to Western lifestyles they perceive as conducive to creativity and freedom. However, they do not necessarily want to share it with those who do not belong to the elite and are alarmed by the presence of Muslims and black people, a sentiment that aligns with Chenchen Zhang (2019, 5) notion of “pro-globalization anti-liberal.” Several participants appeared to share Orbán's hardline approach to refugees and his view that “undesirable” migrants (Muslims and black people) pose a threat to Europe's authenticity and cultural integrity – just as they were eager to consume it.<sup>24</sup> Illustrative of this sentiment in an article for

<sup>23</sup> The program initiated in 2013 serves the double purpose of internationalizing Hungarian universities while also enhancing diplomatic relations under the aegis of the Eastern Opening policy.

<sup>24</sup> In 2016, the Chinese Initiative for International Law, a grassroots group, conducted a survey among law students at elite Peking universities to gauge their attitudes toward refugees: 80% said Europe should not admit



*Vice China*, a youth magazine, a Chinese student in England wrote, “Europe is someone’s luxurious and beautiful living room; we have come a long way to this land of manners and brought our money . . . Suddenly, a bunch of uninvited guests break down the door, have no appreciation for the display in the living room, and pay no heed to us, who are sitting with stiff backs on the sofa” (Ji 2019).

In contrast to the migrants who left China through the opportunity provided by the visa waiver agreement in pursuit of a better future, undertaking strenuous work in Hungary, as I will argue, this cohort represents a relatively underexplored segment of China's new middle classes. It is constituted by individuals who are discontent with China’s neck-breaking economic and social transformation marred by corruption and coming at the price of increasingly authoritarian measures and deprivation of freedoms. Although considering their socioeconomic status, they should be beneficiaries of the transformative reforms in China over the past decades, yet they leave China for a globally marginal and vocally anti-immigrant Hungary, in pursuit of a *good enough life in the present*. To have a better understanding of the structural causes behind this rather counterintuitive phenomenon, in the next section, I explore the political, economic, and social developments that brought about the second voluminous migration from China to Hungary.

### **1.3.5 The birth and coming of age of the Chinese middle-class**

If 1989 marked a halt in the anticipated democratic transitions in the PRC, the decades that followed made it abundantly clear that Chinese markets can be made thriving without either economic or political freedom (Nonini 2008; Dikötter 2022), thereby defeating modernization theory that posits an intimate link between economic growth and political democratization.

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more refugees, and the most frequently chosen reason was that refugees have a negative impact on European culture.

Indeed, the liberalization of a selected range of market mechanisms (X. Zhang 2017) has been coupled with increasingly authoritarian political measures, with the state increasingly intruding into every aspect of life, including both the productive and reproductive realms. The scope of individual freedoms shrunk to the right to consume and is practically confined to private ownership (L. Zhang 2012) – and even that cannot be taken for granted.

China's integration and swift ascent in the capitalist world-system as an economic superpower turned the country into the protagonist of heated debates worldwide, with the best minds trying to wrap their head around the counterintuitive economic miracle (for a recent overview of this debate see for example Ru 2020).<sup>25</sup> Without attempting to enter this debate or to offer a comprehensive overview of the intricate and often perplexing policy developments of the 1990s and 2000s, in this section, I outline the fundamental transformations in the realms of production and reproduction<sup>26</sup> in broad strokes. To do so, I will concentrate on one pivotal manifestation of these transformations: the making of the middle class. The creation and “coming of age” of China's middle class not only offers an entry point to assess some of the most significant dynamics of Chinese state capitalism but also lies at the heart of China's reemergence as a major player in the international migration scene as the section will conclude.

The “middle class” is one entry on the long list of sociology's notoriously slippery concepts. Its ubiquity in public discourse coupled with the tenuous difficulties of assessing its empirical reality prompted scholars to approach it as an ideological construct (Heiman, Freeman, and

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<sup>25</sup> Indicative of both the scope and (in)capacity of this intellectual stimulus are the many names by which researchers address the Chinese political economic system: state capitalism (Naughton and Tsai 2015), hybrid socialist-neoliberal system (Sigley 2006), socialist market economy (Yu 2017), capitalism with Chinese characteristics (Y. Huang 2008).

<sup>26</sup> The way production and reproduction got separated in capitalist societies stands at the center of the theoretical argument I put forward in Sections 2.1.1 and 3.1. By defining reproduction, I follow Nancy Fraser (2016) who identifies it as: the birthing and raising of children, caring for friends and family, maintaining households and communities, and sustaining connections, more generally maintaining social bonds and shared meanings.

Liechty 2012; Weiss 2019). These scholars point out that – contrary to its Marxist and Engelsian dismissal – the middle class plays an indispensable role in the workings and perpetuation of capitalism in four interrelated ways: 1) for carrying out intellectual labor, its epithets being managerial and professional; 2) for being the reliably unsatisfiable consumer basis of an ever-expanding list of goods and services; 3) for being a decisive aspirational source for lower classes, and lastly 4), as an ideological construct which serves to justify inequality and thus an effective tool in annihilating class antagonism (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012). By turning the middle-class citizen into the norm, people around the globe are pushed to pursue middle-class aspirations, thereby propelling the virtuous cycle of economic growth, modernization, and collective well-being (Weiss 2019).

These scholars argue that although the emergence of the middle class is contingent on the “triumph” of capitalism in any given state (Braudel [1977:64] cited in Heiman et al., 2012), this is not to say that the middle class is a natural outcome of capitalism. Rather, states operating on capitalist principles have high stakes in promoting the ideology of the middle class for its above listed functions (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012). The birth of the Chinese middle class is a case in point, as it is unarguably the product of meticulous social engineering rather than a “natural” outcome of the country’s transition to a socialist market economy.

What has been most natural about the country’s capitalist restructuring was the dramatic rise of social inequalities which aroused anger in a society trained on Maoist thought, and indeed having had experienced a considerable level of equality.<sup>27</sup> After the PRC’s entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, capitalizing on poor environmental and labor

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<sup>27</sup> Recent anthropological work (e.g. Evans 2020) point to the significant socioeconomic differences among the urban population and thereby problematize the myth of the “iron rice bowl.” However, without claiming that society was egalitarian before the systemic change, we can confidently claim that it was more egalitarian than afterwards.

regulations effectively turned China into the “workshop of the world” (Hung 2009). State-led economic growth came at the high cost of severe environmental degradation, high looming distributive inequity, and extraordinary urban-rural disparity, measured by a soaring Gini coefficient. The costs were so high, that observers indicated that socio-political turmoil would be likely to challenge the CCP’s political authority (Gustafsson, Shi, and Sicular 2008). During these heated times of profound transformation, the CCP turned to a solution designed to mediate the increasing social inequality that proved to be remarkably successful in the West for its ability to tone down class consciousness and to justify inequality by shifting the limelight to an imaginary of social mobility through open-ended meritocracy: the middle class (Tomba 2004; M. Chen and Goodman 2013).

Since the early 2000s, when problems arising from inequality were no longer dismissible, then-president Jiang Zemin announced that the nation’s goal was to make the middle class the dominant class and achieve an “olive-shaped middle-class society,” which would be both *xiaokang* (小康)<sup>28</sup> and harmonious (Guo [2008:50] cited in Goodman, 2014). Jiang claimed the middle class to be “the political force necessary to stability, it is a regenerative force of production, it is the scientific force behind creative production, it is the moral force behind civilized manners, it is the force necessary to eliminate privilege and curb poverty, it is everything” (cited in Tomba, 2009, p. 606). This marked the initiation of the state-sponsored discourse of the harmonious middle-class society, coupled with government policies aiming at improving residents’ property income, the privatization of large segments of housing (L. Zhang

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<sup>28</sup> The meaning of *xiaokang* lies between ‘comfortably well-off’ and affluent, while also implying social “health.” Lu Hanlong, a CPC advocate, described *xiaokang* as “a competitive society, in which all members and their families own their private resources and live a life based on law and governed by elites” (Lu Hanlong 2010: 111 cited in Goodman).

2012), and expanding higher education to facilitate the transformation of the majority of China's population into becoming middle-class.

The next years saw abundant enthusiasm in both domestic and foreign media celebrating “the stunning growth of a flourishing Chinese middle class” (Croll 2006, 101), while, at the same time statisticians completely disagreed not only on its size and profile but also on whether it existed at all (Goodman 2014, 93). Though the claimed success of these policies in the actual development of a middle class is much debated, the aspirational politics singling out the middle class as the most important vehicle driving China's transition to market socialism is notable. As such, instead of using occupation or income level as a proxy, I use the particular aspirational profile in defining the new Chinese middle class expressed in homeownership, consumerism, and most importantly parenting and educational choices (cf. L. Zhang 2012, 5–6). In identifying the new model citizen as middle class, with high cultural/educational capital, and the capacity to consume, the Communist Party of China (CPC)<sup>29</sup> legitimized the existence of the wealthy while also inciting the poor to pursue the middle-class ideology of investment-driven self-determination (Anagnost 2008). By doing so, in the early 2000s the CPC temporarily bid farewell to its commandist orientation and introduced a qualitatively new, “distinctive pro-people style of governing” that works through people's desires while simultaneously outsourcing the responsibilities once handled by the government onto self-governing individuals (Greenhalgh 2010, 54; Rocca 2016, 229).

#### *1.3.5.1 The social engineering of the middle class: the one-child policy*

Introduced in 1979, the one-child policy, a cornerstone of China's broader modernization project, played a pivotal role in the state-led creation of the middle class. The social engineers

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<sup>29</sup> In 2003, the Third Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China incorporated Jiang Zemin's "three represents" theory into the party constitution and changed the official English translation of the party's name from the "Chinese Communist Party" (CCP) to the "Communist Party of China" (CPC), signaling the shift in its status from a revolutionary party to a ruling party (Ren 2010).

behind the state-controlled transition to a market economy argued that, if, in modern societies higher life standards resulted in a decreasing number of births, a controlled reduction of births would eventually lead to higher life standards and consequently to the modernization of the entire nation (Greenhalgh 2010). Through the reduction of its *quantity*, the policy aimed at raising the *suzhi* (素质), the “quality” of the population by providing better education, better healthcare, and higher life standards in general (Murphy 2004; Anagnost 2004). With an ingenious move, the policy reserved the logic of class production: by concentrating all parental (and grandparental) resources on one baby while instilling middle-class parenting aspirations to guide their uses, the policy first created middle-class babies and through that transformed the parents to become middle class.

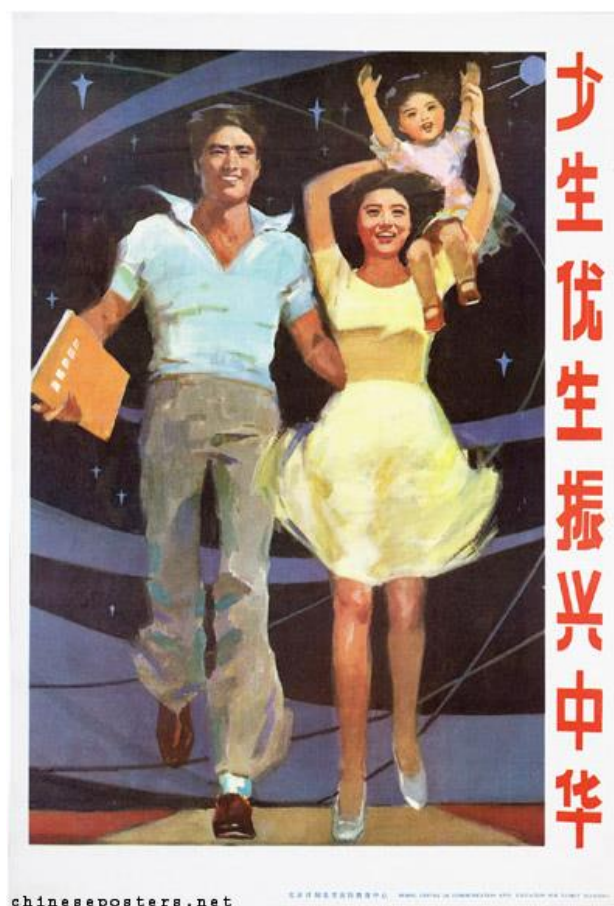


Figure 7. *Less births, better births, to develop China vigorously* – Poster published by Beijing Centre of Communication and Education for Family Planning, 1987. Source: [chinese posters.net](http://chinese posters.net).

The policy evoked a powerful discourse of what constitutes a good life (see Figure 7) while providing parents with advice on how they should work towards achieving it for their only children (Anagnost 2004; Crabb 2010; Kipnis 2006). Evidencing the enormous success of this aspirational approach, middle-class values became pervasive in the country, and “the project to create the perfect child became a fixation of parents and the wider society alike” (Greenhalgh, 2010, p. 58). Though their capability to do so widely differed, people from all walks of life started to aspire to provide their only children with (possibly global) higher education (Kipnis 2011a), a good job, an apartment in the city, etc. This resulted in a cutthroat social and educational competition where a “billion striving individuals” (Yunxiang Yan 2013) compete on a narrow pathway for the still rather limited positions that secure a comfortable living.

The generation born in the 1970s and 1980s, where most parents in this study belong, enjoyed the benefits of an expanding higher education system coupled with a proportional expansion of access to white-collar jobs, providing them with hitherto unheard-of life trajectories. Described in terms of upward mobility and progress, the number of people living middle-class style lives indeed started to number in the millions. However, China’s growth story soon took an “unhappy” turn, as unprecedented levels of economic growth appeared to coincide with an unprecedented decline in life satisfaction, interpreted as a “progress paradox” (Graham, Zhou, and Zhang 2017).

#### ***1.3.5.2 Looming crises***

A litany of crises plagued the political economy of the PRC and the everyday life of its citizens, which, given the inextricable interdependence of the global capitalist world-system on the welfare of its “workshop,” also poses a potential risk to the rest of the world. Reports flooding global media on the faith and prospects of the rising dragon in the past few years include growing graduate unemployment amidst the increasing numbers of graduates (Fu and

Wakabayashi 2023), escalating housing prices (Wakabayashi and Stevenson 2023), a stagnating economy further worn down by president Xi's zero Covid policy (Chotiner 2023), an increasingly hostile international environment dubbed as the Tech Cold War (Sanger 2020), and all in all, an ever harsher authoritarian polity with the government expanding its influence across nearly every aspect of society (Buckley 2018).

In response to these alarming developments, the Chinese leadership identified two key drivers for regaining economic stability and promoting further growth, once again underscoring its reliance on the middle class: innovation (to end reliance on imported technology) and boosting domestic consumption by granting easy credits ('截至去年末, 贷款余额近六百亿元' 2016). Hallmarked by prominent figures in China's technology sector, such as billionaire entrepreneurs like Jack Ma from Alibaba and Pony Ma from Tencent, innovation has been idealized as the epitome of Xi's "Chinese dream." However, the grim reality of excessive work hours (characteristic of but not confined to the tech industry) on which Chinese innovation capitalizes appears to meet popular discontent. For example, Jack Ma's appraisal of the "996" work culture as a "huge blessing" stirred fierce debate across the Chinese internet and led to the articulation of collective, albeit passive resistance (Bandurski 2021). The intense culture of overwork, popularly known as "996" requires employees to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week. This extreme work ethos (also labeled "wolf culture") is characterized by intense competition within the workplace that compels employees to outperform their peers by engaging in a bitter bidding war over overtime, merely to ensure survival.

The CPC has been endorsing an ambiguous attitude toward private wealth and the workings of private capital and its increasing concentration, indicated by the frequent disappearance of public figures like Ma. However, while fervent communication through the party's mouthpiece



People's Daily articulates the party's disapproval of overwork culture, tangible labor protections remain sparse. From a closer look, these developments threaten the social strata that lie at the heart of both the drive for innovation and domestic consumption: the professional middle class. By exhorting longer hours in production to increase their capacity to consume, these changes severely curtail their capacity, and as a matter of fact, their willingness to reproduce.

### 1.3.5.3 *Reproduction in crisis*

The looming reproduction crisis that is an unforeseen consequence of the fundamental transformation of the sphere of production also warrants a hesitant attitude from the state toward the workings of private capital. Despite the gradual relaxation of the one-child policy (initially allowing two children in 2015 and then three children in 2021), China's fertility rate continues to decline, reaching an estimated record low of 1.09 in 2022 – the lowest among countries with populations exceeding 100 million (Stevenson and Wang 2023). The ongoing decline in fertility that happens not only in the absence of state prohibitions but also despite the government's increasingly explicit efforts to promote childbirth can be traced to the structural transformation of the sphere of reproduction that accompanied transformations in production since the beginning of the era of reform and opening.

In the 1990s, the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the subsequent dismantling of the quasi-welfare system provided by the work unit system (*danwei* 单位)<sup>30</sup> saw radical state disinvestment from fields related to social reproduction, such as housing, healthcare, education, and care services, leaving China among the very few countries where child care for children

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<sup>30</sup> In the era of China's planned economy, the term *danwei* encompassed all types of organizations where individuals were employed (businesses, public institutions, government, and military). Besides providing job opportunities, the *danwei* was responsible for a wide array of welfare and services, such as housing, healthcare, education, and pension (Bjorklund 1986; Chai 2014).

under three is not supported financially by the government at all (Dong 2021). The privatization of these crucial sites of reproduction led human lives to become thoroughly commodified and overtly competitive, with the costs associated with essential prerequisites for raising well-rounded children (such as healthcare, education, and housing) escalating. Consequently, many young Chinese have voluntarily chosen single-child families or childlessness, driven by a fear that they may be unable to provide the necessary resources in a society marked by ever-increasing social competition (Yuan 2022).

#### ***1.3.5.4 Involution, lying flat, and the “last generation”***

In the 2010s, attesting to the scale of young people’s disenchantment with China’s development, involution (*nei juan* 内卷), a term of academic origin, became appropriated by the larger public as a lifestyle buzzword. Designating the antonym of evolution, involution captures the social experience in which everyone must incessantly invest more just to maintain the same standard of living (Wang and Ge 2020). The competition has grown so intense that it is widely perceived to be detrimental to the physical and mental well-being of society (Meng 2020). The awareness of involution gave rise to the social movement of lying flat (*tang ping* 躺平), a movement of passive resistance to the national drive for development. This movement calls on young workers and professionals – including the middle class, the envisaged engine of domestic revitalization – to opt out of the struggle for workplace success, and to reject the promise of consumer fulfillment (Bandurski 2021).

While *nei juan* and *tang ping* predominantly express sentiments against the capitalist market and the commodification of human lives, disaffection also expands to the realm of politics, with growing concerns about increasingly repressive authoritarian measures. In this regard, Xi’s zero-Covid policy (Xuecun 2023) became one of the most fundamental morals of Covid for the Chinese society: no matter one’s economic status, one can be subject to arbitrary

government intrusion anytime. With the introduction of the zero-Covid policy, wealth ceased to guarantee the protection of individual freedoms overnight, as authorities exercised full control over one's movement, forcefully imprisoning entire cities without ensuring access to basic needs of food and medication, breaking into homes and beating pets to death as a matter of their "sanitization."

Largescale protests against these measures arose (Hale 2022) heavily involving the middle-class urbanites who were inculcated with and encouraged to foster a sense of individual freedoms by the very same party which now encroached on them. One video footage that went viral documents a young man's response to police officers warning that his family would be punished for three generations had he refuse to go to a quarantine camp: "This will be our last generation." Posted by millions of Chinese internet users, the "last generation" became yet another manifesto of renunciation after *tang ping*, denoting that childlessness is a matter of passive political stance-taking for many (Yuan 2022) rather than of mere economic consideration.

### **1.3.6 Middle-class discontent with the state and its capitalism - Runxue**

These developments evince a growing sense of dissatisfaction and frustration with both the state and its form of capitalism, bringing the messy entanglement between production and reproduction to the fore. Popular discontent with the commodification of human life and the ever-increasing pressure and competition coupled with an increasingly intrusive state prompt younger generations to question habitual markers of success, not only defined as career advancement and material possessions but also family formation. While the talk about involution, *tang ping*, and the "last generation" are inherently passive expressions of despair

about the “Chinese dream” reflecting the general disillusionment with government policies, there is a growing volume of people who take a more active stance.

Though discontents voiced by China’s new middle classes centering around the environment, food security, housing, and education are relatively well documented within the PRC (e.g. Kuan 2015, Li & Tilt, 2018, Rocca 2013), cases in which disaffection results in exit - that is, triggering outmigration - were generally absent before the appearance of “runology” (*runxue* 润学). *Runxue*, the study of why, where, and how to run away became an increasingly viral discourse triggered by the Shanghai lockdown in 2022 (Kuo and Li 2022). Its popularity indicates that an increasing proportion of the new middle class entertains the idea of voting with their feet against being censored, politically suppressed, and completely exploited in the name of the country’s rejuvenation.

However, as the present dissertation seeks to explore, *runxue* has been an ongoing trend, with Covid only catalyzing already existing tendencies among wealthy Chinese, who have been leaving the country in growing numbers since the early 2010s (Xiang 2015; Liu-Farrer 2016). These turns of events suggest that the carefully engineered, better educated, and higher aspiring middle class departed from the state project and embarked on a career of its own, leading to the emergence of uncanny destinations such as Hungary. As this dissertation posits, pre-*runxue* middle-class migrants who presumably account for the overwhelming presence of Chinese nationals in unexpected real estate markets in Malaysia, Japan, or the Philippines (Platter 2019; Georg 2019; Donnelly 2016), as well as in RBI schemes across the globe (Surak 2020), might as well exercise *lying flat* abroad.

### 1.3.7 Chinese “golden visa” migrants in Hungary

Just like the visa waiver agreement, the residency bond immigration scheme (*xiongyali guozhai touzi yimin xianmgu* 匈牙利国债投资移民项目), colloquially known as *guozhai xiangmu* (国债项目) provided these would-be migrants with a smooth immigration pathway, and its simplicity and speed topped with an affordable price was the biggest allure of Hungary. However, the motivations that drive this mobility are fundamentally distinct from that of the *xin yimin*. “New migrants” primary focus in Hungary has been on economic production and considered migration to Hungary as a temporary stage or means to an end, rather than an end in itself. For them, Hungary was a springboard to a better life displaced both temporally and spatially: in the future, in an upscale city either in the US or in China. To illustrate the sharp contrast, consider the following response by Jake, a 36-year-old man from Beijing, who became one of my key informants and good friend, and subsequently became one of the protagonists of this dissertation upon my inquiry of why he came to Hungary:

I didn’t want to go to countries like Germany, Austria, or France, because they only give you long-term residence if you work. And see, I didn’t come out to work, and it would have been very complicated and troublesome (*mafan* 麻烦) to pretend to work. (emphasis added)

#### 1.3.7.1 From work to family: “It’s all for the child”

Sitting on a bench enjoying the sunshine and the fresh air amidst the lingering beauties of spring in Budapest’s City Park as we watch our sons exercising their beginner skate tricks, Jake had nothing to add to this statement. He clearly did not feel that his choice to practically retire at an unexpectedly early age needed any further explanation, which indicates a starkly different attitude to life in general and migration in particular. Jake, just like all my other informants, left behind lucrative middle-class careers in centers of global production such as Shanghai and Beijing, along with properties and social and familial networks to live a *good enough life* in

the *present*. All of my informants unanimously cited their decision to abandon what is otherwise celebrated as a successful middle-class life with the phrase “it’s all for the child” (“*zhi yao while haizi* 只要为了孩子”) – as if quoting an official policy.

As such, one of the ways to capture the distinction between “new migrants” and the “golden visa migrants” is the way in which migrants prioritize matters of production and reproduction in their decision-making. Unlike *xin yimin* who paid a significant sacrifice in the field of reproduction for the sake of production by temporarily and geographically displacing their reproduction-related needs and desires, “golden visa migrants” sacrifice production for the sake of reproduction. Making use of the wealth they already accumulated in China as beneficiaries of the flow-on effects of the past decades’ economic growth as a form of geoarbitrage (Hayes 2014) to finance their lives in Hungary, while living a practically retired lifestyle, they focus exclusively on reproduction in a quite literal sense. What they are looking for in Hungary are a healthier environment, safer food, and a more wholesome and relaxed environment in which to raise children (Nyíri and Beck 2020; F. Beck and Nyíri 2022).

Yet, unlike the *xin yimin* who, if present, tended to provide their children with transnational education (Feischmidt and Nyíri 2006; Nyíri 2014b), “golden visa migrants” often choose to send their children to state schools—even as the Hungarian middle class increasingly flees them for private and confessional schools (Gera 2018). As part of the country’s illiberal transformation under the nationalist Fidesz government, the Hungarian government has backpedaled on liberal educational reform, recreating a centralized school system that champions content-oriented, disciplinarian teaching adhering to patriotic and Christian values (Radó 2022). The centralization of education brought about large-scale protests among educators, bringing thousands of teachers, parents, and students to the streets across Hungary

first in the early 2010s, then in 2022-23. Private and confessional schools are seen as a viable alternative by the local middle class (also defined in terms of aspirations), as these are better financed and are seen as more child-centered, less focused on content delivery and more on creativity, and offering better international connections: precisely what Chinese migrant parents say they seek. It would seem that the old-fashioned content-oriented, disciplinarian teaching that state schools engage in reminds parents of schooling in China, which they say they want to avoid, rather than the “happy education” they claim to pursue.

The reason for the overtly positive expectations toward Hungary’s public education system is that agencies that traded with the Hungarian residency bond soon realized and tapped into the demand for “happy education.” As noted earlier, initially, the program was designed for flexible businessmen, reflected in a marketing strategy that emphasized the lack of requirements to be present in the country, the lack of global taxation and low local taxes, EU benefits, and stable property rights, presuming that applicants would generally be interested in “achieving a balanced allocation of assets” and “asset security.”

**Among immigration program in European Schengen countries**

- **The only program**  
clearly stated that there is no special requirement to apply for permanent residency permit.
- **The only program**  
clearly stated that there is no landing requirement to apply for permanent residency permit.
- **Invest in government, safe and easy.**
- **Government support, no stay in Hungary is required.**

**Exchange Rates**  
1 EUR=308.5532 HUF  
1 CNY=◆◆◆◆! HUF

**Recommended website**  
安居乐业匈牙利

**Links**  
[Immigration Hungary](#)  
[Hungary Embassy in Beijing](#)  
[Hungary Embassy in Shanghai](#)  
[Hungary Embassy in Chongqing](#)

**Hungary State Special Debt immigration**  
Official Weixin

**Hungary State Special Debt immigration**  
Official Weibo

Figure 8. Hybridized marketing strategy. Source: <http://immigration-hungary.com/CN/index.html>

In 2016, when the program became most popular, marketing emphasis changed to focus on family benefits (Figure 8, Figure 9), and the “excellent educational environment” (‘匈牙利介绍-匈牙利移民中心’, n.d.). For example, a company registered in 2016 and operating under the misleading name of “Hungarian Immigration Center” argued yet again rather misleadingly that in Hungary, “education is the most important national strategy.” This claim is not supported by test results or state spending on education (both would locate Hungary in the bottom segment of the region), but by the astonishing per capita ratio of Nobel Prize winners. The advertisement argues that with its 14 Nobel Prize winners, Hungary “ranks first in the world in terms of population ratio” and then goes on to list world-famous Hungarian innovations from vitamin C to the Rubik's cube including some unexpected items such as the telephone (‘匈牙利介绍-匈牙利移民中心’, n.d.).



Figure 9. Number of Chinese main applicants (excluding family members) by year. Source: OINA

### 1.3.7.2 *The emergence of a new mental structure*

Participants in this study are parents in their 30s, 40s, and early 50s who embarked on the road of upward social mobility in the earlier, more meritocratic stage of China’s transition to capitalism. They survived the educational competition and started working in professional,



managerial careers in the growing private sector, while also developing a particular middle-class sensibility in endorsing values of freedom, autonomy, and self-expression, which are apparent in their child-rearing practices. Interestingly, these sensibilities have partly been cultivated by state propaganda under the banner of population quality, which centered the nation-building discourse of rejuvenation around the importance of the mental, physical, and social environment in the cultivation of the future generation. Ironically, it is exactly the discourse of national revitalization (Greenhalgh, 2010) that has “become decoupled from its original agenda and emerged as a mental structure in its own right, triggering a new trend in international mobility” (Beck and Nyíri 2022, 919).

Their mobility is made possible by the reversal of the wage gap between the two countries, and while some arrived with enough savings for five years without any active income in Hungary, other families opted for the astronaut household strategy (Ong 1999, 127; Ho 2002), letting one parent (usually the father) provide for the family in Hungary from China. It is important to note that for the women in these families, physical separation from their husbands is not the only change in their lives: most mothers participating in the research had regular employment in China before migration, and they only transitioned to become full-time mothers in Hungary. On the one hand, this is a response to the ‘care crisis’ (Fraser 2016) as escalating costs of child-rearing in China require both parents to be employed, thus further escalating their child-related expenses. On the other hand, it is also a case of geoarbitrage: while all participant families were dual earners in China out of financial necessity; an individual income from China is enough to support the entire family’s expenses in Hungary.

Even if the migration of these parents is made possible by the side effects of China's advanced capitalism, their emigration also highlights the challenges of a maturing capitalist society governed by an increasingly authoritarian state, and thereby points to a changing nature of

belonging. While the *xin yimin* tended to contribute to the economic growth of the PRC by way of remittances and investments in the homeland, “golden visa migrants” tend to consume, invest, and even donate in their host country (Nyíri and Beck 2020).<sup>31</sup> The CPC’s attitude toward the “exodus of the wealthy” (Liu-Farrer 2016) and the concomitant capital flight is also more antagonistic than its honeymoon-like relationship toward the *xin yimin*.

Unlike the *xin yimin*, whose personal entrepreneurial goals of economic enrichment were aligned with the modernizing goal of the Motherland bestowing them with a strong sense of belonging to the PRC, “golden visa migrants’” relationship to the CPC has been fraught with ambiguities from both sides. Reflecting the Chinese state’s antagonistic attitude, in 2017 the CPC began to regulate individuals moving foreign currency out of the country more strictly, capping overseas property investment. Although reports and research on the uninterrupted Chinese presence in several European, Australian, and Asian real estate markets (Donnelly 2016; Platter 2019; Georg 2019; Robertson and Rogers 2017) indicate that these recent laws have been easily tiptoed around, news about the arrest of Chinese nationals in Japan for “illegal electronic money transfers” corroborates a sterner approach from the government (Nakazawa 2023). Restrictions of this nature, even when potentially circumventable, possess symbolic significance as they compel “golden visa migrants” into regularly engaging in practices that violate the law (F. Beck 2022), making it more difficult to “go abroad with the sense that their project is in line with the values of the dominant discourse of Chineseness, rather than violating it” (Nyíri 2001, p. 639).

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<sup>31</sup> Tellingly, “golden visa migrants” often chose to contribute to Hungary’s “fight against the pandemic” rather than to China’s. They publicised these donations on Facebook (instead of WeChat), with English captions like: “We, the Chinese donate to the second home we live in; we share the same fate as Hungarians”—while using WeChat to organize fundraisers among the Chinese in Hungary.

## 1.4 Conclusion

In the present chapter, I provided a political, historical, and economic overview of the roots and desires that animated two historically, socially, and politically distinct mobilities, taking advantage of two brief periods of liberalization in Hungary's migration controls: the visa waiver agreement between 1988–1992 and a residency for investment scheme between 2013–2017. Representing the infancy of capitalist reconfiguration in the early 1990s China, the over-production crisis coupled with large numbers of mobile people either dismissed or voluntarily leaving state employment gave rise to the figure of the entrepreneurial *xin yimin*, who found its “treasure land” in post-socialist Hungary's barely regulated markets and needy consumers. Unhindered by regulations on both out- and immigration and animated by an aspiration to achieve transnational prestige by proving entrepreneurial success, they used migration to Hungary as a means to achieve a better life in the future.

Two decades later, people are leaving China for Hungary not because of the hope of a better life in the future reached through hard work, but to the contrary: to live a simple and happy life with their family – and not work at all. As such, they attest to the maturing of capitalist transformation in China by shifting the limelight from production to reproduction. While their move is made possible by Chinese megacities becoming the “high latitudes of the global division of labor” (Hayes 2018) where one salary could support a whole family's life in Budapest; their aspirations toward living the good life in them became increasingly difficult to meet. Exemplified by their different aspirations, *xin yimin*'s main objective through migration was to accumulate money to live a better life in the *future*; while “golden visa migrants” use the capital they already accumulated to withdraw from production and live a good enough life at the *present*.

By way of this asymmetrical comparison, I attempted to foreground the qualitative novelty enacted by the “golden visa” families and anticipate the ways in which this mobility challenges dominant theories/ideologies of migration. First, it defeats analysis centered around production and labor by explicitly rejecting even the idea of “pretending to work,” as Jake was saying in a quotation. Second, the discursively denoted protagonists of this mobility are first and foremost children and to a lesser extent their main caregivers, who, in most cases are their mothers. Third, the decision-making process unanimously narrated by all my participants foregrounds the primacy of feelings (most notably of anxiety and hope) while they tend to render economic exigencies as being of secondary concern, only as an aspect that plays a role as a necessary precondition for facilitating their otherwise emotionally defined goals. Subsequently, it also anticipates the need to revise and reconceptualize existing migration theories by incorporating reproduction as an equally important dimension of migration, which will be the aim of the next chapter. Having emotionally driven decisions closely related to ideologies about children at its heart, this study makes the shortcomings of production-oriented, *zweckrational* migration theories conspicuously salient: the role of children in migration and not unrelatedly, the role emotions play in migration decision-making.

## CHAPTER 2: ZWECK AND WERTRATIONAL THEORIES OF MIGRATION – A LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

In *Economy and Society*, Weber put forward his diagnosis of modernity and its problems of meanings through the distinction between substantive (*Wert*) and formal (*Zweck*) rationality of actions (1947, 184–85). While *wertrational* action is an *end in itself*, given the value inherent in the action; *zweckrational* action is a *means*; a calculated, instrumental attempt to achieve a desired end. Weber argued that the modern individual needs to choose between these two competing definitions of rationality, and this choice is necessarily arbitrary as both represent ultimate values and as such, the choice between them cannot be made on a rational basis (Brubaker 1991, 87). According to Weber's analysis, the arbitrary choice made by Western civilization is that of formal rationalization that takes shape in the form of massive bureaucratization, and the reign of cold, instrumental rationality in the public realms of work and politics (Weber and Kalberg 2005), inevitably affecting the everyday conduct of individuals.

I should complement these realms with that of social sciences – a constitutive element of Western modernity – and the field of migration scholarship in particular, where this instrumental understanding of action became remarkably salient and persistent over time. Despite the over four decades of global interconnectivity which has been acceleratedly increasing ever since the end of the Cold War, sedentarism is still persistently considered the norm in both popular imagination and academic orientation toward migration (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). This attributes the decision to migrate a great deal of significance and

understanding the rationale(s) that drive such an important decision emerges as a central arena for exploring one of the oldest questions in social sciences: the logic of human decision-making.

Rationality, broadly understood as the “discipline of subjecting one’s choices – of actions, as well as objectives, values, and priorities – to reasoned scrutiny,” as Sen argues, must accommodate the diversity of reasons *beyond* the narrowly formulaic views based on the “canonical selection of ‘self-interest maximization’” (2002, 4–5). Failing to do so, as Sen points out, in effect amounts to a “basic denial of freedom of thought” (Sen 2002, 5). The habitual reduction of migration decision-making to crude economism depicting migrants as “rational fools” is thus unsustainable both morally and empirically. One way to challenge and counter this tendency for methodological economism is to bring *Wertrationalität* back into analysis, presuming that despite Weber’s proleptic assessment, *Wertrationalität* – though inconsistently and incoherently – has continued to stay with modern individuals in varying forms alongside *Zweckrationalität*.

To capture the unabated tenacity of *Zweckrationalität*, the realm of *reproduction*, an unfairly neglected dimension of human life in migration studies (Orellana et al. 2001; Anderson and Smith 2001; Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Xiang unpublished) presents itself as a suitable entry point. I understand reproduction – yet another entry on the long list of underdefined and overused concepts in social sciences – in its broadest and most quotidian sense: as one of the “ultimately determining element[s] in history, [...] the *reproduction of real life*” (Engels 1978a, 760) – the birthing and raising of children, caring for friends and family, maintaining households and communities, sustaining connections, and more generally, maintaining social bonds and shared meanings (Fraser 2016). Reproduction, as such, involves providing the necessary preconditions of living, which in the twenty-first century is inextricably entangled

with production. It entails a great deal of consumption of goods and services (of a home, food, clothes, etc.), which, as an inevitable necessity, becomes a chore in itself, along with other more explicitly arduous forms of labor, such as chores like cleaning, washing and cooking. Last but not least, it also encompasses the birthing and raising of children.

### 2.1.1 The narrative hegemony of *Zweckrationalität* in social sciences

Before dwelling deeper into migration studies, I find it necessary to contemplate the triumph of *Zweckrationalität* in social sciences and situate its narrative hegemony in the larger socio-economic context. Historically, the subjugation of *Wertrationalität* by *Zweckrationalität* coincides with the separation of the public realm of production from the private realm of reproduction, accomplished by the 19th-century regime of liberal competitive capitalism (Fraser 2016).<sup>32</sup> With the ideal of separate spheres championed by early industrial capitalism, the distinction between the entangled notions of the “private life” or the “family” and the “public” and “work” was born, carrying with it specific implications toward rationality, morality, and gender; and mediated through specific temporal orientations.

Although both the private, *wertrational* and the public, *zweckrational* realms are equally subjugated to the orders of the clock time,<sup>33</sup> they posit markedly different temporal orientations. Instrumental rationality intrinsically prioritizes the *future* and enslaves the present by interpreting actions (by nature taken in the present) from the vantage point of their future outcomes. By contrast, value rationality, in attributing value inherent to the action itself,

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<sup>32</sup> In *The Origins of the Family*, Engels traces this back to ancient Greece (1978b, 738). Though a difference of roughly 17 centuries might seem significant, what is important for my argument is the logic that posits the two realms as distinguishable and irreconcilably distinct. In that regard, there is no significant difference between the authors.

<sup>33</sup> As Rosa (2013) argues, in early Western industrial societies, the spatial separation of the public from the private was accompanied by, and indeed made possible through, the diffusion of mechanical “clock time” and the temporal separation of these realms. Replacing a task-oriented attitude toward work (i.e., work is considered done when a task is completed) with clock time, which marks the end of work time and the beginning of private time, fundamentally changed the course of everyday life and became its guiding principle.

emphasizes the *present*. As Rosa points out, “insofar as the basic ethical question of the good life is the question how human beings desire to or should spend ‘their’ time, time structures and horizons” carry fundamental ethical implications (2013, 31).

Taking together the spatial and temporal dimensions of the separated public and the private realms allows us to see how morals – by which I mean the values that guide actions – intersect or contradict with irreconcilably different rationalities in individual lives. And, as Abu-Lughod reminds us, difference is never innocent of power, and is always a question of unequal subject positions (1996, 469). The emphatically gendered correspondence between the separate realms and the two kinds of rationalities is rather self-explanatory: while the public, paid, competitive, and honored realm of production is guided by supposedly objective, instrumental rationality and is rendered male; the unpaid and thus socially insignificant private domain of reproduction, cast as the province of women, is supposed to be the realm where emotions, morals, and values serve as the basis of the incurably subjective decisions.

### **2.1.2 The missing realm of *Wertrationalität*: women, children, values, and emotions**

Up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, theories of migration focused exclusively on production: the instrumentally rational migration of working men, leaving aside the entire realm of social reproduction and with it, value-oriented decision-making.<sup>34</sup> Migration studies’ preoccupation with production is manifest in the domineering image of the migrant as the “adult paid worker,” leading to what critics call pervasive “adult-centeredness” of the field (Ackers and Stalford

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<sup>34</sup> A notable exception to this trend was *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918). Predating contemporary scholarship on transnationalism by about seven decades, this seminal book was the first systematic study of transnational family life. Indicative of the dominant preoccupation of social sciences, it fell into undeserved oblivion (Skrbiš 2008) and has not achieved its justified canonical status for almost a century.



2004), and an apparent lack of understanding regarding the role children play in the migratory process (Orellana et al. 2001). Instead of critically reflecting on the separation of production and reproduction, with its exclusive focus on production, migration studies contributed to the reification and naturalization of the logic of power and domination, inherent in the separation itself.

The role women, children, values, and emotions play in migration only began to emerge as a legitimate line of inquiry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, testified by a slowly but confidently rising number of thematic special issues (see for example Orellana et al. 2001; Ryan 2008; Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Choi, Yeoh, and Lam 2019). What I find important to point out here is that the increasing attention devoted to these subjects probably reflects more *qualitative* than quantitative societal changes. Women, children, values, and emotions most likely played one role or another throughout the history of migration, and the increasing significance attributed to them reflects once again the situatedness of social sciences in wider sociocultural changes. Most important among these qualitative changes is the emergence of a child-centered ethos as a dominant *structure of feeling* (Williams 1961, 64–65) reflected in the above-cited studies, which stands at the heart of this inquiry.<sup>35</sup>

In what follows I first provide a brief summary of functionalist migration theories to highlight how their almost exclusive focus on economic determinants for migration evinces the triumph of the *zweckrational* paradigm in the field, leading to “writing the family out” from academic accounts of migration (Waters and Yeoh 2023). By pointing out the specific spatial, racial, classed, and temporal presumptions on which these frameworks operate, I foreground the

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<sup>35</sup> I employ Williams’ notion of the *structure of feeling* as a “critical history of ideas and values” that led to the emergence of child-centeredness as a “very deep and very wide possession,” a crystallization of a dominant set of emotions that is “as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity” (1961, 64–65). I explore this central argument in Section 3.3.

importance of incorporating *wertrational* logic to understanding contemporary migration phenomena. Then I turn to a more recent, agentic account of migration – the lifestyle migration framework (D. M. Benson and O'Reilly 2009) – that offers an opportunity for centering migration decision-making and experience around the question of values and emotions, while also taking note of its shortcomings to contextualize agency in structural terms. Afterward, I introduce the capabilities and aspirations framework (de Haas 2021) which I see as the most fecund attempt at reconciling economic and non-economic drivers of migration. Finally, I propose a more systematic approach to aspirations, one that builds upon an undeservedly neglected dimension of human life: social reproduction. Doing so, I account for both the sociocultural change that increasingly foregrounds the importance of social reproduction by centering attention on children and the subsequent developments reflecting this shift in the social sciences in general and migration studies in particular.

## **2.2 *Zweckrational* functionalist theories of migration: the migrant as *homo economicus***

The attempts to create a unique theory of migration have been characterized by a common perspective that approaches migration as an unambiguously *zweckrational* mode of action, as a means employed to achieve a rather narrowly defined end: economic betterment. The first of which, the *Laws of Migration* formulated by Ravenstein (1976) published in 1885 laid the groundwork for approaching migration from the standpoint of functionalist social theory and continues to persistently inform most of the subsequent migration theories. In the framework of functionalist social theory which understands society as an equilibrium, migration becomes a function of spatial disequilibria, by which people move from low-income to high-income areas, following their inclination to restore equilibrium. The assumption of society's tendency towards equilibrium is most evident in gravity-based 'push-pull' models, which remain

pervasive in both academia and popular discourse about migration (de Haas 2011, 8). Functionalist theories thus only tackle narrowly defined labor migration and embrace a rather mechanic and dehumanized image of migrants, whose agency is limited to the most narrowly defined economic rationality – that, according to Sen, practically amounts to a “basic denial of freedom of thought” (2002, 5).

Largely building on functionalist assumptions, the neoclassical economic theory of migration gained prominence as the oldest yet still hegemonic theory of migration, dating back to the 1950s.<sup>36</sup> According to this theory, international migration is caused by geographic differences in the supply of and demand for labor (D. S. Massey et al. 1993) and interprets migration as a consequence of the economic disparities between different countries. In terms of social imaginary, this theory does not advance a radically different image of migrants but depicts them as income-maximizing individuals who operate in well-functioning markets and base their decisions on the rational cost-benefit calculation of wage differentials.<sup>37</sup> Despite attempts to revise the narrowly understood theory of rational choice to accommodate knowledge and market imperfections, the image of the utility-maximizer (*zweckrational*) migrant remained unchallenged (de Haas 2011, 20).

Taking the world-systems theory as its starting point, the migration systems theory (D. S. Massey et al. 1999) understands migration as a natural outgrowth of disruptions and dislocations that inevitably occur in the process of capitalist development. It argues that international flows of labor move on the same routes as international flows of capital, only in the opposite direction: from the peripheries to the core. Thus, at the end of the day, despite its

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<sup>36</sup> See for example Lewis, 1954.

<sup>37</sup> More sophisticated models distinguish themselves with the amendment of ‘expected wage differentials.’

much-needed critical undertone, this theory boils down to the same conclusion of magnetic push and pull factors and deprives migrants of any agency beyond highly reductive economism.

This mechanistic understanding of migration that portrays migrants as “rational fools” (Sen 2002, 6) merely responding to push and pull factors denies migrants agency and presumes their preferences to be static and constant across spaces, societies, and over time. The theory of new economics of migration (Stark and Bloom 1985) intended to amend these shortcomings. The new economics relocated economic disadvantage within the sending society and upscaled the unit of analysis from the individual to the family, conceptualizing migration as a collective household strategy that is nonetheless still understood as a means to overcome economic disadvantages. This theory provides more room for agency because it interprets migration as an active attempt by social groups to overcome structural constraints, (de Haas 2011, 10) while the integration of migrants' remittance behavior and households' remittance use-aspects of migration with migration decision-making is also a fruitful attempt at reconciling economism with agency (D. S. Massey et al. 1993, 457). Albeit these amendments undoubtedly opened new avenues, overall, they failed to intervene in the ubiquitous image of the migrant as *homo economicus*.

By ignoring race, ethnicity, class, and gender as factors that significantly color the figure of the black-and-white utility maximizer migrant and his or her opportunities, *zweckrational* functionalist theories of migration fail to conceptualize migration as a social process. By singling out the economic rationale in migration decision-making as their only subject of interest, they ignore the multitude of non-economic factors that shape and drive decision-making along with economic incentives on the macro level; and ignore that migrants spell out interconnected but analytically distinct social, cultural, economic and political factors as their

main motivations (de Haas 2011, 14). As such, these theories turn a blind eye to all mobilities that challenge their presumptions about geography by moving in the opposite direction (from the core to either the core or periphery, or from Global North to either Global North or to Global South c.f. Vailati and Rial 2016), and involving people who lie at a different intersection of class, gender, and race (middle- or upper-class, women, non-white), and who are motivated by reasons that do not fully comply with economic rationality.

In terms of temporality, the underlying presumption of functionalist theories of migration is that migration cannot have else, but the *future* as its definitive frame. Migrants endure the hardships their journeys entail in the hope of a better life in the future. Therefore, decisions that aim to enhance well-being in the *present* even at the risk of limiting future opportunities also fall outside of their purview. This suggests that a *wertrational* approach to the understanding of the migration decision-making process would not only be a fecund, but an indispensable complementation for accommodating the wide variety of mobility (such as political or environmental refugees, lifestyle migrants, or circulating students) that falls outside the narrowly defined frames of labor migration.

### **2.2.1 Educational migration: education as investment**

A relatively young subfield of migration studies, educational migration bears obvious relevance to the particular case that serves as the ground for the theory I aim to put forward: parents who decide to remove their children from the Chinese education system to raise and educate them in Hungary. However, the field of educational migration is an excellent illustration of the pertinacious nature of economic reductivism in migration studies. Scholarly interest in migration motivated by educational concerns, labeled either as educational migration (e.g. J. S.-Y. Park and Bae 2009) or international student migration (e.g. Brooks and Waters

2011) dates back to the 1990s, paralleling the rapid expansion and internationalization of higher education across the globe. While there is a subtle difference in terms of the age groups they concern (educational migration pertains to younger children from preschool to secondary education and international student migrants are enrolled in tertiary education or above) and the subsequent family arrangements necessitated by the age of students, there seems to be a consensus in uniformly interpreting these movements in terms of *investments*.

Operating with Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of different and interchangeable capitals, accounts of educational migration almost exclusively use the vocabulary of *accumulation* – of educational capital, cosmopolitan capital, transnational educational capital, etc. (e.g. Waters 2006; Lo et al. 2015; Carlson, Gerhards, and Hans 2017; Soong 2022). By stressing the advantages of developing language skills, cultivating independence, the “acquisition of valuable credentials” and cosmopolitan experience, the dominant narrative that underlies research on educational migration discursively emphasizes the numerous benefits studying abroad has to young people without problematizing the oversimplified view that equates education with accumulation. The tendency to prioritize theories of capital accumulation in understanding what drives educational migration leads to a narrow interpretation of its end goal as the reproduction of class advantages (e.g. Findlay et al. 2012), and its failure to address it as an attempt to seek meaning in life, as well as the “profound and life-changing impact” (Waters, n.d.) it has on shaping both students' and their families' lives. Temporality-wise, these accounts presume the *future* to be the decisive timeframe for decision making, positing a (narrowly defined) successful future as the ultimate goal of undertakings in the present, and thereby discard any *wertrational* reasoning participants in the process might put forward.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Fran Martin's (2022) *Dreams of Flight* is a remarkable exception to this rule.

The basic presumption on which this body of literature operates is that the ultimate end goal of acquiring international educational experience and/or credentials is to gain a competitive edge in the global competition for status via the accumulation of cultural/symbolic capital through *superior education*. As such, education is rarely seen as “a goal in and of itself, but a much longer-term *investment in the future* and the means to a good life” (Waters 2023, emphasis added). The interpretation of educational mobilities solely on the basis of *Zweckrationalität* has distinctive geographical, and temporal implications, which, taken together foreground a rather narrowly formulated narrative of what a successful life entails.

The underlying assumption identifies the locale for the pursuit of valuable credentials, capitalizable languages, and meaningful experience invariably with the West, and very specifically the Anglophone West (first and foremost the USA, followed in a varying order by the UK, Canada, and Australia). Although undoubtedly corroborated by the empirical reality of these countries serving as the top choice destination of educational migrants across the globe (with China, following Japan’s suit, also embarking on the road of becoming a *zweckrational* educational destination), once again, by leaving this presumption unproblematicized, this body of literature serves to naturalize the cultural hegemony of the West in setting the terms and goals of the competition, and consequently, in the definition of what a good or successful life means.

### **2.2.1.1 Asian students abroad**

Quantitatively, Asian students dominate the field of international student migration, indicated by labels such as “education exodus” in South Korea (Lo et al. 2015) or “study abroad fever” in the PRC (Fong 2011; Martin 2022). Information regarding tertiary education migration is readily available, in stark contrast to the scarcity of reliable data concerning younger migrants,

an area where a significant knowledge gap persists (White et al. 2011).<sup>39</sup> According to UNESCO statistics, in 2023 over six million young people are pursuing tertiary education abroad, over one million of whom departing from China, 510.000 from India, and 100.000 from South Korea ('Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students' 2023). The volume and constancy of the demand for outbound educational migration despite mounting global barriers against it (such as policies ministered by the Trump administration, the global pandemic, and the subsequent economic recession) suggest remarkable tenacity.

The reason behind this perseverance, on the one hand, is that studying abroad became a culturally dominant aspiration (especially in the PRC, see Fong 2004 and in South Korea, see Lo et al. 2015), and on the other, the rise of an education migration industry (Baas 2019) that capitalizes on perpetuating these mobilities. In the past years, universities and higher education institutions across the globe started to engage in a process called "internationalization." Through "internationalization," institutes of higher education increasingly seek to generate revenues by attracting tuition-paying foreign students, and by doing so, they refashion education from a public good to a commodity for private consumption. These entangled processes effectively expanded the scope of educational credential seeking to the transnational scale (Martin 2022, 10), thereby displacing positional class competition traditionally confined within national boundaries onto what is increasingly understood as a global competition for status (Brown 2000; Chiang 2022).

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<sup>39</sup> The prevalent *zweckrational* approach to migration research and its consequent the focus on adults have led to only approximate figures being available for child migration, despite the unabatedly advancing and ever more perfect systems for surveilling migratory flows. Typically, migration data fail to differentiate between adults and children, unless the children fall into specific victim categories such as refugees or those being trafficked. For instance, while IOM's international migration statistics lack age-specific breakdowns, and while the OECD does provide age-disaggregated statistics for immigrants, yet inexplicably omits individuals under 15 years of age (White et al. 2011). This situation, unchanged for over a decade, is mirrored in Hungary, where data I required specifically from the Ministry of Education reveals that the 2,500 Chinese students in kindergartens and schools match the number of those – tracked by the OINA – in tertiary education.



The general narrative embraced by this literature attests to the particular salience of the *zweckrational* narrative in the study of Asian educational migrants, probably having its origins in Ong's (1999) seminal study, *Flexible Citizenship*. When taking note of how Hong Kong Chinese put the Bourdieusian common sense into practice Ong claims: "For many ethnic Chinese (...), both the well-off and the not-so-rich, strategies of accumulation begin with the acquisition of a *Western* education" (1999, 95, emphasis added). However, as Fong (2011) notes, "Western education" or "study abroad" does not designate just any place outside China, but very precisely the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and to some extent France, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore – the "Global North" in short.

### 2.2.1.2 *Changing moral geographies*

With Chinese outbound students constituting the majority of the international student body for more than a decade, a meticulous "moral geography" has emerged, ranking potential study destinations in a hierarchical order. This ranking guides preferences and decisions regarding where to study by delineating where the most esteemed knowledge and qualifications can be obtained (A. S. Hansen and Thøgersen 2015). The Anglophone "First World" (Fong 2004) emerged as the pinnacle for accumulating (symbolic) capital and continues to attract the vast majority of Chinese outbound students, while, marking the bottom of this hierarchy, peripheral, "small language" European countries that offer less desirable credentials are labeled as "foreign trash" (*waiguo laji* 外国垃圾) (A. S. Hansen and Thøgersen 2015).

Mirroring not only the empirical reality but also this "moral geography," scholarly attention has overwhelmingly focused on the Anglophone "Global North" (Kajanus 2015; Xiang and Shen 2009; Watkins, Ho, and Butler 2017; Waters 2009) with a smaller share of East Asia (S. Huang and Yeoh 2005; Devasahayam and Yeoh 2007), leaving the emerging European "small language" countries outside of their purview. The recent appearance of these "small language"

countries on the map of educational migration from Asia carves out a pristine field in research on educational mobilities that require a toolset that goes beyond the habitual *zweckrational* approach reducing education to an investment.<sup>40</sup>

As Fong (2011) points out, university degrees and jobs acquired in the “First World” readily translate into social prestige in the homeland by gaining the status of what she calls ““developed country citizenship.” As such, in destinations in the Anglophone “First World,” where most research focuses, even when migrants explicitly spell out *wertrational* logic behind their decisions – such as concerns for the well-being of children – these are easily dismissed as “disguised strategy for class reproduction” (see for example Liu-Farrer 2016, 513). However, while moving to places associated with global wealth and power (X. Liu 1997; cited in Woronov 2007) *does* define upward mobility for both children and their parents in China; the choice of peripheral “small language” destinations such as Poland (Kardaszewicz 2021; 2019), Portugal or Hungary (F. Beck and Gaspar 2023) indicates a shift from preoccupation with future social mobility.

Instead of pursuing education in the Anglophone Global North to gain leverage in the ever-increasing global competition for status, parents who choose these low-ranking and thus counterintuitive “small language” destinations seem to give prominence to something else: the present, affective quality of life. By settling with the *good enough* instead of striving for the *superior*, these migrants knowingly leave prescribed models of achievement and trajectories for social mobility behind. Instead of making a better bet within it, they utilize the capital

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<sup>40</sup>A notable and excellent exception to this is Kardaszewicz’s work on international student migration to Poland (2019; 2021). With Sofia Gaspar and Pál Nyíri – both of whom I collaborated with to grasp educational mobilities from the PRC to Lisbon and Budapest (2023; 2022) – I am currently in the process to publish a Special Issue devoted to East Asian educational mobilities to unlikely destinations including case studies of migration from Singapore to Thailand and from Japan to Malaysia besides Chinese migration to Poland.

already at their disposal to *opt out* of the educational competition early on (F. Beck and Nyíri 2022; F. Beck and Gaspar 2023). Less obvious migration destinations outside of the imagined centers of global modernity can thus serve the pursuit of a better life in ways that do not readily translate into social prestige in China (see also Nyíri and Beck 2020). By virtue of lying outside of the global racetrack, these destinations offer a different *present* for both the children and their parents, opening room for a *postmaterial* refashioning of life – a central argument I expound in section 2.5.

## 2.3 Lifestyle migration – an agentive, *wertrational* approach: the migrant as *homo sentimental*

From the very beginning, there has been a contradiction at the heart of neoclassical functionalist theories of migration: if the fundamental impetus for migration is economic necessity, why is it always the relatively better-off members of any given society who are most likely to migrate (de Haas 2011)? This puzzle became even more confusing by the 1980s when migration from traditional sending countries continued at the same or even increasing volume despite the considerable economic growth taking place in them, while, at the same time, traditional receiving countries' economies apparently stagnated. As Sassen points out, international migration has thus been defying the neoclassical economic logic of push-pull factors since the 1980s (Sassen 1990; cited in Xiang unpublished). To address this contradiction, researchers in the 2000s developed a keen interest in conceptualizing migrant agency, breaking away from the century-long tradition of methodological economism and mechanistic explanations for migration.

Not incidentally to the generally observed trend of stratification and general upward concentration in migration (see 1.3.1) (e.g. Bauman 2009; Xiang 2016; Joppke 2021; Lutz

2023), a prominent attempt at intervening in the economic reductionism of migration studies came from the theorization of privileged migration, which has become known as the lifestyle migration framework. Micaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly defined lifestyle migration as the “spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life” (2009, 2). Seeking to challenge the imagery of the migrant as *homo economicus*, this framework conceives migration as a consequence of individual agency and choice, rather than of structural forces and constraint.

This individualistic and agentic approach to migration brings the notion of seeking “the good life” to the fore, which, as the authors explain: “[...] takes many shapes and forms; narratives articulate ongoing quests to seek *refuge from* what they describe as the shallowness, individualism, risk, and insecurity of contemporary (*Western*) lifestyles in the perceived authenticity of meaningful places” (O'Reilly and Benson, 2009: 3, emphasis added). In this conceptualization, the rationale for migration is decidedly *wertrational* and individualistic. Adopting a different Bourdieusian vocabulary, lifestyle migration is interpreted as an intervention that aims to transform *habitus* through changing the “field” (Oliver and O'Reilly 2010).

### 2.3.1 Structural shortcomings and critiques

However, completely absorbed in individual propensities, the theory of lifestyle migration fails to account for the economic, social, and political structure that constitutes it and which it is a constituent part of. Critics point out how the framework's preoccupation with explicating the symbolic meanings particular destinations signify for lifestyle migrants, turns it blind to the economic underpinnings that govern these mobilities (Hayes 2014), and consequently points

to its failure to answer *why* lifestyle migrants move in the first place (Persson 2019). This is most evident in the way the notion of *escape* is treated: despite making it central in their definition stating, “lifestyle migration is about *escape*, *escape from* somewhere and something, while simultaneously an *escape to* self-fulfillment and a new life,” (O'Reilly and Benson, 2009: 3, emphasis added); by focusing predominantly on *escape to* somewhere, the framework fails to theorize *escape from*.

To address this shortcoming Hayes (2014), Eimermann (2015), and Persson (2019) turn to the structural reasons that give rise to lifestyle mobilities. They argue that a combination of neoliberal deregulation, the dissolution of the social welfare system, and the increasing marketization of domains related to social reproduction – such as housing, education, pension, and health care – are propelling people to seek an escape. This trend is further exacerbated by processes of urbanization and the resulting crowded life-spaces and hastened life-rhythms, which constitute what people seek to *escape from*. In short, according to Persson (2019), it is the “rat race” that gives rise to lifestyle mobilities. The urge to radically change one’s environment is indeed apparent in most studies about lifestyle migration. Notably, in the works of Hayes (2014, 1962) and Persson (2019, 9), relatively affluent American retirees in Ecuador and middle-class Dutch families in rural Sweden explicitly self-categorize as *refugees*. The circumstances that these people perceive to be unbearable to the extent that they decide to make such a radical decision uniformly result from the increasing marketization in areas of social reproduction and the subsequent individualization of these responsibilities.

### 2.3.2 Geoarbitrage and reproduction

Looked at from a broader perspective, the type of mobility identified as lifestyle migration seems to reverse the obvious directionality dictated by the functionalist theories of migration,

most outstandingly by the world-systems analysis, in which migrants flow from the periphery to the core while their remittances flow back to the periphery. In contrast, lifestyle migrants follow capital in the same direction: they flow from the core to the periphery, while remittances also flow with them in the same direction in the form of living allowances and investments. This type of mobility is only made possible by the wage differences so central in the functionalist economic models but results in a reversed flow, for the explanation of which the notion of *geoarbitrage* could account.

In an attempt to bring economic structuring back to the analysis, Hayes identifies this type of mobility as the “lifestyle equivalent of financial arbitrage,” whereby individuals gain advantage by relocating their earnings from “‘high latitudes’ of the global division of labor” to lower cost destinations “seeking benefit from price differentials in day-to-day expenses in different markets” – that is, living environments (2014, 1962). As the concept of geoarbitrage suggests, lifestyle mobilities, in contrast with the neoclassical model, are brought about by differences in the conditions of *reproduction* among countries (Xiang 2022) more so than differences in production.

### **2.3.3 Race and privilege: “lifestyle exiles”**

Although the lifestyle migration framework represents a significant departure toward *Wertrationalität* when compared to the still dominant functionalist theories of migration by 1) centering attention on reproduction and 2) acknowledging the present as an important site of decision-making; it nonetheless fails to challenge the racial and spatial presumptions prevalent in migration studies. By unreflectedly lingering on a colonialist perspective, the lifestyle framework reinforces the historical superiority of the white West. Both public and scholarly

imagination have been long dominated by an idea that identifies whiteness with privilege and with the “Global North.”

Just like other categories of migrants associated with privilege, such as the ‘expatriate’ (Kunz 2016) or the ‘volunteer’ (Nyíri 2019), lifestyle migrants are unequivocally presumed to be white. The associated geographies and the associated directionality of migration flows follow a very similar logic. While lifestyle migrants are supposed to be moving from the “North” to the “South,” refugees – their antithesis – are supposed to exclusively originate in the “South” and head “North-ways.” It is interesting to note that despite the increasing difficulty of telling the “North” and “South” apart (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 26) these assumptions still haunt social imagination and the conviction in their existence has barely shaken.

Without calling into question the empirical reality of white privilege, I aim to highlight how overlooking certain movements, such as people of color moving from the Global South to the Global North for lifestyle reasons, or mislabeling them as labor migrants, reinforces and naturalizes the notion that equates whiteness with privilege. This oversight, and at times mislabeling, ignores the nuanced realities of contemporary mobilities that attest to a more complex dynamic considering the intersection of race and class. The emerging unlikely geographies of race and privilege that “lifestyle exiles” from China to Europe represent (F. Beck and Gaspar 2023) call for a new theoretical framework that accommodates the shifting ways through which class is mapped onto an increasingly integrated yet increasingly stratified global landscape.

## 2.4 Traversing functionalism with lifestyle: The capabilities and aspirations framework

While functionalist theories reduce migrants' agency to attribute more complex meaning to their lives and to act out of rationales more complex than utility-maximization; lifestyle migration overplays the role of meaning-making via migration and fails to anchor pursuits of a better life in socio-economic reality. The capabilities and aspirations framework advanced by de Haas (2011, 2021) overcomes the shortcomings of both overtly structuralist and overtly agentic approaches to migration by pointing to their mutually constitutive nature. By proposing that "people will only migrate if they *perceive* better opportunities elsewhere and have the *capabilities* to move" (de Haas 2011, 16), the theory goes beyond the long-standing dichotomy between economic and non-economic explanations for migration. Instead of approaching them as binary opposites, de Haas applies Amartya Sen's conceptualization of capabilities, "the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have" (Sen 1997: 1959 cited in de Haas 2011) to migration, replacing neoclassical economics' gravity-based push-pull modeling with the more dynamic approach of capabilities and aspirations.

Capabilities emphasize both the constraining and enabling aspects of structural forces, while aspirations point to the historically and socially embedded directionality of individual motivations and desires. Although the use of aspirations as an axis for analysis implies choice and agency, it also shows that agency is constrained by and is contingent upon structural (political, economic, social) conditions that create opportunity structures. Evoking Doreen Massey's (1994) conceptualization of 'the power geometry of time-space compression,' the focus on capabilities brings the structuring effects behind migration to the fore and makes room for a more nuanced understanding of how certain factors (such as state policies, economic and



social inequalities) produce and reproduce inequalities along the lines of race, class, gender, age, etc., making migration a fundamentally selective process.

Foregrounding selectivity as the defining characteristic of migration not only takes an issue with the pervasive image of the poor migrant but also invites the conceptualization of migration as a commodity (c.f. Bauman 2009). Investment-based or “golden visa” migration, in which mobility is literally sold and bought (for an overview see: Boatcă 2015; Shachar and Baubock 2014; Surak 2023) is a tangible example of the commercialization and upward concentration of international migration. Turning their focus to the institutional and organizational basis that enables and facilitates the growing demand for lifestyle mobilities, researchers revealed the workings of a complex lifestyle mobility industry, mediated by ‘brokerage assemblages,’ encompassing networks of agents transversal to state, non-state, human and non-human processes, and actors (Ackers and Dwyer 2004; David, Eimermann, and Åkerlund 2015; Åkerlund 2017; Robertson and Rogers 2017). Stepping one step beyond the world-systems analysis that sees migration as a consequence of capitalism, theorists of the migration industry focus on the actual commercialization of migration as a constituting and constituent part of the system (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2013).

While capabilities cast light on the stratified nature of the opportunity structures within which migrants make their decisions, the framework proposed by de Haas simultaneously draws attention to the corresponding stratification in their *aspirations*. Given the field’s long history of focusing exclusively on economic determinants of migration, centering analysis on how migrants define a better life is rather revolutionary and is an important step toward accommodating *wertrational* drives behind migration. By marking aspirations as one of its linchpins, this theory invites *wertrational* logic to complement the crude *zweckrational*

interpretation. Thus, it opens the door to a reconceptualization of migration as an act with intrinsic well-being enhancing value (de Haas 2011, 19) - available only to the few.

## **2.5 Upward concentration and value transition: postmaterialist migration**

To complement this otherwise fecund theory, I propose a more systematic approach to aspirations, intimately connected with the concept of reproduction in its quotidian sense — that is, for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing life rather than increasing incomes or advancing careers. As Xiang (unpublished) points out, while the relationship between production and migration enjoys abundant scholarly attention, the relationship between reproduction and migration is profoundly undertheorized. He argues that despite the plentiful empirical evidence for reproduction migration<sup>41</sup> it tends to be 1) analyzed on a case-to-case basis, and is yet to be theorized together, and 2) case-to-case analyses tend to adopt a production-centered interpretation (e.g. describing care workers as a subtype of “labor migrants,” or identifying student and retirement migrants as “consumers”). Unlike the 1960s, when the purpose of conceptualizing a wide range of activities into a matter of reproduction and the subsequent mainstreaming of the term was to show how women’s unpaid work at home is directly related to the capitalist economic system as a whole; today, reproduction is highly visible mostly because it constitutes some of the fastest growing service sectors such as education, medical care, and entertainment. Theorizing its disembedding and internationalization – a theme I explore in more detail in Section 3.2.2 – into a coherent analytical framework could generate new insights on shifts in the global political economy.

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<sup>41</sup> Xiang lists the movement of students, retirees, medical patients, marriage partners, “birth tourists,” and investment migrants who move to benefit from better education opportunities, care provision, lifestyle, quality of food, air, and water in the destination.

As argued in the introduction to this chapter, reproduction has been historically interlinked with *Wertrationalität*, a realm in which the logic of rationality is guided more by values than by instrumental logic. Therefore, I propose reproduction-related, *wertrational* aspirations as a fruitful entry point to approach the increasingly prevalent reproduction-related migratory phenomena. As demonstrated in Section 1.3.1, migration has become an increasingly selective process. The concept of "upward concentration," I argue, has specific implications for understanding aspirations for which Inglehart's (1977) theory of value transition presents a useful framework. The theory of value transition operationalizes Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs defined on an individual basis and applies it to the societal level, analyzed in a national container model for examining the socially stratified nature of aspirations. Using quantitative data, Inglehart endeavors to prove that as material conditions stabilize in a given nation, the prevailing values of society tend to shift from "survival values" that emphasize physical and economic security to "postmaterial" ones which he defines as a set of values that favor environment-consciousness, self-expression, free speech, gender equality, etc.

The value transition theory is closely linked with the concept of social reproduction through the theoretical framework of the "second demographic transition." The first demographic transition – characterized by a decline from high to low mortality and birth rates – is largely attributed to structural changes in the political and economic order coupled with technological change and an increased control over health. In contrast, the "second demographic transition" of the 1960s – unilinear change toward well below replacement fertility within already low-fertility populations accompanied by a diversity of union and family types – is believed to stem primarily from an ideational change. Inglehart argues that this ideational change has taken place in Western nations as a result of the post-war economic affluence and security, resulting in what he calls the "silent revolution": a "powerful, inevitable and irreversible shift in attitudes

and norms in the direction of greater individual freedom and self-actualization” (Zaidi and Morgan 2017, 473; see also Lesthaeghe 2011) – moving away from a collective focus on the survival of the group.

However, Brym identifies three major exceptions from the “silent revolution”: the USA, Russia, and the PRC. This leads him to assert that “the postmaterialist thesis does not adequately explain trends in value change in the leading geopolitical powers over the past few decades” (2016, 202). The PRC, he argues, “has not yet registered movement toward the postmaterialist values that Inglehart’s theory anticipates” despite “two generations of the fastest economic growth the world has ever seen” (Brym 2016, 197). I would argue that “upward concentration” in emigration does coincide with a discernible value transition that generally tends to motivate the aspirations for migration. The “exodus of the wealthy” from China potentially contribute to Inglehart’s failure to register evidence for the “silent revolution” in the national container of the PRC.

Given its “national container” approach, the theory of value transition falls squarely into what Wimmer and Glick Schiller have characterized as a particular mode of methodological nationalism: “the territorialization of social science imaginary and the reduction of the analytical focus to the nation-state” (2002, 307). Consequently, the theory has been rarely applied to migration and indeed posits negligible capacity to register value change that occurs across national borders – as I argue is the case of more recent migration from the PRC (see for example Kuo and Li 2022).<sup>42</sup> Those who are capable of emigrating given their resources are likely to foster self-expression values which in turn are likely to motivate their decision to do

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<sup>42</sup> The consistently declining below replacement fertility rates the PRC has been experiencing since 1990s – let alone popular discourse around “the last generation” – seem to contradict Brym by evincing the impact of value transition on demographics.

so, given the increasingly authoritarian atmosphere in the country. The increasing number of families who use the wealth they have accumulated in China to opt for exit (Hirschman 1970) and refashion themselves as immigrant parents point in this direction.

“Golden visa migrants” describe China as an environment that is not only physically but also socially and mentally unhealthy for children, lamenting the excessive pursuit of wealth and a poisonous atmosphere of social competition (Yan 2013). They explicitly reject this competitive pursuit distilled in parenting (Kuan 2015) in favor of an ideal childhood free from social pressure, which they envisage in Hungary. These parents’ craving for freedom, autonomy, and self-realization falls squarely into the category of self-expression values put forward by Inglehart (1977; Welzel and Inglehart 2005), who also identified these values as prerequisites for democratic transformation. However, instead of demanding democratic change in China, these parents decided to opt out and choose to pursue their postmaterial aspirations on an individual basis in another country.

## 2.6 Children in migration

Following my participants’ clue, I use child-rearing, where abstract aspirations about the good life translate into explicit discussion and palpable practices and actions, as an entry point for understanding aspirations formulating at the intersection of social reproduction and economic production. Education is an interesting dimension in and of itself, as it represents a transient sphere between production and reproduction, a scope that families can (to some extent) navigate in preparing their children for their future opportunities in terms of production (cf. Lareau 2003). It is said to be a crucial site for the (professional) middle classes in particular, for which – unlike for other classes where membership is inherited with money or the lack thereof – it is the site where membership can be secured (Ehrenreich 1990, 83). This

foregrounds the pivotal significance of good parenting for the middle class (Lareau 2003), for which “intensive parenting” (Hays 1998) emerged as a mandate, a dominant ideology (a theme I explore in more detail in Section 3.2.1). As I see, aspirations revolving around children govern parental decision-making of an unprecedented quality (that is, of significance, i.e., life-changing decisions such as migration) and quantity (the astonishing proportion of decisions adults make with respect to their children’s perceived needs and desires), signifying the emergence of child-centeredness as a globally dominant *structure of feeling*.

The intersection between parenting ideologies, educational aspirations, and migration offers a tangible field where shifting aspirations for a good enough life, happiness, and hesitant attempts at proposing new definitions of success become manifest - alongside the anxieties surrounding these. Considering that hopes associated with migration are often closely linked to hopes for one's children, it is perhaps surprising that the links between migration and social reproduction, or the role of children in migration, have not been more widely acknowledged until recently. Scholars of migration who noted the conspicuous lack of children in the analysis of migration decision-making processes argued for the need for a closer examination of children’s role within migration processes. Children, they argue, often are “the central axis of family migration and often a critical reason why families move back and forth and sustain transnational ties” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2006, 19) and thereby fundamentally “shape the nature and course of families’ migration experiences” (Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, 2001, p. 587). These scholars claim that “adult-centered” studies of migration obscure how children actively shape the nature of their families’ journeys, the spaces they move in, and their experiences within those social fields (Orellana et al. 2001). The absence of children becomes ever more conspicuous when, as in the case of middle-class and elite Chinese transnational mobility,

migrants explicitly name children and their needs as their primary aspiration for migration (Liu-Farrer 2016; Robertson and Rogers 2017; Xiang 2016).

As noted in Section 2.1.2, that important recent work began to be published in the past two decades (Parreñas 2001; Orellana et al. 2001; Dobson 2009; White et al. 2011; Waters 2015; Choi, Yeoh, and Lam 2019) reflects more the infiltration of child-centeredness as a dominant *structure of feeling* into social sciences than a quantitative rise in children's involvement in the migratory process. Notably, the term "adult-centeredness" frequently features as the reason behind excluding children from the analysis of migratory phenomena (see for example Levitt and Schiller 2006, 1016; Dobson 2009). By using the antonym of child-centeredness, these critiques, perhaps inadvertently, hold the field of migration studies, much like a bad parent, accountable for not being child-centered enough. Yet, this expectation would be completely illegitimate if child-centeredness was not a hegemonic *structure of feeling* in the first hand – which it has not been for most of human history.

Although children have always been involved in and influenced by processes of migration, their role until recently has been conceptualized as a sort of collateral damage: either having to adjust to a new environment as a result of parents' migrations or being "left behind" (Orellana et al. 2001; Dobson 2009; White et al. 2011). These authors call for a more "child-centered perspective," that is, for centering children's agency in migratory decisions and experiences. Although exploring children's agency is important to this study, what I find more interesting is how children came to acquire such a remarkable narrative centrality, and how they came to be understood as agents in their own rights in matters like migration that they can only possibly (legally and economically the least) navigate by way of their parents (Figure 10). To understand the socioeconomic and historical context that gave rise to a new conceptualization of children

as agents in their own rights as well as their increasing leverage over parental aspirations, decisions, and actions, in the next chapter I explore the notion of *reproduction* central to the theory in more detail.



*Figure 10. Child in the City Park. Photograph shared by participant*



## CHAPTER 3: TOWARD A *WERTRATIONAL* THEORY OF REPRODUCTION MIGRATION

### 3.1 Introduction

As outlined in section 2.1.1, by the eighteenth century, the family emerged as the locus of “private” life, coupling *reproduction* with *emotions* and *value rationality* while emphatically rendering it female. This was the result of the family’s conceptual separation from the “public,” accomplished across the modern industrial world in the nineteenth century. In identifying “the origins of the family,” historians, philosophers, and social scientists seem to share an agreement in putting their finger on the birth and expansion of the capitalist mode of production. It was this particular mode of production that introduced the ideal that work (public), and life (private) are categorically separate spheres, endowing both with corresponding rationality and thus giving rise to the ideology of the modern family as we know it.

As Ariès points out, this “privatization” of the family carries a double meaning: on the one hand, its *privatization as an institution* deprived much of its power (amounting to “deinstitutionalization”) while, on the other hand, *privatization within the family* provided individuals who make up it with more freedom and autonomy, and practically the right to private life (Ariès et al. 1998, V.:51; see also Yunxiang Yan 2003). In Ariès’ words: “[The family] became something it has never been: a refuge, to which people fled in order to escape the scrutiny of the outsiders; an *emotional center*; and a place where, for better or for worse, *children were the focus of attention*” (Ariès and Duby 1989, Volume III.:8 emphasis added). This formulation not only foregrounds the association of the private realm with *Wertrationalität* but also articulates this as the precondition for the emergence of child-centeredness, as a hegemonic *structure of feeling* (Williams 1961, 64–65).

In what follows, I go into more detail regarding the conceptualization of this dissertation: ideals of childhood and child-rearing, as well as their growing significance in the organization of adults' daily lives to the extent that adults' life gets to be increasingly arranged according to the perceived needs and desires of children. To do so, I provide an assemblage of theories of social reproduction conceived in Western capitalist societies, which, as I demonstrate, can serve as heuristic tools for analyzing the societal processes that increasingly give rise to qualitatively novel mobilities in and from East Asia. Drawing on the pioneering work of Christopher Lasch (1977), Viviana Zelizer (1978; 1985; 2005), Arlie Hochschild (Hochschild 1979; 2003; 2012; 2013b), Sharon Hays (1998), and Nancy Fraser (2016; 2022), this theoretical assemblage reveals the permeability of the socially constructed boundary between production and reproduction by exposing the multidirectional processes by which both spheres exert logic onto one another. By pointing not only to the socially constructed nature of the boundary between the economic and reproductive sphere but also the flexibility and permeability of this boundary, these works offer an entry point for foregrounding a theory of decision-making that accommodates both economic and non-economic realms and intersecting rationalities while maintaining their interdependent nature.

Next, I aim to prove that despite the significant differences in the larger socio-economic and historical contexts where they were conceived, these distinctly Western notions (heuristic tools) are remarkably applicable to the context of the PRC and have great potential for elucidating social reproduction experience across East Asia. Employing the heuristic tools to the Chinese context, I provide an account of the transformation of the Chinese family in broad strokes through a historical *tour d'horizon* of the shifting notions of childhood from the early twentieth century, outlining the similarities between the processes. The most striking difference, however,

is the temporal dimension in which the otherwise notably similar processes unfolded, comparing the roughly three centuries in the West with the barely one century in the East.

Therefore, I use *social acceleration* (Rosa 2013)– another markedly Western concept – to illuminate the distinct experience this compressed transformation entails. The accelerating pace of foundational social change reached a tempo higher than “the basic sequence of generations.” According to Rosa, such *intragenerational change* brings about an “erosion of lifeworld certainties” to an extent that change is no longer perceived as transformation, but instead as a “fundamental and potentially chaotic indeterminacy” (2013, 110). As I show, hegemonic understandings of childhood (and dialectically parenthood and education) shifted *intragenerationally* in the PRC context, bringing about an ambivalent coexistence of still vivid social memories of completely antagonistic conceptions of childhood that, by the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, came to dwell side by side uncomfortably.

Finally, I offer a theoretical framework that integrates the *wertrational* standpoint in addition to its traditional locus, social reproduction, and discuss how the two perspectives can mutually benefit each other. Building on the central notions of emotions, temporality, and morality, the theory of reproduction migration I put forward serves as the grounded theoretical background of my case study about “golden visa” migration from China to Hungary.

### **3.2 The ideology of the modern family – structural approaches**

In his classical essay, *Haven in a Heartless World* Cristopher Lasch (1977) pioneered an explanation for the rise of the American ideology of the modern family as “an emotional sanctuary.” Instead of approaching “private life” as a naturally separate realm, he demonstrates that the notion of “private life” has been a constituent part of while also being contingent on

the historical developments that capitalism brought about through the course of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century. He argues that the sacralization of domestic life found “ideological support and justification as an emotional refuge in a cold and competitive society” (1977, 6), intuitively marking the distinction between the two spheres as pivoting around the juxtaposition between the two kinds of Weberian rationalities.

The 18th-century bourgeois ideology of the modern family and the exaltation of domestic life completely transformed the meaning and value of the role of women and children both in the public and the private realms for the middle and upper classes (while situating them as role models for the lower classes). Throughout the twentieth century, children, as symbols of the *future* became the focus of heated debates over cultural and national identities across the globe (Naftali 2014), turning their development into a pivotal public matter. While states partly assumed responsibility for this in the form of public education, the utmost importance was attributed – by way of the separation of realms – to mothers in the privacy of their homes. Outlining the indispensable contribution to the processes of capitalist accumulation of middle-class women as housewives and mothers, and children as both objects and subjects of consumption, American accounts of this transformation provide a convincing narrative that describes the structural underpinnings of and imperatives behind refashioning middle-class women as housewives and the subsequent emergence of the economically worthless yet very expensive, emotionally priceless child.

The process Maria Mies (1986) calls *housewifization* refers to the reconceptualization of middle-class women’s roles as breeders and consumers. As “breeders,” mothers simultaneously serve the interests of the state and market by enabling the reproduction of an educated, disciplined, and law-abiding workforce at their own expense and out of their own

will (Hays 1998). As consumers, mothers provide a reliable and easily mobilizable basis for consumption, which has been acquiring an ever-growing economic significance since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Schor 2014). Exalting the domestic role of women went hand in hand with the *sacralization* of children, reconfiguring them from “objects of utility” into “objects of sentiment” (Zelizer 1985, 7), giving rise to the hegemonic modern conception of children as “precious” (Zelizer 1985). This dialectical resignification of motherhood and childhood foregrounded *Wertrationalität* as the legitimate logic of the private sphere as an “emotional refuge” and the emergence of child-centeredness as a dominant *structure of feeling*.

For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of sociology’s founding fathers like Marx, Weber, or Tönnies – in line with Lasch’s argument – posited the family as one of the few realms that was supposed to remain immune to the ethos of the rationalized market society and its domineering *zweckrational* logic, presuming it to be organized around “a different set of ideas and practices” (cf. Hays 1998, 10–11), and as such, the last bastion of *wertrational* action. This course began to change with the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with prominent scholars such as Polányi (1944, 31) or Sahlins (1976, 212–13) lamenting that “the motive of gain” and “the ideology of practical reason” began to penetrate all spheres of life in Western capitalist societies, subjecting the once “safe haven” of the family to the *zweckrational*, utilitarian logic of personal interest. Hays provides the following description of the 20th-century condition of the family, inexorably invaded by the violent forces of *Zweckrationalität* (1998, 11):

[...] the family is invaded not only by public schools, the courts, social service workers, gardeners, housekeepers, day-care providers, lawyers, doctors, televisions, frozen dinners, pizza delivery, manufactured clothing, and disposable diapers, but also, and more critically, by the ideology behind such institutions, persons, and products. They bring with them, in whole or in part, the language and logic of impersonal, competitive, contractual, commodified, efficient, profit-maximizing, self-interested relations.

Regardless of the empirical reality whether the family has ever been “intact” from its *zweckrational* surroundings,<sup>43</sup> it is interesting to point out the discursive importance of keeping the family’s *wertrational* logic unspoiled. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we see a decline in public anxiety concerning the penetration of utilitarianism to the family superseding value rationality. With the growing consciousness of risks of all kinds (U. Beck 1992) that seem to attribute distinct significance to children and their rearing, parents are urged to take a risk-conscious, and as such, by nature instrumental approach to raising their children (Furedi 2002). Increasing consciousness over the “fatal” consequences of parental choices distributed by an army of experts in the fields of psychology and individual development turned child-rearing into an ultimately *zweckrational* endeavor.

This qualitative turn compels parents to view and conceive their practices – and even their feelings – in the present with regard to their *future outcomes*. Resulting in an instrumental approach much focused on, and indeed narrated as making the best bet in investing their children, this turn explicitly translates the once value rationally governed experience of child-rearing into the language and logic of the capitalist market. While it would be foolish to question the persistence of value rationality in the private life of families, what I want to point out is that we can discern a decline in its narrative centrality. Good parenting is no longer assumed to be fully *wertrational*: for instance, the scientization of the role of emotions and a growing awareness of their long-term consequences discursively turns even the utmost intimate realm of feelings into a matter of utilitarian consideration – regardless of whether parents internalize this rationale or not.

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<sup>43</sup> Mies (1986) and Zelizer (1985) indeed suggest otherwise by depicting the pre-modern actors of the family – respectively mother and children – as guided by profoundly *zweckrational* logic, completely subjugated to the demands of the economy.

### 3.2.1 Intensive motherhood: the proletarianization of parents and children

An early and exceptionally perceptive account for this gradual transformation is provided by Hays (1998) in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Analyzing mothering as a historically constructed ideology, she argues that the contemporary cultural model of socially appropriate mothering in the USA takes the form of an ideology she calls intensive mothering – ideology in the sense that it is a fully elaborated, logically cohesive combination of once taken for granted cultural ideals, that under contestation become ideologies (Hays 1998, 14–15). She construes intensive mothering as 1) child-centered, 2) expert-guided, 3) emotionally absorbing, 4) labor-intensive, and 5) financially expensive. The persistence of this ideology, she argues, is puzzling considering that over half of US mothers are recruited to the workforce and considering that such a selfless imperative is deemed most appropriate in a society that otherwise recklessly worships self-interested gain.

Advice on child-rearing increasingly emphasized the need for vigilant supervision and protection and protection, feeding into the norm of intensive parenting. Children were no longer seen as competent, responsible, and resilient; instead, there is a growing focus on their vulnerability, which has radically transformed the experience of childhood. Children may have gained an unprecedented level of autonomy in personal choices with the emergence of child-centeredness deciding what they want to eat or wear; yet their freedom to engage in unstructured play and to make independent, responsible contributions to the family and the community has seen a steady decline (Thorne 1987; Bristow 2014; Rutherford 2011).

This line of argument can be read as a continuation of the process Lasch (1977) interpreted as the “socialization of reproduction” and the subsequent “proletarianization of parents,” and I shall add, the proletarianization of children as well. Drawing an analogy with the socialization

of production and the proletarianization of workers, Lasch analyzes official policy discourse initiated by educators and reformers, to reveal how the rise of “professional help” declared the family unfit for providing for its own needs without expert intervention (cf. Illouz 2013). This resulted in a sequence of policies that first proletarianized parenthood by claiming parents to be incompetent, and then by empowering “social pathologists” to give the parenting knowledge (appropriated from parents) back to parents, and thereby eventually render parents even more helpless in their attempts to raise their children (Lasch, 1977, pp. 13–21).

Although the term intensive mothering originated in the USA and has mostly been researched in that context, emerging research in South America, post-Soviet Eastern Europe, and Asia suggests that with the global rise of middle classes, we witness a class-specific dispersion of parenting as a set of ideals and practices that are ‘child-centered,’ resource-intensive, and focused on the maximization of individual achievement and potential (Faircloth, Hoffman, and Layne 2013; Szőke and Kovai 2022; Lan 2018). Hopes about children and related parenting ideologies play a central role in outlining distinctly middle-class lifestyle orientations. Although the classed aspect of parenting pursuits is an undoubtedly significant structural aspect of – the increasingly globalized – competition for status (Lareau 2003), what interests me here is the aspiration in and of itself (that might, but also possibly might not contribute to the making of classed subjects) and the emergence of child centeredness as a globally hegemonic *structure of feeling*.

### **3.2.2 The disembedding of social reproduction and the contradiction of capital and care**

Nancy Fraser’s (2016) seminal essay *Contradictions of Capital and Care* (recently turned into a book: Fraser 2022) claims the boundary struggles over social reproduction – the struggle



between economy and society, production and reproduction, work and family – to be as central to capitalist societies as class struggle. By asserting that social reproduction is a *non-economic background condition* of production, that is, an external precondition for capitalism, she points to a constant boundary struggle between economic forces and social reproduction. Taking the larger perspective – the world system as it is – at its focus, Fraser outlines the history of this boundary struggle from the early forms of capitalism through the present stage of financialized neoliberal capitalism. She points to an inherent contradiction in capitalism between capital accumulation and social reproduction: while the capitalist mode of production is dependent on social reproduction, its orientation to unlimited accumulation inevitably destabilizes the process of social reproduction on which it relies. Given its nature to “devour its own substance,” she likens capitalism to the ouroboros that “eats its own tail” (Fraser 2022, XV).

Regarding the contemporary processes within globalizing financial capitalism, she highlights two defining characteristics. The first is the recruitment of women to the paid workforce (the two-earner family model) coupled with a general increase in working hours. This results in a deprivation of *time*, which is one of the most important resources on which intensive mothering relies. The quotidian significance of this particular boundary struggle that centers around the temporal dimension of human life is testified by the ubiquity of public discourse on the “work-life balance” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Hochschild 2013b). Time being a finite resource, it is a zero-sum game, which thereby touches upon the fundamental dilemma of the basic ethical question of the good life: how people desire to or should spend ‘their’ time (Rosa 2013, 31).

The second process that takes place in parallel to time deprivation and increased responsibilities mandated by the ideology of intensive parenting is the state’s general disinvestment from social

welfare and the subsequent privatization of reproduction. Analogous to the disembedding of production in Polanyi's (1944) *Great Transformation*, Xiang (unpublished) interprets this phenomenon as the *disembedding of reproduction*. So, while on the one hand, responsibilities regarding "proper" reproduction are ever more complex and resource-demanding, on the other hand, these responsibilities become increasingly individualized and commodified, in one word: privatized (Szöke and Kovai 2022).

The disembedding of reproduction seems to be a constitutive element of what is generally understood as "neoliberal" politics, which is often characterized by the retreat of the state from providing welfare to its citizenry. By way of legal, institutional, and discursive means, neoliberal politics turn the responsibility of reproduction into a private, personal matter. Though I aim to refrain from the overuse of neoliberalism, I find it notable that reproduction-related aspects of life (housing, health care, education, and elderly care) are indeed increasingly becoming privatized across the globe, and thereby enable the "internationalization of reproduction." In an analogy to Sassen's (1990, 17) argument that the "internationalization of production" explains the ongoing flows of migration that otherwise seem to defeat economic logic,<sup>44</sup> Xiang (unpublished) argues that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is the "internationalization of reproduction" that account for the large-scale, yet seemingly economically irrational movement of people.

The joint effect of these two processes is what Fraser calls the "care deficit" or a "crisis of care" (2016; 2022), leading to a "desperate scramble to transfer care work to others" (Fraser 2016; 2022, 70). The commodified and privatized externalization of care work, however, is selective

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<sup>44</sup> "The specificity of labor migration in the current historical period lies not in these general conditions or individual motivations but in its articulation with the internationalization of production, a dynamic which assumes concrete forms in particular locations." (Sassen 1990, 17)

by nature and therefore contributes to further stratification and is increasingly displaced onto a global scale. Building on Parreñas's (2001) research on Filipina mothers working as nannies of children in the US, Fraser argues that well-paid middle-class women in the First World transfer their care work to those who are poorer, often imported from the periphery, resulting in the development of "global care chains" whereby a net effect of "care drain" is created to displace the care gap instead of filling it (Fraser 2016; 2022, 70).

### 3.3 The emergence of child-centeredness as a dominant *structure of feeling*

Important as these findings are, given their fundamentally structuralist approach, they fall into a category that Kuan calls the "ideological mystification argument, commonly found in studies of motherhood under capitalism" (2015, 13). As such, they fail to explain the agentic aspect of why women succumbed to their new role with such infinitesimal resistance despite the clear disadvantages it brings upon them. I would argue that it is the *emotional dimension* of these changes – what Zelizer calls the *sacralization effect* – and their powerful and captivating appeal that explains the stickiness of this ideology and consequently accounts for its practically global ubiquity. It is the emergence of child-centeredness as a dominant *structure of feeling* that is crucial to understand to make sense of the overwhelming acceptance of new ideologies of childhood and parenthood mandated by the capitalist world system. I employ Williams' notion of the *structure of feeling* as a "critical history of ideas and values" that led to the emergence of child-centeredness as a "very deep and very wide possession," a crystallization of a dominant set of emotions that is "as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity" (1961, 64–65).

Apart from Williams' much-used concept (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015), emotions – for much of the reasons outlined in Section 2.1.2 – are generally associated with the “private” and the “woman” and are habitually used as synonyms for irrationality and subjectivity. Therefore, emotions and feelings have been deemed inadequate as subjects of social scientific inquiry up until the “emotional turn” by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Anderson and Smith 2001; Lemmings and Brooks 2014). In this regard, the work of Arlie Hochschild on *emotional labor* (1979) provided a significant breakthrough, focusing on how one's most intimate and private sphere, the sphere of *feelings*, becomes subject to a fundamentally economic logic (1979; 2003; 2012; Hochschild 2013a). Her later research (2003; Hochschild and Machung 2012; 2013b) provides an intimate appreciation of the emotional imperatives that are central to understanding how the capitalist mandate became hegemonic among middle-class American women.

While Hochschild is primarily concerned with questions related to market logic's infiltration into the uttermost intimate dimensions of one's private life (that is, personal feelings), in *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Zelizer (1985) challenges the “overestimated power of the market” by demonstrating that, though often overlooked, processes do occur in the opposite direction. From a host of inquiries, Zelizer investigates the processes by which sentimental values (*Wertrationalität*) get to dominate the supposedly *zweckrational* economic sphere in setting the price of “priceless” values like life (1978) or children (1985). By focusing on particular economic objects whose price-setting is subjugated to the logic of emotions (what she calls sentimental values), she reveals the limits of the market and shows how “the market is transformed by social, moral and sacred values” (Zelizer 1985, 21).

To do so, she offers an economic historian account of how the price of children,<sup>45</sup> once conceived as economically useful participants to the family unit bearing little value on the market, began escalating in parallel to their diminishing economic contribution and indeed growing role as an expense to the family budget. She argues that in this case, the pricing process itself is transformed by its association with value and as such evinces that economic forces can be subjugated to social and sentimental values. This exceptional economic-historical account demonstrates that, by complementing the *commercialization* of children's lives with *sacralization*, value can indeed shape price, and doing so, to a certain extent it can deprive money of its economic worth. Counterintuitively, as noted earlier, it also deprived children of meaningful autonomy that goes beyond choices of consumption.

As Nancy Fraser reminds us, capitalist society exists only in historically specific forms. In the next section I will attempt to apply the previewed concepts – housewifization and the sacralization of childhood, proletarianization of parenthood, care deficit, and the disembedding and internationalization of reproduction – conceived in the slowly unfolding advance of capitalism in the specific context of the United States to a starkly different context: the highly-compressed and one-sided (by which I mean economic but not political) capitalist restructuring of China. Even though the theory of social acceleration was conceived to describe and explain the social experience of the West, not only is it applicable to China, but, given its extremely compressed nature, as if looking through a magnifying glass, the theory plays out in an even more enhanced manner. As we will see, although these concepts are remarkably similar in form, given the distinct (historical, political, economic, and social) context in which they took root, they came to signify intrinsically divergent meanings (cf. Bayly 2003, 20).

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<sup>45</sup> Zelizer investigates three types of historical records that reflect the market price of children: children's insurances, compensation for the wrongful death of children, and the sale of children for adoption.

Following Bayly, I would argue that the global diffusion of child-centeredness, just like other historical developments, is “determined by a complex parallelogram of forces constituted by economic changes, ideological constructions, and mechanisms of the state” (2003, 7) and instead of giving any one of them an overriding weight, should be studied in the complexity of their interactions. In line with Bayly’s general argument, I argue that child-centeredness is becoming a globally hegemonic and increasingly *uniform* structure of feeling, facilitated by the progression of standardized information in the form of expert advice based on the scientific – hence “universal” and “objective” – notions on childhood development. However, as I will try to elucidate, the “formal similarity” and “mutual translatability” of child-rearing ideologies – just like the examples Bayly uses to illustrate the birth of the Modern World – “mask significant difference and intrinsic style” (Bayly 2003, 20).

By extrapolating the different sources that gave rise to the context-specific manifestation of these concepts, this undertaking elucidates how the notions conceived on the boundary of social reproduction and economic production serve to facilitate a *wertrational* explanation of the capabilities and aspirations approach put forward in section 2.4. Using these concepts as heuristic explanatory tools enables me not only to describe more systematically what the “*Wert*” in *wertrational* decision-making is but also to explain how and why it emerged as a dominant rationale engendering a new type of mobility.

### **3.4 The sacred children, housewifized women, and proletarianized parents of China**

Child-centeredness irrefutably sprung up as a pivotal *structure of feeling* in contemporary China. This is most evident in the notion of the “inverted family” – a family in which

generational hierarchy is turned upside down, with “the vertical parent-child relationship coming to replace the horizontal conjugal tie as the central axis of family relations” (Yunxiang Yan 2021c, 20). However, the intrinsic meaning of child-centeredness and what it entails in practice – that is, how the needs and desires of children are conceived and defined, what their obligations, rights, and entitlements are; and consequently, what is considered the “best interest” of children – varies significantly across space, time, and social class.

Treating childhood as a social construction (Prout 2015), I investigate the dialectical evolution of notions of childhood and parenthood in China. By tracing their historical, political, and social origins from the disintegration of the Qing dynasty to contemporary policies, I explain how they eventually culminated in the emergence of child-centeredness as a dominant *structure of feeling* among contemporary Chinese families. Through a historical overview of the dual role of the Chinese state and market in shaping parenting ideologies (Greenhalgh 2008; Woronov 2009; Naftali 2014; Kuan 2015; Naftali 2016; Xu 2017) as a key element on the agenda of engineering the middle class (Tomba 2004; Anagnost 2008; Tomba 2009; Chen and Goodman 2013), I show how the dialectical ideals of the child, the mother, and the ideal of a good life (what is success and how it is to be achieved) took on shifting meanings throughout this compressed transformation.

In China, similarly to many other countries of the world, disputes over the conceptualization and subsequently the education of the young have historically been enjoying distinguished attention from the state, as it has been considered pivotal to processes of nation-building, modernization, and subject formation during the Republican (1911–49), Maoist (1949–76), and Reform and Opening (1978–1989) and post-reform (1992–) periods. Today, with China’s quest to become a global superpower, childhood once again features as “an important locus for

discussions of modernity and selfhood, national identity and citizenship” (Naftali 2014, 2), bringing with it a new set of desirable traits and a reconceptualization of childhood. Enabled by specific political and economic forces and contingent on millennia-old notions of the family (and the dialectically entangled notions of childhood, motherhood, and increasingly fatherhood), socio-historically specific articulations of child-centeredness took on divergent and often contradictory meanings as the dominant norm changed from one generation to the other – before eventually reaching the course of intragenerational change. The historical unfolding of economic, political, and social processes weighs heavily on these ideations and largely outlines the dominant normative image of childhood and parenting. In the following sections, I outline in broad strokes the most influential ideas that linger on in today’s conceptions of childhood, serving as the other side of the dialectical coin of parenthood, with which I continue.

### **3.4.1 Confucianism: the obedient child**

For centuries, the most dominant ideal of the family among *Han* Chinese was the Confucian extended or multigenerational family. Confucian philosophy was practically conceived as a manual for ethical governance in the turbulent decades of the “Spring and Autumn Period” (722-481 BCE) and primarily consists of a set of practical, governance-oriented ethical ideas. Confucianism posits the multigenerational family as the fundamental unit of society, which encapsulates a miniature version of the state. Confucianism presupposes the family to “incorporate[e] the economic functions of production and consumption as well as the social functions of education and socialization, guided by moral and ethical principles” (M. Park and Chesla 2007, 296). As the organizational structure of the family is supposed to reflect the state at large, it postulates a strictly hierarchical order that attributes a position to each family member matched with well-defined ethical obligations according to gender and age, giving the



most authority to the eldest man. Doing so, the Confucian family instills a rigidly patriarchal order, in which both women and children are assigned roles that serve the interest of male elders while depriving them of the right to dissent.

Just like other social phenomena, Confucianism and associated ideals of the family vary across time and space, taking contextually specific forms. However, with placing negligible emphasis on childhood as a separate stage (Naftali 2014, 86), generally speaking, this conception of the family conceives children as subordinates to adults and embraces values in children such as filial piety and obedience. Expectations of filial piety and obedience proved to be remarkably persistent across time and transforming socio-economic structures (see for example Evans 2020), and remained to be defining elements in the vexed assemblage of contemporary views of children in China. The following sections will explore the vicissitudes of the Confucian family ideal from its demonization in the era of the revolution until its most recent rehabilitation with Xi Jinping's neo-Confucianism that reinstated it as the moral ideology of the "Chinese dream" (Ambrogio 2017).

### **3.4.2 May Fourth: the innocent and playful child**

With the disintegration of the Qing dynasty in 1911, a new generation of Western-educated anti-imperialist intellectuals, known as the May Fourth Movement (1919-1936), propagated democratic reforms and modern science to supersede Confucianism. They saw Confucianism as responsible for keeping the country in a "backward" state by hindering development and modernization, and as such, as the ultimate cause behind the "century of humiliation." Though the May Fourth Movement effectively rationalized its program with the need to achieve national survival and social progress, it proposed a considerably progressive view of the family, and within it, children as coequals.

The May Fourth Movement introduced a Rousseauian version of childhood to Chinese public discourse, strongly arguing for distinguishing childhood as a distinct and special stage of personhood. Embracing a firm belief in children's inherent abilities and capabilities, the May Fourthers argued for children's need for autonomy and freedom. Doing so, they challenged the Confucian notion of the obedient child as the property of its parents, and concomitantly, the authoritarian patriarchal family, and proffered a concept of childhood as an idealized site of play, freedom, creativity, and innocence in the place of it (Farquhar 2015; Naftali 2014). While with hindsight, the May Fourth Movement was only a mild and largely intellectual attempt at introducing new ideas in thinking about the family and the role of children in it; the proclamation of the People's Republic in 1949 and its empathetical shift to revolution brought a sharp end to the still dominant Confucian ideal.

### **3.4.3 Children of the revolution: little comrades, little soldiers, and iron women**

With the proclamation of the People's Republic, the ideas fostered by the May Fourth Movement became radicalized and infused with Marxism (Farquhar 2015). Driven by the Marxist belief that the state should replace families in assuming responsibility for children's care as part of a utopian egalitarian society, drawing on Engels (1978b), the CCP under Mao's leadership sought to deinstitutionalize the family by reorganizing urban society through establishing an all-encompassing work-unit (*danwei*) system while setting up agricultural collectives in the rural areas. The state used the *danwei* system to finance the reproduction needs of urban families in the form of providing housing, medical care, and education (Yunxiang Yan 2021d, 238; Jankowiak 2021, 204).

During this era, the CCP ambited to liberate children from the yokes of their tyrannic and backward elders. Instead, it aimed to enhance children's social and political role by reconceptualizing them as "little soldiers" and later "little comrades" in the service of the Party and the revolution (Farquhar 2015). A great illustration for this is the headline of the first issue of a new journal specifically dedicated to children called *Children of the Border Areas* (*Bianqu Ertong*), written by Mao Zedong, in his own calligraphy during the Yan'an period and the Japanese invasion:

RISE UP, CHILDREN, and learn to be free, independent citizens of China, learn how to wrest this freedom from the yoke of Japanese imperialism and transform yourselves into the masters of a new era! (Mao, 1938 cited in Farquhar 2015, 175)

After the CCP ceased power, children's new roles as politically active agents of the new society became all pervasive. In analyzing children's literature of this era, Farquhar points out that in essence, children's literature became indistinguishable from adult's literature in both subject choice (basically reduced to the revolution) and in tone. From today's perspective, children's rhymes dated to this era tend to beat a shockingly harsh tune with "pummeling landlords, murdered fathers, raped mothers, and killing 'bandits'" (a term denoting the Japanese invaders), sweeping away the imaginary of cute and innocent childhood proffered by the May Fourth Movement (Farquhar 2015, 179).<sup>46</sup> The notion that "children possess unique needs or that childhood ought to be a time of amusement and leisure" was deemed bourgeoisie and was "soon to be eclipsed by the radical ideology of class struggle" (Naftali 2014, 87).

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<sup>46</sup> One great illustration for this is a children's rhyme on "fighting for the land reform," which I take from Farquhar's (2015, 177) long list of examples:

A Mauser pistol, a red silk tassel,  
Stuck in my belt to kill white bandits,  
Kill white bandits and divide the land;  
Everyone calls me The Little Red Devil.

This agenda was pursued by a systematic endeavor aiming to eradicate the power of the Confucian patrilineage by legislative and discursive measures. Legislative measures – such as the confiscation of lineage property in the name of land redistribution and collectivization (1949), and the Marriage Law (1950) which sought to abolish the “arbitrary and compulsory feudal marriage system” (Naftali 2016, 31) that was said to ignore the interests of women as well as children – were coupled with a full front propaganda attack on ancestor worship and the Confucian notion of filial piety in a concerted effort to shift power from the old to the young. Culminating in the dramatic decade of “Cultural Revolution” (1966–76), children’s role as “vanguard fighters” in the struggle for the construction of a new socialist society (Donald 1999, 82, 95; cited in Naftali 2014) was brought to full bloom, as Mao called upon the youth to publicly critique, decry and physically abuse their elders and seniors who were accused of “counterrevolutionary” thinking (Naftali 2014, 36).

Women’s liberation was also central to the agenda of the revolution. The collectivization and deinstitutionalization of the family also meant to push women out of the private sphere and encouraged them to “hold up half the sky” by assuming politically and economically important public roles. The socialist ideology of “gender sameness” manifest in the new feminine ideal of the “iron woman” (Evans 2002; Meng 2018, 146) practically fashioned women’s liberation as an approximation of “standards established by masculine example” (Evans 2002, 338). The private sphere was deemed a harmfully narrow “little world” (*xiao tiandi* 小天地), focusing on which was indeed thematized as a threat to both children (by failing to provide the revolutionary example on which their healthy development depended), and their husbands (by failing to provide “powerful stimulus to doing even more for the revolution”) and consequently, a general threat to the success of the revolution (Evans 2002, 337).

Representing an antithesis to the Confucian ideal of wifehood that bound women to the home serving the members of their extended families and essentially banning them from public-oriented matters, women during the Mao era were “pressured to shift their loyalties away from exclusive focus on the domestic sphere” (Evans 2002, 337–38). However, later research has convincingly shown that despite the forceful attempts at enhancing the status of women, gender equality was never realized beyond the ideological level (Wolf 1985). Women remained mainly employed either in the informal or the so-called risk sector in collectivized services (Mies 1986, 183) – most notably in education and health care – leaving the gendered division of reproductive labor by and large intact (Dong 2021; Rodriguez 2023).

### 3.4.4 Market reforms: the quality child

In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping announced the plans to fundamentally transform China’s economic and social structure through the Reform and Opening, the often traumatic, violent memories of the Cultural Revolution barely faded. The new ideal of the “harmonious family” promoted by the pursuit of the “moderately prosperous society” – a signature theme of the Hu-Wen administration – once again signified a sharp break with its predecessor as much as the Maoist era did with Confucianism.<sup>47</sup> While the CCP under Mao’s leadership attempted to collectivize and socialize the family by its deinstitutionalization, the advancement of liberal economic reforms in the proceeding decades increasingly sought to privatize it, but this time on a nuclear basis (Yunxiang Yan 2010).

The social system apparatus was once again re-engineered to “liberate” individuals from the all-encompassing socialist institutions of the urban work units and the agricultural collectives,

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<sup>47</sup> However, there are scholars who argue that the changes the Chinese family went through were more gradual as some of its origins can be traced back to Maoist years (see for example Jankowiak 2021).

turning the self-regulating individual – conceiving self-regulation strictly in accordance with the state’s expectations – into the basic unit of social life (U. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010). Liberal economic reforms in their early stage were coupled with a qualitative shift toward “people-centered governance,” what Greenhalgh describes as a shift from “subjection to subjectification” that – instead of stridently commanding people to act according to the state’s interests – “works through individual desires for such things as good health, citizen rights, individual choice, and small, modern families” (Greenhalgh 2010, 55).

Legislative measures of the early ‘80s also reflect a deep-seated ambiguity in their approach that on the one hand “emphasize[d] the equal status of children within the family and highlight the role of the law in regulating family affairs,” while on the other hand, most notably by the new Marriage Law (1980) and the Constitution, they parallelly sought to limit children’s rights *vis-à-vis* their parents by rehabilitating the Confucian notion of filial piety (Naftali 2014, 37). The latter agenda marks the beginning of growing state interest in promoting Neo-Confucianism as the precondition of “harmonious” family relations that in turn are the preconditions of “harmonious” societal relations. Party-state leaders have been assigning increasing importance to the family in governance, practically “building the family for the nation-state,” standing in diametrically opposed position to their predecessors who “destroyed the family for the nation-state” (Yunxiang Yan 2021d, 245).

#### ***3.4.4.1 Neo-familism and the rise of the individual***

This “neo-familism,” as Yunxiang Yan, a historian of the private life of both socialist and post-socialist China argues, is qualitatively different from traditional (Confucian) Chinese familism. Unlike traditional familism which revolved around ancestor worship and the perpetuation of one’s lineage, “neo-familism” is deeply embedded in the country’s capitalist restructuring and is mostly defined in material terms such as wealth and consumption. At the same time, it carries

a fundamentally nationalist undertone as it conceives the family not only as the harbinger of a happy life but also as a vehicle for the new national agenda of the “Chinese dream.”

The pursuit of a “moderately prosperous society” (*xiaokang*) in the context of China’s reintegration into the capitalist world system shifted emphasis from socialism and revolution to science and modernity once again, complete with a generous splash of consumerism. This time, foregrounding the primacy of science and modernity entailed the adoption of Western psychology in conceptualizing the role and function of the family as an “emotional center” (Yunxiang Yan 2003, 8–9). The privatization of the family, just like its European counterpart, also engendered privatization *within* the family (see Prost 1998) and “the rise of the individual” (M. H. Hansen and Svarverud 2010).

However, given its state-sanctioned nature and its infusion with compulsive consumerism, individualization in the context of post-reform China entails more the “individual assignment of responsibility” and the “endless pursuit of individual happiness” rather than an increasing consciousness of individual rights (U. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010; Yunxiang Yan 2013)<sup>48</sup> – to which, as I argue in the Conclusion: Striving for the good enough, children’s rights poses a remarkable exception. Disembedded from both the social structure and its governing ideologies (be them Confucian or Maoist), living conditions from housing through education and health care to retirement – in one word: reproduction – became abruptly nonetheless comprehensively commodified and being subjected to an ever more involuted competition among “a billion striving individuals” (Yunxiang Yan 2013) amid an increasingly precarious

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<sup>48</sup> This is what Yunxiang Yan came to call the risk of the rise of the “uncivil individual.” Given the Chinese state’s hostility toward self-organization, the rising individual “is primarily confined to the sphere of private life” and has shown a tendency to emphasize rights while overlooking obligations and other individuals’ rights. Consequently, he argues, it is more “egotism” rather than individualism what we witness (Yunxiang Yan 2003; 2010).

and unpredictable social environment (Evans 2020), progressively defined by risks (U. Beck 1992).

The implementation of the one-child policy (1979-2015), what Rodriguez describes as an emblematic “technocratic effort to demographically engineer modernity” (2023, 204), was a fundamental structural force behind both the privatization of the nuclear family and the increasing individualization that took place within it – given that parents from that on practically started to think about children in the singular, individual form. The policy provided the state with a remarkably salient interface to shape and channel ideas about childhood and parenting. On a structural scale, the policy was also a decisive force in redrawing the boundary between social reproduction and economic production.

#### ***3.4.4.2 The sacrificing mother and the quality only child***

As briefly outlined in Section 1.3.5.1, the one-child policy needs to be understood in the larger politico-economic context of the country’s state-controlled modernization project, which determines its desired function. Relying on a reversed population engineering agenda, the policy became a cornerstone of (re)turning China into world power by producing a “high quality” population. Having raising the *suzhi* (素质), the “quality” of the population as its primary goal, through the reduction of its quantity, the policy held the promise of better education, better healthcare, and higher life standards in general for all. The notoriously floating term “quality” gained momentum when reforms intensified through the 1990s and 2000s (Kipnis 2006), as the party state took advantage of the flexibility, multivocality, and ambiguity of the term to “give coherence to its policies in China while justifying its failures or shortcomings” (Fong and Kim 2011, 339) and practically became ubiquitous in both public and private discourse.



Market forces joined state propaganda to produce new reproductive subjects: the sacrificing mother and the quality child (Greenhalgh 2010). As parental desires to secure their offspring's "wholesome development" translated into money, a booming market for goods and services for children emerged, expanding to 4.5 trillion yuan (US\$695 billion) in 2020 according to *Economic Daily*.<sup>49</sup> This market not only includes the clothing, feeding, and entertaining of China's only children, but a significant proportion of it is constituted by extracurricular tutorials in sports, arts, and languages that aim to enhance the child's *suzhi* and therefore its chances in the increasingly involuted educational competition.

As Anagnost argues quite persuasively, *suzhi* is not something that naturally inheres in the body but is achieved through vigorous and vigilant cultivation. Acquired through intensified nurture and training, the discourse on *suzhi* turns the body of the child into "a new frontier for capital accumulation," (2004, 189) while it simultaneously relegates the newly conceived labor of "building quality into the child" to mothers, whose *housewifization* (Mies 1986) thereby gains new momentum (Meng 2020). The notion of *suzhi* also provides a tangible link between processes of production and reproduction as it documents how the representation of value, the changing relationship between value and bodies has been reorganized under the transition from planned to market economy (Anagnost 2004, 190). By making "concerted cultivation" the norm, - the deliberate cultivation of a child's development, what Lareau (2003) identified as the middle-class parenting style that makes class reproduction possible - the bar for the new normative, middle-class figure of citizenship has been set forth (Anagnost 2008). Turning the individual into a site for investment not only resonates with the profoundly neoliberal idea of "concerted cultivation" practiced by the intensive mothers of the American middle class but also blends with older Confucian traditions of cultivation and self-cultivation.

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<sup>49</sup> Huang 2021.

The one-child policy along with the unfolding market reforms did significantly alter women's position in Chinese society: on the one hand, as a result of selective birth control (a euphemism for gendercide) (Rodriguez 2023, 190), women became scarcer contributing to an increase in their value; while on the other hand, parents had practically no other option but to make peace with the idea that their only child is a girl. For urban daughters, this presented unprecedented access to parental resources, most importantly in schooling, which was hitherto considered a male privilege (Fong 2002). Receiving parental support and acquiring high-quality educational credentials of unheard-of levels, urban only daughters got recruited to the newly constituted competitive labor market and began entertaining visions of career and independence. This newly gained independence, according to Margery Wolf (1985) led to the disappearance of the "uterine family:" the emotional interdependency once of utmost utilitarian significance for one's own elderly care, women no longer needed to rely on the closeness of their emotional bonds with their children.

#### ***3.4.4.3 The contradictions of motherhood and the crisis of reproduction in contemporary China***

If and when becoming mothers, however, women in today's China find themselves facing a dilemma strikingly familiar to readers of this dissertation: on the one hand, the management of the perfect child project makes such complex demands on mothers that it would mandate their *housewifization*, a practically complete retreat from the labor market (what the party-state has indeed been promoting in its attempt to reinstate "traditional" femininity); while the ideology of the modern women would compel them to pursue public careers – thereby presenting the classical contradiction of motherhood (Hays 1998). So, while the extreme norm of intensive mothering makes skyrocketing demands on mothers' resources, their *time* to fulfill this role

significantly diminishes. Arguably, this contradiction plays a significant role in steadily declining fertility rates even to the extent of voluntary childlessness, as noted in Section 1.3.5.3.

Despite the gradual relaxation of the one-child policy (with introducing the two-child policy in 2016 and the three-child policy in 2021) and indeed in the face of a state that actively incentivizes births, the purposeful engineering of urban Chinese society appears to be irreversible, evinced by a steady decline of the total fertility rate well below replacement levels (S. Yang, Jiang, and Sánchez-Barricarte 2022). For today's generation of parents, "being able to provide a higher living standard for one child is more important than having many children," attesting to the emergence of a new "middle-class fertility culture" (Rodriguez 2023, 211–12) where the costs of having a second child outweigh the desire to have them that at all. Bearing striking resemblance to the notion of the "second demographic transition" (see Section 2.5), what Rodriguez describes as the new "middle-class fertility culture," is indeed a further indication that the postmaterialist value transition, the "silent revolution" did make its appearance across China's middle class.

#### ***3.4.4.4 The 4-2-1 family and the emergence of affectionate fatherhood***

However, even as young couples today keep holding onto the significant autonomy and independence from their parents they assumed through these transformations, they nonetheless need to rely on their parents' assistance in making up for the reproduction needs of their daily lives in taking (bodily) care of the child, and the home by cleaning, cooking, etc. The "crisis of reproduction" (Dong 2021) thus led to a general restructuring of the household's constitution spurring a resurgence of multigenerational households by reinventing grandparents to the daily lives of young, urban middle-class couples (Suowei Xiao 2021). Though not without its

conflicts and contradictions, the new 4-2-1<sup>50</sup> multigenerational family is pivoting around the perceived needs of the only (grand)child. This marks the reversal of the traditional Confucian model of hierarchy, creating what Yan calls the “inverted family” (2021c, 4).

The “inverted family” is characterized by the specific direction of resource transfers concentrating in the only child, and a consequent transformation of power relations within the family. This reconstitution entails a redistribution of household chores, where – standing in sharp contrast to the Confucian notion - individuals define their own positionality and functional role with respect to their own life situations and personal capacities. In urban middle-class households, restructuring casts mothers in the role of the “manager in leading the entire family in the competitive enterprise of raising the perfect child” (Suowei Xiao 2021, 18). Meanwhile, grandparents often take charge of the basic reproduction needs, and fathers are increasingly re-casts as emotional companions to the child besides keeping their role as major breadwinners.

The transformation of fatherhood from the more traditional stance of “the stern moral authority ever ready to criticize shortcomings” to one where an explicit wish to foster more intimate relationships with, and indeed “become close friends with their children” is a remarkable trend (Jankowiak 2002, 316–17). According to Jankowiak, the “new folk notion promoting fatherly involvement” that has become apparent in urban settings by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, emerged partly in response to women’s increased participation in the workforce (over 80% by the early 2000s), and partly to the narrow spatial economy of urban housing, placing father and children in close proximity (2002, 316). However, I think a very important reason behind the

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<sup>50</sup> In Chinese vernacular, numerical acronyms are highly popular (such as the aforementioned 996). 4-2-1 refers to four grandparents, two children, and one grandchild.

tendency of more intimate father-child bonds – that only become more marked throughout the past two decades – is that child-centeredness as a *structure of feeling* trespassed the long-standing gender divide and practically became unisex.

In terms of its connotations regarding *Wertrationalität* and *Zweckrationalität*, in the contemporary Chinese context, we can observe a qualitative transformation in the traditional gendered distribution of normative rationalities. Since “the perfect child project” has been enjoying an overwhelming normative significance in post-reform China, assuming the role of the “manager” of the project endows mothers not only with extensive responsibilities but also with considerable leverage and power within the household, leading some scholars to interpret this restructuring as the “hollowing out” of patriarchal kinship relations and even label it as “post-patriarchal” (Yunxiang Yan 2021b). As the vocabulary suggests, “management” entails a highly *zweckrational* mindset, which practically consists of keeping the child’s schedule under strict control to make the most efficient use of its time. On the other hand, fathers’ increasingly affectionate presence in their children’s lives suggests a distinct orientation toward *Wertrationalität*, complicating the habitual gender division rationalities (outlined in Section 2.1.1).

#### **3.4.4.5 *The contradiction of quality: competitiveness and happiness***

To understand the contradictions of parenthood in contemporary China, we need to take a closer look at one of the key terms, *suzhi* (quality) that was introduced by the party state propaganda of birth control. The notion of *suzhi* played an important role in the *disembedding and privatization of social reproduction* by connecting the ideology of national development with private investment in children’s development. This move displaced public concerns about national development into anxiety over child-rearing in the private realm (Woronov 2007, 30).

To train morally and physically fit inheritors to China's globalizing economy, the *suzhi* discourse compels agents of social reproduction to cooperate in fostering children's creativity, independence, nationalism, and physical fitness, "factors identified as essential to producing a new generation of high-quality patriots who will be suited to the exigencies of the new economy" (Woronov 2007, 33). The production of healthy, well-educated, well-rounded, independent, and market-minded "quality people," the citizenry of twenty-first-century China, emerged as a dominant *Wert* through the course of the past four decades.

As reforms intensified throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the notion of *suzhi* took on new meanings and became omnipresent in everyday discourse as the hegemonic scheme for thinking about children (Anagnost 1997; Kipnis 2006). However, by way of its ubiquitous presence in official discourse, and making its way into private vocabularies, the notion of *suzhi* became decoupled from its original meaning. As I show in the empirical chapters (see Section 5.2.3 in particular), despite its origins in state propaganda, this term was reappropriated by the public to describe individually defined values that might sharply differ from party interests.

In an increasingly stratified society, *suzhi* was thus no longer only a national goal; it also resonated with class reproduction and child rearing among the newly affluent, upwardly mobile families. As Woronov (2007) points out, the ideology of *suzhi* has been deeply fraught with ambiguities since its inception, reflecting authoritarian China's inconsistent and contradictory incorporation of the neoliberal capitalist world system as it trickles down into the intimate lives of the families. Parents are charged with raising children who are simultaneously Chinese patriots and global cosmopolitans – that is, who are free to consume and pursue their individual interests but not free to speak; endowing them with both collectivist and capitalist/individualist morals (Woronov 2007, 30).

By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the emerging notion of “psychological health” (xinli jian kang 心理健康) gained official recognition as a matter of policy concern (Kuan 2015, 5). This led the already complex and oxymoronic expectations contained by *suzhi* to successively expand to include children’s psychological well-being. The incorporation of psychological health into the patchwork of *suzhi* further escalated the inherent incongruity in the moral quandary of parenting, charging parents with striking the right balance in raising a both competitive and psychologically healthy – that is, happy – child (Kuan 2015).

#### 3.4.4.6 *Education for quality*

These inherently self-contradictory pursuits are further hindered by the rote learning-based and exam-centric education system (M. H. Hansen 2018), turning education to be a central arena in which contradictions play out. Widely criticized for being unfit for preparing the next generation to cope with the challenges of an uncertain future, the exam-centric education system not only remains firmly in place but competition within it has further intensified (Kuan 2015, 11). Public education remains closely controlled by the state, with merit-based selection for “good” schools now operating at every level from nursery school (Xu, 2017) to university admissions. This is justified as one of the last ostensibly income-blind channels of upward social mobility, but also widely decried since, in practice, parents with more financial or political means are more likely to secure housing in the right educational district or the extra coaching their children need to be admitted to better educational institutions (M. H. Hansen 2018; Mok 2005; Veeck, Flurry, and Jiang 2003).

Indeed, a thriving private educational service sector has emerged to provide coaching, classes, and camps meant principally to enhance children’s performance and distinctiveness. Refashioning education as a service and a good to consume, the burgeoning private educational

sector not only introduced *choice* to the vocabulary of parenting but also contributed to refashioning parents as professional managers who have to take responsibility for the outcome of the choices they make (Crabb 2010). Taking more and more individual responsibility in the face of an ever-fiercer competition results in a fetishization of “the right choice” (Kuan, 2015), beginning with the right nutritional choices when the baby is still in the womb. The growing private education sector offers a “happier” environment as an alternative to competitive education to parents wealthy enough not to worry about their child’s future competitiveness in the job market (see Friedman 2023).

Standing in the frontline of China’s modernization process and its aspiration to become a world center for innovation, the Ministry of Education took the critiques to its heart and responded with an “educational reform for quality” (*suzhi jiaoyu gaige* 素质教育改革) (Dello-Iacovo 2009). The state did not underplay the significance it attributed to the curriculum reform, stating that, “to a developing nation like ours, this curriculum reform has a profound meaning for the revitalization of the Chinese race” (Zhu 2002, 5–6, cited in Kuan 2015, 10). The reform explicitly endorsed American child-rearing techniques, promoting creativity, and skill-oriented teaching as exemplary, while it also aimed to reduce educational pressure on students by moving away from an exam- and grade-centric model (Kipnis 2011b) – while blaming parents for its apparent lack of success. Reformers – showing a clear analogy to Lasch’s 19th-century reformers in the US – accused parents of overburdening children by adding extra exercises at home, while parents argued that to give their child at least a chance not “to lose out before the starting line” in the extremely competitive education system, they have no other option (Kuan 2015).



As early as 2007, 70 percent of Beijing parents aged between 35-44 said the only purpose of their family savings was to pay for their children's education, and about 60 percent of Chinese families in major cities now spend one-third of their monthly income on it' (*Xinhua News Agency* 2007). In the 2010s, while incomes rose further and access to higher education expanded, rising graduate unemployment, and increasing awareness of declining social mobility amplified the pressure on parents by generating further anxiety about surviving in a society widely regarded as both competitive and nepotistic. A decade later, "education involution" – the idea that the Chinese education system "requires ever-increasing amounts of 'labor' while yielding ever diminishing 'returns on investment'" for students and parents (X. Yang, Ge, and Ownby, n.d.) – was recognized as a strong cause for public dissent, arousing a wide public outcry across China's netizens.

Study burden and the costs of extracurricular activities have become such central considerations for parents that, in 2021, the government announced stringent regulations aiming to crack down on the private educational sector.<sup>51</sup> Known as the "double reduction policy" (*Shuang jian zheng ce* 双减政策), the 2021 regulation aims to reduce the educational burden on both parents and children by employing legislative measures to reduce homework and after-school tutoring pressure on primary and secondary school students, as well as to reduce families' spending on expensive tutoring, while simultaneously improve compulsory education. The "double reduction policy" also reads as an illustrative example of the inherent contradictions between the state and its form of capitalism, mediated through ideals of

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<sup>51</sup> Upon implementation, the Ministry of Education stopped issuing new for-profit licenses for tutoring institutions and required existing ones to stop tutoring "core curriculum courses" for students having compulsory education, as well as requested all after-school tutoring institutions to become non-profit. The implementation of the policy reduced the tutoring industry considerably. The number of offline tutoring institutions decreased by 83.8 percent, while online tutoring institutions decreased by 84.1 percent, fundamentally shaking the market by leading to an almost complete collapse of the hitherto booming education industry, laying off ten (of the fifteen) million people who were working in the tutoring industry before the implementation of the policy (Wang, Luo, and Yang 2022), and its overall economic impact could be felt as far as the US stock market.

childhood and the crisis of reproduction - as education-related expenses are understood to contribute to low birth rates (Rodriguez 2023) which it now sees as a problem.

The “double reduction policy” is the party state’s most recent attempt to “initiate an education overhaul across the country,” according to the National People’s Congress’ news portal, *Xinhua*, by aiming to “alleviate educational anxiety and promote students’ *overall and healthy growth*” (‘China Adopts New Law on Family Education Promotion’, n.d. emphasis added). Discursively, through the “education overhaul,” the Ministry of Education foregrounds an ultimately individualistic approach to education “emphasiz[ing] students’ *personality rights*” (S. Li, n.d.), empathetically positing students as individuals with “differentiated learning needs,” “personal strengths,” and “individuality,” stressing the need for “well-rounded development.” For example, the policy initiates discarding the long-standing tradition of public examination ranking, as it is feared to have a negative psycho-social effect and can be potentially damaging to “students’ self-esteem.” Children are feared to develop severe mental and physical health issues as a result of being “weighed down by workload,” a joint result of high pressure and time deprivation.

Although its market implications are rather evident (see Footnote 51), the success of the “double reduction policy” in terms of its primary goal – the reduction of burdens on children and parents – is rather questionable. Many parents believe that instead of fostering educational equity and reducing burdens, the policy only exacerbates stratification, as those with extra means (money, connections, etc.) will likely be able to continue to increase their child’s competitiveness, while those in a less fortunate position are being cut off from the competition (Yifei Yan 2022). This time, blaming parents for the failure of educational reforms and the

*proletarianization of parenthood* is made explicit by the formulation of a new law on “family education promotion” (2022).

The law on “family education promotion” aims to complement the “double reduction policy” by “ban[ning] parents from placing an excessive academic burden on their children, stating that the *guardians of minors should appropriately organize children's time for study, rest, recreation and physical exercise*” (‘China Adopts New Law on Family Education Promotion’, n.d. emphasis added). Notably, the law largely operates with the vocabulary of “personal rights,” confirming Naftali’s (2014) observation that there is a remarkable trend in conceptualizing childhood in terms of *individual rights*. What is particularly interesting for this study is the emphatic significance the party state places on *time*, on the one hand associating children’s rights with *having time* (to study, rest, and recreate), while on the other hand simultaneously defining parental duties in the terms of appropriate *time management*.

### 3.4.5 “Baby Chickeners” and “Buddha Parents”

To illustrate the divergence of parenting strategies deriving from a decisive uncertainty regarding what childhood should look like – and what kind of adulthood it is supposed to lead to – I introduce two popular parenting styles: the “baby chickeners” and the “Buddha parents.” Both became buzzwords across the burgeoning Sinophone parenting sites and are household terminologies used by members of the *Home Educational Sharing Salon*, a WeChat group for Chinese parents in Budapest where I conducted extensive ethnographic research. The two parenting strategies represent polarly opposed ideals as they operate on markedly distinct rationalities, for the capturing of which their respective temporal orientations provide a fecund entry point.

The term *ji wa* (鸡娃) literally translates to “chicken babies” and derives from the phrase “to inject with chicken blood (*da jixue* 打鸡血),”<sup>52</sup> denoting an ultra-intensive parenting style of “concerted cultivation.” It is used to describe extreme parental interference aiming to indoctrinate the child to study hard, and as such is the epitome of an ultimately *zweckrational* approach to concerted cultivation - albeit with a hint of self-irony. By emphasizing the significance of *nurture*, it conceives parents’ role not only as heavily consequential but in essence, as the sole determinant of the child’s future success.

The premise on which this parenting strategy relies is exercising overall control over children’s time, strictly preventing any “waste” (such as play dates, sleepovers, or watching a movie), and promotes making the most use of every waken minute by arduously working toward a highly successful future. The most prominent paragon of this type of ultra-intensive parenting is probably “tiger mom” Amy Chua, who transplanted “traditional Chinese” parenting to the US and earned worldwide fame by putting her children through an extraordinarily rigidly scheduled childhood (Chua 2011). Although Chua’s book stirred great controversy concerning its lack of attentiveness toward children’s individuality and indeed, personal rights. Yet, as one of her daughters got to perform at Carnegie Hall by the age of fourteen while the other became a Yale Law School graduate, she proved her method “right,” and is respected as a role model for strict parenting techniques for many parents who chase after success defined in similar terms.

The ideal of the “Buddha parent” (*Foxi jiazhang* 佛系家长) proffers an antagonistic opposition to the “baby chickener.” The “Buddha parent” refrains from any interference with the child’s

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<sup>52</sup> Chicken blood therapy has a long and peculiar history (Martinsen 2011), and gain momentum as a “health fad” during the Cultural Revolution, spreading the belief that injecting chicken (rooster) blood into the human body will make the person stronger and more aggressive – therefore more competitive.

development and takes a back seat instead, wisely observing as it unfolds in its natural course. By adopting an inherently *wertrational* approach, the Buddha parent not only respects the child's individual autonomy but also makes it the guiding logic of their upbringing.

In a sense, “Buddha parenting” is very similar to what Lareau (2003) calls the “accomplishment of natural growth,” which she delineates as the characteristic working-class parenting strategy. In Lareau’s work, the “accomplishment of natural growth” is contrasted with the middle-class strategy of “concerted cultivation” and is assumed to be a chief reason behind class reproduction and social stratification.<sup>53</sup> However, in the Chinese context “Buddha parenting” has a distinct appeal to the middle classes, who are increasingly disenchanted by the cut-throat educational competition, and the detrimental psychological effects of the severe time deprivation it has on the well-rounded development of children (see Friedman 2023).

The temporal orientation of this parenting ideal is a refrain from schedules and the over-structuring of children’s time, underscoring the intimate link between *time* and *autonomy*. The rationale behind non-interference is that if intensive parenting leads to a decline in children’s autonomy (Rutherford 2011; Bristow 2014), inversely, non-interference should contribute to its growth. Despite “Buddha parenting’s” growing popularity in theory, many parents describe it as unattainable to realize in practice amidst the social reality of contemporary urban China (see also Friedman 2023). The following post from a mother in the *Home Educational Sharing Salon* illustrates the shifting desires and the antagonism inherent in it:

I just want to be a Buddha parent who has self-control. It wouldn’t be impossible to return to China, but it would be impossible to be a Buddha there~[Facepalm]~ I don’t

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<sup>53</sup> Throughout the past decade, the strategy of “free-range parenting” also emerged as a distinctly middle-class challenge of the “helicopter” (that is, intensive) parenting in the USA. Its overlap with “child neglect” however elucidates the markedly classed assessment of child rearing. While white middle class intellectuals practice “free-range parenting” with the *intention* to give their children more freedom to act independently; the same practice, if out of cultural difference and/or financial necessity is condemned as criminal child neglect (Pimentel 2012).

want to fight anymore ~ I just want to be lazy and binge-watch series ~ You can escape, day by day [Cool Guy emoji] [OK emoji]

This suggests a very different idea of a good life from the one endorsed by Chua: self-control is needed not to achieve more, or to be more productive, but rather to the contrary. This mother wants self-control to be able to let go of these urges. Although the words “lazy” and “binge-watch” imply a bit of shame, she boldly states that this is what she is striving for, instead of constantly trying to keep her head above water and put up a meaningless fight. It also indicates that for this mother, the aspiration to realize “Buddha parenthood” and the improbability of its realization in urban China indeed emerged as a rationale not only to become but to continue to be a migrant – and thereby “escape, day by day”.

### 3.5 Summary

The similarity between the pattern of societal changes that followed market reforms in the PRC during the past four decades and those in the American context unfolding over the *longue durée* of more than two centuries is striking. Similarly to the American context, the emotional valorization of the (only) child has been accompanied by steady privatization and commercialization of children’s lives (Zelizer, 1985) evincing the state’s withdrawal from the fields concerned with social reproduction (health care, housing, and education) and in the emergence of a booming reproduction industry. As a consequence of the disintegration of the *danwei* system and agricultural collectives, social reproduction got disembedded, privatized, and individualized, turning child-rearing in urban China into an unprecedentedly complex, demanding, and resource-intensive endeavor, that is increasingly framed in terms of a competition among a “billion striving individuals.” As Xiang Biao reminds us, analogous to the disembedding (Polanyi 1944) and subsequent internationalization of production (Sassen 1990) the disembedding of social reproduction follows a similar pattern of internationalization,

enabling the global displacement of reproduction-related problems and responsibilities (Xiang unpublished; see also Fraser 2016). However, as the preceding sections aimed to illustrate, reproduction-related problems and responsibilities are often self-contradictory in themselves, and as a result, their global displacement also follows counterintuitive and perplexing trajectories.

The particular state and market mechanism outlined in this chapter also fundamentally transformed the meaning and role of the family and its members, turning “little soldiers” and “iron women” into “quality children” and “housewives” practically overnight. Unfolding in an accelerating tempo, these political-economic processes brought about complex and perplexing conceptions of childhood (and dialectically the family), evinced by the ambivalent coexistence of still vivid social memories of completely antagonistic conceptions of childhood. Deriving from the antagonism between mutually exclusive truth regimes promoted by the state, the market, and their intersecting institutions, contemporary parenting ideologies in urban China are deeply ambiguous: they simultaneously expect children to be autonomous, independent, creative, and innovative but nonetheless filial, obedient, and submissive, while mental health is attributed growing significance. However, the agenda to raise well-rounded children who are as happy as competitive, proves to be increasingly unfeasible in the social reality of the “billion striving individuals” (Yan, 2013), all competing on a narrow pathway for narrowly defined success (Fong 2004; Fong and Kim 2011; Kuan 2015). In the face of an ever-growing reality of “falling” (Ehrenreich 1990), parents simultaneously feel compelled to make more and more efforts to increase the ‘quality’ of their children – while simultaneously disdaining the system that compels them to do so (F. Beck and Nyíri 2022).

Since the pace of foundational social change in the institution of the family reached a tempo that speeded out “the basic sequence of generations,” we speak of *intragenerational change*, which, as Rosa (2013, 110) claims, indeed brings about a fundamental “erosion of lifeworld certainties.” Parents who stand in the crosshairs of different truth regimes promoting antagonistic and often mutually opposed ends, means, and values experience a decisive uncertainty about what they should consider as their child’s best interest and how should they act toward it. Should they be easygoing or hypervigilant? Should they focus on their child’s future success or present happiness?

We can also interpret this as a conflict between *Zweck-* and *Wertrationalität*. The argument I would like to make is that the “erosion of lifeworld certainties” resulted in a scenario where the returns of *zweckrational* decisions are ever more doubtful while their costs are undoubtedly escalating, giving leeway to seriously entertain a more *wertrational* approach to life. Although there indisputably is a hegemonic definition of success that defines both its goals (material abundance) and the pathways leading to it (high-quality Western education), self-contradictions in the “problem” itself – that is, how the best interest of the child is defined – open new avenues to redefining what the good life is, and thus engender individually conceived proposals for *the good enough life*.

### **3.6 Toward a *wertrational* theory of migration: in search of a good enough life**

The inherently eudaimonistic pursuit of a “good enough life,” as described by my participants, diverges from the view dominating both popular perception and academic discourse, which portrays migrants as striving for “better” or “superior” lives, driven by fundamentally instrumental, utility-maximizing rationality (F. Beck and Gaspar 2023). Lying beyond and



between existing explanatory frameworks for migration, such as entrepreneurial (Rogers, Lee, and Yan 2015; Robertson and Rogers 2017; Ley 2017), privileged (Xiang 2016; Liu-Farrer 2016), lifestyle (D. M. Benson and O'Reilly 2009; M. Benson 2011; Hayes 2014; Persson 2019), and educational mobilities (S. Huang and Yeoh 2005; Waters 2009; Fong 2011; Watkins, Ho, and Butler 2017; Lan 2018; Chiang 2022), this case study opens an avenue to rethink migration around the axis of reproduction and its corresponding rationality, *Wertrationalität*.

The rehabilitation of *Wertrationalität* in the study of migration brings with it all the social phenomena that are traditionally and habitually confined to the “private” realm: emotions, social reproduction, women, children – and life as it is. It is not accident, then, that all these subjects tend to be systematically omitted in migration studies, as I have shown in the literature review (Sections 2.1.2 and 2.6). My objective, therefore, is to challenge the presiding production-driven narratives in migration theories by centering on the question of “the work required to realize alternative life visions and the suggestiveness of living otherwise” (Gershon 2019 cited in Friedman 2023, 384). In response to Joel Robbins’ call for an “anthropology of the good” (Robbins 2013), I anchor “the work required to realize alternative life visions” around the specific *temporal orientation toward the present*, as it plays out in emerging geographical orientations (see also Friedman 2023) toward unlikely destinations like Chiang Mai, Warsaw, Johor Bahru – or Budapest. The qualitative novelty of this temporal orientation has implications not only for migration studies but also for fostering a broader understanding of the interconnection between parenting and political subjectivities. Following Meng, I employ the “seemingly apolitical realm of child-rearing” as an entry point for capturing political subjectivities as it “illustrates the collusion between the state and the market in configuring identity, desire, and aspiration, all of which are key dimensions of political subjectivity” (2018, 167).

To assess the temporal dimension of the distinction between *zweckrational* (futurist), and *wertrational* (presentist) rationality, I draw on Rosa's theory of social acceleration, serving as an entry point to grasp "the basic ethical-political question of the good life" (2013, 31). I integrate temporal orientations with Hayes' (2014, 1963) notion of geoarbitrage (the strategy to maximize one's quality of life by relocating earnings from high latitudes' of the global division of labor to lower-cost destinations) to coin the notion of *temporal-geoarbitrage*, and thereby attempt to go beyond the dichotomic categorization of economic and non-economic rationales of migration. The notion of temporal-geoarbitrage is fruitful for the analysis of reproduction-related *aspirations* that animate the global geography of emerging middle-class trajectories (Zelizer 1985; Parreñas 2001; Cole and Durham 2008; Fraser 2016), while simultaneously suggesting the potential emergence of new political subjectivities that I think are inherent in this specific spatiotemporal orientation.

In summary, my theory of reproduction migration extends de Haas' capabilities and aspirations model (2021) with a more systematic approach to aspirations, integrating the Weberian distinction between instrumental (*Zweck*) and value-oriented (*Wert*) rationality (1978, 81) and their corresponding realms of production and reproduction with the value transition theory applied to the upward concentration of migration. The blending of these theories, I argue, foregrounds the increasing importance of the realm of reproduction and *Wertrationalität* in shaping the aspirations of upwardly concentrated migrants. Rather than treating production-reproduction and *Zweckrationalität-Wertrationalität* as mutually exclusive dichotomies, this theory of reproduction migration focuses on their dialectical relationship and mutually constitutive nature, as they take shape in theories and practices related to reproduction.

The argument I would like to make is that, contrary to Weber's proleptic binary vision of modernity, the late modern human condition suggests a decisive undecidedness regarding the arbitrary choice between these competing rationalities. Conversely, my research shows that the late modern experience is characterized by an increasing intermingling between the private and the public, and the corresponding structures of gendered rationalities, for the grasping of which emerging mobilities offer a useful prism. With the gradual and linear "erosion of lifeworld certainties" (Rosa 2013, 110), the returns of *zweckrational* decisions become ever more doubtful, while their costs are undoubtedly escalating. This creates an environment in which entertaining a *wertrational* approach to life becomes ever more sensible, opening new avenues to redefine what the good life is, and thus engender individually conceived proposals for *the good enough life*.

I argue that the drastic choice that the parents in this study undertake by prioritizing their children's present happiness at the cost of jeopardizing their future success, suggests the rise of a hitherto unprecedented ethos of individual human rights in the PRC (Kleinman 2011; Yunxiang Yan 2013; Naftali 2014), understood as *temporal autonomy* and the right for *free time*. Implicitly political in nature, this ethos finds mediation through the perceived needs of children for autonomy achieved by governing one's own time, which I suggest is gaining ground in segments of the Chinese middle class. Such a shift could represent a departure from the enduring emphasis on collective socioeconomic justice that dominated Chinese "rights talk" for the past two millennia (Perry 2008) and by virtue of the dialectical relationship between parent and child extends beyond the child-centered ethos of individual rights (Naftali 2014).

### 3.6.1 Application to the case study

Applying this framework to the case that is the focus of this study elucidates that while the mobility of these families is made possible by instrumental means of the current political-economic order (*capabilities*), the *aspirations* that animate it follow a decidedly *postmaterialist*, *wertrational* direction that crystallizes around distinct temporal orientations. The middle-class lifestyle emigration we see emerging today (cf. Xiang 2016; Liu-Farrer 2016) can be directly linked to the escalation of both children's price and pricelessness (Zelizer, 1985) as a combined effect of the state's (now abolished) one-child policy and the rise of middle-class sensibilities and desires that came to coexist in an antagonistic manner, focusing not only on the *child's future success* but also, and often contradictorily, on its *present happiness*.

Although middle-class parenting across the globe is increasingly infused by a *zweckrational* logic driven by a social environment dominated by a fear of losing out and a desperate quest to minimize an ever-increasing volume of risks by adopting the most efficient techniques in maximizing the child's potential (U. Beck 1992; Furedi 2002; Elkind 2001; E. Lee, Macvarish, and Bristow 2010), parents in this study took a great leap toward the unknown. Ironically, they opted for the Hungarian investment immigration scheme despite being acutely aware that understood as an *investment*, their choice of Hungary is an ill-advised one. Yet, they still believe that through investing in Hungarian state bonds, they acquire something that money in China cannot buy: a slow and relaxed environment, conducive to their children's spontaneous development and autonomy. By emphasizing the departure from economic considerations, anxiety, risk minimization, and future success (Lan 2018) to an inherently *wertrational* focus on the present well-being of the child, I join a small but growing body of literature (Igarashi 2015; Martin 2022; Friedman 2023; Göransson 2023; J. Li, Guo, and Aranya 2023) that aims to look beyond the general blinders of migration studies.

As I argue elsewhere, the choice of “unexpected destinations” (that is, outside the imagined centers of modernity) follows a less instrumental logic, and their emergence represents a qualitatively new, value-oriented rationale for migration (F. Beck and Gaspar 2023; F. Beck and Nyíri 2022) centering around reproduction in its most quotidian sense. Instead of chasing superior education to enhance their children’s future competitiveness, parents in this study use migration to *opt out* of the tyranny of competition early on (cf. Friedman 2023), by which they aim to reappropriate the present, affective quality of life. “Golden visa migrants”’ choice of Hungary thus signals a shift in the global middle classes’ aspirational tendencies as they cast aside the West and move countries not for economic or symbolic gain, but for a freer, healthier, and more leisurely life, creating a new global migration dynamic (F. Beck 2022).

The migrants in this study drop out of the parenting race in China not for the potential rewards of educational choices abroad in the *future*, but for an environment that seems to be best for their child at the *present*. This research suggests that although the search for a mentally, physically, intellectually, and emotionally wholesome environment was engendered by the nation-building discourse of national revitalization (Greenhalgh, 2010), it has become decoupled from its original agenda and emerged as a *structure of feeling* on its own right, triggering a new trend in international mobility. As one interlocutor put it:

Chinese mothers think very plainly: it’s all for the child (*zhi yao weile haizi*). You have to sacrifice everything for your child. This has become something of a policy for Chinese mothers [laughs], especially since we could have only one [child]. But actually, our expectations are quite simple: *a good enough life* in a *good enough environment*, where the kid can be happy. However simple this sounds; we could not realize that in China.

This self-conscious *spatial downscaling* suggests a renunciation of the norms and values of material modernity accompanying the PRC's swift and fundamental economic, political, and social reconfiguration, mediated through emerging notions of an ideal childhood; while *temporally*, it points to the emergence of the *present* as the decisive temporality for migration decision-making. I interpret this presentist temporal orientation toward the basic ethical question of living a "good enough life" as a form of *temporal-geoarbitrage* by which migrants use their capital to opt out from the normative implications the grinding temporal structures of contemporary urban China entail, and choose Hungary as an "oasis of deceleration" (Rosa 2013, 158) in order to repossess the *temporal autonomy* over how to spend their lives. Understanding their quest for creating new meanings for the good life through orientations to time and place stands at the heart of this inquiry (Robbins 2013). In the words of one interlocutor:

In the Chinese education system, children are treated like robots who have to work all day; there is not one tiny bit of playing around, happiness, not a bit of freedom. Studying from morning to dawn, I think that's not healthy. In China you must study well, there is no other option but to be the best in everything. (...) expectations are very high, you have to paint, you have to swim, you have to play the piano, and speak English of course... Our salary is not enough to pay for all the classes... And I don't think like that, I think the kid should have one thing he likes, be good at it, and that's it. (...) [Here] we just go down to the park together, jogging, playing football, playing around. I don't want him to make it professional, like in China, where everything has to be professional. I think the most important is to be healthy and have fun, the rest is not important.

Interpreted as a form of *temporal-geoarbitrage*, the rationality of moving to Hungary is to achieve *temporal autonomy* over how one wants to spend their life. Temporal autonomy in the new environment is hoped to be conducive to their children's freedom by letting their personal inclinations prevail (F. Beck and Nyíri 2022). From this perspective, childhood happiness is associated with freedom (understood as temporal autonomy), pointing to the grinding temporal structure impelled by the PRC's state capitalism as a major reason prompting the decision to leave. Radically overburdened by mandatory obligations, children in China have neither the time nor energy to nurture their individual predispositions. In this view, the lack of democracy

and individual freedoms in China, mediated through temporal perceptions, directly relates to children's deprivation of agency and wholesome development. In sharp contrast to the traditional ideal of the obedient child corresponding to the norm of filial piety, a growing number of Chinese parents have begun to embrace the idea of their child as a coequal, autonomous individual capable of making decisions for and on his or her own (Kuan 2015; Naftali 2016).

Childhood happiness is closely associated with freedom in general and democracy in particular in the narratives evoked by many parents, thereby making the decision to leave an inherently political one. In this context, Budapest – notwithstanding the steady decline of democracy in the country since 2010 – offers an environment in which experimenting with and fostering individual propensities becomes affordable in terms of money, time, and personal energy. Coming from a rigid authoritarian regime, the idea of having *choice* in Hungary stands out as an important theme in the narration of decision-making. In this view, the lack of democracy and rights in general is directly related to children's lack of choice and denial of agency.

By moving to Hungary, middle-class parents not only opt out of the parenting race but also explicitly reject the overtly commodified, corrupt, and competitive Chinese education system with its rigid pedagogy aimed at the continuous cultivation of ever higher *suzhi* (quality), stressing instead on happiness and self-fulfillment. Doing so, they project their disappointment with the developmental state and its form of capitalism onto a “Europe” they imagine as more pristine and less commodified (Nyíri and Beck 2020). They opt for an educational environment in which choices are perceived as less pivotal and consequential, and thereby provide an opportunity for making decisions on a *wertrational* basis.

While the narratives put forward by parents tend to pivot around children's needs, in a dialectical manner they also speak to the qualitative transformation opting out entails for their own lives. Many of them practically become full-time parents just when they significantly reduce the demands child-rearing makes on their resources in terms of energy, time, and money. Notably narrated as a "sacrifice" made for their children, – a sacrifice of all that they have achieved in China, including careers, social capital, and intimate bonds with friends, family, and occasionally spouses – moving to Hungary also entails an opportunity for realizing alternative visions of the good life for themselves.

In conclusion, this research seeks to elucidate the social consequences of China's rapid economic development coupled with tightening autocracy, focusing on the emergence of a novel form of political subjectivity as it assumes new potential in the migratory environment. An anthropological account of the dialectical relationship in which the parent and the child form and guide each other through their new environment is hoped to elucidate the complex relationship between migration, well-being, parenting, and evolving political subjectivities. This shift in migration dynamics reflects a changing perception of well-being emerging among members of the new Chinese middle class. The decision to move to Hungary exemplifies a desire for *temporal sovereignty* by which migrants intend to break free from the rigid temporal regime and narrowly defined concept of success imposed by Chinese state capitalism. The shifting aspirations of these middle-class families encapsulate an evolving ethos that takes the question of individual freedom for the younger generation more seriously than previously observed (Figure 11).





*Figure 11. Happy children in the Danube. Photograph shared by a participant*

## CHAPTER 4: MALINOWSKI'S TENT INSIDE OUT – METHODS AND POSITIONALITY

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the research methods through which I sought to grasp the intricacies of what I identified as a distinctly *wertrational* migration mediated through the prism of child-rearing enacted by Chinese “golden visa” families who arrived in Hungary in pursuit of a “good enough life.” As hinted in the introductory vignette (see pages 1–2), this research challenges the well-established premises of anthropology in many ways. Instead of traveling to a far-off research site to pitch my tent among the “natives,” I simply opened the doors of my home and let the field in. In a sense, I became the “native” who was studied by the lay “researchers” as they attempted to make sense of their new environment, turning the research relationship upside down and inside out.

Thus, this research overtly confronts the persistent assumption that the ‘field’ and the ‘home’ are physically and conceptually separate realms of the fieldworker’s life, bearing close resemblance to the public-private divide, one of the central theoretical themes around which previous chapters pivoted. Since turning my home into a field site is a considerable transgression of anthropology’s holy grail, ‘fieldwork,’ it needs to be carefully addressed. Therefore, hereafter I provide not only a detailed description of the particularities and practicalities of the research I undertook in the past five years but also a deeper reflection on my positionality and the ways in which it is constitutive of my findings. Finally, I reflect on the limitations of this research and its potential for furthering the conversation on the *wertrational* approach to migration.

## 4.2 The field-home divide

Anthropology, as a discipline, is situated in the same socio-historical context outlined in the previous chapters, for which the distinction between the public and the private, *Zweckrationalität* and *Wertrationalität* also carries particular implications, most tangible in its distinctive method: the fieldwork. In essence, fieldwork is the identity-making method of the discipline, the “quintessential hallmark” of its scientific pursuits (Amit 2000, 1), it is what makes social and cultural anthropology distinguishable from other social sciences (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The notion of the ‘field’ emerged as the discipline’s characteristic method and indeed its crux, with Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) pitching his famous tent in Melanesia, which led to the “discovery of intensive personal fieldwork” and served as an important stimulus in the development of the discipline (Wax 1972). By incorporating an expectation of travel away from ‘home,’ the ‘field’ dialectically implies a cultural, social, and spatial separation from and intricate relationship with the ‘home’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

The Malinowskian archetype of the solitary field worker is expected to travel long distances to *immerse* him or herself in “other” cultures, readily invoking a diametrical opposition to “our” culture. The mission of immersion on the one hand presupposes the *a priori* existence of the field as “an independently bounded set of relationships and activities which is autonomous of the fieldwork through which it is discovered” (Amit 2000, 6), while on the other hand expects the field worker to make him or herself in this spatially, culturally, and socially distinct place as much at *home* as possible. The stake of immersion is to obtain high-quality data, by forging intimate bonds with the “natives.”

Serving as “primary vehicles for eliciting findings and insight,” relationships of intimacy and familiarity between researcher and subject in anthropological inquiry are seen as the

“fundamental medium of investigation,” which is argued to be a distinct characteristic of field research (Amit 2000, 2). However, to suffice the expectations of (the disciplinary illusion of) objectivity, these relationships need to remain “emotionally uncommitted, so as not to prejudice the results of one’s findings” (Kosack 2004, 28). These relationships are also necessarily *zweckrational*, as they are formed with an inherent purpose in mind, that is obtaining qualitative data. Nonetheless, the anthropological ideal of membership and immersion requires these relationships to be as intimate as possible – but only to exploit intimacy as an investigative tool (Amit 2000, 3).

After the successful completion of immersion, however, the field worker is expected to leave the ‘field’ and return ‘home.’ This backward journey, a metaphoric and literal distancing, is hoped to be conducive to retaining the level of objectivity (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) required by any scientific discipline if it is to be taken seriously. Once the solitary field worker exits the ‘field’ and returns ‘home,’ the craft of anthropology is measured by the capacity of its practitioner to render the distant familiar (Amit 2000, 4).

Expressed through the recurring tropes of entry into and exit from the ‘field,’ the sharp contrast between ‘field’ and ‘home’ leads to what Gupta and Ferguson call a “hierarchy of purity of field sites,” which is defined based on the sites’ distance from ‘home.’ In their words: “After all, if ‘the field’ is most appropriately a place that is “not home,” then some places will necessarily be *more* ‘not home’ than others, and hence more appropriate, more ‘fieldlike’” (1997, 13 emphasis in the original). As they argue, the persistence of this hierarchy not only goes against contemporary postcolonial theoretical currents in the discipline but practically lingers on one of the oldest conceptions of anthropological fieldwork in which sites were selected based on their potential to offer closer approximations of what was assumed to be “the

natural state" of the human condition. Though stripped off from its evolutionary musings, considerations of appropriate field sites retain a fixation on exoticism, often defined through spatial distance from home. In the light of anthropology's traditional dedication to "the cause of contextualizing the exotic and unfamiliar so effectively that it is rendered explicable and unexceptional," the familiar "nearby" is seen as an inadequate pursuit (Amit 2000, 4).

Much has changed in anthropological thinking, which Amit characterized as a "post-Said decade replete with anthropological atonement for the sins of orientalism" (2000, 4), let alone the changes that have taken place in the empirical reality of the world in which the discipline is situated, which, to state the obvious, got ever-more interconnected. As Abu-Lughod writes: "If there was ever a time when anthropologists could consider without too much violence at least some communities as isolated units, certainly the nature of global interactions in the present makes that now impossible" (1996, 146). Field sites are no longer seen as isolated units, but as enmeshed in a globally interwoven context. Yet, the institutional practices in anthropological granting, training, and hiring continue to favor a definition of fieldwork as a journey to distant and exotic places (see Caputo 2000), perpetuating the "colonial-style heroic tales of adventurers battling the fierce tropics" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 13) – despite the emphatic discursive awareness of its complete outdatedness. Although it has become "a virtual truism to note that the distinction between 'home' and 'away' has become blurred" by the transnational contexts in which both the anthropologist and his or her subjects are situated (Amit 2000, 15), the existence of the 'field' as an entity separate from 'home' and 'everyday life' is rarely questioned.

The insistence on upholding the 'field' and the 'home' as separate domains is most likely a residue of the discipline's "uneasy placement [...] in the modern organization of academia,

amid the positivist social sciences' valuing formal methods and research designs" (Marcus and Fischer 1986, 22). At stake of what Amit (2000) calls the "compartmentalization of fieldwork" – the separation of the object and subject of the discipline by spatial, temporal, and textual strategies (Fabian 1983) – is the discipline's scientific status. The literal and metaphoric distance the field-home separation entails allow the researcher to switch identities and retain a professional gaze that can pass as objective. Conversely, doing research at home invites the hazard of losing objectivity as a direct consequence of losing distance (cf. Dyck 2000, 43). To the personal experience of the anthropologist as a field worker this not only invokes the much-rehearsed distinction between private, personal life, and public, professional life but by incorporating physical distance displaces the separation of the realms on a geographical scale. One is doing fieldwork when one is far away from home and does nothing else – that is to say, is not involved in the private matters of his or her life. The anthropologist is expected to keep his or her personal life from the professional one rigidly apart.

This leads to an almost complete detachment of the anthropologist from his or her own social and affective context, in many cases resulting in an uncomfortable ambiguity regarding the aim of his or her work (which is to provide the richest possible context and embeddedness of her subjects), and his or her positionality, devoid of context (either by the nature of the fieldwork or by choice to comply with the norms of the discipline). In most ethnographic monographs, the social and affective context of the fieldworker, the backdrop against which ethnographic work is conducted is not considered to be part of the "work" in fieldwork, indicated by the trend that "wives, husbands, and children appear in dedications, acknowledgments, prefaces, but not in the core chapters" (Bornstein 2007, 486). Reflecting the modernist divide between work and family, children and other relatives are generally excluded from the anthropologist's "productive" life (Amit 2000) – just as they are excluded from migration studies (see Section

2.1.2). The archetype of the solitary field worker, even if (s)he studies families, is supposed to dwell in the field alone. In Bornstein's words: "Ethnography is work and children belong to the home, unless, that is, you study children and then most likely they are not *your* children" (2007, 489 emphasis in the original). This clear-cut separation between work and family, the professional and the personal, as Amit argues is "responsive to a much more pervasive structural bias in capitalist, industrial societies," and while the principal methodology of anthropologists rests on "a maverick if sometimes uneasy melding of these domains," anthropologists nonetheless "attempted to uphold their overall separation by compartmentalizing fieldwork spatially, temporally and textually" (2000, 3).

### 4.3 Transgressing the field-home divide

For the anthropologist working at 'home' however, an inescapable dilemma presents itself, as here "the personal and the professional are inextricably intertwined at every step of the ethnographic and wider anthropological endeavour" (Dyck 2000, 49). The "messy, qualitative experience" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986:22) the melding of personal and professional roles in ethnographic fieldwork retains particularly gendered connotations, which I illustrate with two examples of anthropologists, Noel Dyck, a father, and Erika Bornstein, a mother. Their examples aim to reveal the gendered difference between the experiences and interpretations of the intermingling between 'home life' and 'professional life' for anthropologists who set out to turn their 'homes' into their 'fields.' As I will demonstrate, their experiences and conclusions of what the blurring of the boundary between 'home' and 'field' meant for them personally and professionally were conceived differently and led to different outcomes.

Noel Dyck is a Canadian anthropologist who went through anthropology's rite de passage by conducting extensive fieldwork with Canadian aboriginals, but later in his career, after also

becoming a father, he started to foster professional interest in community sports activities for children (Dyck 2000). For him, this meant a fundamentally problematic intermingling between his “professional and home life”, between which he thus far “carefully nurtured partition” by spatially and temporally separating the demands of work and home (Dyck 2000, 33). He describes the “diffuse and unanticipated feelings of concern when anthropology began to seep out of the confines of an academic career and spill over into what had become part of my home life” (Dyck 2000, 32), as he began to develop *professional* interest toward children’s soccer matches, in which he initially participated “amiably and paternally” (2000, 32), in his “personal pastime” (2000, 34). To Dyck, then, this endeavor was the professionalization of the personal, the transformation of his ‘home’ into his ‘field,’ raising ethical dilemmas concerning what this transformation entails regarding his relationships existing prior to research. Describing the dilemma as being “short of wearing a cap with a label proclaiming ‘anthropologist at work’” (Dyck 2000, 43), his concern sheds light on the fundamentally contradictory qualities of ‘home’ and ‘field’ relationships.

Dyck’s dilemma about the transformation of his informal, homey relationships existing prior to research into formal professional research relationships can be interpreted as a conflict between the differing rationalities of ‘field’ (work) and ‘home’ (private) relationships. One’s private relationships conceived in the realm of the home are presumed to be *wertrational* (“amiable” and “paternal”), as they are fostered simply for the sake of having them, without any instrumental consideration. While the intimacy these “homey” relationships possess by nature would proffer a fertile ground for conducting high-quality research, their contamination by attributing an instrumental goal beyond having them for their own sake poses the researcher with an ethical dilemma narrated as a tension between the “professionally and personally appropriate” (Dyck 2000, 44).



Erika Bornstein on the other hand contrasts two of her own different field experiences: one in full compliance with what she calls “the alienated misconception of fieldwork” conducted in complete detachment in Africa, rigidly maintaining the conceptual divide between life and research; while the other, conducted in India and embedded in the environment of her husband’s family integrated fieldwork with life “almost by necessity.” Here, “ethnographic immersion no longer became a choice or a task that could be avoided” (2007, 503). To her, the challenge to the boundaries between research and family posed by the second experience “provided a rare opportunity to think critically about fieldwork relations about ethnographic ideals of belonging” (2007, 485).

But, unlike Dyck, Bornstein’s critical revision seems to operate in the opposite direction which she interprets as a welcome opportunity to “more fully integrate [her] life with [her] work” (2007, 496), allowing her to “incorporate multiple aspects of [her] own identity into [her] research” (2007, 502). In contrast to Dyck, who experienced discomfort with transforming his (personal) life into research, Bornstein interprets her endeavor as one in which *research* transforms to be *life* (see for example 2007, 497, 503). As Bornstein reveals, the integration of life with work on the one hand did “cancel ethnographic distance,” but on the other hand, the abandonment of the objectivist stance provided her with a more complete and complex experience of inhabiting the field (2007, 502). In this experience, instead of being a source of “diffuse feelings” (Dyck 2000, 32) the intermingling of the personal and the professional is interpreted as “ethnographic practice seem[ing to be] in harmony with living” (Bornstein 2007, 502).

The experience of both Bornstein and Dyck resonated with my own encounter, suddenly finding myself in the middle of a ‘field,’ and one in which I was very importantly positioned as a mother. After spending several – rather unrewarding – years trying to conduct anthropological research with Chinese immigrants in Hungary, this new type of immigration became first visible to me through my children. In sharp contrast with my earlier, most often futile experiences, when I did travel considerable distances to the outer skirts of Budapest scouting for Chinese immigrants across what since came to be called Chinatown; in 2017, I found myself amid a buzzing Chinese community without taking any detour from my private, everyday routes crisscrossing between the kindergarten, the school, the City Park, or the ice rink. My first acquaintances were parents of my children’s new classmates, whom I got to know casually conversing as we waited for kids to emerge from school or sitting around playgrounds. Instead of feeling I was chasing after them, they not only welcomed me but directly invited me into their lives.

I offered my help with interpreting, which did come in handy in the social reality of the Hungarian public education system, where a few teachers would speak any language other than Hungarian. But they seemed to be genuinely enthusiastic even more about the opportunity to form a meaningful relationship with a “native.” Turning the traditional hierarchy between the anthropologist and the “native” upside down, I hardly realized that I had started making interviews as I have been interviewed about the “native” insights of say, kindergarten life. These parents light-heartedly told me about their concerns, fears, and desires, their opinions about the Chinese education system and Chinese society in general, and their hopes for, impressions of, and experiences in Hungary, without having to ask much. Before dwelling into more detail regarding the practicalities of the research that ensued afterward, I stop here to ponder the nuances of my positionality, that is to acknowledge myself, the anthropologist as

subject, as an individual actively engaged in moral commitments and ethical positions, embedded in a particular social and affective context (Fassin 2012).

## 4.4 Positionality – Self-Other-Self

A long-standing critic of the exoticist bias in anthropological orthodoxy which artificially positions ‘field’ versus ‘home,’ Judith Okely argues strongly for the importance of autobiographical reflexivity as an integral element of anthropological fieldwork (Okely 1992 cited in Amit 2000). As Fassin eloquently states, “reflexivity is neither an exercise of ego analysis for its own sake nor a dismissal of the possibility of a grounded analysis but on the contrary the condition of an objective analysis of moral and ethical issues” (2012, 16), which falls squarely with the aim of this dissertation. That anthropologists are enmeshed in the interfusion of contexts, involvements, roles, and perspectives is by no means peculiar to those working in close geographic proximity to their place of residence (Amit 2000, 8). Drawing on Simmel (2009 [1922]), Bornstein also argues for the importance of attention to the “texture of ethnographic membership in the field, which shifts according to one’s web of group affiliations” (Bornstein 2007, 484). She contends, that a closer understanding of how anthropologists are situated in their web of affiliations would not only cast light on how this affects their experience in the field but is also constitutive of what they observe (both in terms of the kinds of data they can collect and the types of observations they can make), as well as the research practices they uptake. Anthropologists’ subject position thus determines the knowledge they have access to, and the way they approach it, while it also structures the knowledge they produce (2007, 486) – regardless of whether they conduct research away or at home.

Many of the defining characteristics of my social location significantly overlap with those who came to be my research participants and many of whom, through the course of five-seven years,

also became my friends. Centering my positionality around these overlaps by focusing on connections and interconnections aims to advance anthropological research beyond “the hegemony of the distinctive-other tradition” (Morsy 1988; cited in Abu-Lughod 1996, 139). While this research falls in the rubric of studying the ‘ethnic other’ of my ‘own society,’ focusing on the overlaps in our intersectional subjectivities seeks to challenge the traditional power hierarchy inherent in the self-other distinction of anthropological research. Blurring the distinction between “native” and anthropological perspectives, I hope this research will contribute to re-devising anthropology from fostering and encouraging a globally informed discourse of ‘otherness’ to one of ‘usness’ (see Dyck 2000, 48; Abu-Lughod 1996, 148–49).

What made this research possible in the first place is that both myself (along with my family) and my research participants reside habitually in the inner districts of Budapest (7<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>). Budapest is the urban environment in which we all carry out our comings and goings crisscrossing over the Danube, making use of its comprehensive public transport, its cozy and beautiful public spaces, its embeddedness in global circuits providing access to Asian food retails, its affordable access to community sports in the form of swimming pools and ice rinks, etc. We inhabit and approach this urban space from a shared social status vaguely defined as “middle class” which very much shapes our capabilities and aspirations of how to make use of it.

This shared status is reflected in our material possessions, including owning our homes which are spacious and convenient but by no means extravagant, and driving our cars that are second hand and similarly refrain from luxury, while also do not shy away from taking public transport or riding a bike. Being university graduates is also an element in our shared social location, one that I found to be of great importance to my participants, many of whom tended to

categorize people – other earmarks such as wealth or ethnicity apart – solely based on this: either as “having culture” (*you wenhua* 有文化) or “not having culture” (*mei you wenhua* 没有文化). Middle-class subjectivity also got reflected in our decidedly postmaterial aspirations (see Section 2.5), having our existential dilemmas pivoting more around meaning-seeking than bread making – and seeking meaning to a great extent around our children. I came to understand the importance of postmaterialism to my participants by their reaction to my attitude toward money. The fact that I did not want to monetize let alone capitalize on our relationships and was reluctant to accept money in exchange for my “services” was perceived as a sign of a moral character, that many of my acquaintances praised as an antithesis to the excessive materialism they tended to despise in Chinese society.

Nevertheless, the middle-classness of our social location also differs meaningfully. While I was born to a family that cultivated a middle-class tradition for multiple generations, those parents who were born before the implementation of the one-child policy (1978) – which is the vast majority of the parents I got to know – are first-generation members of this newly created class (see Section 1.3.5). Thus, in many regards, for them this class position entailed an experience of *intragenerational* change (Rosa 2013, 110) that invokes a profound uncertainty which qualitatively differs from my feeling of the “pervasive, deep-seated anxiety” that is a universal characteristic of the middle class in its constant “fear of falling” (Ehrenreich 1990).

In other respects, our subject positions differ more significantly. As Strathern contends, to verify whether an anthropologist is genuinely conducting research at ‘home,’ it is essential to establish whether both the researcher and the subjects of the study “are equally at home, as it were, with the kinds of premises about social life that underpin anthropological enquiry” (1987, 16). Them being racially visible immigrants in a largely xenophobic country which I am a

native of, “the kinds of premises about social life” they face up to are radically different from my own experiences of the ‘home’ we all inhabit. In this context, my help in arranging the most ordinary things would compensate them for the absolute lack of institutional assistance on the state’s side, that recognizes the presence of immigrants neither in discourse nor in practice (see Section 1.3.4). It would soon become evident, that my presence as a white, middle-class person who speaks Hungarian would make running any sort of errands a whole lot easier, practically turning me into a subsidy for state integration policies and a vessel of integration. Since my membership in the ‘field’ was a given, instead of coping with the conventional challenge of immersing myself in the ‘field,’ I coped with helping my participants’ immersion. Being put in the shoes of migrants in this secondary nature provided me with an outlook on the substantial odds against which my participants have to persist in their seemingly banal pursuit of the good enough life. Serving the role of mediating between a rather hostile state and racially different immigrants provided me with a radically different outlook on my ‘home-field,’ eventually rendering the familiar distant.

#### 4.4.1 Motherhood

As noted earlier, the social phenomenon I identified as *wertrational* migration which came to be my ‘field’ entered my sight through my children, marking my position as a mother decisively. It informed not only which fields I *could* enter but also opened fields I *would* enter without the ‘professional’ intent of doing research, but simply living my ‘private’ life. After a while, I was not surprised to find Chinese parents practically everywhere where my ‘private’ life as a mother took me: attending parents’ meetings, enrolling in music school, going to ice hockey training, or having ice cream in the park. The “topic of my research was swirling around me” (Bornstein 2007, 502), washing away the conceptual divide between the ‘private’ and the ‘professional,’ the ‘home’ and the ‘field.’ In these encounters with would-be research

participants in my research, I introduced myself as an anthropology PhD candidate researching the topic of “golden visa” migration and parenthood, without having to introduce that I am a mother as well. This shared subjectivity formed a common ground and a basis of comradeship that furthered intimacy in ‘professional’ research relationships as well. It also set a boundary to immersion: having my own family with its responsibilities and obligations precluded the archetypical anthropological aspiration of the solitary fieldworker to become part of the families in the ‘field.’

Most importantly, it was our identity as parents and our shared embrace of a child-centered attitude where the interfusion of our contexts, involvements, roles, and perspectives overlapped to the greatest extent. In practical terms, child-centeredness for parents means that their children’s lives – either defined through their needs or their desires – are *the* organizing principle of their own lives. This manifests in our very similar *being in time*, which means that in essence, our daily schedules are determined by the schedules of our children – our time is structured around their time. It goes without saying, that parents do possess a certain level of authority in scheduling their children’s time – at least the part of it that is left after the state-imposed schedule of compulsory education – as they have the final say in what is an appropriate way of spending it: Whether this time should be spent with activities that enhance the child’s potential in the form of commodified extracurriculars, with activities the child enjoys for their own sake, or perhaps simply left unstructured to leave both the parent and the child to their own whims. As I elucidated in Section 3.6, these seemingly banal questions carry a fundamentally ethical undertone not only in that they draw the boundary where parental authority ends and children’s autonomy begins, but they also outline the image of the good life both in the present and the future. Being a mother of two children myself, these dilemmas also form and inform my life to a great extent. Therefore, when conversing about these questions

and observing them in practice I do not simply stand on the presumed objective ‘outside’ but have my subjective views and involvements.

My interest in the topic also emerged from a sense of being offended *as a mother*, which eventually and somewhat counterintuitively set me on the path to approach this intersection of political subjectivities, migration, and parenthood from a universalizing angle instead of an exoticizing one. Frequently recurring comments in my encounters such as “You would never understand that: this is a Chinese mothers’ thing. Chinese mothers would do *everything* for their kids,” first made me upset on a visceral level. Being a mother, I, too, embrace the idea of myself as someone who “would do *everything*” for my children. The naturalized notion of sacrifice implied by this self-imposed otherification, followed by the equally naturalized, self-defensive impulse of indignation on my part set me to wonder about the cultural and social constructions shaping motherhood. I, like most people, also imagined motherhood to be an ultimately *private* and fundamentally intimate experience that is invulnerable to the penetration of structural forces of market and state (see Kuan 2015).

This was particularly so in the light of my journey to become a mother. I chose to become a mother at a young age well before even having an idea of a career *despite* all the tacit and explicit social expectations of my social location as an intellectual urbanite that would compel me to pursue a career first and only then start a family. Unlike many young urban middle-class women across the globe, who experience tremendous societal pressure to become mothers in their thirties, to me, this choice in my early twenties was almost a rebel-like move going against the norms – as it was made unmistakably clear to me by family, friends, and state institutions, endowing me with a deep sense of autonomy considering my motherhood. Partly being generationally cut off from “mainstream mothers” by whom I was over fifteen years younger,



and partly consciously cutting myself off by refraining from taking part in fiery debates over breastfeeding, sleeping schedules, and the like, I deliberately cultivated what I imagined to be my private mothering style. I certainly did not feel like I belonged to an imagined community of ‘Hungarian mothers’ and neither consciously nor unconsciously embraced an idea of ‘usness’ in this regard – one that would have been comparable to the image of “Chinese mothers” many of my participants proffered.

I assumed this outlier status would allow me to develop into motherhood in a way that suited both my own and my children’s interests the best, independent of the dictates of any hegemonic norm. I, in full consciousness of my autonomy, nurtured an affective and intimate relationship with my children heavily attending to their psychological selves. Eventually, I chose a career that allows for the flexibility of arranging my time around their often sudden needs – be they institutional, health-related, or emotional. I have been trying to respect my children’s selves and provide the best environment for their natural development, balancing with respecting my own self – and often finding myself in the middle of irresolvable contradictions. And yet, here I found myself realizing that my intimate experience of motherhood, the independence of which I took for granted, is not that independent after all, but the articulation of child-centeredness, a practically universal *structure of feeling*. Thus, counterintuitively, my participants’ ‘self-othering’ as “Chinese mothers” turned out to be the origin of the universalizing perspective I chose to adopt.

Hegemonic *structure of feeling* notwithstanding, their parenting choices that led up to our getting to know each other (by moving halfway across the globe) are inarguably more radical and resource-intensive than any decision I ever made. They left their complete lives, careers, homes, parents, and in many instances, their husbands, to provide a happier childhood for their

children, in the hope of being conducive to a more fulfilling adulthood. The other major difference between our parenthood considers generational change. As one's parenting, especially in less conscious moments, inevitably carries on the received patterns, it is a fundamentally *intergenerational* experience. Being first-generation middle-class parents, my participants' excessive focus on child-rearing is where their transforming socioeconomic situation is reflected. Unlike my participants, I grew up in a relatively slowly evolving social environment free from any sharp socio-economic or political rupture, and the way I parent and think of my children does not differ significantly from the way my parents raised me. Trends have become more pronounced, but they were present in my upbringing – there has been no *intragenerational* change affecting the foundational social institution of the family. My participants on the other hand have grown up in a radically transforming socioeconomic environment and received a fundamentally different parenting from what they wish to give their children, presenting a radical departure from their own experience of growing up. The stance they attempt to take by treating their children as equals who have a say in the questions of their lives is a lot less authoritarian than their parents' rigidly hierarchical approach to them. They endorse an explicit goal of raising autonomous, whole-rounded personalities, letting their children realize their (individually defined) potential. Thus, for them, the contrast between conscious and relatively unconscious moments often stands in a more radical conflict with each other than for me.

Over time, I began not to take these “offenses” personally, and I am honored - and also quite surprised - by the sense of respect I enjoy from some of these mothers. Taking feelings of modesty aside, unpacking the source of this respect casts light on the particular parental aspirations that form the center of my analysis. I started unraveling the components behind this unanticipated recognition as a combination of elements in my biography – none of which I

previously thought of as having identity-making capacity – such as my Jewish ancestry, my PhD status at an American private university, my history of studying abroad in Shanghai and subsequent (relative) fluency in Chinese, which together seemed to make up for a cosmopolitan ideal in most of my research participants’ view, marking me as someone who “has culture”. The cosmopolitan capital I appeared to embody in their view and my home full of books endowed me with a dignified air of middle-class intellectuality in the view of the Chinese parents, which they never fail to praise upon entering my home. They were also quick to draw connections with the intelligence they attribute to my children and their rearing – which they have no means to ascertain, given their lack of common language. Nevertheless, I am frequently asked for advice on issues related to parenting and education, putting me in the position of a “native” child-rearing expert – which is quite unusual for me, considering that for reasons previously explained I am hardly perceived as a valuable source for advice on such matters among my Hungarian peer-mothers. I was frequently asked to solicit opinions on the kids’ school environment, school selection, or the choice of extracurricular activities. In these situations, my embeddedness as a “native” mother in the education system, together with my social capital cast me as a reliable source of local parenting know-how.

It was in this context, that I was asked to teach Hungarian for some of the new coming children. Although I had no experience in teaching my mother tongue as a foreign language, nor in teaching such young students in any other subject, and I consequently had serious doubts about the quality of my Hungarian classes, my name quickly spread as a go-to home tutor among Chinese mothers, and my phone started constantly buzzing with new requests every day. After taking on four students, I had to realize that Hungarian as a second language is a profession I had not yet mastered and turned down all subsequent invitations, but, to my greatest surprise, my reputation has not seemed to fade for a while. This position nevertheless afforded me a

glimpse into the culture of home tutoring embraced by many middle-class Chinese mothers, some of whom appeared to engage in “teacher collecting” as a hobby.

I also found myself amid an even more unexpected and rather uncomfortable embrace, being cast as a role model for some of my students.<sup>54</sup> Initially, I found this position uncomfortable and baffling. However, over time as I got over the aversion of being cast in this ambiguous role, I realized that assessed with careful reflexivity, deconstructing the aspects of my biography that have a particular appeal to these parents helps to elucidate the central question of aspirations. Assessing my reflection in this particular relief served as an inversion of the old anthropological craft of getting to know the ‘us’ in the mirror of the ‘other.’ Instead of learning something about myself from this idealized version of myself, I learned about what my participants aspire for their children. I came to understand that this idealized image of me was most importantly constituted by two aspects, closely resonating with the popular reappropriation of the *suzhi* state discourse. One aspect is a matter of “nature,” that is of mere luck (i.e., being born into a “good” family, and being smart), while the other is a matter of personal achievement (i.e., hard work). Setting me as an example aimed to showcase to their children that although I was fortunate by nature, considering my circumstances – just as they are – I did not waste my potential, and so should they work hard to realize theirs.

## 4.5 Research questions

First and foremost, the *wertrational* mobility that stands at the center of this dissertation offers a lens to the characteristically late modern human experience of the uneasy intermingling between the public and the private and their corresponding structures of gendered rationalities.

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<sup>54</sup> About the role of exemplars in Chinese pedagogy Xu writes: „In Chinese culture, it is a deeply ingrained educational practice to use models and exemplars to cultivate personhood and discipline people, and this principle is still alive in today’s educational settings” (Xu 2017, 24; see also Kuan 2015).

In the preceding chapters, I established that reproduction is a central arena in which this experience plays out most pronouncedly, evinced by the dispersion of child-centeredness as a deeply ambiguous yet globally hegemonic *structure of feeling*. I contended that child-centeredness emerged as a dominant *aspiration* in contemporary Chinese society, and among segments of the newly *capable* middle class, it triggered a distinctly *wertrational* mobility. As I argued, the *wertrational* character of this mobility is manifest in a distinct orientation toward space (downscaling) and time (presentist orientation), which I interpreted as *temporal-geoarbitrage*.

In the empirical chapters that follow, I seek to explore how the strategy of *temporal-geoarbitrage* shapes ensuing migratory pathways by focusing on reproduction-related discourses and practices as they animate the global geography of emerging middle-class trajectories. I employ the “seemingly apolitical realm of child-rearing” (Meng 2018, 167) as an entry point for capturing the emerging political subjectivities that I think are inherent in this specific spatial-temporal orientation. To grasp the intersection of parenting, migration, and emerging political subjectivities, I will focus on the basic ethical question of the good life, by focusing on “the question how human beings desire to or should spend “their” time” (Rosa 2013, 31). Understanding Hungary as an “oasis of deceleration” (Rosa 2013, 158) opens room for interpreting this choice as one that aims to repossess the *temporal autonomy* over one’s life. Understanding their quest for creating new meanings for the good life through orientations to time (and place) stands at the heart of this inquiry (Robbins 2013).

In the following chapters, I seek to answer the following questions: What is considered to be “the good enough life” in theory, and how is it pursued in practice? How do parents imagine the ideal present for their children? Where are those imaginations grounded, what are the global

and (trans)local scales that frame and shape them? How do parents map out these ideals strategizing from the here-and-now onto the future? How does this translate into practice, and how does practice translate back to theory? How do children themselves repossess and rearticulate ideas of their own future (Thorne 1987)? To what extent and in what realms do parents leave room for children's autonomy? How are these practices and ideals put into practice in reconciliation with the obstacles encountered in the Hungarian reality? What is the larger political-economic implication of this pursuit of the good enough life if we zoom out to the intersection of migration, parenting, and political subjectivities?

## 4.6 Practicalities

As Amit claims, “it is the circumstance which defines the method rather than the method defining the circumstance” (2000, 11). Having described the circumstances in which the research took place in detail in the previous sections, most of the methods that followed from them have been already hinted at. All participants gave informed consent to being included in the study, and all identities were anonymized. Consequently, all names that appear throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms.<sup>55</sup> Below I complete this picture by providing a more systematic overview of the research methods I adopted, divided into three categories: 1) participant observation, 2) interviews, and 3) online ethnography.

### 4.6.1 Participant observation - natural immersion

Following Weiss, I find the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork the most fruitful way to gain a full understanding of the proposed questions as it is the methodology best suited for studying the mutually constitutive dynamics between theory and practice. By eliciting “the

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<sup>55</sup> The only exception to this rule is Yu *Laoshi*, whose identity as the WeChat chatgroup's administrator is impossible to anonymize. I chose all pseudonyms to reflect the real name of participants in terms of their preferred cultural identity being Chinese, English-international or Hungarian.

common ways in which things are defined and described, and triangulat[ing] them with interview data and with observation of people as they act over time and in specific settings” within the institution of the immigrant family, this methodology “almost always brings to the fore a host of tensions between the official and ideological logic of institutions, what people do in their framework, and the outcomes of their actions” (Weiss 2019, 18). Instead of focusing on individuals (either on the parent or the child) as units for analysis, my study proposes to focus on entire families and pay particular attention to the relations within and among them as well as to their paths of incorporation (Levitt and Schiller 2006). Relying on a processual approach to anthropology as proposed by Sherry Ortner (2006) provides the main theoretical point of departure for micro-level analysis, whose combination of Bourdieusian practice theory with theories of performativity (Butler 1993) and narrativity offers a fruitful apparatus for capturing micro-level processes. I have been recording my observations, insights, and thoughts on all the activities detailed below in a classical field notebook. I did not carry the notebook with me so that its presence did not “spoil” the natural unfolding of encounters (to reinstate, all these friends and participants were aware that I had been conducting research) and recorded the most meaningful observations only upon returning home.

#### ***4.6.1.1 Living life (2017-2024)***

An important part of the research was conducted by living my non-professional, personal life, spending time in the most ordinary parenting situations: attending parents’ meetings, waiting for the kids together, taking them out to the playground after school, organizing play dates, hikes, inviting families over and getting invited to their homes. While in these situations I participated primarily as a parent, I also made sure that my parent peers are aware that I am simultaneously a researcher whose research interest lies in parenting. These non-orchestrated encounters provided me with rich ethnographic data about “the practices through which cultural models are embodied involve values, emotions and motives,” opening the door “to

lived experiences which incorporate but transcend language” (Amit 2000, 12). Taking advantage of anthropology’s unique capacity to identify and explore “forms of social and cultural activity that tend to be overlooked or taken for granted within contemporary Western societies” (Dyck 2000, 39), I obtained this data to take note of the diverse and often contradictory rationales behind raising happy, competitive, and autonomous children, and the subsequent perplexity in practices. The minuscule conflicts necessarily unfolding between parents and children over what to do, where, and when, offered a great insight into observing the everyday workings and reworkings of parental authority and children’s autonomy.

#### ***4.6.1.2 Home tutoring kids (2017-2019)***

After fostering closer relationships with some of the mothers I got to know, I was asked to teach their children Hungarian, which turned my ‘home’ into a ‘field.’ Altogether, I have been teaching four girls for about two years, shortly after their arrival to Hungary. The girls at the time we got to know each other were aged between 9- and 12 years. These language classes provided me with an official frame to bond with the girls, to learn about their experiences in school and their relationship with their parents. Most of the classes were in my home, which all of them seemed to enjoy and explored with great enthusiasm. Most importantly, these classes also provided an opportunity not only to observe but to play along with the kids’ strategies. Experimenting with boundaries of what we can get away under the heading of “teaching” gave me interesting insights into how the ideological matters of ‘competitive childhood happiness’ translate into practice, as well as with a tangibly explicit idea about parental expectations.

Some of the mothers came by for the time of the class, rested on the sofa, and seized the time after class and before leaving – as long their daughter played with my children’s toys – to discuss their strategies and plans with me and ask for my advice. Asking for such consultations



gave me an insight into their dilemmas and their concerns in decision-making. Since children were present, they could also reflect upon and intervene in these negotiations made above their heads.

#### ***4.6.1.3 Integration assistance (2017-2024): education, housing, and health***

Since 2017, I have been actively participating in the integration process of four of my friends (three mothers and a father), helping them cope with the education and healthcare systems, bureaucracies, and the like. My participation in these issues also provides me with the position of a reliable and trustworthy friend, enhancing the intimacy of these relationships as well as making the relationship more reciprocal than one-way observation.

Concerning education, I was asked to accompany Chinese parents to interpret at parent-teacher meetings and one-on-one meetings with teachers, to help in the process of school transfers after a problem identified through those meetings appeared to be irremediable and to assist in the process of application for central high school examination. These situations provided me with valuable insights into educational choices, and consequently into the expectations and aspirations these parents foster regarding their child's education, while I was also actively involved in decision-making processes. I could closely observe as these parents, who hoped to secure a relaxed and caring educational environment for their children gradually faced the reality of an education system that was unprepared to deal with migrant pupils (Feischmidt and Nyíri 2006) while also not delivering anywhere near the amount of learning they would get in China. As a result, the anxiety over losing out on the educational competition that the parents sought to leave behind inevitably began resurfacing. These encounters also introduced me to the teachers' attitude to and coping strategies with migrant children, and the evolution of (re-)stereotyping Chinese students as affluent and ambitious.

These friends also shared with me the details of their home-making and other real-estate operations. When buying their own homes, they liked to have me around – even when an officially designated interpreter was present – just to share with me the excitement and ask for my “native” insights about the apartment in question in the wider context of the real estate market. I accompanied them to apartment viewings, learning about the aspects they prioritized in their decision. Interestingly, these aspects also tended to revolve around their children’s needs: for example, the proximity of schools and potential high schools that are accessible via child-proof routes that would foster the child’s independence in comings and goings, and whether there is a private room for the child or each child – even when a private room for the parent(s) was not a precondition.

This was followed by the renovation of these homes, tailoring them to familial and personal needs. Over time, some new aspects emerged, casting a different light on the already inhabited home: men were drinking on the street, or too many Roma people were living nearby. These discontents revealed that at the stake of securing the right home was securing the right *suzhi*, in this context understood as the right environment, that forestalls the eyesight of supposedly bad influences. These considerations often triggered the cycle again, starting over with apartment viewings, and renovation.<sup>56</sup> Being involved in the intimate process of homemaking yielded me a view of the profoundly spatial dimension of my friends' everyday lives and the ways in which this spatial dimension was conducive to their social positioning within their new environment.

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<sup>56</sup> Though never directly referenced, this always invoked a famous four character idiom, *mengmu sanqian* 孟母三遷, that translates to Mencius' Mother Moves Three Times. The crux of the parable is that providing the right environment is just as important to a child's upbringing as the upbringing itself (see also S. Huang and Yeoh 2005).

In the highly dysfunctional field of health care, my help was seen as indispensable in moments of utmost vulnerability. These moments exposed the most precarious dimension of some of the mothers' lives: raising their children alone while their husbands stayed in China to make money, they felt extremely exposed when going through physical distress. In these moments, they experienced their loneliness in its most visceral sense, feeling that their social network was not strong or intimate enough to have anybody who could stand in for them in temporarily taking responsibility for their children. Eventually, these situations got resolved within their circle of closest friends further enhancing the tightness of these bonds, but failure to provide help also potentially led to the significant demise of friendships that were hitherto considered close.

#### ***4.6.1.4 Intercultural mediation at the 2<sup>nd</sup> district Child Protection Services (2021-2022)***

Apart from these organically developing relations and situations, in which both participation and observation came quite naturally, I also got involved in more extraordinary life events through volunteering at the child protection services as an intercultural mediator for Chinese families.<sup>57</sup> I have been working with two families, both residing in the affluent and leafy neighborhood of the second district. My help was required to mitigate the “linguistic and cultural barriers” between the social worker and the parents who were accused of child abuse and/or neglect. Given the generally high social status of the district's inhabitants, the parenting norms embraced by the majority largely converged with the middle-class parenting ethos cultivated by state child protection services (see Szőke and Kovai 2022), and consequently, relative to more underclass neighborhoods there were only a few cases of this sort.

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<sup>57</sup> The services contacted me because I am a registered volunteer in an immigrant helping NGO, Menedék Association to assist in issues relating Chinese speaking clients. I registered around 2007, and since then, they hardly contacted me at all: Chinese immigrants tended not to rely on their help, but got their issues solved on their own.

As I familiarized myself with the cases, it became rather evident that the racial difference of these parents invited more scrutiny from all those involved (the teachers and Hungarian parents who reported the problem to the state services, the social workers working on the cases, and the police officers who investigated the accusations) than other, white middle class “clients” would have been subjected to – for whom these events would never have led to such serious charges. However, these cases not only offered me an insight into the classed and racialized workings of the child protection services but also provided an unusual parental perspective on an extreme end of parenting ambiguities. In these cases, the casual pursuit of the good enough life failed to meet the expectations of appropriate child rearing proffered by the Hungarian state. Parents who fell under state scrutiny in this particular form were required to engage with their views – and practices – of parental authority and childhood autonomy on a deeper level than ordinary life would demand them to do. I devote Chapter 7: Siobhan and the Hui family to exploring one of these families’ life.

#### **4.6.2 Orchestrated research: Interviews and participants’ profile**

I complemented the ethnographic information I gained on *practice* via the encounters listed in the previous sections by conducting extensive semi-structured interviews. As Caroline Brettell argues, the genre of ‘migration stories,’ by “elucidating how the process looks from the inside out and from the ground up” offers anthropologists a unique perspective to “get beneath the abstractions of migration theory” (Brettell 2003, 26–27). Through the interviews, my aim was not only to assess the ‘migration stories’ of families but also the *discursive theoretical* dimension of the parenting ideologies and the aspirations for a better life these parents endorse. This discursive theoretical material could then be triangulated with the ethnographic material on practice, and thereby realize anthropology’s potential for immanent critique (cf. Weiss 2019).

Altogether, I interviewed 21 people, four of whom belong to those more intimate relationships where I did establish a relationship of mutual trust and recognition, while the rest were conducted in a more detached way, with varying connections prior to or post the interview. All interviews were conducted by me in Mandarin Chinese and lasted from 45 minutes to 2,5 hours. If the interviewee agreed, the conversation was recorded, and then manually transcribed and translated to English. The interviews were semi-structured and aimed to elicit the demographic background and social location of the participant in the Chinese society, his or her ‘migration story,’ the decision-making process, the hopes and expectations toward living in Hungary, the experiences of living here, and the plans for the future. Although in this sense the ‘structured’ part of the interviews belonged to the classical genre of ‘migration stories,’ participants tended to deviate toward a perspective of parenting and narrate the entire process from the perspective of their children – for which the ‘semi’ part provided room. Instead of taking command in defining the narrative structure of the interview, I let my interviewees define it according to their personal experiences and interests, and in most cases elicited questions only for further clarification. This technique aimed to encourage more personal accounts and to avoid preconditioning the interviewee to confirm my hypotheses.

#### **4.6.2.1 Profile of interviewees**

I recruited interview participants by a combination of “convenience” (9) and snowball sampling (4), and I also posted a call in a WeChat chatgroup to which a few mothers volunteered (3). In terms of gender, 13 were mothers, and five were fathers, while there were two young men and one young woman who did not have a family by the time the interview took place.<sup>58</sup> The average age of (adult) respondents was 42 years old. All of them chose to

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<sup>58</sup> I included them among my interviewees because they received the residency bond from their parents to leave China and pursue a good enough life, and therefore fit my general interest in *wertrational* migration,

move to Hungary because the Hungarian residency bond immigration scheme was the fastest, simplest, and most affordable way they found out of China. They all arrived from “first-tier” (*yixian chengshi* 一线城市) (Beijing, Shanghai) or “new first-tier” cities (*xin yixian chengshi* 新一线城市) (Kunming, Nanjing, Wuhan) while there were only one couple from the second-tier city of Lanzhou.<sup>59</sup> The emphasis on city tiers brings the remarkable prevalence of spatial hierarchy in Chinese culture to the fore, casting light on the emphatic *downscaling* the move to Budapest entails.

In terms of family arrangements, nine (out of the 13) mothers raised their child(ren) alone (among whom one was divorced) while their spouses maintained their jobs in China to put bread on the table which they only occasionally visited (let alone the unfolding of the Covid pandemic). Among the five fathers, two raised their children by themselves, both married, but their wives returned to China because of health issues. Finally, there were eight families where both parents resided in Budapest habitually. Of the 19 families, four had two children, while the rest (15) only had one child. Grandparents temporarily appeared in the homes of four participants in all kinds of living arrangements (one single mother, one married single mother, and two non-split families), but generally tended to dislike the Hungarian environment which, on the one hand, they found “boring,” and on the other, impossible to navigate as elderly Chinese people with no command of any language other than their mother tongue. There were participants, who mentioned that their parents disapproved of their decision to move to

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complementing it with a young adult-child perspective. While two of them were young adults living on their own, one was still in high school living with his family, whom I did not get a chance to interview.

<sup>59</sup> The city-tier system is semi-official categorization of Chinese cities that ranks them in a hierarchical order based on their “socio-economic development level,” and “future potential.” This classification system enjoys enormous popularity in international media for its implications for commerce, transportation, tourism, or education. Although „there are no such official lists in the country, as the Chinese government does not publish or recognize any official definition or a list of cities included in the tier system,” the China Integrated City Index which forms the core of the classification system is jointly produced by state and private research institutes, and is widely popularized by Chinese state media, endowing cities with titles such as “the backbone of China’s economic growth.”

Hungary and expressed that their move represented a more symbolic break with them, while others expressed no hard feelings, but rather a sense of guilt for departing from their elderly parents to whom they would return whenever their health condition required to do so.

In terms of incomes, as noted previously, in transnationally split households the spouse who habitually remained in China provided the means of existence for those who settled in Hungary. After a few years, some parents ventured into starting companies: one mother opened a small retail shop, another a buffet, and a father operated a bubble tea shop. These enterprises were not a matter of dire necessity and tended to be short-lived. Among the 21 interviewees, there were only seven people who relied on an active income in Hungary. One was operating a company that catered to China's soft power ambitions by facilitating the import of Chinese culture, two worked for Huawei, one practiced as a doctor of Chinese medicine, and three found employment in businesses located in Budapest Chinatown, joining in the wholesale enterprise operated by "new migrants." Of the seven people who had an active income in Hungary only one was living in a transnationally split household, a father. The rest of those who obtained active incomes in Hungary were living in non-split arrangements. There was only one family, possibly the most well-off in this small sample, that could afford the luxury of exclusively relying on passive incomes and had no active income either in China or in Hungary. However, over time passive incomes tended to be a growing financial resource for many participants as they started to "play" on the Hungarian real estate market. By the time I finished research in 2023, I knew of four participants who purchased at least one apartment to rent it out, and who subsequently achieved "FIRE" (Financial Independence Retire Early).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> "FIRE" is an increasingly global movement with legs from Japan to India, bearing close resemblance to the *tang ping* movement (see Section 1.3.5.4), that rejects the social expectation that the central focus of one's life is ought to be work.

Concluding the profile of my interviewees, the average respondent was a middle-aged, university-graduate mother, who left behind a white-collar career, a spouse, elderly parents, and a social network to focus all her resources on the well-rounded and wholesome development of her child.

#### 4.6.3 Digital ethnography in the *Home Educational Sharing Salon* WeChat chat group (2021-2023)

Acknowledging that the online sphere, more precisely WeChat<sup>61</sup>, is an equally important dimension of the lives I wish to understand, I conducted digital ethnographical fieldwork in a chat group called *Home Educational Sharing Salon* (*jiating jiaoyu fenxiang shalong* 家庭教育分享沙龙). The chat group is a vivid forum for discussing all sorts of children and parenthood/motherhood-related topics among Chinese parents who arrived to raise their children in Budapest via the “golden visa” immigration scheme. As the group counts 362 members who exchange over a hundred, but not infrequently close to a thousand messages a day, this online space provided me with a relatively large sample of views and narratives – a necessary complementation of and correction for my decidedly narrow qualitative sample constituted by the interviews and participant observation. The extensive array of subjects discussed in the group – ranging from what to buy and where, the most dramatic events in the latest episode of a top hit Chinese family soap opera, or traveling, all the way to Hungarian and

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<sup>61</sup> The globally available international version of *Weixin*, WeChat was launched in 2012, and with its users numbering over 1.3 billion by 2023, it is indisputably the most favored social media app of Chinese people both inside and outside of China. It is described as a “super app,” a “super-sticky all-in-one app” and a “mega platform” (Y. Chen, Mao, and Qiu 2018), or as the “digital Swiss Army knife for modern life” (K.-F. Lee 2018), famed for its pervasive penetration into everyday life and its expansive market power. Its ubiquitous uptake by Chinese migrants also turned it into the key arena of Chinese language diasporic media, and subsequently the central site of anthropological interest in the cultural politics of Chinese transnationalism in the past decade (Sun and Sinclair 2016). WeChat profoundly altered the everyday personal messaging, group communication and community business activities of Mandarin-speaking migrants across the globe, having enormous impact on the way community business activities are conducted, news are distributed, or information is accessed or shared. Nothing illustrates its importance more, than the Trump administration’s attempt to ban it among US users, and the vehement and rarely experienced backlash from the diaspora (Sun and Yu 2022).



international school rankings and exams, Math Olympiads, and Hungarian customs and traditions – offered a glimpse into the concerns, interests, and a curated version of everyday lives of group members.

One topic, the topic of politics, however, was strictly forbidden by the group admin, Yu “*Laoshi*” (“Teacher” Yu), who closely monitored all discussions taking place in her group. Self-censorship was perceived to be crucial to her because her revenues depended on the maintenance of the group – she did not want to have it suspended by Chinese authorities. I learned this the hard way, when my research collaborator, who offered English classes to group members was barred from the group because Yu *Laoshi* perceived his subject choices for the English classes (the installation of surveillance cameras in Chinese nursery schools and Hungarian elections) repeatedly failed her expectations of absolute apoliticality. Since I was the one who invited him to the group, my membership was also suspended. After many rounds of trying to convince Yu *Laoshi* emphatically claiming that I had no intention of “politicizing” the group discussion, my membership was restored – but not my research collaborator’s.

I introduced myself to Yu *Laoshi* as a PhD researcher on the topic of Chinese motherhood in Hungary and offered free Hungarian classes for parents in exchange for my presence in the group. This fitted well with the business model adopted by Yu *Laoshi*: besides chit-chatting about a diverse assortment of topics, the platform also provides educational services. While some are free of charge such as an English reading group for kids, or the so-called “experience sharing lectures” by fellow moms, there is an increasing presence of for-charge products: conversational English for adults, and all kinds of IB preparation classes<sup>62</sup> for students.

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<sup>62</sup> Yu Laoshi’s son is enrolled in the prestigious and pricy private American International School of Budapest, that offers an IB (International Baccalaureate) education, foregrounding a transnational educational trajectory in the US or the UK.

Although channeling the group's direction toward English tertiary education was Yu *Laoshi's* well-considered interest as she aimed to capitalize on the commodification of her know-how of navigating this bumpy road, the majority of parents seem to be left uninterested. Although there were a few parents, whose child was enrolled in English private institutions, the vast majority attended public schools, and all seemed adamant in their conviction to resist educational anxiety – and opted to fervently discuss how hot Hungarian daddies are, or the latest surprises in their favorite soap operas.

The free-of-charge events, however, enjoyed incessant popularity. For the kids' English reading group, though *zweckrational* in both content and form (as they picked readings from the recommended International Baccalaureate reading list and tended to refrain from any conversation that went beyond the crude translation of texts), given its weekly regularity, it still served to maintain a sense of community among both mothers and students. The “experience sharing lectures” presented by group members offered mothers a semi-public opportunity to show off their motherly achievements and harvest their peers' admiration. Thus, in this sense, although leaving the gendered configuration in child-rearing is untouched, the platform allows mothers to make their work visible and acquire—if not money, at least—prestige for it. As I explored elsewhere (F. Beck 2022), looked at through the prism of parenthood, WeChat enables Chinese migrants to negotiate their shifting positions as transnational subjects *vis-à-vis* the motherland, expressing a form of political subjectivity. By offering a platform for middle-class parents to challenge prevailing narratives of good parenthood it also opens room for expressing their transnational political subjectivity – in a decidedly apolitical form.

## 4.7 Narrative structure

In terms of finding a satisfactory narrative structure for the material I collected on the mundane, yet deeply ethical pursuit of the good enough life with all its incongruities in a way that brings people to life on their own terms, I adopt the textual strategy of "ethnographies of the particular," proposed by Abu-Lughod (1996, 149). As she argues, centering the narrative around "particular individuals in time and place" could be employed as a powerful tool for subverting the process of "othering," inherent in anthropological writing that tends to center around 'culture' instead. As Abu-Lughod demonstrates, centering the narrative around 'culture' is a function of generalization, the "characteristic mode of operation and style of writing of the social sciences," that inherently invokes the problematic connotations of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness. She suggests that adopting a writing strategy instead that strives to "reconstruct people's arguments about, justifications for, and interpretations of what they and others are doing" in explaining how social life proceeds would "show that although the terms of their discourses may be set (and, as in any society, include several sometimes contradictory and often historically changing discourses), within these limits, people contest interpretations of what is happening, strategize, feel pain, and live their lives" (Abu-Lughod 1996, 153–54).

In seeking textual means of representing the continued aspiration for a happy, free, and autonomous childhood as it comes to coexist ambivalently with renewed attention on a seemingly unescapable competition, I decided to follow in the exemplary footsteps of Susan Mann (2007) and Harriet Evans (2020) and devote each of the following chapters to the story of a particular family. While Mann's work gives an intimate account of women's lives in elite households throughout late imperial China, Evans focuses her attention on contemporary Beijing's most disadvantaged and marginalized people, living under the long shadow cast by

China's rise. By zooming in on middle-class family lives on the run, my contribution fits neatly between these wonderful works – even if attempting to fill such big shoes is a risky endeavor.

Thus, the following three chapters will be devoted to three families, selected from my longitudinal case studies for their exemplary character in their distinct pursuits of the good enough life. Each family's story highlights both particularities and commonalities in their quest for a good enough life and expresses a distinct modality of ethics exemplified by the parents in question. I introduce each of these families by using a combination of descriptive narrative and direct quotations from interview transcripts and field notes, while only using the rest of the collected material (interviews with other parents, field notes, and digital ethnography) to juxtapose or further enhance the arguments I would like to make through the ethnographic vignettes.

The first story (Chapter 5: Yunxia and the Zhang family), telling the journey of the Zhang family, is selected for its representativity and stands for an exemplar of an ordinary case. The Zhang family is led by a single (although practically married) mom, Yunxia, who raises her two children alone, bravely facing challenges and showing vulnerabilities. Yunxia is an exemplar of the strange amalgamation of a postmodern matriarch and a housewife. Second (Chapter 6: Jake and the Chen family, the Chen family offers an exciting example of a household, where conventional gender distribution is reversed: while Mr. Chen, Jake, refashioned himself as a “háziapa” (housefather) – as he likes to refer to himself in Hungarian – as the primary caretaker to their only son, Mrs. Chen is a fiercely ambitious career woman. Both Mr. and Mrs. Chen were born as only children, and therefore their unusual lifestyle also offers a glimpse into the exponentially accelerating postmaterialism as a function of the heavy

concentration of resources spanning two generations.<sup>63</sup> Finally, in Chapter 7: Siobhan and the Hui family we get to know the exceptional story of the Hui family, a family of four living a secluded life in a leafy neighborhood of the Buda hills. Mr. and Mrs. Hui realized FIRE (see Footnote 60) and practically conduct a retired lifestyle, devoting all their time, resources, and energy to accomplish a harmonious and quiet family life for their two daughters. What makes their case exceptional is that the tediously familiar narrative this time is introduced through the family's confrontation with state authorities over appropriate child-rearing, providing a sharply different context for their pursuit of good enough life.

## 4.8 Limitations

It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive overview of Chinese migration to Hungary. Due to my theoretical focus on the shift from production to reproduction, I focused on just two groups of Chinese migrants in Hungary while ignoring a variety of others. I am aware that by doing so, what I portray can be read as a unilinear progression from production or *Zweckrationalität* to reproduction or *Wertrationalität*. However, it is important to note that this is not the case. Older forms of production do not simply cease to exist, and with China's changing position within the system of global capitalism, the emergence of new forms of production only makes the spectrum of rationalities more diversified, resulting in different flows of migration.<sup>64</sup> Although there is scholarly interest in the political economy of Chinese state-owned capital investment in Central and Eastern Europe's illiberal democracies (e.g. Rogers 2022), the human dimension and the complexity of rationalities driving these flows are completely unknown. These developments bring both skilled labor and professional-

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<sup>63</sup> This is what is described as the 4-2-1 „inverted family” model. See Section 3.4.4.4.

<sup>64</sup> Two important examples for Europe and Hungary in particular are infrastructural investments under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative (e.g. the Budapest Belgrade railway); and the relocation of specific aspects of automotive manufacturing (e.g. the construction of lithium-ion battery factories in Germany and Hungary).

managerial labor with them, whose aspirations and capabilities, and corresponding distinction in better life narratives would be important to explore.

The admittedly “positioned and partial truths” (Abu-Lughod 1996, 142) this dissertation aims to reveal cast light on the dialectical relationship in which the parent and the child form and guide each other through their new environment. While undeniably and purposefully limited, my aim is not to present a coherent and homogenous ‘culture’ of contemporary middle-class Chinese parenting abroad, but to the contrary, to highlight the contradictions, conflicts of interest, doubts, and arguments, and changing motivations and circumstances inherent in people's beliefs and actions (Abu-Lughod 1996, 153). The migratory field in this context operates as a Babylon of dominant discourses and ideologies, providing an opportunity for parents to realize the arbitrary nature of hegemonic parenting ideologies, and simultaneously open an empowering space of new possibilities and the opportunity to refashion their own understanding, guided by *wertrational* motivations.

In this sense, parents in this study engage in what Ong calls tactical or strategic transnationalism (1997) but on a decidedly *wertrational* basis: through migration they seek to elude the imposed subjectivities like that of the ‘sacrificing mother’ and the ‘quality child.’ By making place and finding home, they take advantage of the transnational social field as an opportunity for forming new and hopefully more harmonious and self-possessed subjectivities. Thus, the longitudinal ethnographic research detailed above and explored below provides a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between structure, ideology, and agency, emerging in mutually constitutive relationships as it assumes new potential in the migratory environment.

## CHAPTER 5: YUNXIA AND THE ZHANG FAMILY

I got to know Yunxia on the morning of a sunlit, early autumn day in 2017, upon returning from an extensive summer holiday to kindergarten and my regular schedule. These returns were always deeply ambiguous to me, after spending long months with two little children in an inherently haphazard manner, I always felt both melancholic and relieved to go back to “normal.” As I tried to make sense of these mixed feelings and contemplated the lost paradise of open skies and unstructured time in the gray and dull corridor of the kindergarten amidst the familiar noises of laughter, crying, and quarrels, I noticed Yunxia — the first Chinese parent I ever saw in this building. She was beaming all over her bleak surroundings while her son, Ryan, a reckless little boy, was fully absorbed in finding excuses to avoid entering the classroom. Standing in the crowd of other parents who were seemingly losing their patience and grew increasingly frustrated by their children’s unwillingness to simply accept the cruelty of reintegration as they were getting late from work, Yunxia, with a sunny smile spreading across her face seemed to be the least bothered by the unfolding scenario. Finally, however reluctantly, both my son, Miska, and Ryan entered the classroom, where their teacher and friends warmly welcomed them.

As we stood by the half-closed door waving our goodbyes, I engaged in a conversation with Yunxia in Mandarin. Unlike my usual experience, when the Chinese person I approached talking Chinese strictly concealed any sign of surprise and was usually slightly dubious of my intentions, Yunxia was conspicuously and pleasantly surprised, and immediately seized the opportunity to attempt to introduce herself to the teacher again, this time with my help. She shared that they just moved to Budapest from Beijing, and how blissful she felt for Ryan to be accepted in this class. As we made our way out, leaving the kindergarten building behind and entering the tree-lined avenue filled with light, she folded her arm into mine, chatting, as if we

had known each other for a long time. I got to know Yunxia to be a straightforward, vivacious, and fundamentally emotional personality, always up for a laugh, and characterized by a child-like enthusiasm and interest for all things nice in the world belying her over 50 years of age. She would never hesitate to make new friends, learn new things, and gather new experiences. Unlike most grown-ups I know, she does not shy away from displaying her feelings and impulses, like asking for the leash of my puppy with whom I first showed up at one of our meetings and holding it cheerfully as we strolled across the neighborhood. At the same time, she was just as eager to feel, express, and even embrace negative feelings such as exhaustion, distress, or sadness.

As she later explained the way in which she ended up in that kindergarten on the day when we first met also spoke to the importance of feelings in her decision-making process. As I learned, the Zhang family (Yunxia and her husband Dongheng, and her two younger children, Ryan and Eszti), first traveled to Budapest in 2016 under the aegis of an organized group tour, together with five families. During this trip, they got to know a father from Beijing, a resident of Budapest by this time, who introduced the residency bond immigration scheme (*guozhai xiangmu*) to them. As she was heading to the Chinese embassy that is located on the very same tree-lined avenue, Yunxia passed by the kindergarten where we first met each other, and saw how beautiful and spacious it was, surrounded by an expansive garden where ancient trees cast favorable shadows on the newly constructed playground below. And this view made her mind set: she wanted to have her youngest child, Ryan, playing in the sandbox under the clear sky in these very shadows. Looked at from the perspective of Beijing, where children are overstressed by the educational burden from an inconceivably young age and are exposed to air pollution so severe that they are rather held indoors to avoid the air outside, this view held the promise of health and happiness that immediately and fundamentally enchanted Yunxia.



However, as the story of Yunxia reveals, the allure of the sandbox and the associated meanings of freedom and happiness it stood for at times proved to be staggeringly difficult and challenging to actualize. The narrative account of the Zhang family's leap to the unknown and their gradually increasing ability to make sense of their new surroundings shows how stressful it is to commit to the ideal of a relaxed life in practice. Yunxia's path toward recognizing her children's autonomy and trying to make peace with it while also constantly revising received wisdom, also speaks to the inextricable entanglement of *Wertrationalität* and *Zweckrationalität*, pointing to their co-constitutive nature and the ways in which they are mutually implicated upon each other, countering the binary approach proffered by Weber.

## 5.1 Pressure reduction arbitrage

Yunxia and her husband, Dongheng, have been already entertaining the idea of leaving the polluted social and physical environment of Beijing behind, for which the *guozhai xiangmu* offered a great opportunity. They obtained permanent residency cards ("blue card" *lanka* 蓝卡) for the whole family right away but continued with their lives in Beijing for one more year. As the Beijinger father, who first introduced the program to them was not involved in the evolving migration industry, they had to go through the route of finding a local intermediary in Beijing that marketed the Hungarian state bond and found the process easy to handle. It was "extremely simple" (*tebie jiandan* 特别简单) when compared to roads more traveled such as the US or Canada, and "could be done in a single step" (*keyi yibu daowei* 可以一步到位). In terms of costs, including all additional expenses such as buying a home, it was cheaper than other emigration options while it also costed less than enrolling in an international school near Beijing.

Yunxia interpreted the costs of (inevitable) relocation as “pressure” (*yali* 压力) on her husband, Dongheng, and said Hungary was the best choice because it would “put less [financial] pressure” on Dongheng. As Yunxia quit her state service job in accounting when giving birth to Ryan, and has been a “full-time mother” (*quanzhi* 全职妈妈) for the past five years, it was clear from the outset, that at least in the beginning, it would be Dongheng who provides the financial background for relocation, and the family would rely on the (in the Beijing context moderate) salary he earns as an employee of a private company doing commerce. When compared with more “developed countries” (*fada guojia* 发达国家), living costs in Hungary in 2017 – which began rising dramatically as the cumulative effect of the economic recession brought about by the Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine short after – seemed to fit this budget perfectly.

“Low pressure” emerged as a central quality of Hungary in relation to all family members: the educational pressure on children, the financial pressure on Dongheng, and the social pressure on Yunxia herself. So, like many other families, the Zhang family adopted the strategy of *geoarbitrage* by transnationally splitting the family with displacing the division between production and reproduction on a global scale. Although *geoarbitrage* is adopted to pursue ultimately *wertrational* ends—to provide a relaxed and happy life to the family—the decision to transnationally split the family and disrupt its unity creates an inherent tension.

A macro-structural explanation based on the suggested framework (see Section 3.2) would read the relocation of the sacrificing mother and the quality child(ren) to a considerably cheaper country as corresponding to an extreme version of housewifization (Mies 1986) which provides a solution for the “care gap” (Fraser 2016). Instead of outsourcing care to cheaper labor at home

by hiring an “auntie” (*ayi* 阿姨), in this scenario, both the subject and object of care are outsourced altogether to a cheaper living environment, thereby significantly lowering the costs of raising quality children. While the mother and the children become completely dependent on the remittances arriving from the father who continues to earn in China, the physical distance within the spatially split family opens new room for maneuvering this dependency.

In contrast to the chunk of literature on transnationally split families that focuses on “fathers in mid-air” who stay in China, rather than on the experiences of their families “parked in safe havens” elsewhere (Ong 1999, p. 120), selecting Yunxia’s as its focus, this chapter sets the agency and practices enacted by “parked” families center stage as they attempt to break free from the identities imposed by the truth regimes of Chinese state capitalism. As this chapter attempts to show, crude structural reductionism notwithstanding, individual mothers on the micro level attribute quite different meanings to their choice and their scope of agency. Instead of experiencing this as “being outsourced,” on the one hand, they reclaim reproductive activities *beyond* the realm of the market while on the other hand, they experience a growing sense of empowerment and agency in exercising power as the sole heads of the households.

## 5.2 “Why come to such a poor country?”

Unlike most parents I got to know, Yunxia never seriously considered other options besides Hungary, even though her oldest child from her first marriage, a daughter, was studying at a US university.<sup>65</sup> Although Yunxia also described her trajectory as “very accidental” (*ourande*

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<sup>65</sup> The fact that despite the one-child policy, Yunxia did have three children requires some explanation. Since the first two children (Mindy and Eszti) were born in two different marriages, it was only the birth of Ryan which was legally problematic. Unlike most parents with two children whom I got to know, the Zhang couple did not resort to the common practice of having their second child in Hongkong, but simply had Ryan in Beijing. They received a “ridiculously high” fine which they refused to pay, and consequently, Ryan did not have a *hukou* for the first few months into his life. Later on, relying on their social capital in the public service and most likely a bit of corruption, they managed to have Eszti on Dongheng’s *hukou*, and Yunxia could take Ryan on her own.

偶然的) and as a “coincidence” (很机缘巧合之下 *hen jiyuan qiaohe zhi xia*), her fondness of Hungary prior to awareness of the scheme sets Yunxia’s story apart from my other participants. The vast majority of people I interviewed said that they knew nothing of Hungary prior to obtaining permanent residence in it, making their choice distinctly accidental and arbitrary. These participants were first and foremost adamant about leaving China and were only attracted to Hungary because of the scheme itself, which offered a quick, simple, and relatively cheap way out. For these parents, the overwhelming attractiveness of the scheme posited a strong contingency, that needed to be turned into choice by way of hindsight legitimation. Given the country’s established categorization in the Chinese imaginary of global hierarchy (see Section 2.2.1.2) as a “poor, small language country” (*pinqiong xiao yuzhong guojia* 贫穷小语种国家) (Figure 12), this process required significant efforts, and not infrequently failed, resulting in “secondary migration” (*erci yimin* 二次移民) (Positive Energy [Pseudonym] 2018).



欧洲贫穷小语种国家的人因为穷而窝在家的生活

Figure 12. "People from poor small language countries in Europe don't leave their home because they are poor" Source: Positive Energy [pseudonym] (2018).

### 5.2.1 A neat country without immigrants

One of the widely used strategies for turning contingency into choice and legitimizing Hungary as a desirable destination was its comparison with other non-desirable destination countries, such as Spain, Portugal, Greece, and even France that were described as “messy” (*luan* 乱). The term *luan* in these contexts took up a strong racial connotation, and generally implicated the presence of refugees (*nanmin* 难民) and “black people” (*heiren* 黑人), in short, the “riffraff” (*luanqibazao de ren* 乱七八糟的人) in large numbers in these countries. This ambiguous position evinces the coalescence between state-controlled Chinese media that portrays Europe as failing to contain the wave of refugees who bring crime and disorder (Shi-Kupfer, Gong, and Lang 2016), with the popular discourse embraced by the American alt-right – and Viktor Orbán – that accuses liberals of betraying the interests of their countries and effectively destroy their historical values (C. Zhang 2019).

Orbán’s firm rejection of immigration, then, struck a counterintuitive chord with “golden visa migrants,” articulated the most explicitly by one of Yunxia’s acquaintances, Lieniang: “I like Orbán. Because he managed to keep out the riffraff (*luanqibazao de ren*). Because he knew that had he let bad people in, good people like us wouldn’t come” (see also Nyíri and Beck 2020; F. Beck and Nyíri 2021). In part, this stance is closely linked with perceptions of safety, and both Dongheng and Yunxia emphasized that Hungary was a *safer* (*anquan* 安全) country precisely because it had fewer African and Muslim immigrants. These sentiments were further ignited and validated after the terror attacks that took place in the neighboring countries. For example, in November 2020, after an Austrian-born ethnic Albanian man shot four people in Vienna, in the social media groups formed by Chinese *guozhai* immigrants there was a consensus that the lack of refugees in Hungary makes such an attack unlikely here.

### 5.2.2 Reservations

As noted, Yunxia fell in love with Budapest – more concretely with that particular kindergarten – first and decided to move only when learning about the scheme that made this dream relatively simple to attain in practice. However, unlike many others, she was much more hesitant to leave China behind. Though immersed in a social context where the pursuit of studying abroad was a hegemonic cultural model (Fong 2004; 2011), with friends and peer mothers in Beijing constantly on the lookout for study abroad options and opportunities, or already relocated vehemently sharing their experiences via WeChat chat groups or Moments (WeChat’s Instagram-like feature), Yunxia was initially very half-hearted. The main reason behind her hesitation was that her middle child, Eszti, was enrolled in a prestigious “key elementary school” in Beijing, where she was an “outstanding student” (*youxu xuesheng* 优秀学生). As she explained:

I was very hesitant to leave this behind, you know. I was not sure what was best for her. All I knew was that we were in this excellent school, which other people can’t even buy themselves into, and she was doing great, had no hardship to perform, and I didn’t even have to hire private tutors. But of course, this didn’t mean that it would go on like this forever... As kids get into later grades, the pressure grows, and who knows how long she could bear it.

Measuring the costs of leaving an objectively successful trajectory behind initially outweighed the perceived benefits of relocation, while the costs of staying were not fully evident. Eventually, after a year of rumination, she made up her mind: “The air was so polluted that we couldn’t even see, and the costs were so high.... Kindergarten, school, Eszti’s hobbies, fencing, painting, everything is extremely expensive.” Air pollution coupled with financial pressure led her to the conclusion that Beijing is not a place for raising children. And there she was, packing up Eszti (10), and Ryan (5), moving into an apartment in one of the sketchier neighborhoods

of Budapest's 7<sup>th</sup> district (which she chose based on its proximity to the dream kindergarten), starting off their new, “simple” (*pushi* 朴实) life with the promise of health and happiness.

### 5.2.3 *Suzhi* – a compelling argument

Her immediate environment, her parents, younger brother, and friends all agreed that coming to “such a poor country” was an ill-founded idea, and pointed out that they are already living the “Chinese dream” in Beijing: they have a stable income, their own apartment, and a place in a key school for their school-aged child. As she elaborated in our first official interview in 2017:

Before we left, many people asked me, why come here, to such a poor country? For example, my friend went to Ireland and told me how nice it is, but I didn't want to put so much pressure on my husband to make a living for us there. And me, I also wanted to be in a place where life is simpler, and the pressure is small. I don't know about the future, but I still think Hungary was a great decision for now. Because the buildings might be run down, and it can be poor compared to other countries, I still think the *suzhi* is here. It received Europe's influence for centuries, and this made an impact on it. The way I see it, it might look poor and broken, but the people's *suzhi* is very good. And even though it's such a small country, its music, its art are excellent, and recognized in the world.

As this account foregrounds, she interprets her migration story – alongside the economic argument of geoarbitrage aimed at pressure reduction – from a distinctly postmaterialist point of view, underpinned by a distinct, yet subtle temporal orientation toward the present. When she says, “I don't know about the future,” on the one hand means that she is not sure whether the kids will go to university in Hungary, while on the other also implies a dismissal of future concerns. The presentist orientation is further corroborated by claiming that “[Hungary] is a great decision *for now*,” suggesting a *wertrational* attitude that prioritizes inherent value – that is by nature presentist – over calculating future costs. Postmaterialism also comes to the fore in her emphasis on inner values (“the *suzhi* is here”) over superficial ones (“run down”, “poor”, “broken”), performing an interesting reappropriation of the *suzhi* discourse (see page 113).

Standing in sharp contrast with its state-sponsored version of prodigious over-achievement, she uses *suzhi* to refer to the inner qualities of the Hungarian historical, social, and cultural environment, which she finds ultimately more moral and elaborate.

As I later got to understand, by the Hungarian people's *suzhi*, she does not mean educational attainment or other forms of competitiveness, but something completely different: a moral quality of goodness, that finds expression in a willingness to help without any ulterior motive – a moral quality that she finds disturbingly missing in contemporary Chinese society. She recounts banal examples like when the bag in which she tried to carry the groceries home broke and everything fell on the ground, multiple people rushed to her help, and an old lady even gave an apple from her own shopping to Ryan. In contrast, she depicts Chinese society as an essentially lost cause to morality, where “money precedes humans” and everyone is driven by individualistic utilitarian motives (cf. Yunxiang Yan 2013) that are meticulously camouflaged behind an indecipherable charade: “People would never directly say what they want, but they are always after something – it's so complicated (*fuza* 复杂)” – she explains. The contrasting qualities of *pushi* (genuine, straightforward, and simple) and *fuza* (complicated) were often evoked to compare Hungary with both China and other, “more developed” destination countries.

#### **5.2.4 A simple life: trading development for quality**

The genuineness of Hungarian society also translates to a perception of racelessness and classlessness that many mothers voiced: unlike in Beijing, people in Hungary do not look down upon each other for their social status, and unlike in other European countries, in Hungary, people do not treat them differently because they are Chinese. This utopian imaginary of Hungary as a harmonious and equitable society – evoking the CPC's discourse of the



harmonious society – contributes to Yunxia’s experience of life in Budapest as “simpler” (*pushi*) and “less complicated” than in Beijing. As a Hungarian myself, holding a generally depressing view of my own society, I was thoroughly surprised by how widely shared this impression of Hungarians as uncalculatingly cordial, and inherently egalitarian is.

In many interviews, versions of this theme came up as interviewees compared Hungary to both China and other European destinations. Yunxia also liked to surround herself with mothers who held similar values. For example, her friend, Lieniang said, that she dismissed France as a potential destination because it was “too extravagant” and “everything was about money,” while others emphasized their experiences of being discriminated against when visiting Austria or Germany and got discouraged from contemplating re-migration to a more *fada guojia*. As one of Yunxia’s close friends, Nora expressed this feeling:

And that’s a big difference between the two countries [Hungary and China]. Because I think, if you are a worker here [in Hungary], it doesn’t matter that your job is dirty and tiring when you finish working, you can still have your hobbies, etc, and not live with the consciousness of being in the “lowest rung of society” (*shehui zui diceng de ren* 社会最底层的人). And I don’t want the kid to grow up with this idea, that because of his/her job, someone is less of a person than someone who is a lawyer for example.

The perception that menial work does not relegate one to the lower rungs of the social hierarchy adumbrates the view of Hungary as a classless society. As someone who is possibly more aware of the leaden signs of social crisis as an unquestionable indicator of Hungarian class stratification, as well as someone who is better equipped to unravel the classist and racist dimension of everyday discourses and practices, I found these assessments immensely interesting. However, these mothers were adamant in this imaginary and did consciously renounce some of the most conspicuous signs of their own social prestige, leaving them behind in the Chinese metropolises where they hailed from. For example, most Chinese mothers dress very casually and refrain from brand-name clothing or showing off luxury handbags. Yunxia

also left her entire brand-name wardrobe in Beijing, as she did not see any point in parading them in Hungary. Instead, she is always dressed comfortably and practically, allowing her to sit in the park or ride her scooter. When Yunxia was buying a car, she had to fight with Dongheng over choosing a more modest, secondhand option, having to explain to him that in the Hungarian social environment, driving a “simple” car does not amount to “losing face.”

### 5.2.5 “We represent the middle class”

In summary, although the choice of Hungary was framed in terms of accidentalness, and was narrated as moving downwards on the ladder of global hierarchy marked by its “backwardness” (*luhou* 落后), it symbolized a moral common ground among Chinese people who ended up here. However, this moral common ground, as Lieniang pointed out, does have a special connotation of class. The Chinese people who came via the *guozhai xiangmu* to Hungary were not only close in terms of values by being “neither very rich nor very ambitious but desirous of a simple and quiet life,” but these qualities also mark them as distinctly middle-class. As Lieniang expressed:

In the US and Canada, there are many wealthy Chinese already, but not here. Here, the old migrants... They are very different from us because they left China because they were poor. In terms of the “three views of the world, the family, and the person” (*sanguan*: *shijie, jia, ren* 三观: 世界, 家, 人), they are different from us. We have more education, university and above, they don’t. But since they have been here for such a long time, they slowly improved. But we are different, we represent a different *culture* in general. So, the most affluent went to Canada, etc, the poorest came here earlier, and *now* we represent the *middle class*. (emphasis added)

While this characterization delineates their group from the *nouveau riche* and the descendants of corrupt officials (*fuerdai* 富二代) who populate the “First World,” it also invites a demarcation from the lower rungs of society by foregrounding the centrality of *culture*. As this nuanced intra-ethnic division simultaneously mapped onto space and time reveals, a growing sense of distinction based on class is narrated through the pivotal notion of “culture.”

### 5.3 “You have to have culture” – freedom, autonomy, and agency

“Having culture” (*you wenhua* 有文化) was a central theme in Yunxia’s reasoning as well, both in legitimating her choice of Hungary (“even though it’s such a small country, its music, its art is excellent, recognized in the world”), and her urge to leave China. As she articulated:

“I brought her [Eszti] here to be more international, so her sight becomes wider. Living in Europe, she can experience different cultures, and have a wider sight, so she will be able to look further. Her sister is in the US, they can communicate, and see how the world is. This is the question of culture: you have to have culture. If you face a problem, you will see there are different ways to go about it.”

As this quotation exemplifies, the notion of culture in Yunxia’s understanding takes on a cosmopolitan quality and is deeply intertwined with education. She frequently distinguished between people who had and who did not have culture, which in most cases could be simply deduced to educational levels. So, as she claimed, one of the primary drivers behind her decision to take this great leap into the unknown leaving the familiar behind was to provide Eszti with foreign education and with that, a more cosmopolitan outlook on the world.

This outlook is composed of an ideal of multiculturalism coupled with an ideal of freedom to think and act in the world. As the excerpt suggests, Yunxia’s grown daughter from her first marriage at this time (in 2017) was still pursuing her studies in the liberal arts in the US (but later, in 2023, she decided to return to China – against her parents’ advice). She found the transnational dispersion of her children to be conducive to a more complex and nuanced perspective on the world, which she finds indispensable in growing up to be autonomous, independent persons. The association between autonomy and freedom in general and democracy in particular was made explicit in Yunxia’s account: “I want my children to grow up in a democracy, even if they are too little to understand what it means. In Hungary, there is democracy and freedom. In China there is none, you don’t have any rights.” Coming from a

rigid authoritarian regime, the idea of having *choice* in Hungary – notwithstanding the steady decline of democracy in the country since 2010 – emerged as an important theme in the narration of decision-making. In this view, the lack of democracy and rights in general is directly related to children’s lack of choice and denial of agency.

However, the deprivation of individual freedoms is not singlehandedly attributed to the political system, but also to the grinding time structures, that are only partially orchestrated by the state, and against which, as we have seen in Section 3.4.4.6, the state indeed exerts efforts. Radically overburdened by mandatory obligations, children in China have neither the time nor the energy to nurture their individual inclinations, and even if they develop their “own way of thinking” against all odds, they have no chance to act upon it because of the political system. A divorced mother who came out with her older (15 years old) daughter told me: “You know how Chinese children are? Apart from studying, they don’t know anything, anything at all! They don’t know how to make a scrambled egg, or how to eat a hamburger, or how to peel a boiled egg. They no nothing but studying!” Her account drew a clear line between the excessive educational burden and the development of completely dependent subjects.

Yunxia herself is also an advocate of cultivating her children’s autonomy and developing their skills for self-support. She lets them go to school and training classes by themselves although, in the environment of the Hungarian middle class (as a result of the heavy adoption of “intensive parenting” as the hegemonic articulation of child-centeredness as a *structure of feeling*), this is an increasingly rare practice that potentially attracts suspicion of neglect from both peer parents and educational agents. Nevertheless, Yunxia finds the small-scale, cozy urban environment of Budapest to be both safe enough and manageable for children to navigate on their own, especially in comparison to the megacity of Beijing. “I would never let [Ryan

(11)] to go on the streets in Beijing like this, I would be afraid that he was kidnapped for his organs or something. In fact, last time we went back I didn't let him go [by himself], but he didn't even want to, that sea of people is frightening to him," she said.

Comparing the two cities, the distances one has to navigate in Budapest are disproportionately shorter, and thereby significantly reduce the time, money, and energy one needs to spend on the road daily, and as such affords more freedom in moving around. Yunxia still gets upset in recalling how she wasted her life in the traffic jams in Beijing, where she had to chauffeur the kids from one mandatory attendance to another. In contrast, in Budapest, the kids just jump on their scooters or public transport and easily make their way, which is not only conducive to the kids' independence and autonomy but also liberating for Yunxia's time budget.

This commitment attests to the reality that a growing number of Chinese parents have begun to embrace the idea of their child as a coequal, autonomous individual capable of making decisions for and on his or her own (Kuan 2015), posing a stark contrast with the traditional ideal of the obedient child corresponding to the Confucian norm of filial piety. In this context, Budapest offers an environment in which experimenting with and fostering individual propensities becomes affordable in terms of financing, time, and personal energy.

## 5.4 Searching for culture in a segregated school

I found the centrality of the cosmopolitan outlook in Yunxia's narrative to be remarkable, especially since on the face of it, Eszti's education practically fell out of the decision-making process and was completely contingent on the trajectory that was defined by decisions made out of other concerns: Yunxia bought their apartment based on the proximity of the kindergarten she laid her eyes on for Ryan, and upon their arrival, Eszti simply started her

career in Hungarian public education in the school that was assigned to this address. As a result, Eszti happened to end up in a school that was an exemplar of Hungary's semi-hidden educational segregation.<sup>66</sup> The school is in a neighborhood called "Chicago," nicknamed after its grid layout and high crime rates, and where the overwhelming majority of the student population is of Roma origin. As a parent in the same narrow educational environment, I never considered this school as an option for my children – although this strategizing was foregrounded by previous and rather painful experiences.

When my first child went to kindergarten, my approach was different and, in many ways, more naïve. I proudly enrolled my son in one of the nearby segregated kindergartens where the vast majority of families were of Roma background, proffering a stance that I would not contribute to the social processes that go against my principles. However, I soon learned that segregation operates in a much more nuanced, multidimensional manner, and among other structural traits, it also often entails the contra selection of teaching personnel. So, when my son was showing indisputable signs of psychological distress from a teacher's abusive behavior, I was facing a hitherto unknown dilemma: do I persist with my ideological principles even if I can see that they cause my precious child to suffer, or do I play along with the structures I despise and thus prioritize the emotional well-being of my child?

After a few fundamentally futile attempts to start a dialogue with the abusive teacher, I started organizing with other Roma parents and attempted to negotiate with the principal. These discussions also proved to be pointless, as the principal made it clear that considering the shortage of kindergarten teachers, especially of the ones who would be willing to work in her

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<sup>66</sup> The complex processes consisting of various structural and individual measures by which Roma pupils are systematically channeled in high concentration to particular institutions beginning with the kindergarten are beyond the scope of this dissertation (for an overview see Radó 2020).

institution, she had no means to let go of this admittedly abusive teacher. So, I went with the second option and decided to overshadow my social principles for the sake of my son's interest and transferred him to another institution that enjoyed popularity among middle-class families. It was here, that I got to know Yunxia, who one year later enrolled her younger child, Ryan, in the same class where my son had been transferred.

#### **5.4.1 Immigrant children in Hungarian public education**

From this perspective, I found it utterly interesting that while Yunxia chose the local middle-class option for Ryan's schooling, she wanted to provide Eszti with "culture" practically by chance in this ill-reputed institution, even though until this point in time, Eszti's education was of so much importance, that it was the most prominent factor in postponing migration. Unlike me, Yunxia had no experience in the public education system of Hungary and had high, yet completely unfounded hopes in it. The school where Eszti ended up, just like all Hungarian public institutions, did not have any practice – let alone policy – to handle immigrant children, who upon enrollment faced up to the challenge that the only teaching language is Hungarian while they are rarely provided with Hungarian as a second language course.<sup>67</sup>

What happens to migrant children at school is completely at the mercy and disposition of individual institutions and teachers who deal with them according to their willingness and abilities (Feischmidt & Nyíri, 2006). Instead of being given extra help, Eszti, just like most other students who do not speak Hungarian, was set one year back compared to the grade corresponding to her age to give her time to learn the language. For some children, feeling

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<sup>67</sup> Since 2015, anti-immigration has been a defining element in the Hungarian state's ideological position and rhetoric, and as a result, no state services acknowledge the presence of immigrants – although their number is increasing because of the more liberal immigration policy it adopted in practice. Thus, there are no institutionalized policies to assist the school performance of non-Hungarian-speaking children.

mute, deaf, and stupid surrounded by considerably younger children – who vent their childish anger and cruelty or show benign interest to the newcomer

s at their whims –, this is a psychologically distressing situation. As we will see, rather than experiencing distress, Eszti found this situation to be ideal for her dedicated pursuit of *tang ping*.

Nonetheless, this school fit the bill of an earlier study on migrant children’s education in Hungary that found that educational institutions with largely “disadvantaged” student populations (which in this context is a synonym for children of Roma background), to be more inclusive towards other “disadvantaged” children – such as those whose mother tongue is not Hungarian (Feischmidt and Nyíri 2006). Eszti, among the increasing number of well-off Chinese students, did enjoy a relatively warm welcome in the institution. Since Feischmidt and Nyíri’s (2006) study, negative stereotyping of Chinese pupils by teachers and children has shifted to positive. My conversations at primary and secondary schools revealed that Chinese students are not only seen as hardworking and diligent by their teachers but also “cool” by their Hungarian peers who are fascinated by their high-tech electronic gadgets and fashionable outfits. Their class status, evidenced by their well-groomed appearance and their access to resources to enroll in extra classes, along with perceived willingness to learn, seemed to overwrite their inability to fully participate in class due to their limited Hungarian language skills. Teachers and headmasters appreciated these upper-class kids in their institutions in the hope that their presence would somehow mitigate the school’s overall status.

#### **5.4.2 An ideal learning environment – for lying flat**

In the beginning, for over a year, Yunxia returned the positive feelings and found the school to be ideal for Eszti, who also enjoyed herself. It was during this time, that I started teaching her



Hungarian, providing me with a more intimate outlook on her integration into the school by frequently negotiating her development with teachers as well as frequently mingling with her schoolmates. She quickly made a few friends and seemed to cherish her newly gained free time – resulting from the low expectations toward her given the difficulty with language – which she devoted to her favorite hobby, playing as much soccer as possible. Whenever I went to pick her up or occasionally had a Hungarian class in the school building, I would always find her in the yard, hair soaking wet, chasing the ball in high spirits. As we were sitting in the corridors, kids and teachers alike would engage in friendly chatter with us, showcasing benign interest in her.

Eszti, as Yunxia would often remark with an ambiguous smile that simultaneously expressed fondness and scorn, really had “her own way of thinking” (*hen you ziji de xiangfa* 很有自己的想法), and, as I could tell, was determined in reducing her learning efforts to the absolute minimum. This was a growing concern for Yunxia, who, as time went by was increasingly anxious about whether she made the right choice for Eszti by moving her to Hungary. Serving as a private tutor for Eszti, I could also understand Yunxia’s concerns. Eszti spent most of our classes lying on the desk, yawning in a clearly exaggerated manner, and did as little as possible.

She repeatedly claimed that she was very happy having moved here because she did not have to study any longer, and I could not find any way to motivate her or raise her enthusiasm. Soon enough, she realized that she could use these classes to do the little schoolwork she was assigned, two birds in one fell swoop. She made me help her recite the poems she had to memorize for school and every time I tried to explain to her what the poem was about – assuming if it made more sense, it would also help her memorize it – she cut me short and was only interested in pronunciation. I could not really make sense of her, she was extremely

intelligent, yet somehow already fundamentally lost as a kid, in a way she made an impression of a disenchanted grown-up.

## 5.5 Having second thoughts

As the first year went by, and Yunxia also got more integrated into Budapest, she also gradually got more well-versed in local articulations of classism – in this case, deeply infused with racism – and started to realize in parental meetings that it was not exactly the crowd where she wanted to belong. Precisely because disadvantaged children such as Roma and immigrant students are overrepresented at these institutions, they tend to have a negative reputation among local upper-class parents and little in common with the standards of “happy education” imagined by middle-class Chinese parents. Given Yunxia’s strong inclination to perceive Hungary as a classless society, as well as one where racism – at least concerning the Chinese – is nonexistent, I was surprised to observe how partial and elusive this stance was. I was once put in a deeply uncomfortable situation when Yunxia along with a Chinese friend, Nora, exchanged their racist knowledge and mutually educated each other in spotting “gypsies” (*jibusai ren* 吉卜赛人), which started to carry growing importance for both of them and was generally identified as a defining marker educational and living environments.

### 5.5.1 Revisiting *suzhi*

Upon familiarizing herself with the local vernacular of racism-infused classism, Yunxia, like many other Chinese parents, quickly began to speak it fluently. Schools were often left and chosen because of the presence or absence of Roma children, who emerged as markers of an inappropriate environment. Yunxia’s friend, Nora expressed her concern that reveals a direct causal relation between the “right environment” and the child’s moral development: “Gypsy [kids] cheat and steal each other’s stuff. It might be a small thing, but the child learns quickly

that she can take away whatever she wants.” Assuming direct causality between social environment and moral development, this logic, while on the one hand highlights the significance of the child’s moral upbringing, at the same time, by attributing paramount significance to the social environment’s determinative power, it also overlooks the child’s subjectivity (see also Xu 2017, 1–3). Concomitantly, it also assigns the task of securing the right environment as a primary responsibility of parents – a responsibility that was one of the main drivers behind relocation in many parents’ accounts, and that continues to be a decisive factor in their lives.

While the larger “environment” of Hungary seemed to be secured by Orbán’s law and order style politics that promised to exclude “the riffraff” from the country – or at least from eyesight, along with the perceived moral character of society, the *suzhi* of Hungarian people in general; Nora and Yunxia kept worrying about the *suzhi* of their microenvironments. Nora found their present neighborhood in the 6<sup>th</sup> district to be too “messy” (*luan* 乱), with “gypsies drinking on the street all day,” and eventually decided to move to the 13<sup>th</sup> district because she “didn’t want the kid to see that every day, to grow up in *that* environment” – seeing Roma people on the streets. Like Mencius’ mother (see Footnote 56), she moved to an environment she identified more with “culture” to ensure her child’s proper moral development – in this case, identified on a racial basis as a predominantly white neighborhood. These exchanges also made an impact on Yunxia’s way of thinking who started to search for a more suitable educational environment for Eszti, even though Eszti herself was visibly devoid of any educational ambitions and was thoroughly content with her low-key school and repeatedly expressed her wish to stay.

Attesting to her unquestionable intelligence, Eszti took advantage of this situation and strategically curated the information about her education which she felt willing to share with

Yunxia, while also tactically concealing her actual knowledge of Hungarian from her teachers in school in order to minimize the expectations toward her. Doing so, she exercised a high level of autonomy and agency in manipulating the overall situation to provide herself as much freedom as possible, realizing a child version of *tang ping*. However, Yunxia was also very much aware of the language barrier keeping her from assessing Eszti's study status in school, as well as with the possibilities this situation provides for an agile 11-year-old, and did not let fool herself easily.

### 5.5.2 The stress of being relaxed

Yunxia anxiously said: "The teacher keeps saying that she is very smart, but what does it matter? Every kid is smart! I also know that I never see her studying at all! In China, I saw her studying all the time, and it just worries me sick that I feel like she is not doing anything." Both Yunxia and Dongheng felt Eszti was taking advantage of them and misused the opportunity for the providing of which they worked hard and sacrificed a lot. Yunxia was increasingly anxious over Eszti's apparent laziness which she saw as a deficiency of her educational environment and a direct consequence of low expectations:

I am very confused (*kunhuo* 困惑) about whether it was right to bring her here (...) I am still a member of the Beijing school's WeChat group, and I keep seeing that children there are working hard incessantly, day by day. (...) The daily workload in Beijing is very heavy. She never failed to complete her homework [there]. We did not have to manage her studies before because we were in a very good school, where teachers want children to have good grades, because schools evaluate teachers based on students' grades. Eszti is very strong and she worked very hard because in that environment (环境) everyone was working hard.

Comparing Eszti's present that is perceived as having gone astray as a result of a lack of pressure with their experience in China where, because of the heavy workload she was on the right track; this excerpt also reveals the utmost significance attributed to the interlocking logic between environment and individual development. During this prolonged period of rumination,

comparison with the alternative reality of Chinese peers (instantly accessible via the social media platform WeChat) also inescapably sprung up as an important source feeding Yunxia's anxiety. Continued comparisons with peers who remain in China aggravate anxiety over choosing the good enough over the superiorly competitive, magnifying the risk element in what the *wertrational* choice entails for the future.

During a summer vacation before the pandemic, Yunxia went back to China with then-6-year-old Ryan and Eszti. Her experience in China, witnessing the incessant school preparations carried out by her friends' children amplified her anxiety over her children falling behind by "wasting time" (*langfei shijian* 浪费时间). Upon returning from China, Yunxia confessed to becoming more nervous about how Ryan spent his free time as well, who was about to begin school: "Back there they keep taking classes, and here they just play in the sandbox!" Thus, Yunxia felt like her original intention to reduce school pressure went overboard, making her revise the idea and eventually realize that some pressure after all is an indispensable element of proper child-rearing. The very sandbox under the ancient trees and blue skies that once triggered her to move across half the globe now stood as a metaphor for wasting time.

Later in the same discussion, the importance of the educational environment and its intersection with class - measured by parents' educational levels, and the pressure on children to perform, came more to the fore:

It's different here, here parents attach great importance to their children's own way of thinking (*jiazhang dou hen kanzhong haizide xiangfa* 家长都很看重孩子的想法). As long as their children are happy (*haizi zhiyao kuaile* 孩子只要快乐), parents don't have many requirements... But Chinese parents *never* think this way. She has no pressure here. School is very relaxing (*qingsong* 轻松), and children's nature is to play. In our previous school, the majority of parents were highly educated, but I looked around at the parents in her class... They don't seem to be very good... I was wondering if the

atmosphere (*fenwei* 氛围) in this school was not good and we are considering transferring her to another school.

Adopting the same logic of environment, this time complemented by parents' social class and the corresponding aspirations, she concluded that by being too "light," the present school is a harmful environment for Eszti, who, following her "childish nature," is "only willing to play." "Children's nature is to play" is no longer interpreted as a legitimate right, but a flaw, the correction of which is her parental responsibility. The much-embraced ideal of childhood happiness and the lack of pressure at this juncture of their lives appeared for Yunxia not only as not desirable but outright harmful to her children.

Though in the outset, "relaxedness" and "low pressure" were exactly what she was looking for in their new environment, now they appear as a defective characteristic of the culture of foreign life, unacceptable for Chinese parents: "Chinese mothers just love their children too much for treating them like this" – by which she does not mean scolding and beating, but rather being too permissive. Yunxia contrasts Chinese and Hungarian parenting cultures arguing that Hungarian parents only "attach importance to their children's way of thinking," unlike Chinese parents, who demand their children to perform because they know that it is in their best interest. Her frequent expression of admiring Eszti's "own way of thinking" notwithstanding, in this time of heightened anxiety, she discards respect for the child's autonomy as a culturally alien feature of her host society. The shortcomings of the environment, here articulated as "atmosphere," overwrite and undermine the child's personal agency.

## 5.6 The dilemma of opting out

Exemplifying the widespreadness of this characteristically "overseas *suzhi* anxiety," an online education market sprung up directly targeting Chinese parents who pursue happy education for

their children overseas. This market capitalizes on the “perennial fear from falling” (Ehrenreich 1990) caused by the ambiguous coexistence of a continued idealization of a happy, free, and autonomous childhood with renewed attention to competition. For example, a “high-quality educational product” in an official WeChat parenting account in Budapest titled *K Ma zai Ouzhou* (K mum in Europe) was marketed to induce a specifically „overseas *suzhi* anxiety”<sup>68</sup> in the following way:

Parents hope that their children will have a better life than themselves, which holds especially true for Chinese living overseas (...). The relatively loose, flexible, and carefree overseas education system *impedes Chinese parents from being relaxed* about their children's education. When the child is still young, parents will do their best to provide the highest quality educational resources (...) and since the epidemic has swept the world, *mothers have to shoulder the responsibility* of searching for quality online courses (*K Ma zai Ouzhou* [K mum in Europe] 01. 2021, emphasis added.)



Figure 13. Inducing overseas *suzhi* anxiety: educational products for Chinese parents overseas. Source: *K Ma zai Ouzhou*.

In this discursive context finding “the highest quality online course” acquires crucial significance. With the aid of images such as Figure 13, these advertisements suggest that unless

<sup>68</sup> Although I found this image on a Hungarian parenting site, the same content has swept through many overseas Chinese parenting *gongzhonghaos* from Singapore to Belgium, suggesting that ‘overseas parental anxiety’ has been successfully constructed as a market.

the mother lives up to her responsibility, the child will lose “before the starting line”—as the popular middle-class Chinese saying goes. The gendered underpinning that relegates this responsibility solely to the mother, complies with Meng’s findings (2020), who highlights the gendered dynamics underlying the reconstitution of the Chinese family by redefining the middle-class mother as “consumer-in-chief,” whose primary role is to make good purchasing decisions for her children (cf. Mies 1986). This image is exacerbated by her situation as an *overseas mother*, ironically attributed to characteristics of overseas education such as “carefreeness” and “flexibility”—precisely what Chinese migrant parents say they seek. The ambivalence between rejecting competitive pressure in the name of freedom and a renewed search for competition speaks to the anxieties and ambiguities of being a middle-class parent in contemporary China, which cannot be escaped even by leaving the country (F. Beck 2022).

Acting as a responsible parent, Yunxia was facing the weight of making an important decision – although decidedly termed and phrased outside of the vocabulary of the market, as she persisted in searching among public schools – in choosing a more appropriate educational environment. In addition, she also had to deal with the significant resistance from Eszti’s side who wanted to stay, compelling Yunxia to redraw the boundary between parental authority and the child’s autonomy. This seemingly banal situation – well-known to most practicing parents – indeed raises fundamentally important questions that lie at the heart of political subjectivity. Although Yunxia deliberately opted out from the educational race in China – despite Eszti’s promising outlooks – in favor of a path that held no promise of a competitive edge, but of a carefree and autonomous childhood, she perceived the conspicuous carefreeness and growing autonomy of Eszti as a misuse of her motherly sacrifice and as potentially harmful for Eszti herself. Negotiating their conflicting interests became a defining characteristic of their everyday lives, and instead of bearing fruit only bore increasing antagonism.



### 5.6.1 Tipping point

One day these futile negotiations reached an absolute dead end. Right before our Hungarian class was scheduled, I received a message from Yunxia to cancel the class, because she needed to sit down with Eszti and Dongheng and talk through the situation. She texted:

“Fanni, her father wants to take her back to Beijing to go to school. We also want to have a good talk with her today. (...) Her father also observed a lot of things about her. If she doesn't work hard, we won't let her stay here. So, she needs to think clearly. She has to understand how hard we work for them, if she doesn't start to act (*ta ziji bu dong qilai* 她自己不动起来), it doesn't matter what we say. We are thinking more and more about bringing her back to China. She will wait until she grows up and comes out on her own.”

This was a tipping point in their lives, in which environment, agency, and morality (understood as ethical responsibility) got intertwined in a more complex manner. The Zhang parents formed a united front and rephrased the exercise of their authority – their power to move Eszti not only to another school but even back to China, which in this context was clearly framed as a threat – as conditional on Eszti's agency (her “starting to act”), taking shape in ethically responsible behavior. In this sense, somewhat counterintuitively, Eszti was once again cast in the role of the protagonist of her own life, and no longer seen simply as a subject to her environment. On the contrary, in this scenario staged by the united front of parents, her environment became contingent on her behavior: as long as her attitude complies with parental expectations in exerting efforts can she stay in Hungary at all – let alone her school. The threat of moving back to China represented a significantly higher stake, and was not an empty one, as Dongheng at this point has been already pushing the idea of returning Eszti to China for a while.

I was waiting with bated breath on pins and needles to learn the outcome of this high-stakes negotiation. I was extremely anxious over the possibility that the unequal power position occupied by Eszti would result in her return, which for some reason I felt would be detrimental

to her. I was all the more relieved and not the least surprised to learn that apparently, Eszti played her cards well. The next thing I knew was that not only did she dissuade her parents from sending her back to China till adulthood but managed to convince Yunxia to let her stay in Hungary with me and my family for the whole summer while Yunxia and Ryan returned to Beijing for the holiday. The significance of this compromise from Yunxia's side is not to be underestimated, as it practically meant that Eszti skipped the classification exam in her Chinese school – which she did take in the previous summer following her first school year in Hungary – and thereby completely cut ties with her Chinese education.

The pact also required compromise from Eszti, who agreed to change schools in the next school year and promised to strain herself more. This outcome attested a tacit acceptance of Eszti's autonomous subjectivity, while also signaling that Yunxia came to terms with her anxieties over the legitimacy of the *wertrational* choice she made in rearing her children. When trusting the responsibility of caring for Eszti to me and my husband, I explicitly asked what her expectations were to us from the design of everyday programs and activities to the nature of discipline. She simply responded that she admires our way with children, and she trusts our decisions, letting go of control fully.

Even though I assumed that to some extent Eszti's desire to stay with us was an expression of her fondness for me and my family, her integration into our family was rather bumpy. Since Yunxia did not ask otherwise, I went with my original plan trying to avoid planned programs as much as possible, endowing children with as much unstructured time as they – and myself – could bear. Unstructured time is not easy on today's children who are increasingly accustomed to spending their time in and outside of school in a form that is orchestrated by adults. In the beginning, Eszti visibly suffered from having so much time on her hands, but

unlike my children who usually seek my help for entertainment, Eszti seemed determined to deal with that by herself. When in our Budapest home, apart from the meals where her presence was mandated by me, she seemingly tried to spend most of her time separated from us, patiently enduring my children's uninvited but frequent visits to the room we attempted to make cozy for her stay. For most of the time, she was reticent and short-spoken, limiting her communication to share her bodily discomforts with me: she constantly had aches in her head or her stomach, which I assumed to speak for her unspoken emotions. However, when we relocated to the family's weathered, small cottage in the tiny town of Horány on Szentendere Island, only a few minutes away from the bank of the Danube, she seemed to enjoy freedom more. Swimming in the wild running river, playing five in a row scratched by stones on the wall of the dam, or spending hours in the amusement of the sprinkle under the ancient, gnarled nut tree in the garden seemed to unite her with my children belying the age difference and make her genuinely happy.

Then, Yunxia's return eventually came about. In the evening before, Eszti showed me a notebook, full of notes on a lexicon of the British Museum she diligently compiled over the entire course of her stay at our home. Neither Yunxia nor Eszti told me about this project, which was assigned by Yunxia to Eszti before her departure. I assume it has been part of the pact that was made during those eventful days of emotional turbulence that seemed to be long gone. Eszti was thus allowed to enjoy an impressively high level of freedom, in exchange for a self-controlled responsibility that she needed to display by straining herself to learn European culture in this overtly explicit form. During this time, Yunxia never asked me neither about how am I getting along with Eszti, nor how "useful" I orchestrated spending our days. With hindsight, I attribute this complete letting go of control and parental authority great significance in Yunxia's trajectory to finding peace with, and fully embracing their new lives in Hungary

in a fundamentally *wertrational* way: representing inherent value, irrelevant of outcomes defined in terms of productivity, efficiency, or achievement (Figure 14).



*Figure 14. Eszti feeds a swan. Photograph shared by Yunxia.*

## **5.7 Finding peace – the tiger mom lies down**

Upon returning from China, this time Yunxia – instead of experiencing aggravated anxiety as in the previous year – grew more estranged from the everyday experience of Chinese society, which she saw as ultimately dehumanized, utilitarian, and unhealthily competitive again. She decided to let Ryan spend one more year in kindergarten instead of sending him to school, which could have just as well been interpreted as a waste of time since both Ryan’s age and

proficiency in Hungarian would have afforded him to start his elementary education. This decision complied with an increasingly accepted norm among middle-class Hungarian parents who almost uniformly consider an extra year in kindergarten immensely beneficial to children to the extent that going to school at the age of six is deemed to be harmful to children and indeed a proof of parental negligence. Yunxia argued that Ryan is entitled to one more year of carefree happiness surrounded by kindhearted teachers and good friends, which she saw as conducive to his emotional stability. Ryan had no qualms against this decision and was living the child-life to the fullest.

Regarding Eszti's school transfer, first, she seriously considered a school operated by the Reformed Church – and as such better financed, equipped, and attracting a more upscale, racially and financially homogenous crowd, while also promising an elevated level of pressure. As I was requested by the school to accompany Eszti to her “probational period,” I was increasingly disappointed by her would-be teachers. I found it rather discriminatory from the outset that they did not entrust Eszti to be able to handle the situation herself, despite that she did speak Hungarian, even if a bit brokenly. When they exhibited no sign of taking note of her presence and treated her as air, even though I was sitting beside her for entire school days precisely to facilitate communication, I was outright outraged. I told Yunxia my feelings of resentment at Eszti's reception, pointing out how ambiguous I found the teacher's day-long preaching of goodness that was not matched with acting in the same manner, while also hinting at the comparison with her present school, which was way more welcoming. Eszti herself was not particularly ambitious and was happy to procrastinate the inevitable departure from her low-key school, which to her was synonymous with freedom.

However, Eszti did begin to show signs of ambition and started to take fencing increasingly seriously. What was once a mere pastime, the origin of which was indistinct whether stemming from her own or from parental encouragement, now emerged as a pivotal dimension of her life. While she completely lost her competitive spirit in the sphere of studying, she developed it in the sphere of sport. She switched to a more competitive club and spent an increased amount of time and energy on training, which almost incessantly bore fruits and translated into medals and trophies. This was also a comforting development for Yunxia, who accepted her daughter's interest in sports as legitimately replacing educational aspirations.

Though inherently competitive, Yunxia also approached sport from a *wertrational* angle. On one of our regular morning visits to a coffee – during her time in Hungary, Yunxia developed a refined taste for coffee – she offered me a comparison between two skateboarder champion girls of Chinese origin, one of them from the Mainland, the other from America. She showed me video clips of each of them receiving their trophies and pointed to the great difference between the speeches they delivered: the “Chinese Chinese” girl submissively thanked first the country, then the trainer, and lastly her father for her achievement; while the American Chinese girl just talked about how much she loved skateboarding and her ambition to become a professional when she grows up. “See, they are the same age, and they both do skateboard. But the Chinese girl is terrible (*zaogao* 糟糕), it's like she doesn't have *her own way of thinking*, just reciting what she was trained for. I find that so sad!” – she commented. Yunxia once again appreciated “having one's own way of thinking” as a virtue. Her support of Eszti's own choice of competitive sports stems from her moral disposition to attribute value to doing something for the sole reason of enjoyment – that might but just as well might not translate into trophies.

Eszti was nevertheless transferred to a (public) school that stood out with its explicit embrace of multiculturalism and an English-Hungarian bilingual curriculum. Although the school is public, and therefore is subject to all the structural deficiencies that propelled Hungarian public education to the verges of dysfunctionality, it unquestionably provides a more cosmopolitan *fenwei* with its student body. As Yunxia proudly describes it: “There are many people from all over the world, the Arab countries, Iran, and even some from the US and Canada.” In the new educational environment, Eszti responsibly fulfilled her duties in the school but did not make any extra efforts nor get more interested in studying. Nor did she get much integrated into the school’s community but got more and more introverted as she grew. Albeit this did cause unpleasant moments for Yunxia, who is a pronouncedly outgoing personality who does not get deterred even by the language barrier from making new friends on a daily basis, as Eszti grew, Yunxia learned to accept more and more her personality (*xingge* 性格) as introverted as it is.

Ryan also entered the same elementary school, where he thrived more on the social side rather than in studying and made best friends with an Iranian boy. Yunxia’s previously displayed islamophobia notwithstanding, in this environment where she saw the presence of Muslim people to be conducive of a multicultural atmosphere, Yunxia maintained good relations with the Iranian parents of Ryan’s best friend. Ryan’s headteacher was frequently perturbed by his complete lack of discipline, and after a cumulating number of incidents requested a personal meeting with Yunxia. This was not a new development; the kindergarten teacher also approached me several times to convey messages to Yunxia about Ryan’s misbehavior.

In the kindergarten years, Yunxia dismissed all this saying that it was “children’s nature” to misbehave. “Ryan has his own personality,” she said, “and even if I want him to be a little bit obedient, it is actually very difficult for a child to be obedient when he is young. You can’t

make a child completely listen to you, because he is an independent individual and unless he is a fool would he listen to you, but he is not, so he will not completely listen to you.” While interpreting childhood as a distinct stage that is subject to different rules and expectations, she also phrased obedience as synonymous with foolishness, once again attesting to her embrace of the transforming view of childhood. However, Ryan’s lack of obedience in school was increasingly a source of worry to her, and while admitting that she might spoil Ryan a bit too much, she argued that the root cause of this issue was the absence of a fatherly figure from his life.

### **5.7.1 An absent father – discontents with the transnational split family**

Dongheng, after this many years, has still not made his mind up about moving to Hungary, despite Yunxia’s constant nagging and the increasingly frequent fights among them. Unlike the husbands of Nora and Lieniang, two of Yunxia’s closer friends, who, in spite of their initial reluctance were eventually convinced to give up their Beijing careers at least partly and move to Budapest, Dongheng was unwilling to do so. Lieniang, whose husband moved to Budapest right around the time our interview took place, agitatedly described her husband’s life in Beijing as filled with cigarette smoke, alcohol, and karaoke. Likewise, Dongheng, while emphasizing the existential perspective of his relocation by pointing to the poor outlooks offered by the Hungarian economy, nonetheless admitted that he finds life in Budapest boring, where “after the sky turns dark there is not much to do.” Lieniang did not go easy on her husband and told him that “[they] both have to sacrifice something for the sake of the kid.” Yunxia was on the same page and increasingly saw Dongheng’s resistance to relocation as a sign of his reluctance to “sacrifice” for his children.



A few years before, especially around the turbulent times when Eszti was almost sent back to China, Dongheng did seem to leverage a certain amount of power in the most important decisions regarding his overseas family. However, as time went by, and separation not only got prolonged but exacerbated by the pandemic that effectively turned travel between the two countries into an unattainable luxury, Dongheng's point of view gradually faded into complete irrelevance. Eszti effectively cut contact with him, because, according to Yunxia, living that far away, Eszti felt he was not entitled to discipline her. As Yunxia's grievances with the unfulfilled promises that Dongheng would join them in the next year grew year by year, she got more and more supportive of Eszti's declaration of independence, acknowledging it as yet another expression of her "own way of thinking." While she did not find Eszti's detachment from her father problematic, she was much more concerned regarding both the institution of their family, as well as Ryan's upbringing devoid of a fatherly figure. Unlike for Eszti, she found that a male caretaker would be indispensable for Ryan and rejected any responsibility considering his increasingly frequent misbehavior in school.

When Yunxia moved homes, it was not because of the presence or absence of Roma people, but to ensure that everyone would have a private room. As the kids grew and with their growth came an increase in both the frequency and intensity of disputes over their shared bedroom, Yunxia decided that it was time to leave behind the dim-lit ground floor apartment opening from the interior courtyard of a run down, typical U-shaped tenement house and seek a more luminous and spacious option. Although looking in a wider range, she finally moved only a few blocks away from their original home. When renovating the new apartment, she would often fantasize about Dongheng's private spaces in the new home. Throughout the process, Dongheng made (negligible) contributions to making the new home from afar and kept fueling

Yunxia's hope that he would be living with them soon after. However, now, seven years into moving to Budapest, there is still no sign of Dongheng realizing this promise.

As Yunxia got more settled in Budapest, in every meaning of the term, she stopped fooling herself with lending credit to Dongheng's repeatedly failing promise, and she started to wonder about the institution of their family in more serious terms:

Ryan is already 11 years old and has been living here since he was 5. He spent more than half of his life apart from his father. Sometimes I wonder whether we are still a family at all, you know... Living this far away for such a long time, our lives are so different, kind of embarked on parallel trajectories. Living separated is not like a real marriage, it is like if you were divorced. How could I explain to him our daily lives, the problems we face, if his life is so different? He is always busy with work, traveling here and there in China, and outing with his boss and colleagues drinking and smoking. I cannot use words to describe our life and our experiences, and neither can he. We have very little left in common. It feels like we are strangers.

These feelings of estrangement are rarely acknowledged in the literature that tends to celebrate ideas like “digital togetherness” or “co-presence” through polymedia with the aim to “demonize distance” by portraying transnational families as thriving in their separation (e.g. Baldassar 2016). In contrast, Yunxia's prolonged separation prompted her to question whether their relationship would still qualify as marriage and asserted that it felt like they were divorced. As Yunxia explained, her estrangement from Dongheng also manifested in taking on completely different outlooks on the world and eventually resulted in an ideological mismatch, a gap setting them apart. Moving beyond the Great Chinese Firewall, Yunxia has access to all sorts of coverage that take a radically different perspective on the developments in China:

In fact, after so many years abroad, my thinking has changed a lot because of how I see China. This great transformation in me [occurred] because I have access to what people are saying out in the world about the things that happen in China. China does not report these things, just covers it all up until no one can see anything. But I'm abroad and I do see it, so now my husband and I have a big difference in our thinking. He's always like “Ah, why do you always say China this and China that?” And I tell him, look, I see things that you don't... I can tell you, we have a hard time sorting this out.”

Having moved abroad, it is not only Eszti, whose “sight became wider and is thus able to look further,” but Yunxia as well. Living in a more polarized and nuanced media environment has contributed to taking a more critical stance regarding the mother country. It was only after this prolonged period and deeper embeddedness in a foreign country that translated the vaguely defined discontents that once made her leave China into a more conscious and explicit political alienation.

In the summer of 2023, when they first got to return to China after the suspension of the Zero Covid policy, this political awakening was a source of intense conflicts within the extended family. When they visited Dongheng’s father, Ryan got into a fight with his long-time no-see-grandpa during dinner about whether Taiwan was a separate country or not. Instead of feeling embarrassment or shame, Yunxia took great pride in Ryan’s ability to form and express an opinion in the field of “big politics.” “You know, Dongheng’s parents were very much opposed to us moving here, and this incident did not make them more convinced,” she says chucklingly. “I was amazed at how well-informed Ryan was, and not only did he have much knowledge, but he also formed his own opinion! Like the other day, a Hungarian mother was at our home, and she asked me what my stance on the developments in Ukraine was. I was too exhausted to discuss this, but Ryan just immediately jumped in, and took my place in discussing this serious topic!”

## 5.8 Concluding remarks

As the present chapter attempted to elucidate, for Yunxia and her children, Ryan, and Eszti, moving to Hungary opened up an environment where they could foster and cultivate their “own ways of thinking” and acting in the world. Though the road to embracing autonomy as a virtue was not without its bumps and pitfalls, through the course of seven years it is the destination

they reached – even if at the outset, Yunxia had no clear definition of it as a goal. Escaping the repressive political and time regimes of Chinese state capitalism, this pursuit of autonomy stands at the center of the good enough life Yunxia aims to pursue. Eszti's traipse in the Hungarian education system attests to the difficulties faces by Yunxia in carrying through with the choice of opting out from the educational competition, while simultaneously elucidating how difficult it was for Yunxia to accept and work with her child's emerging autonomy, at the cost of cutting down her parental authority. Taking part in their daily struggles and dilemmas for seven years, with hindsight, their story can be narrated as a triumphant though rough road to autonomy: autonomy for children in choosing their ways of life, autonomy for Yunxia to raise her children according to her own values, and autonomy for all of them to critically engage with China.

Yunxia's pursuit of the good enough life thus required significant work in challenging and revising the well-accepted norms and values expanding beyond the narrow concerns of success and child-rearing, to the field of political subjectivity. Yunxia's struggle to allow her children to think for themselves and hear them speak was paralleled with her own "sight becoming wider" and subsequent development of political subjectivity, embodied in a more critical engagement with the nature of power – be it her husband or the Motherland. Unlike the surging nationalism of many Chinese migrants (Barabantseva 2011; Nyíri, Zhang, and Varrall 2010; Sun and Sinclair 2016), Yunxia, like an increasing number of young, well-to-do Chinese questions the received wisdom of official nationalism and fosters a highly ambiguous relationship with the Motherland (F. Beck and Nyíri 2022).

Both Ryan and Eszti took up Hungarian citizenship, which, as China does not accept dual citizenship entailed the renouncement of their Chinese nationality. Yunxia only mentioned this

to me in passing, she did not attribute symbolic meaning to the nationality swap but saw it rather as the natural course of affairs. With a Hungarian passport, the kids will travel easily within the European Union but have a significantly harder time if they want to travel between China and Europe. Yunxia sees no harm in cutting both symbolic and pragmatic ties with China, claiming that Ryan spent most of his life here, and as such does not have any meaningful relationships in China. She even added, followed by a devilish giggle, that he speaks Chinese as defective as me. For Eszti, the uptake of Hungarian nationality enabled her to join the Hungarian national team for fencing, and thereby expanded her scope of opportunities.

Living the autonomous life in Hungary comes at the cost of being a single mother – although one without financial difficulties. Nevertheless, it is still a vulnerable position to be in, both financially and physically. Even if Dongheng continues to send remittances to finance their everyday lives, if Yunxia gets sick or disabled by any means, she cannot rely on any other person to care for the children. Although I found Yunxia's obsession with constant medical check-ups to be exaggerated at the outset, I came to fully understand her fear of vulnerability when standing beside the bed in a hospital after she suffered a serious ski injury, making her bedridden for three long weeks.

She took Ryan and Eszti on a ski holiday to neighboring Slovakia, where she fell and injured her spine. She knew that she was not entitled to health care in Slovakia and was in so much pain that she could not sit up, with her two frightened children by her side, she had no idea what to do. Her nightmare becoming a reality pushed the experience of vulnerability to the fullest, but at the same time, it also cast light on Yunxia's ability to rely on the dense network of friends she eagerly cultivated during these years. Eventually, she reached out to a Chinese friend in Budapest, who quickly jumped in the car together with another friend and drove to

the rescue of Yunxia and the kids. One of them drove Yunxia's car back with the kids, while the other car got transformed into a pop-up ambulance car. This terrible experience proved to Yunxia that after all, she is fully autonomous as a single mother, capable of navigating life on her own, empowered by the social capital that is completely her own doing.

## CHAPTER 6: JAKE AND THE CHEN FAMILY

I introduced the protagonist of this chapter, Jake, in the first chapter sharing his thoughts with me on a sunlit bench in the City Park about how coming out of China, he did not even want to *pretend* to work. In this chapter, I dwell in more detail about where this decision came from and how it plays out in the everyday life of the Chen family. Most importantly, I look into what the marked renunciation of work signifies for the production-reproduction boundary and the values and morality represented by the small community of the Chen household. The Chen family represents an exceptional case – both in the Hungarian and the Chinese context, and indeed in the general context of most modern nations – of a gender reversal in the distribution of household roles. While Jake fully takes charge of homemaking and child-rearing, Sandy is an ambitious career woman and the sole breadwinner of the family. Jake and Sandy are also exceptional in that, unlike Yunxia and most participants in my research, they themselves are only children (*dusheng zinü* 独生子女), which sets their lives apart generationally. Themselves having only one child, Tim, on the one hand, makes their family an example of the 4-2-1 family model, while on the other, it also offers insight into a particular example in which the financial security guaranteed by the heavy concentration of resources enables a postmaterialist value transition that reorganizes the ethics of the family.

### 6.1 From Rags to Riches

I got to know Jake in 2019 when my son started his educational career in a 6<sup>th</sup> district primary school and became classmates with Tim. Jake is a cheerful, chubby guy, who dons the interesting look of a Chinese American Cali punk, fully tattooed up until his neck, and interestingly combines elements of skating shoes with luxury backpacks in his outfits. Born in 1980s in Tianjin, Jake, though never having lived outside of China before, is the only one

among my acquaintances who has mastered fluent conversational English, making him more capable of acting on his desire to integrate into Hungarian society – which is a desire that, albeit having been voiced by all people I spoke with, have been severely hindered by the language barrier. However, his journey to becoming the cosmopolitan upper-class stay-at-home dad I got to know was not a smooth one, a privilege accorded by birth, but an achievement of arduous efforts and high performance in the educational competition by the turn of the millennium.

While Sandy's parents are high-level cadres, Jake's are “very ordinary workers” (*putong de gongren* 普通的工人), “not even brigade leaders,” who only have elementary education and have worked in the textile industry for their entire lives. His ascent from rags to riches is an exemplar of the upward social mobility made possible by the more meritocratic avenue of education that characterized an early period of China's reform and opening:

Honestly, my parents belong to the lower class (*diceng de ren* 低层的人), so I went to a very ordinary elementary school. In China, schools are assigned to addresses, and real estate prices in the catchment areas of “key schools” were already very high at that time, and my parents had a below-average salary in Tianjin. But even though I was in a very ordinary elementary school, my parents were always pushing me to study hard, and instilled in me the belief that academic excellence and top score on the state exam was my ticket 'from rags to riches'.

Jake took his parents' advice to heart and lived up to their expectations. For as long as he can remember, he has been studying hard, getting only five hours of sleep a day for most of his school years, persisting all the way until the *gaokao*, the infamous national college entrance exam. Since his parents “didn't have culture” (i.e., lacked formal education), other than incentivizing him, they left Jake to navigate the terrain of educational mobility on his own. He did what everyone else was doing around him and invested all his childhood years in studying. Eventually, his efforts yielded the desired results, and he graduated from high school with the fifth-best score from his grade of 600 students on the college entrance exam. Though he did



not have any interest in agriculture, he wanted to make sure that he got into a university in Beijing, and with his Tianjin *hukou*, the Agricultural University offered the highest chance of admission.<sup>69</sup> A university in Beijing could be his stepping stone to securing a coveted Beijing *hukou*, a precondition of the Chinese dream: a white-collar career in the capital, and better chances for his future child. To realize these aspirations, he had to be very strategic about his decisions from early on, repressing his personal inclinations. Although his strategy worked out and he achieved all that he ambioned, with hindsight, he sees the personal price he had to pay was too high: he had to abdicate his physical needs, suppress his personal interests, and, eventually, miss out on his own childhood.

Back then, I never stopped to question whether what was happening was normal or not. Everyone around me was doing the same, so, if I wasn't to fall behind, I had to keep pace. All my peers and all my friends were doing the same, so I didn't question if it was normal, I just assumed that this must be how life is. It was only after university, when my child was born, that I began to ponder if what we considered normal was indeed acceptable at all. And now, the situation is even more bewildering compared with when I was in school...

Reflecting on his journey to the top, he recounts how seamlessly he internalized the grinding rhythm of educational competition, while also suggesting that the price of success was sacrificing his individual autonomy by suppressing his agency. Fatherhood became the catalyst for Jake to critically reexamine what he assumed to be “normal was indeed acceptable at all,” and ultimately came to reject this way of life. By the situation becoming “more bewildering,” he refers to the educational involution that only accelerated ever since he got out of the system. He explains that while “back then” the competition was only among students, now it expanded to incorporate parents as well: “You must be in round-the-clock communication with the teacher, constantly reflecting on the child's development. That's a crazy rhythm, not only for

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<sup>69</sup> By the time students need to send in their applications to the universities they are not aware of their *gaokao* results.

kids but parents as well.” With the birth of his son, Tim, Jake vowed to spare both of them from this way of life.

This attitude counters one of the dominant proxies of middle-class child-rearing, which Ehrenreich describes as follows: “All that parents can do is attempt, through careful molding and psychological pressure, to predispose each child to retrace the same long road they themselves once took” (1990, 83). Instead of making Tim retrace “the same long road,” Jake reexamined the core values of life and decided to provide Tim with a completely different road, a road that has more forks, and thus offers more choices and the promise of a more authentic life.

In China, you can’t just study what you like, because you have to strategize, calculate your chances of getting into a good university, and calculate your future income. The same with marriage: you can’t just fall in love, and get married, and it’s the same with having children. You have to calculate everything strategically. I didn’t want Tim to have a life like that. Since I went through it, I know perfectly well what it takes. You have to work hard for success, and you might get a good job, but you might as well hate it, so what’s the point of it? And in the meantime, you missed out on life, you can’t play like [children] do here. You don’t have a choice. I wish Tim had a job he likes, what he really enjoys. Because you [Hungarians] have big families, but we don’t, and when we die, Tim will be alone. At least he should have a job he enjoys doing.

In Jake’s narrative, there is a heavy emphasis on temporal orientations, embodied in a recurring contrast between calculated strategizing and spontaneity. These temporal orientations also correspond to agentive modalities: while (*zweckrational*) strategizing implies a sense of submission to structural necessities, by contrast, spontaneous (*wertrational*) choice is seen as an expression of agentive independence. Despite his apparent success in navigating the terrain of education and employment and launching his life in Beijing based on well-calculated decisions, he sees this life as devoid of spontaneous choices, and consequently, devoid of meaning.

In Jake's account, the freedom of choice is limited not politically but first and foremost economically. He highlights the milestones of adult life (university education, marriage, employment, family), and expresses a longing for a fundamentally Western notion of individualism understood as "emotional freedom," the freedom to choose and act according to the injunction of one's desires (Illouz 2019) – and not according to calculated strategies dictated by the market. This longing for having an emotionally meaningful life – be it education, a romantic relationship, or employment – was so paramount in Jake's narrative, that he pointed at it as one of the most influential motivations for him and Sandy to give up their apparently successful lives and search for a new environment that would afford Tim a better life, defined in terms of spontaneous and as such, autonomous choice. In his words:

Other people might have thought in our place that their life was very good. Some people think that if you live in Beijing and have an apartment in a good primary school district, then you are the king. And if you also have the Beijing *hukou*, then everything is truly fabulous. There is no need to change anything because you are already at the top – well, that's exactly what we gave up. I didn't want my child to struggle with anxieties that I didn't even know what end they served. I have studied hard all my life. I have worked hard all my life. And suddenly I realized that actually, I had nothing. Childhood is an irreplaceable period in life. Tim can work hard in the future. But I hope that while he is still so young, he can enjoy his childhood.

In this account, Jake contrasts the way his life was seen from the outside by others as practically living the "Chinese dream," with the way he felt on the inside, as "hav[ing] nothing." As he lists all the material possessions one can aspire to have, he alludes to things money cannot buy, that is, meaning to life. By bringing in the notion of childhood, as "an irreplaceable period in life" accompanied by the conviction that the child is entitled to enjoy it, Jake contrasts this ideal with his own wasted life, spent on things he had no interest or delight in, and foregrounds his ambition to step off the beaten path and provide his child a meaningful childhood he never had the chance to have.

## 6.2 The 4-2-1 Family

Jake's life, however, was not fully bereft of spontaneity. Just like me, he became a parent at an unusually young age (26), especially in the context of metropolitan China. And, just like me and my husband, Sandy and Jake were not married by this time, as the norm would dictate. They fell in love while they were both attending university and their love was founded on an exceptional sense of harmony they found with each other. Having been born on the very same day, they entertained the idea that their finding each other was the order of the universe and that Tim's birthday was only one day after theirs furthered this enchantment. They shared very similar views on the world and agreed on most of the important questions in life. Even in trying times, as Jake often liked to remark in the first period of our friendship, they rarely raised their voices – let alone quarreled. When after five years of dating Sandy accidentally got pregnant, they decided to keep the baby against the odds of social norms and pressures. He described the exceptionality of their trajectory in the following way:

You know, my friends from university still don't have children, because in China you must take a lot of problems into consideration even before starting a family, most importantly the question of your economic situation, even to get married. Housing, for example, is extremely expensive in Beijing. Most of my former classmates are still struggling with their mortgages, they have no way to think about having a child. Having a child, you need to think through whether you can afford anything that your child would need. Nowadays, every kid needs to go to all sorts of cram courses (*buxi ban* 补习班) after school, and these classes are extremely expensive. I would estimate the extra classes for one kid in Beijing around 15.000 euros, yearly, at the very least. And this is the reason why so many people don't want to have kids. If you can't finance everything the child needs, your kid might be not competitive (*jinzhengli* 竞争力) enough, and won't have development opportunities. We weren't like that, like, we got married when Tim was already underway. We didn't do much planning [laughs].

As this brief and apt description of the reproduction crisis in China (see Section 3.4.4.3 and 1.3.5.3) and his relation to it suggests, Jake draws a line between calculation as a necessity and the freedom of spontaneity once again. He also acknowledges, that his ability to make a

spontaneous choice in having a baby at his first whim and getting married to his love, Sandy, without following the social norm of deliberate and meticulous building up a nuclear family life from one calculated brick to the next, was indeed a privilege. Unlike most young adults in China, he never had existential pressure that would put him anywhere close to precarity. This was partly because he had a good salary in the tech company where he was employed, and partly because Sandy was from a family of money. In addition, his own, “very ordinary parents” also support him and his family financially up until this day, despite his active rejection and indeed begging them to stop doing so. Money was neither a source of problems nor a source of meaning in his life.

Despite the fact that Tim was not a planned child, Sandy and Jake did start to plan immediately after his conception, though not the boosting of his “competitiveness” in this crudely commodified and excessively competitive environment, but rather his escape from it. Tim’s competitiveness was never a source of anxiety for Jake:

To tell you the truth, I don’t think like most Chinese parents. Most Chinese parents have very high expectations/hopes (*gao de qiwang* 高的期望) toward their child, and how the kid will be later on. I don’t. This might sound bad – and I never told him this – but later on, Tim will never be short of money. My wife and I are both *dusheng zini*, and all our parents have real estate. We have apartments in Beijing and Budapest, so, if you see what I mean, he will never have to fight for his existence. Of course, I never told him this, that he doesn’t have to be hard-working, and I never will, but I am clear in my heart. This is the reality, he’ll never have the pressure that he’ll say, shit, I have to go to work and earn money, to have a good life and provide that for my family. I’m not telling this to him, because that would be bad pedagogy, that you can stop working hard. But this is the reality, so I really don’t have high expectations of him, and don’t put a lot of pressure on him, because it isn’t necessary. I want him to be a good, sincere (*chengzhi* 诚挚), and honest (*chengshi* 诚实) man, who knows how to care (*dongde guan ai* 懂得关爱), how to enjoy happiness (*dongde xiangshou kuaile* 懂得享受快乐), and helps other people. I don’t want him to go to a good university or something. Of course, if he is diligent and gets into a good university, I’m very happy for him, but this is not my expectation of him, this should be his own expectation of himself.

While the 4-2-1 family model (see Section 3.4.4.4) is rather the norm than the exception in contemporary China, the Inglehartian value transition (see Section 2.5) indicated by Jake's interpretation is rather unique. Despite the financial security that the concentration of resources traversing two generations entails, most accounts of parenting in urban China from the middle class to the elite speak of inextinguishable anxiety over class reproduction (e.g. Crabb 2010; Meng 2020; Chiang 2022) – conforming to Ehrenreich's argument – rather than the sense of ease and peacefulness (“I am clear in my heart”) that allows Jake to let go of existential angst over Tim's welfare and to focus on decidedly moral qualities such as sincerity, honesty, compassion and generosity. Notably, the moral characteristics Jake wants to inculcate in Tim are exactly the characteristics that contemporary Chinese society – amidst its vocally pronounced moral crisis (Yunxiang Yan 2021a; Xu 2017) – is argued to be devoid of. Financial security also allows him to look at Tim's education from a *wertrational* perspective, instead of a *zweckrational* one. Rather than having “high hopes/expectations” for Tim that he must get into a good university to secure a stable upper-class living, he only wants him to study only as long as finds inherent value in it.

### 6.3 Anywhere but China: chronic problems

This leads us to the question of why Sandy and Jake decided to leave behind their life “at the top” of Beijing for an uncanny destination such as Hungary. Jake explained: “You know, both my loved one and me, we both studied domestically (*guonei* 国内). And we both think that Chinese education [hesitates about how to express himself] is going in a bad direction... I think learning is effective if you find joy in it, if you enjoy the process of learning. But in China, learning became a great source of stress (*jinzhang* 紧张).” So, they sacrificed their successful careers in China partly to break free from a soul-numbing system of education that would turn

Tim into a “study machine” and to provide him instead with a more relaxed and freer educational environment where learning is a source of inherent enjoyment that they see as conducive to Tim’s happiness, creativity, and autonomy. Regarding “wholesome development,” practically anywhere was better than China.

Besides the mental and moral environment contingent on the educational system, similar to Yunxia, the Chen couple was also very much concerned about the deteriorated physical environment of Beijing. Air pollution (*wumai* 雾霾) was so severe in Beijing around the time when Tim was born that it caused a chronic cough for the baby. As new parents, they were tormented and took him to all sorts of medical checkups and examinations, and tried many different medicines, to no effect.

“We tried everything, we spent half of his life in hospitals, but nothing helped. We realized the problem was chronic, and we were like, we have to do something about this! So we decided to leave. You know in the winter, the smog is so extreme, that you can see it with your eyes. My mom lives on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor, and in the winter, she doesn’t see anything when she looks out from the window, it’s like living in a cloud. So, bad air quality was among the main reasons to leave.”

As Jake pointed out, for better air quality, they could simply move to another city within South China, but they reasoned that “there is not much difference in moving to another city, or another country, we have to start from scratch anyhow. And then, it made more sense to move abroad.” Unlike most of my other acquaintances and interviewees, probably related to his being an only child, Jake was much more willing to shift the center of the narrative from Tim to himself and Sandy and construe what their own motivations were for leaving their accomplished lives behind:

The third reason for moving was me and my loved one. We were already over 30 years old, and we were wondering about the future – and didn’t really know where it was. I had been working at a big company for many years by that time and still didn’t get the promotion I wanted, because others had better connections. I was very disappointed,

thinking okay, I keep working here for two more years, five more years, doing the same thing every day, and this made me feel bad. I also experienced a great deal of pressure during this period, which I found difficult to bear. You keep worrying about a lot of things, but for what reason? In China, you have to pay the mortgage, the car lease, and the kindergarten. On top of all this comes the prices of the extracurriculars, and even if your salary is high, it's just way too much to pay. You don't have savings, and you worry about losing your job, even if you really hate it because you know it would be very difficult to find something that pays just as well. So, on top of being depressed and hating your job, you can't even think about stopping. So, this was the pressure, the feeling that I hated. So, I thought we should go abroad, not only for my son but also for ourselves.

This honest description of his life and career in Beijing imbued with injustice, anxiety, and depression casts light on the harsh price of what it takes to make a middle-class living in the capital of an emerging global superpower. The escalating prices of reproduction in the form of housing and education compel people to engage in arduous production but deprive them the choice of changing. Through this narrative, Jake points to the inherent contradiction in capitalism between capital accumulation and social reproduction and presents a personal glimpse into what it feels like to live under capitalism as the ouroboros “eats its own tail” (Fraser 2016). It portrays a life of an involuted rat race in which pressure is constantly rising while the rules of getting along are set by overt nepotism, a life that brings neither joy nor meaning but only agony. As Jake emphatically states, they were yearning for a breath of fresh air and wanted to imagine a future for themselves that was different from their present.

The above-cited motivations by no means narrow down the Chen's options for relocation to Hungary, and to be sure, it was not among their first ideas. Initially, Jake, “like most people” also wanted to go to the USA and filed an EB 5 application with the help of a migration agency:

Because at that time I thought I want to go to an English-speaking country, because Hungarian... We didn't want to go to a “small language country” like Hungary, not because it's not good, but simply because I can't speak the language. You know my English is okay, I can communicate. And without that, I think life is too difficult. So that's why initially we were thinking about English countries, not because they are big or strong or something.



Jake places heavy emphasis on the pragmatic nature of this choice – speaking the local language simply makes life easier – and presses that although he is fully aware of the imaginary of the global hierarchy (see Section 2.2.1.2), he did not have an intention to move upwards in it. However, because “in the USA, they don’t really like my industry, they assume we would all be spying,” after three years of waiting, their application was rejected, and the Chen’s needed to look for a destination that fostered better relations with China.

## 6.4 Hungary as an emergency exit

By this time, the Chen couple felt an urge to make a quick move out, as Tim was about to reach school age making them feel they were “running out of time.” Instead of making the most not to let Tim lose “before the starting line,” they wanted to remove him from the racetrack altogether, and timing was of essence in this matter. Their approach attests to a strong determination to take the child’s psychological well-being very seriously: they wanted to spare Tim the trauma the language shift would inevitably cause and argued that the smaller the child is, the easier it is for him to learn a new language. As Jake explained: “That way, he has a year to learn the language before starting school. I think that immediately jumping into school, the language barrier was too big, and the pressure on him would have been overwhelming. I think it’s really painful for them [migrant children]. My idea was that you have to make a good plan, and then carry it out, to make the kid more or less comfortable.” Thus, they wanted to relocate for Tim’s last year in kindergarten, giving him enough time and space to learn the language of whichever country they would end up in precisely to ensure his emotional wellbeing.

Time pressure being his central concern, he turned to the migration agency again, and asked “which countries were relatively easy to go out to, and which one was relatively quick.” Their broker had Greece and Malta on offer at that time, but Jake discarded both options as “good

for travel, bad for living.” Akin to the participants quoted in the previous chapter, he rejected Greece on the ground that it had a poor economy and a poor government, while society-wise, he found it to be too complicated (*fuza* 复杂), because “there are many Muslims there, so you would think there is a big difference in beliefs.” And lastly, in terms of public security, it also made an impression on him that it leaves something to be desired, as thieves and pickpockets are all over the place.

Apart from the Muslims, his rejection of Malta rested on similar grounds: a lacking economy that exclusively depended on tourism coupled with bad public security. Moreover, Malta seemed claustrophobically small to him: “I remember the repulsion I felt the first time we went to visit, I felt I really didn’t want to live here. How can you spend your days in such a confined space, where can you venture on such a tiny island? Even trying to imagine [living there] drives me crazy. You know how much I love to travel and explore new places! I had a friend who moved there: he lasted for two years and returned.” On the one hand, Jake’s racial/ethnic preferences (articulated as the absence of Muslims) as well as public security concerns echo Yunxia’s point of view and suggest the presence of a common understanding among would-be migrants on the necessary preconditions that make a destination desirable. On the other hand, Jake’s decision to rule out other, “more developed” countries such as France or Germany on the ground that they do not have an investment immigration option and would “only grant long-term residence if you go to work” was quite unique. Jake estimated the costs of “even pretending to work” to be too high to pay when weighed against benefit of escaping from China.

At this point, all the options the agency offered were either undesirable for offering residence in a country that was “for travel and not for living” such as Greece, and Malta also including Portugal and Spain, or unfeasible such as the USA or other “developed countries.” It was in

this moment of unresolvedness that he first learned about the opportunity presented by the Hungarian *guozhai jiemu* from a former teacher of his from Tianjin. First and foremost, the program fulfilled Jake's priority condition about quickness. Second, the program also presented itself as a trustworthy barter: if you paid the money, you got your residence permit in exchange. This was an important aspect since the burgeoning migration industry has been paralleled by an increase in migration fraud. Jake's recount of the way he got acquainted with the program heavily centers on it coming from a trustworthy source:

I heard about the program from one of my previous teachers from Tianjin. Her daughter studied medicine in the UK and she wanted to have residency in an EU country to make visiting her daughter easier. By this time, she already had the [Hungarian] residence permit, and this contributed to my trust in the program, that is for sure. After all, you pay a lot of money to strangers, and you never know if it's a fraud, until someone has direct experience to prove otherwise. [Financial] security was very important to me; I wouldn't want to lose that much money.

Indicating a sense of lingering uncertainty and heedful of long-term commitment, instead of paying the full amount of 300.000 euros that would be hypothetically recovered after five years, Jake chose another option – completely unknown to the Hungarian public– of paying 170.000 euros which does not get refunded. By carefully assessing the scheme, he was among the few people among the Chinese buyers who realized that the other party in the contract was not the Hungarian state, but an intermediary. He saw no guarantee that after the course of five years, this intermediary would still be around to refund him. Therefore, he opted to invest the remainder of his funds in apartments in Budapest and finds it very funny that, with the escalating real estate prices, if he sold his apartments after five years “the residency bond was practically for free for [him].”

Jake chose Hungary not because the country signified any sort of symbolic meaning that attracted him – as for example, Goa does for German middle-class youth (Korpela 2010) –

contrarywise, he, like most kindred spirits, hardly knew anything about the country prior to migration. Instead of promising symbolic or material return for their investment, Hungary provided something else to Jake and other would-be migrants: a simple, relatively cheap, and most importantly quick way out from China, unmatched by any other investor immigrant schemes offered by a wide range of countries. This aligns him with the considerable segment of China's newly affluent classes for whom "out-migration [is] the ultimate intention behind migration," as Xiang puts it ( 2015, 287). In these cases, the predominant desire to emigrate renders the choice of destination a secondary matter.

## **6.5 Choosing Hungary: a “relatively traditional, relatively religious country”**

Therefore, the work of attributing symbolic meaning to Hungary and framing it as a desirable destination, turning contingency into choice, was postponed after their relocation took place in 2017, shortly after receiving their residence permits. Before making their final move, Sandy and Jake enjoyed a romantic holiday in Budapest, where they assessed the conditions and scouted opportunities for their impending new life. Renting an Airbnb close to Oktogon, one of the central nodes of the city, they hopped on and off the trams and buses, and toured Budapest. The city made a good impression on them: they found it beautiful, safe, cheap, and relatively clean. They enjoyed the vibrant ambiance of the Oktogon so much that it was the main reference point in choosing their first family home which they found in a traditional hanging corridor tenement building located in a crowded area on the periphery of downtown Budapest: a second-floor apartment, “big enough to play badminton in it” and to potentially host grandparents long-term in a guest room.

Their social environment, friends, and parents, however, were all very skeptical about their decision, making the work of meaning-making a more salient and challenging one:

When I told others that we were going to move to Hungary, well, they were not very optimistic... Many thought that those who moved away from China should go to a better place. If we think about the United States, that's a better place, Canada, and Australia, are better places. England, the Netherlands, and Germany, those might be the best places, but many thought that there was quite a gap between Western Europe and Central-Eastern Europe. They didn't understand the point of moving to Hungary, a very small country with a very difficult language, and moreover, not too many job opportunities.

This recount also attests to *downscaling* being a very self-conscious dimension underlying their choice, and not a matter of accident. So, what *was* the point of moving to such a country? Jake did find many reasons in favor of Hungary, on top of fulfilling the necessary but insufficient preconditions of a country “to live and not to travel” (being within easy reach and having strong public security – manifest in the lack of thieves, homeless, or Muslims). The most salient among these was the lack of discrimination, which he attributed to two sources: the catholic tradition of the country and the benign intergovernmental relations fostered by Orbán and Xi. Though rather critical of both governments, Jake saw diplomatic relations as a necessary precondition of having a harassment-free life – a precondition that practically all “developed” countries in the West fail to fulfill in the current geopolitical environment.

The existence of a sizable Chinese diaspora in Hungary for decades also contributed to his optimism in Hungary being a country without anti-Chinese sentiments. On pragmatic terms, he also found the presence of an established diaspora as very “fortunate” in terms of aiding their entry and initial integration into the country: “When we first arrived, they [old Chinese immigrants] helped us a lot: there were Chinese real estate agents who helped us buying homes or looking for a kindergarten. We didn't speak Hungarian, and we could easily find interpreters who not only spoke the language but also raised their children here. So, when we first came,

we found it very fortunate to find here so many Chinese people.” These “old migrants” (*lao yimin* 老移民), on the one hand, authenticated that Chinese people could get along in Hungary, while on the other hand, they could fill in the void of the absentee Hungarian state in matters of integration.

However, initially, the lack of discrimination and the supposed Catholic morality of Hungarian society did not make up for *downscaling* to an underdeveloped country with a poor economy in the Chen couple’s eyes. After obtaining their residence permits in 2017, Jake and Sandy instantly wanted to utilize the opportunity provided by the permit to be more mobile within the EU and seriously entertained the idea of moving a bit westward to a “better,” more “developed” environment, laying their eyes on Austria. However, when they took a trip to Vienna to buy an apartment and generally assess the environment, Jake had an epiphany on a Viennese playground where Tim got harassed by a local child whose mother got into an overtly racist fight with Jake:

I think if you are a kid, and your classmates, your friends say you should go back to your country, this is psychologically damaging (*dui xinli shanghai* 对心理的伤害). At that time, I decided that the country where I wanted to live might not be as developed, it might not be perfect. But I want to live in a country where people are friendly (*youshan* 友善), and polite (*limao de* 礼貌的). I think, especially for little children, this is the most important.

This incident led him to realize that more important than a country's status in the global hierarchy was the moral quality of its society. He once again underscored the significant role of the psychological perspective, emphasizing the importance of societal morality especially in its relationship with children. Interestingly, despite its notorious reputation for high levels of xenophobia, Hungary outcompeted other countries in appeal, not only in Jake’s opinion but also in the view of many others. Since Jake was very much disillusioned by politics, he attributed this to a more religious reason:

Although my family is not religious, at that time I wanted to choose a relatively traditional (*bijiao chuantong de* 比较传统的), and relatively religious (*you xinyang de* 有信仰的) country. Because I think people in a religious country, most of them, they should be good, because they believe in God, and they think that their acts have consequences. So, they more or less have morals, and don't do bad stuff."

Interestingly, he starts by emphatically asserting that his family is *not* religious, and by that, he shifts the argument about religion to a more secular ground of moral culture. Jake presented a very similar argument to what Yunxia interpreted by the reappropriation of the *suzhi* discourse but using the language of religion as moral culture. On this ground of moral culture, he contrasted Hungary's supposed Catholicism not with Islam (which he found to be a deeply troubling belief as indicated earlier) but with the Protestantism of more developed Western countries like Germany and the USA. The disturbing scene on the Viennese playground also stood as an example for this, leading him to conclude that people in Protestant countries are not as "good" as the supposedly Catholic populations of Hungary. This moral and social environment presented a central element in his work of framing Hungary as a meaningful and legitimate decision:

If you live abroad, especially with kids, it really isn't easy, it's extremely challenging. So, if you run into people who are friendly and willing to help, you feel very grateful and very lucky, very happy. So, I am very content with Hungary. When people ask me what I mean by that, I always have trouble explaining it, but it's basically like this, it is a warm place. My neighbors, and my fellow parents, give us so much warmth that we don't feel lonely at all – not like in China, where you are very lonely.

Here, the supportiveness and accommodating atmosphere provided by their narrow Hungarian environment embodied by neighbors and schoolmates, with a somewhat unexpected leap in his train of thought, gets contrasted with the estranged experience of contemporary urban China. Jake experienced the social texture of his immediate environment in Hungary to be more densely knit, consisting of more meaningful relationships which he accorded to the overall Catholic moral quality of society. Integration into this society was not an empty slogan to him,

but a guiding principle in his life and in the choices he made for Tim, which I will explore in introducing his educational career.

Upon my repeated attempts to challenge his insistence on the benevolent and gracious nature of Hungarians, trying to solicit his negative experiences Jake responded: “We used to have this Hungarian teacher for years, he is a Jesuit and he asked me what I think of Hungarians. I said they were fine. He was like really; don’t you know that most of them hate you? I was like really, they do? I never thought so. I think God (*laotian* 老天) takes care of us, every hardship we came over with quite an ease, with the help of friendly Hungarians.” However, as Jake himself remarked, his friends are not “ordinary” Hungarians, but “are all highly qualified, educated people,” adding that “those people who are less educated might be racist, but I decided not to care too much about them.” His logic in distinguishing between “highly educated” and “less educated people” echoes Yunxia’s classification of people as either having or not having culture, but Jake employs this parameter to strategically integrate into a specific slice of Hungarian society, simultaneously implying preference and a precaution to avoid racism. He often invited his “highly educated friends” to try and taste special Chinese meals he prepared, while discussing questions of Hungarian, Chinese, and international politics and economics.

### **6.5.1 Geoarbitrage on a *wertrational* basis**

Besides these morally guided motives, Jake did not hide his crudely economic, *zweckrational* considerations under a bushel either. Like most others, he also emphasized the significance of affordable living costs, the low prices of housing, utilities, and food – at least in 2017. Doing so, his rationale for *downscaling* also entailed the element of *geoarbitrage*, narrowly defined as enhancing one’s quality of life by moving to a cheaper living environment, albeit with a remarkable twist:



But of course, would I have moved to a slightly more developed place, it's an important consideration that I had to start everything from scratch. You have to answer the question of how you will be able to make a living there. This is a tremendously important question. My cousin lives in Germany. He called me several times to go there. But had I gone there, my quality of life would not be the same as it is here. Consider my current situation: there is no pressure on me, I can be at home, and I can take care of my child all day. Sometimes I think that my son is very lucky that his father accompanies him throughout his entire childhood.

Notably, in this particular articulation of *geoarbitrage*, Jake defines his quality of life by his ability to be a stay-at-home dad, a lifestyle he could not have afforded had they moved to a more expensive living environment. Ironically, the poor economic prospects in Hungary presented an attractive feature not only in the sense that they did not necessitate “going out to work,” but even more so in making “going out to work” look completely irrational and outright ridiculous in Jake’s eyes. This configuration enabled him to embrace child-centeredness – in the place of work-centeredness – not just as a feasible but indeed a more rational alternative:

When I first arrived, I really felt like Hungarian salaries were ridiculously low, because the salary I had before was multiple times than what I would get here. And my prospects seemed hopeless since I didn’t speak Hungarian. This made me think: do I really need to go out to work for that little money? Honestly, my situation wasn’t like I’d starve to death if I didn’t work for that little money. There was another important reason: My goal for the first year was to familiarize myself with this country and with this environment. There were a lot of things I didn’t understand when I first came, like schools, etc. I wanted to take care of the child’s things first. Find him a school, a music teacher, a Hungarian teacher, etc. There was really a lot to do. It didn’t make sense to start working, from a disadvantaged position, and for little money. Putting the child in the center (*yi haizi wei zhongxin* 以孩子为中心) made much more sense.

Hungary's low cost of living allowed Jake to stop working, providing Tim with not only a childhood that is freer and more relaxed, but also one in which his father is always present. And the presence he strives to establish is one of “company” and comradeship, in his words “more like a brother than a father.” As this wording implies, he desires a more horizontal and intimate relationship, “where there are no taboos, and everything can be discussed.”

Although research on fatherhood in China from the past decade suggests that understandings of the paternal role and fatherly involvement have shifted from a detached disciplinary figure to one that embraces a more intimate and nurturing relationship with the child (see Jankowiak 2002; 2021; X. Li 2018), Jake’s decision to fully overtake the role of the primary caretaker is far from being typical. On the contrary, analyses of the impact of the transition to the market economy on Chinese women indicate a sharp decline in their labor market participation, mostly attributed to social expectations regarding the gendered division between career and family preferring women to choose the latter (Saizi Xiao and Asadullah 2020). In urban China, however, where women are joining the labor force in increasing numbers because of the escalating costs of living, they do so without any significant change in the traditional gender division of labor, and women still take primary responsibility for household chores (X. Li and Michael 2015).

In summary, Jake justified the unlikely choice of Hungary with claims of a morally, socially, and physically purer environment than China or other destination countries. Most importantly, he employed *temporal-geoarbitrage* and conceived his move as breaking free from the temporal and financial pressures of pursuing a middle-class lifestyle in China to become a full-time dad in Hungary instead.

## 6.6 Becoming a “house dad”

One of the first expressions in Jake’s developing Hungarian vocabulary was “*háziapa*,” which literally translates to “house dad.” This expression does not enjoy wide popularity among native speakers – in fact, I am not sure whether I have ever heard it before coming out of Jake’s mouth. The reason for this most likely is that the phenomenon it signifies barely exists. Contrary to the widespread perception shared and voiced by many female participants in this

study, most fathers in Hungary engage in chores related to the household and child-rearing on a proportionally smaller scale than their female counterparts, and cases in which they entirely give up their careers for the sake of caring for a young child and supporting their spouses' career ambitions are few and far between.

The perception of Hungarian fathers as caring and deeply engaging with their children was nonetheless a recurring object of attraction and envy among mothers in the *Home Educational Sharing Salon* chatgroup as well. One day, Yu *Laoshi*, the group's administrator casually posted a message about "a tall, strong, and handsome Hungarian dad" she passed by as she was driving back home, "holding a cute little daughter in his hand. The contrast [with Chinese dads] is so huge and enviable, Chinese dads are always too busy." The way Yu *Laoshi* presented the image of this man interestingly combines elements of unmistakable masculinity carrying a moderately sexualized undertone (tall, strong, handsome) with his emphatic presence as a father (holding his daughter), implying the emergence of a novel version of masculine appeal. Is he desirable as a dad, or is he desirable as a man? Or is it the man-dad altogether, who is desirable? And what is the property he possesses that appears insurmountable when compared with Chinese dads? Are they not as "tall, strong, and handsome" or are they not holding their daughters in their sturdy hands enough? The concluding remark "Chinese dads are always too busy" points to the notion of time, suggesting that Hungarian dads have more time in their budget for family purposes than their Chinese counterparts.

This message unleashed a flood of emotions, triggering a great many mothers to respond and express their feelings about comparing Chinese and Hungarian (or in many cases, generally "foreign" *laowai* 老外) fathers. They zealously exchanged their experiences and impressions gained in their educational environments or the looks they sneaked on neighbors. Some of the

commenters held a generalized view of foreign fatherhood, for example as presented by the quickest responses: “When I came, I was amazed by how many Hungarian dads are taking care of children, it is so cute [in love emoji].” Without much nuance, this mother simply notes the difference in volume while also aligning herself with the attraction articulated in Yu *Laoshi*’s original posting, celebrating the “hot dad” as a new idol.

Another mom offered a more specific experience, sharing her observations from over the fence of her neighbor’s garden: “I have two children, my [Hungarian] neighbor has three. And the dad is out there playing with the kids in the garden *every single day*. As a consequence, my two [children] ask, why daddy is never playing with us? This dad is too good, it makes my kids jealous. The contrast is too big”- she confirmed. This mother, instead of speaking of her own feelings (be it envy or attraction) toward the Hungarian dad and her own husband, centered on the emotions of her children, claiming that it is them who are jealous for not having a dad who plays with them. Interestingly, she frames her children’s desire for fatherly intimacy not as natural, but sarcastically blames it on the neighbor dad for being too good and thus inducing it.

The image of the father-of-three constantly entertaining his kids in the garden made another mom raise the question, how come “foreigner dads do not have to go out to earn money?” By doing so, she made the connection between time and fatherhood implied by Yu *Laoshi*’s original comment explicit. This question points to the heart of the zero-sum nature of time: a dad either spends his time making money or with his children – you cannot have both at the same time. A unified stream of responses urged for the rescue of Hungarian dad’s honor, expressing in different forms that Hungarian dads do go out to earn money – and thus fulfill the gendered expectations of being a breadwinner – but, unlike Chinese dads, *after* getting home from work “they don’t only sit on the couch, head deeply sunk in the phone,” but

meaningfully engage with their children. As one mother claimed reinforcingly, “In Chinese families, every responsibility belongs to the mother. The dad is on the side holding his phone.”

The instinctively defensive response to the proposal that Hungarian dads are so good with children because they are so bad at work (i.e., not work at all) suggests that ideally, these mothers do want their husbands working but less, and they also want them to be more with children. This discussion made it clear that for the educated middle-class women who raise their families in Hungary, there is an explicit desire to transform the gendered division of labor, and none seemed threatened in their maternal identities by the potential contribution of their male spouses by forming more intimate bonds with their children. On the contrary, they articulated this matter as an unfulfilled desire.

Against this background, Jake’s choice to switch roles with Sandy appears to be even more unconventional. In the beginning, Jake saw his decision to overtake the role of homemaking not only as a way to provide Tim with unlimited fatherly intimacy but also as a way to support Sandy’s career ambitions. Shortly after they got settled, Sandy found employment in a Chinese company run by “old immigrants” that oversees the accounting of Chinese wholesale trade going through the logistical hub of Hungary. By the time I got to know the Chens in 2019, Sandy’s career was already highly profitable, but, as Jake argued, beyond that it also “served her growth as a person.” Given their distribution of household chores, I barely got to know Sandy: her career ambitions demanded most of her time and she rarely made appearances in the school or the after-school playground hanging outs, and even at the dinner play-dates Jake organized in their home. Whenever I got to see her, she was always very pretty, dressed in the global smart casual uniform of ambitious women. She kept herself fit by jogging every day before setting out to work.

Initially, Jake did not find anything objectionable about Sandy's career ambitions and the unusual reversal of the gendered division of labor they found themselves in: he liked hanging out with Tim and very much enjoyed going to the market and preparing delicious meals, and Sandy liked making money (*zhuan qian* 赚钱). Jake described Sandy in our first interview in 2019 as "(...) very easygoing, she is fine with everything, and I like that a lot. She is nothing like most women in China, fierce and having so many expectations, she really isn't like that. I could always be myself and be free beside her, and I really appreciate that." Instead of conceiving stepping back from his career and into the home as a sacrifice made for Sandy, he conceived it as something for which *he* should be grateful to Sandy. As shown, Jake found this reversal to be the rational course of affairs and, instead of a sacrifice, he felt a sense of liberation from the yokes of meaningless and/or unrewarding work and threw himself into child-rearing and housekeeping with authentic enthusiasm.

He has been in charge of everything related to running the household and rearing the child. In the morning, he takes Tim to school, and as he gets back home, he tidies up a bit and cleans the house. When the house is spick and span, he sets out to one of the traditional market halls located in the atmospheric ambient of the close by park to buy fresh vegetables, fruits, and meat from local producers – the ingredients for the dishes he prepares from Tim and Sandy. He is an enthusiastic and talented cook, a talent he likes to share not only with his immediate family but with his new and old friends, employing it an important tool for making and sustaining a community around him. After the meal for dinner is ready, he sets out again to pick up Tim from school and accompany him to his private class of the day: cello, hip-hop dance, or Hungarian. Then, at the end of the day, ideally, the family gathers around the dinner table, sharing their experiences of the day. In his private time, Jake has been attending

Hungarian class two times a week, signifying more so his *wertrational* willingness to integrate than a *zweckrational* intention for employment, as he sees no prospects in the Hungarian job market. Other than that, Jake has no scheduled obligations and likes spending his time around friends.

## 6.7 Postmaterialist child-rearing philosophy

As noted previously, Jake is different from most of my other respondents, because his singleton status (along with his wife's) means that they do not struggle with existential concerns. This enables them to focus on Tim's psychological well-being and moral development, using all resources to let him grow into a well-rounded adult leading a self-fulfilling life. Following the plan, Tim acquired fluent Hungarian during his two years in a Hungarian kindergarten, which Jake summed up in the following manner: "It [Tim's integration] worked quite well, he picked up the language in kindergarten without even noticing, it was so *easy*, not like the kids who come here directly to school. I think that's very hard, *ey*, you don't want to be in that situation, where you just don't understand a thing. My biggest fear was that if he doesn't speak the language, he can't make friends, and he would be very lonely (*gudu* 孤独)." Jake's repeated assertions – also matched with his actions – of the fundamental importance he attributed to Tim's ability to speak Hungarian did not lie in enhancing his "competitiveness" (he harbored no illusions regarding the value of Hungarian knowledge in the global social competition for status) but in *psychologically* defined goals: sparing him the "psychological damage" of being mute and deaf as a school-aged and thus more self-conscious child, and, his ability to "make friends." He saw learning Hungarian as an essential tool that allows Tim to fully integrate into society, by which he mostly understood the ability to form meaningful relationships.

What he wished was to provide Tim with a childhood he never had a chance to enjoy with free time that gave room to form friendships and pursue hobbies of his own choice, and to let his personality unfold in its own rhythm and on its own trajectory. Presenting a radical departure from his own upbringing in which education was framed as a life-or-death matter and the exclusive organizational principle of his life, he decidedly conceived education in Tim's life as an ancillary consideration, emphatically "not the purpose of [his] life." Jake's priorities reflect a strong commitment to cherish childhood as a special, never-returning period of life, to which different rules should apply:

Look, most of my Chinese friends who live here apply Chinese educational methods, but I don't. They have a lot of extra classes and private tutors; they live almost as if they were in China. But I think I wouldn't have had to move abroad to do that! In China, the school would end at 5 o'clock, Tom finishes his studies here around 3 o'clock, after that, he might play the cello, play basketball, and go here and there. But in China, after school hours, only tutoring for compulsory subjects would be possible, not sports and such. Then he goes home, where he has free time, and there is no homework, in China, he wouldn't have any free time until bedtime. I believe that while he is still so young, he can enjoy his childhood. He can do what he wants, he can be happy, we don't put any pressure on him, he can make friends. I believe that actually, grades are not the most important thing in the world, but abilities are. The ability to swim, to try out various sports, to play music, to speak languages. I think these are very important, but not the grades. It doesn't matter if they are average or excellent. I'm really not interested in that.

Distancing himself from Chinese parents both in Hungary and in the Mainland, Jake focuses the center of his narrative on the interdependence between time and autonomy. Chinese parents (apparently all over the world) in his interpretation appear to spend all their time on mandated, compulsory activities that leave no room for fostering personal inclinations. Standing in sharp contrast, he portrays Tim's life as abundant in free time, which he can devote either to structured activities that are emphatically of his own choice or to completely unstructured ones: "he can enjoy his childhood, do what he wants, be happy."



### 6.7.1 His own person

True to his word, for the first four years in school, Tim did not have any classes forced on him by his parents, not even Chinese or English, for they did not want to interrupt his process of acquiring Hungarian fully. Tim could do what he wanted, trying out different and relatively non-competitive sports like hip-hop dancing. Enabled by his free time, Tim's ability to choose activities that he enjoys was closely connected to the idea of his individual personality, the acknowledgment and cultivation of which was an emphatic concern for Jake. While Yunxia also recognized her children's "own way of thinking," to her this was a challenging and often controversial issue, Jake articulated the significance of developing an autonomous personality more explicitly and also represented a more consistent attitude toward it:

He might be a child, but he is also his own, independent person, and you have to respect that. And every independent person is different. Even though he is a kid, he has his own ideas and his own way of thinking, and I have to respect that. I can't always tell him that this is right and that is wrong, or that you have to do this or that. I think that isn't right. Because you are you and he is he, and we all think that our way of thinking is the right one, and I don't like thinking like that. Other than that basic level like he should not be committing crimes, I give him space where he can act freely. So, our relationship is very good, extremely good. The two of us, we are men. With men, you have to keep your word, (*yao shuohua suan hua* 要说话算话).

In contrast with Yunxia, Jake was very self-conscious regarding the consequences of treating Tim as an autonomous person comes at the cost of his parental authority. By drawing the boundary between legitimate and arbitrary parental authority around committing crimes, he set the bar for his own legitimate intervention very high, representing a willingness to bow to Tim's personal fulfillment. Despite the discomfort this often caused him, he persistently embraced the ideal of Tim as a coequal, while also adding a hint of gender to the ensuing intimacy between them as distinctly masculine ("the two of us, we are men"). As long as Tim was still a relatively small child, Jake's conception of their relationship as a male friendship seemed to work quite well. Tim was also a remarkably easygoing child, and completely

fulfilled the only expectations toward him of enjoying his childhood, making friends with everybody with a welcoming attitude.

### 6.7.2 Postmaterial investments

At the same time, Jake was very deliberate in instilling the right set of values in Tim and this largely revolved around shielding him from the excessive materialism of contemporary Chinese child-rearing. Despite they would have had the financial background to boost his – and consequently their own – status either by enrolling him in a private school or by equipping him with the latest trends in phones or clothes, Jake intentionally refrained from doing so:

My child-rearing philosophy is that I don't buy expensive name-brand clothes or expensive toys for him, I think that is meaningless/doesn't make sense (*mei yisi* 没意思). I always buy very ordinary clothes for him, for a few thousand forints. So if I invest (*touzi* 投资) in him I'd rather take him out, to let him see, let him experience. I think these are a lot more important than clothes, toys, and stuff like that. You see, Chinese parents always buy phones and iPads for their kids, but Tim doesn't have any of that. It's not like we couldn't afford it, I think those things are not important for him. Providing him with experiences is a lot more meaningful, it lets him understand the world more. You should use your time to enjoy yourself instead of spending that time on useless things.

When discussing his “child-rearing philosophy,” he – just like Yunxia did with the notion of *suzhi* – performs an exciting reappropriation of the notion of “investment,” and tailors it to his own purposes. The idea of “investment” in relation to children sprung up on the tailwater of the *suzhi* discourse that appraises the “the body [as] a site of investment through an entrepreneurialisation of the self” (Anagnost 2008, 512), acquiring distinct significance in the field of education which is increasingly interpreted and perceived as an investment in the future. Education represents a “changed ethical regime in China where state agendas to sustain high economic growth through investments in human capital improvement match up with private efforts to secure a ‘middle-class modern’ lifestyle through greater and greater expenditures in the name of educational success” (Crabb 2010, 387).

Reverting these official and popular claims almost to the extent of irony, Jake uses the expression to signify almost the opposite of its original meaning. After foregrounding education as a *wertrational* realm, the purpose of which is inherent enrichment and is understood as nothing more but a catalyst for forming meaningful relationships, he further discounts other monetary “investments” in the child as “meaningless.” Being the main organizer of the family’s holiday activities, much of which consists of hikes in close-by forests and seasonal “pick it yourself” fruit pickings across the countryside, Jake “invests” in Tim’s enrichment on markedly low budget terms, claiming that observing insects in the forest in the loving company of his parents is a better “investment” than handing him an iPad (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Tim reaps the fruits of their 'pick it yourself' activity. Photograph shared by Jake

## 6.8 Mother tongue Hungarian

The educational choices Jake made for Tim were also consistent with the principles he outlined as his child-rearing philosophy. While Tim was in kindergarten, he familiarized himself with the educational landscape of Budapest, searching for an institution that would “provide him with a free educational environment.” When choosing the small public elementary school where we got to meet each other, he relied on his neighbor’s native knowledge. This couple – glass artist DLAs – had a boy just the same age Tim was, and their artistic poise was a guarantee for Jake that they would be making the right choice when it came to tracing down the “freest” educational option nearby. Housed in an impressive though fairly dilapidated late 19th-century villa, the 6<sup>th</sup> district school they eventually opted for does not boast with a bilingual curriculum or any special feature, but only with a homey atmosphere and a small student body of only 360 pupils distributed across eight grades. Jake explained the rationale behind his decision as follows:

There are many Chinese, who wouldn’t have chosen this school, they would opt for the Hungarian German bilingual, or other international schools. Do you know why I didn’t want to enroll him in an international school? Because in international schools you only speak English all day, not a word of Hungarian. But what if he wants to live here when he grows up, how bitter his life would be without the language, without friends? So, I said the minimum is that he does elementary schooling in Hungarian, to integrate, learn the language, and have Hungarian friends. [When choosing this school,] I focused more on the teachers, classmates, and the whole environment of the school. I didn’t care about how “good” the school was, because I don’t expect him to study exceptionally well, I just want him to have friendly classmates and kind teachers; that would be enough for me. What I’m not very satisfied with is the “hardware” – the school facilities, and the school’s [physical] environment. The whole environment is a bit run down, and there is no modern equipment, resources for teaching – you don’t really have that cutting edge feeling [*we laugh about this as the school is far from being cutting edge –if the century-old blackboard has a new coating count as progress*]. But for us, that’s not the most important. For us, the most important are teachers, classmates, and classmates’ parents.

His approach to distinguishing between surface and content, looks and inner values, and his clear priority toward the latter evokes Yunxia’s general assessment of Budapest. However,

unlike for Yunxia, for Jake, the school does not represent a cosmopolitan ideal but is construed markedly as home, where Tim can truly take his roots. He interprets the primary function of the school as a means to serve this end, and by that contrasts his own attitude with “most Chinese parents” who opt for well-equipped international educational institutions that would prompt more transnational trajectories (cf. Nyíri 2014b). The comparison with Chinese parents who pursue transnational educational careers for their children also underscores his awareness of the limited practical value of investing in learning Hungarian. While pointing out that the “hardware,” the material preconditions for excellent education are lacking, he also dismisses this as an irrelevant aspect in his assessment, since what was more important to him was the social environment that served a more important purpose: Tim’s integration.

This environment, consisting of “teachers, classmates, and classmates’ parents” is also arbitered according to moral criteria such as “kindness” and “friendliness.” These moral qualities are hoped to guarantee a discrimination-free environment, while also point to the particular crowd into which he imagined Tim’s – and his own – integration to be one that exhibits certain traits of “having culture.” Ranging from glass artists through actors to astronomers, the crowd of parents waiting every day in front of the school for their children to emerge was indeed a selected one, as I also came to realize on school career days where I got present as a social scientist in between a textile artist and an evangelical priestess. Despite its public status and operation based on school district assignment, this school attracted a distinctly intellectual middle-class crowd, striking a chord with Jake’s ideal. By the end of the first year, he concluded that it was indeed the right decision to enroll Tim in this class because Tim “fitt[ed] very well in with classmates. I think he is just the same as his Hungarian peers, I don’t have any feeling that he would be different in any way.”

However, living a slow-paced, relaxed life proved to be increasingly stressful for him, much like for Yunxia:

When we came here, I just wanted to provide him with a free educational environment. But when I see the children of relatives who study in China and are almost the same age as Tim, I feel that they already know almost everything. They have learned a lot, and Tim - really nothing at all. So sometimes I worry a bit about this. Sometimes I feel that the fault is with me, because sometimes I am glad that he has a free childhood, and other times I ask him to study more. Maybe the problem is with me, I admit that.

But, in contradistinction to Yunxia, he realized that the source of the contradiction lay in his own controversial approach and was not a character flaw of Tim. Nevertheless, conflicts between the two were increasingly frequent, and Jake also grew more discontented with how things in the school proceeded. While he channeled his discontent to teachers' behavior which he started to see as increasingly disconnected and irresponsible, I also heard troublesome news from my son.

With the Covid pandemic being a determinative force throughout their early school years, some of the kids in class began developing strong anti-Chinese sentiments, taunting Tim as a "virus" and playing cruel games of exclusion. Since schools were shut down shortly after, these proceedings came to a fortunately abrupt end. With the pandemic quieting down, explicit expressions of anti-Chinese sentiments also subsided, but Tim remained a subject of suspicion among his peers when schools reopened. As they were fourth graders, conflicts revolved around group formations for competitions and little objects that had gone missing in the classroom, with Tim being the usual suspect of both unwelcome intrusions, treacheries, and theft. To my greatest surprise, a few peer-mothers joined in these markedly cruel and racist games, appearing as self-appointed inspectors on these matters between children, contributing to the incitement of anti-Tim sentiments. All things adding up, Jake decided to transfer Tim to another school, this time opting for a new, relatively expensive private institution offering a

Hungarian English bilingual curriculum in one of the well-off neighborhoods on the Buda side.

He argued:

State schools might be good in the primary grades because the main point there is to play and learn through playing. But I think that in the higher grades, there are not enough teachers in the state elementary schools. And this is also why I just took him out of the state school and transferred him to a private school. I think the future of the country lies in education. That's why I don't understand why the government pays teachers so little and why it doesn't give money to support the schools. I think if education is good, then the future of the country can be bright. I didn't know this when I came here. Some told me not to worry about it, that education here is very free, the children are constantly playing, and they can gain knowledge from playing. I think, maybe this is true for the lower grades, but after the fifth, and sixth grades, the difference is very visible.

While Yunxia, like many other parents I got to know failed to realize that the problems they were facing in school were systemic and kept trying different options in Hungarian public education, Jake posited a very apt and well-founded view on the crisis of the education system, attesting to his advanced level of integration and news-literacy. By framing the problem as structural, he displaced personal responsibilities and grievances to a higher and more detached level of analysis. His accurate summary of a dysfunctional state education system also gets intertwined with Tim's aging and his consequently transforming view of what he finds appropriate regarding Tim's age.

About to reach the age of 10, Jake no longer considered Tim's prime responsibility to be enjoying himself. Instead, by this time Jake perceived that Tim should start preparing for his future. Despite his marked attempt to integrate into Hungarian (highly educated) society involving both arduous and casual efforts, Jake never went so far in attributing meaning to living in Hungary that it would be his chosen home where he would spend the rest of his life. Just like Yunxia, he sees it as a great decision for the present, emphatically without future commitment. Preparing for the future, however, was far from being straightforward given the

multitude of contingencies that might make the future take unpredictable turns. Just like before he departed from China, he was not sure “where [their] future was.”

To be honest, we are foreigners, and I can't guarantee where our future is. So, I thought we should be better prepared for this. For example, if we leave Hungary, then Hungarian is useless. How could he integrate into a new country if he only speaks Hungarian, or say, what if he goes back to China? Tim speaks a bit of Chinese, but he can only write very few words. So, if we go back to China, there's a problem. If we don't stay in Hungary, let's say we move to Austria or Germany, then the language is new, so that's problematic too. So, what can we do? We have to prepare him better, that's why English, I think, is very important. But in the state school, they learned very slowly. They might have only two English lessons a week. It makes total sense why there are so many Hungarian people who can't speak English well.

In this very uncertain outline of the future where an open-ended variety of options seem to offer not much of a compass for navigation, one's best bet remains English. Among all of its shortcomings, the public school's failure to deliver English became the major one. Not the least, pointing to the lack of English as the main problem can be easily communicated to headteachers when discussing Tim's departure from the class, far easier than tackling the issues of discrimination and the way it got mishandled by teachers. This diplomatic, yet honest and pragmatic ploy enabled Tim and Jake to part on good terms and preserve a good relationship with those they valued, while sparing them from confrontation with individuals they considered toxic and unworthy. Jake invested significant efforts in maintaining these meaningful relationships with peers and parents after their departure and also tried his best to secure a psychologically smooth transition for Tim by continuing his basketball training in this school, letting him return every week ever since his departure.

Notably, Jake nevertheless kept Hungary as a hugely potential future option if not for himself, but for Tim. In searching for his new, better equipped, higher standard, enhanced English educational environment, he only consulted options that offered a bilingual Hungarian English



curriculum. As he argued, preserving Hungarian was an important aspect from an emotional point of view, underscoring the importance of belonging:

I believe, perhaps Tom, since he moved from China at the age of four, doesn't even know Chinese life. I don't think he knows too much about China. So, I think, since he lives here, the Hungarian language is crucial for him to integrate into Hungarian society. If he doesn't speak Hungarian, how could he make friends and study here? You know, he believes he is quasi-Hungarian, so the Hungarian language is also very important to him. And this is why I didn't choose an international school for him because I think now he has been speaking Hungarian for six years, and if he goes to an international school speaking English all day, in two to three years, he will forget a lot.

The new school provided Jake with an ambiguous experience, while it had remarkably little impact on Tim, who once again attested to how easygoing he was about everything. Initially Jake was very happy that Chinese parents from whom he tried hard to distance himself had not yet discovered this new institution, and there was only one Chinese student enrolled in the school by the time Tim was transferred. While he encouraged me to transfer my children praising the great “service” the school provides, he emphatically asked me not to tell my Chinese friends about it, fearing it would gain traction in the diaspora. The majority of parents in the school were Hungarian but represented a different crowd from the previous one, by being wealthier and consisting “mostly of dentists and lawyers,” living in luxurious villas in the most expensive housing areas of the Buda hills.

Jake described the new educational environment as an epitome of happy education: “The atmosphere is very encouraging; the teacher makes *everybody feel special* – I guess this is what you pay an extra price for,” he added laughingly with an exaggerated intonation pointing out the self-contradiction in “everybody being special,” suggesting a hint of irony. He was very contented with the “excellent service” the school provided and characterized the features that the price of commodified education included as emotional extras: the considerate and communicative attitude of teachers, thinking of everything to make both parents' and children's

lives pleasant. Education was also more demanding, and there were a lot of project-style homework assignments that also made heavy demands on his own time.

Although the school fulfilled Jake's expectations of a happy educational environment, however, he was not entirely happy with the social environment it entailed. From the beginning he expressed having qualms with the prevailing morals among parents he judged to be overtly materialistic, as well as with the apparent lack of community feeling. He sat down multiple times with Tim to make sure that he understood that he was not in this school "to compare who has more expensive shoes, but to learn." Unlike in our public school, in this private one kids were always chauffeured to and from school, leaving little room for community activities or simply hanging out together after school. Jake also expressed his concerns about the parents' ostentatiousness and their unreflected indulgence of and selfish preoccupation with children.

He also noted that given that education was a commodity in this context, these parents tended to behave like "pushy customers," who had no other concern than their own child's interest, displaying disrespect for all other parties concerned (other children and their parents, teachers, or the institution), and kept pressing the school to fulfill their individualistic demands. When one of the "crazy rich girl's" mom, "a lawyer for god's sake," made the principal expel a new boy on his third day for saying something dirty to her daughter, Jake began developing a serious discomfort with this community. But the last straw came a year after when all the pushy dentists and lawyers began pressing the school to cut back on English for the sake of enhancing preparations for the Hungarian high school admission exam. Their feverish urge to enhance their children's competitiveness in getting into the most prestigious Hungarian high schools was too much of a reminder of the environment Jake wanted to leave behind. Jake commented that being a market service provider, the principal did not really have a choice other than to

please his best-paying customers even at the cost of modifying the school's curriculum, while leaving them with no other choice than transferring school once again.

This time the private international school they chose was lower key, located in the Pest side, and attracted a more international crowd from more diverse backgrounds. Notably, it also offers a Hungarian and English bilingual curriculum, attesting to Jake's commitment to preserving Hungarian as Tim's mother tongue. This school has fulfilled Jake's expectations by not being as flamboyant as the one in Buda, while also delivering more English. Tim, having the "whatever goes personality" seemed to be completely untroubled by changing his communities – in which Jake hoped him so much to be embedded – rather frequently. Jake sometimes wondered whether this was normal: he never missed his previous friends and nor did he seemed to care much about the meaningful relationships Jake finds so important. Nevertheless, if not to particular people, over the years Tim has developed a strong attachment to Hungary, about which Jake had no reservations:

I really think he has a very, very good life here. Look, Tim thinks he is a Hungarian person, he identifies himself as Hungarian. It's very funny... He doesn't think there's much difference between him and his classmates, and he considers himself Hungarian. But I think this is okay because when he came here, he was only four years old and now he has spent more than six years in Hungary. And he doesn't have too many ideas or memories of what life in China was like. So, in his memory, his whole life happened here. Probably that's why he considers himself Hungarian. Sometimes he refuses to learn Chinese, saying there is no point: he doesn't use it during the day, he speaks with classmates in Hungarian and English, and he doesn't speak Chinese with anyone. He asks why should he learn Chinese then? I tell him it's because you are Chinese, but he doesn't agree with me. He thinks he is Hungarian, not Chinese. But I don't mind that, I think he has reason to think so.

The symbolic meaning told by the half-hearted conflict between Tim and Jake about learning Chinese is ultimately a tale of belonging. Even though for Jake, Tim's Chineseness was self-evident, he also accepted the fact that Tim eventually did not develop any sense of belonging to China but he did develop a Hungarian identity (Figure 16). As a fifth grader, Jake enrolled

Tim to a Chinese weekend school. However, as a beginner, Tim found himself surrounded by kids half his age, which he found unpleasant, leading Jake to give up on his plans to educate Tim in Chinese literacy. Eventually, explicitly framed as a means to express his belonging to Hungary, Tim also initiated to take up Hungarian nationality, and Jake supported him in this decision and assisted him following through. After all, it was a very important aspiration of his from the beginning to have Tim take root in his adopted country, and is happy about this course of events.



*Figure 16. Tim lends a helping hand to the granddad of a friend in the countryside. Photograph shared by Jake*

## **6.9 The *ennui* of the house dad**

The longer the time Jake spent as a “*háziapa*,” the more frequent and enhanced his sense of loneliness, depression, and boredom was expressed. As the repetitive and monotonous cycles of household work began to wear him down, his longing for experiences beyond the confines

of the home increasingly came to the fore. “You know, when everything got settled, and everything was on the right track, I felt I should find myself something to do... To be at home all day long, it’s too boring. Especially when the kid is at school, you are like, what am I doing here?” At this point, Tim was already well accommodated in his primary school, Sandy’s career was on track as well, and Jake’s devotion to the household started to fade after four long years:

Yes, I think it's hard... There's actually no financial pressure on us, but it's still boring. I do the same thing every day, and every day is almost the same. I have no social life because all I do every day is take the child back and forth. Sometimes this makes me feel quite bad. I really don't want to always be at home, especially at my age this might not be ideal. It's strange, because I used to be very busy, and I longed for free time. But now that I have too much free time, I'm looking for ways to be more occupied. I came to realize that it's not important how much free time you have, but rather how you think about it. If you're enjoying your free time, then you have a good life, but you don't want to be free all the time, you want to find something to occupy yourself with. I worked in China for almost nine years, I think being busy has become a kind of habit for me. Maybe I can't just stop. If there is nothing, I simply long to have something to do. Honestly, sometimes I find this situation to be very embarrassing and uncomfortable.

As this excerpt reveals, spending four years in the role of a housewife started wearing Jake out emotionally, and he increasingly doubted whether the kind of retired lifestyle he lives is appropriate (“ideal”) at “his age.” Interestingly, he remains consistent in ignoring the gendered expectations of the male breadwinner and focuses exclusively on the age-appropriateness of the expectation of being engaged outside the home. Again, time and temporal orientations feature emphatically in this excerpt, not only in considering the social expectations of his age but also in the way “free time” gets understood.

As noted earlier, free time is synonymous with the freedom to choose the activity one wants to engage in, and it is a quality almost uniformly articulated by participants in this research as an object of desire that made them escape the grinding temporal regimes of contemporary urban China, and as such a major reason behind their relocation. However, finding himself amidst an infinity of free time (“to be free all the time”), Jake increasingly experiences his life as both

socially unacceptable (“very embarrassing”) and personally difficult to bear (“uncomfortable”), while also employing a reference to his preformed “busy” habitus. He frames his desire to return to work, to find ways “to be more occupied,” from a *wertrational* perspective by emphatically underscoring that there is no “financial pressure” that would compel him to return to production. Instead, it is a longing for social life and more importantly, for meaning. Realizing that it is more important “how you think about free time” than “how much you have,” he formulates his own articulation of the “good life.” At this point in time, he admits he fails to appreciate his own freedom and, therefore, is not living the good life. Similar to how Yunxia struggled to find a balance in the right amount of pressure that would bring about her children’s proper development, Jake struggled with finding the right amount of free time for his own mental health. The monotonous and repetitive days of work he found so unbearable in China turned to be the monotonous and repetitive days of childcaring in Hungary.

His growing discomfort began straining his relationship with Tim. Despite their buddy-buddy relationship he cherished explicitly for the past years, he was increasingly losing his patience with Tim, for not being responsible and quick enough to respond or carry out tasks, or for not doing what he was expected. One evening, Jake invited my family over to their home to stuff *jiaozi*<sup>70</sup>. Though slightly late, Sandy also joined us on this occasion and took part in the family activity of kneading, rolling, and stuffing of dumplings. Somewhat unprompted, she turned to me and asked: “Are you ever angry at your kids? Do you also often shout at them?” Caught off guard, I started mumbling something about how kids could be really annoying at times, but she immediately continued: “You know, Jake is so impatient with Tim lately, he always fights with him, constantly reprimands him.” Jake overheard us and sighed out infuriatedly: “Of course

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<sup>70</sup> Chinese dumplings, the hand-made production of which is often associated with celebrating the Lunar New Year because *jiaozi* sounds similar to an expression meaning “transition from old to new.” As Jake expressed, these dinners served the function of both connecting with his host society and educating them about Chinese culture.

I'm angry, he never listens to me, never keeps himself to our agreements but does stuff behind my back. I'm exhausted caring for him all day long!" Sandy responded with a line that was practically verbatim quotation of Jake's "child-rearing philosophy" from the first interview I conducted four years before with him: "Look, he is his own person, has his own way of thinking and personality," adding that Jake should have a drink every evening to be more relaxed. In sharp contrast with his commitment to cultivating Tim's personality and having a coequal, "man to man" relationship, Jake dismissed this argument by conspicuously rolling his eyes, letting out a heavy sigh before taking a large sip from his spirit.

Without any financial pressure, driven by a longing for excitement and social interactions, he found a by all accounts fun job in a travel agency that targeted Chinese tourism to the Balkan. This job required him to travel extensively throughout the region while made his role as a primary caretaker wavering. Since Sandy had no intention of stepping back from the role of the primary breadwinner, they needed to find ways to outsource their caretaking responsibilities for Tim. Sandy's high-prestige parents paid one short visit to them after they got settled in 2018, but politely expressed that they have no intention to move to Hungary even temporarily for they found it underdeveloped and boring. Although Jake's "very ordinary" parents also found Budapest boring, they were more willing to sacrifice their excitement temporarily to take care of their only grandson. During these times, their presence added a new color to the crowd of caretakers in front of the school, dressed in "very ordinary" old Chinese people's clothes, smiling shyly around. Unfortunately, this temporary period of fulfillment for all parties concerned did not last long, as the unleashing of the pandemic washed away the tourist agency instantly, and also made the Chen grandparents return to China, which, the Chen household seemed to agree "handled the virus much better," and presented itself as a safer option for the elderly couple.

While the pandemic presented a temporary suspension to the emerging gender conflict, Jake's resentment at being a bored housewife came back with a vengeance after life "went back to normal" in Hungary. During the summer of 2021, five years into him being a *háziapa*, Jake and Tim visited us in Horány. While the kids set out on their bikes to discover the dusty roads and overgrown gardens and forests of the little town, Jake confessed that he came very close to losing his mind being a stay-at-home dad. The issue was that Sandy's high earnings meant they had no financial need for an additional income, leaving him feeling unjustified in asking Sandy to reduce her work hours simply to provide him with more opportunities for pursuing personal enrichment in work. Thus, the financial surplus which initially freed him from the need to seek meaningless work outside the home enabling him to engage in meaningful work within the home, through the course of the years reversed its meaning: now it prohibited him from engaging in more meaningful work outside, even if his work inside started to fade in both meaning and significance.

As Jake got increasingly exasperated being a *háziapa*, Sandy got more and more immersed in her job. Time being a zero-sum game, the more time Sandy spent at work, the less she got to spend with her family. The imbalance reached a level that deeply infuriated Jake, who increasingly took Sandy's overwork hours as a personal offense. He also found Sandy's career advancement to be coming at the cost of her having a meaningful relationship with Tim, which made him very sad. On the rare times when they got to spend time together, Sandy tried to make up for her physical and emotional absence by materially indulging Tim – and thereby shamelessly and offensively breaching one of the principles of Jake's "child-rearing philosophy." Instead of expressing personal insult, Jake expressed his worries about how commodification would deteriorate the bond between mother and son.



During this relaxed outing in Horány, Jake shared with me his plan to overcome the excruciating boredom in his life: he entertained the idea of using their savings invested in Hungarian real estate to open a small noodle shop, building on his signature chili oil. This chili oil signified a symbolic meaning to his identity, as it stood as proof of his culinary talent and other people's admiration and appreciation of it, while the chili oil also became a hard currency in his social network building. Sandy kindly dismissed him, and asked instead to last out for two more years, when Tim will be able to come and go on his own. Three years later, it is not only the wishful plan of the noodle shop that evaporated into thin air, but the very fabric of the Chen household started disintegrating.

## 6.10 A disintegrating household

The complex reasons that caused the deterioration of this once markedly strong texture stems from the ongoing struggle to balance between the private and the public, between capital and care, practically irrespective of the unusual gender reversal through which it got embodied. Jake's accusations of Sandy mirrors classic grievances traditionally directed toward fathers: Sandy's standing in the way of his free fulfillment outside the home, her "caring more about her work than about her son," and that she reverts to the kid's material indulgence to make up for the time she failed to spend with him are identical with the all too well-known reproaches operating on the opposite set of gender pronouns.

Instead of channeling their savings into launching Jake's nascent business venture, Sandy, driven by the ambitions of her company and under the persuasive influence of her boss — an established figure in the "old migrant" entrepreneur community — opted to invest in the shares of her company and a high-end real estate project featuring luxury villas on the periphery of

Budapest. Jake saw this villa from the beginning with great skepticism both as an investment and as a place to live. Far off from the central spaces of Tim's life, such as school, cello, and basketball, he found it to be very inconvenient and unfeasible from the perspective of child-rearing. Looked at from a crudely economic point of view, he understood that in the Hungarian real estate market, such an excessive investment in a poorly located luxury villa would never yield any returns. His reservations extended beyond the economic aspect; the opulence of the villa was at odds with his aspiration for a "simple life," and he associated it with the overtly materialistic tendencies he criticized in "old migrants," who, in his view, "have no culture and care only about money." Thus, the villa symbolized a rupture between Sandy's and Jake's ideals and values, which, despite their long-standing accord, started to bifurcate along the lines of materialism and postmaterialism.

Yet, as Sandy was the breadwinner, Jake unwillingly went along with her choice and as the primary homemaker, he also half-heartedly carried out all the work the realization of such a development project requires from the future owner. He was busy with frequent visits to the construction site, making incessant decisions from the blinders to the external cladding of the house, but this was not the occupation, the kind of busy he was longing for, as he had no desire to live in that atmosphere. On top of that, he was increasingly frustrated by Sandy's boss, who was set to become their neighbor, alongside another senior manager convinced to invest in the same area. He found it problematic from the beginning that Sandy's boss, who increasingly embodied all what Jake saw wrong with "old migrants," formed expectations toward Sandy's private life to this extent, telling her where her family should live.

It was rather obvious that by becoming neighbors, the unwelcome intrusion of Sandy's boss into Jake's private territory of the home and the family was not going to abate. The boss's

interference extended to almost every minor decision Jake made, encroaching upon his domestic authority. This cascade of conflicts reached a tipping point when the boss made them redo the outer cladding – that was chosen by Tim. Sandy’s reluctance to protect Tim’s choice and stand up for the privacy of their family was the critical juncture for Jake, signifying something way more important he could not take any longer: Sandy’s preference for her job over her family.

## 6.11 Concluding remarks

Much of the Chen family’s trajectory outlined throughout the pages of this chapter echoed Yunxia’s. They both left behind a life that by most measures counted as successful guided by a desire to escape the grinding temporal regimes of Chinese state capitalism in pursuit of autonomy that served as the central aspect of the good enough life. They both choose Hungary for reasons that simultaneously conform to both *Wert-* and *Zweckrationalität* and adopted the strategy of *temporal-geoarbitrage* by which the pursuit of the good enough life in a physically, socially, and morally pure environment is enabled by the country’s affordability.

However, while the gender relations in the Zhang family of household roles represented an extreme version of the traditional division of labor displaced on a transnational scale, the Chen family stands for an exceptional case of a reversal in the gendered distribution of household roles. As an antithesis to the notoriously absent Mr. Zhang, who played the role of the breadwinner in China making faltering attempts to wield authority over his family abroad; Jake decided to sacrifice over a half-decade of his most productive years to become the primary caretaker of his son. The activities in which Jake did (and did not) engage conform to a life distinctly driven by *Wertrationalität*, in which activities are pursued solely for their own sake to an extent that is almost *anti-economic*: instead of strategizing to reap future benefits – such

as choosing a minor public school for Tim instead of a private international school where he would not only master English (which is unarguably a more relevant future asset than “investing” so much time and energy in learning Hungarian) but is also presumably more lucrative in terms of transnational higher educational career; or sacrificing a half-decade of his most important CV-building years to housekeeping – all for the sake of making everyone happy.

What allowed Jake to adopt such a *wertrational* life was the financial security granted by the intense concentration of resources in the 4-2-1 family model arbitrated into the cheap environment of Hungary, enabling Jake to set aside existential anxiety and search for a more meaningful life which he initially found in fatherhood. Reflecting on his own childhood, he realized that he wants to provide Tim with a completely different one: in which spontaneous choices based on emotional impulses lead to a fulfilled and authentically self-identical life. Thinking about Tim’s rearing and trying to secure all the things he found important for his wholesome development occupied him for the first years of their relocation: his life pivoted around the identification and realization of Tim’s needs and desires. What he wished for was a simple, stable, and well-rooted life in which meaningful relationships and meaningful employment altogether make one’s life meaningful.

Initially, his decision to trade production for reproduction was both self-fulfilling and made the rest of the household content: Sandy could start building a career, and Tim had a deeply engaged father always around to care for him. However, as time passed by, he began to relive the same monotonous and repetitive days at home in Hungary that he left behind in China at work. As Sandy’s career flourished, his invested fatherhood faltered, presenting a rupture in the status quo. At this point the unusual gender reversal notwithstanding, their relationship began resembling its stereotypical flip side to an uncanny extent: as Jake got more and more

depressed and uncared-for, driving Tim around in a “toy car,” Sandy got more and more in shape, thriving in her career and driving ever bigger cars; as if one’s advancement could only come at the cost of the other’s demise. Despite a long-standing accord between their values and ethical dispositions, their paths began to diverge markedly along the lines of materialism and postmaterialism.

By the time the construction of the villa finished, Jake decided to take a radical stance and initiated the couple’s separation: Sandy moved into the villa alone, and Jake bought a small newly built apartment that is emphatically located “right in the middle between Tim’s school and cello class,” signifying his willingness to put the child in the center – something that Sandy utterly failed to accomplish. When I went to visit Tim and Jake with my family in their temporary subleased apartment where they had been living for a few months, their intimacy seemed to grow stronger than ever. The once hopelessly reckless little boy exhibiting no concern for anybody other than himself was so attentive to his father as I had never seen him before. Jake was still very angry at Sandy, who acted like “those Chinese guys who keep promising that they will be faithful and cheat on their girlfriends the very same day, and then the next day come back with their promises again.” Inviting a stereotype of the “regular” gendered roleplay, Jake unintentionally puts himself in the “girlfriend’s” role while Sandy is playing the masculine one.

Though I have never seen Sandy after these unfortunate events, according to Jake’s interpretation, the separation goes hard on her as well. When every now and then they manage to get together, she always gets very moved over how much she misses her family and realizes that their separation is a direct consequence of the choices she made. However, she seems to be unable to make different choices and keeps disappointing both Tim and Jake even on special

days such as Christmas by choosing her work over her family again. “She keeps saying she has no other choice, all her money is in this company, and she has to please her boss if she doesn’t want to lose it,” Jake says. “But I think you *always have a choice*. You know, sometimes I picture her entering that huge, cold, and empty villa after work, finding herself completely alone in that luxury. I wonder how it feels to her, is this really what she wanted?”

While upset with Sandy, Jake also voiced concern for her well-being, troubled by her work obsession and the way money had become the central axis of her existence, a priority that was evidently taking a toll on her personal life. As he was showing me a video of Sandy’s father lying on a hospital bed recovering from a serious surgery, he said “You know what she replied, when it turned out that her dad was having life-saving surgery? That she needed to check her calendar to see when she could go back! Can you believe that?! And it turns out, it will be [two months from now]. When I heard that, I realized something was really wrong with her. And I also thought of myself – who am I to her if she treats her own father like that?” Though finding Sandy’s prioritization of work over her nuclear family problematic, what made Jake realize that the issue was beyond a matter of simple misery was Sandy’s big-time failure to live up to the minimal expectation of filial piety.

Standing in sharp contrast to Sandy’s failure to be a filial daughter, in these moments of misery, Jake finds great solace in Tim’s affectionate behavior toward him. “Whenever his mom wants to take him out – not that often, I have to say – he always asks me how *I* would feel about it, and assures me that he would happily stay if it was better for me. And this makes me really moved, really happy, you know. It makes me feel *I* made the right decision when I chose to stay at home and care for him. In the future, I will never be so alone [as Sandy’s dad], I will always know I can count on him.” With their already small family of three further disintegrating,

the significance of the relationship between Tim and Jake acquired new significance (Figure 17). To interpret these relationships, Jake explicitly evokes the notion of filial piety, but in contradistinction with its original meaning revolving around the language of hierarchy and obligations, he uses in a markedly individualistic sense revolving around the language of affection, intimacy, and emotions – emerging as the ultimate arbiter proving the righteousness of his decisions.



*Figure 17. Tim and Jake on a hike. Photograph shared by Jake*

## CHAPTER 7: SIOBHAN AND THE HUI FAMILY

In May 2021, Szilvia, a social worker in the second district's Child Protective Services reached out to me asking for my help as an intercultural mediator, describing a perplexing situation: an 11-year-old girl had been removed from her family and been put into temporary state care upon the serious suspicion of planning to run away from home - for being beaten and hungered. I could not have been more surprised upon meeting the well-groomed mid-aged parents: Tara and Bill fit exactly into the new migration pattern I identified. Not only did they live in an expensive neighborhood amidst expansive greenery surrounded by a scenic view of hills dotted by century-old villas, were very well educated, but they also recounted the very same narrative as all my other acquaintances: their first and foremost reason for moving to Hungary was to bring about a better, happier life for their children. However, this time the well-known statement has been a part of a confession, officially translated, and sealed with stamps:

Our child [Siobhan] was taken away from us in a sudden, it was a heavy strike on us. We are suffering and torturing, while we are reflecting: What on earth made us deviate from our original goal of giving endless love and happiness to our daughter, so as to bring such a disaster to [Siobhan], and to the family?<sup>71</sup>

The present chapter draws on my participation in their case as an intercultural mediator. For it was conceived under starkly different and rather dramatic circumstances, the narrative structure of this chapter and the resources on which it relies also differ from the deep engagement with the trivialities of ordinary lives characterizing the previous chapters. Since I got to know the family right at the time when their migratory experience took an inarguably life-changing turn, I had no means to assess their life and aspirations unaffected by the incident. Nonetheless, their example shows an extreme end of the ambiguities raised by the previous chapters: how the self-consciously articulated principles adopted to provide a happier childhood for their children

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<sup>71</sup> Excerpt from Tara's and Bill's statement to the authorities. 2021. 04. 28.



reflecting the transforming socioeconomic situation of first-generation middle-class parents come into an unresolvable conflict with the received and less conscious parenting patterns that stem from the compressed transformation of the ideal of childhood (detailed in Section 3.4). Paradoxically, the Hui family's encounter with the Hungarian Child Protective Services offers the case in which the recognition of children's autonomy and its consistent implementation in practice is brought to its zenith.

## 7.1 Ambivalence in sharp refraction

According to the official statement released by the parents who described themselves as “diligent, honest, well-educated people, (...) full of yearning for family life,” the family of four left Beijing for Budapest in 2017 through the national bond immigration scheme. Just like Yunxia and Jake, the Hui parents also left behind an immensely successful life, and explicitly interpreted their decision as a form of *tang ping* (see Section 1.3.5.4). They recited the very same reasons for doing so: a sense of urgency to escape the physically, socially, and morally polluted environment of Beijing to provide “endless love and happiness” to their daughters. However, as the incident has made it abundantly clear to them, their determination in and of itself did not live up to the standards of the Hungarian child protection system.

One day a few weeks before I first entered the Hui family's home, the police turned up unannounced. A few minutes later, without any previous investigation, they took their older daughter, Siobhan, to a temporary children's home, to the complete surprise and unimaginable shock of her parents. Hungarian law on child protection<sup>72</sup> stipulates that on well-founded fear that the child's welfare and security are in danger, removal from the family can be

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<sup>72</sup> 1997. évi XXXI. törvény a gyermekek védelméről és a gyámügyi igazgatásról - Hatályos Jogszabályok Gyűjteménye (Act XXXI of 1997 on the Protection of Children and Guardianship Administration - Collection of Current Legislation) 1997

instantaneous and unwarned. But in cases of ambiguity, removal should be the last resource of authorities and should be preceded by a thorough assessment of the living conditions and family environment and if found inappropriate, attempts at trying to improve the conditions to prevent the child's removal are necessary, indicating that the state's priority is to provide appropriate conditions for the child at home. However, among groups that are culturally different from the white middle class (most notably the precariat and/or Roma people), sudden and often unwarranted removals do occur frequently, presenting a major forefront for dedicated legal activists (Boros 2016).

The unanticipated and abrupt the process of removing her from the family went, the slower it took to reverse it: Siobhan's return to her family home took six long weeks despite that all parties agreed that her removal was hasty and mistaken. During our weekly visits with Szilvia to the family's home while Siobhan was kept in the temporary children's home, I got to be part of the Hui parents' learning process and search for the reasons that led to the disastrous events. Their home – despite its location on the Buda hills which is the designated area for upper-middle-class living – was anything but ostentatious: it was relatively small but sunlit, cozy, and well-kept. A laid table always waited for our visits in the small kitchen surrounded by impressive children's paintings of gaudy colors covering most wall space, all in all, giving off a markedly homely atmosphere.

Prior to the incident, the family led a quiet and discrete life, detached from both the majority society as well as the local Chinese diaspora, pursuing what they described as a way of overseas *tang ping*. Bill's previous adeptness in the stock market arbitrated to the financial environment of Hungary and coupled with a modest downscaling of their lifestyle and expenses afforded the family to effectively realize FIRE (see footnote 60). In the present, Bill claims to “work

only once in one or two years” by making a single investment, and only return to cash in on it and make the next investment. He self-consciously shuts out any “work-related” thoughts or worries in the time between, to devote himself to his intimate family life. In the meantime, Tara volunteers English classes for children in China online and does not have any income.

Before the turbulence, their secluded everyday life consisted of pleasant activities such as visits to the traditional Turkish baths or enjoying barista coffees. Instead of hiding any secrets, the reason for their markedly aloof lifestyle was that the family consisted of four artistic and fairly introverted people, who all preferred to engage in their private intellectual pursuits: painting, story writing, or the study of Chan Buddhism. Surprisingly enough, they appeared to be an extraordinarily ordinary family, where sisters often quarrel with each other, and parents’ patience has limits – had they been white, they would never get on the radar of the child protection services. Yet, they never doubted the rationale for the serious measures taken by the Hungarian authorities, which, to me seemed completely irrational and way too exaggerated from the very beginning.

What struck me from the moment I got to know these parents in this extraordinary and hurtful situation was the unflagging empathy and support Tara and Bill showed toward each other throughout this time of crisis, their lack of pride and absolute docility towards Hungarian authorities, and the complete lack of anger with their daughter who triggered the whole turbulence, which was both impressive and deeply disturbing to me at the same time. Instead of making dramatic scenes about the unfounded, inappropriate, and undignified nature of these proceedings, – which would have been justified considering that in conclusion, the prosecution dropped all charges – they devoted all their energies to truly comprehending what had happened. Instead of blaming Siobhan for turning their restrained family life upside down or

challenging the legitimacy and rightfulness of the action executed by the state they adopted a different strategy – virtually non-existent in the general experience of Hungarian family welfare services<sup>73</sup> – and claimed that the fault lied with them and engaged in an exercise that strikingly echoed the practice of “criticism and self-criticism.”

Although they never hurt their daughter in any of the aforementioned ways, they were constantly practicing self-criticism, and never once departed from the narrative that hurtful as it was, they are happy that these things happened because it helped them to realize that the “happy childhood” they wanted to provide their children requires a more serious reconfiguration of their parenting style, namely a true recognition of their child’s autonomy. This turbulence made them realize how special Siobhan was, and how they should pay more attention to her special needs. Supplanting the mounting of expectations and responsibilities and turning a deaf ear to what she has to say in rejecting them, they dedicated themselves to a way of parenting, entirely inexperienced to themselves: replacing the hierarchical order with a horizontal one, where children are autonomous and equal. Up until today, almost three years after the heart-wrenching incident, they consistently uphold that the atrocity notwithstanding, they are grateful for the Child Protective Services for helping them uncover the unreflected, deep-flowing flaws in their parental conduct, and eventually helped them become better parents and redounded a happier family life.

## 7.2 Criticism and self-criticism

To understand the Hui couple’s approach to the situation as docile subjects subsuming themselves to state authority and engaging in the act of “criticism and self-criticism,” it is

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<sup>73</sup> Personal communication with social workers and legal activists.

important to have an outlook in its Chinese socio-legal context. The practice of “criticism and self-criticism” (*jiantao* 检讨) emerged from a mechanism of inner-party decision-making and discipline among Chinese political elites to become a form of mass mobilization and education and indeed a normative model throughout the decades of CCP rule. It continues to be a widely employed “technology of the self” (Licandro 2018) and is a recurring element in public television shows. Differing sharply from the “show trials” based on the extraction of false confessions favored in the Soviet Union, *jiantao* is supposed to be inherently redemptive and have a positive impact on social solidarity. Unfolding in a four-step sequence that includes the acknowledgement of the mistakes, the analysis of the causes of the mistakes, the labeling of the faults, and the envisioning of strategies to reform oneself, the emphasis of self-criticism is on educating and transforming the wrong-doer rather than simply punishing him.<sup>74</sup> Schurmann summarized the supposed solidarity-strengthening function of “criticism and self-criticism” as follows:

Essentially, the technique consists in the usually temporary alienation of a single member from the group through the application of collective criticism. One member is singled out for criticism, either because of faulty ideological understanding, poor work performance, or some other deviance. He is not only subjected to a barrage of criticism from the members, but also joins in and begins to criticize himself... The avowed purpose is to "correct" (kai-tsao) the individual. Under normal circumstances, the individual is "reintegrated" into the group after the "temporary alienation." The experience of temporary alienation of the one criticized and collective criticism by the group members is, in theory, supposed to have the general effect of maintaining the group's cohesion and effectiveness. Great fear exists on the part of those potentially criticized that they may become victims of a more permanent alienation. Fear of such permanent alienation serves to strengthen the bonds within the group. (Schurmann 1959, 57 cited at Dittmer 1973)

<sup>74</sup> While some scholars argue that pre-modern practices of self-examination can be found in Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism and argue that the *jiantao* derives from Confucian ethics (Dittmer 1973, 710), others suggest that the introduction of *jiantao* was an inherently modern technology of the self, adopted as “a disciplinary, transformative tool whose language and function mirrored the project of building a strong, modern nation” (Licandro 2018, 51–52).

The Hui parents interpreted the course of events as a “collective criticism” from the Hungarian state represented by the social worker and understood that they had been “singled out” for poor parenting. The previously quoted letter-statement addressed to an allegorical “Dear Officer” was their first attempt to grapple with the completely incomprehensible situation in which they found themselves and which they had to navigate without any knowledge of the language, the law, or the workings of the child welfare system. Szilvia did not speak English at all, and the family lawyer they found as the first hit in Google search could not be said to be fluent either, speaking only the keywords that she assembled in rudimentary sentences. In this state of desperation, they decided to carefully avoid any form of dissent and show full compliance, while also relied on “self-criticism” to win the authority’s support.

### 7.2.1 The self-proletarianization of parenthood

They released a statement in which they tried to describe their emotions of “heart-wrenching pain,” “hearts dug with a big and hollow hole,” “huge torture”, “suffering,” and ultimately as the “the unlimited anguish that cannot be described by language” in an attempt to prove the authenticity of their love for Siobhan to the authorities. Besides wrestling with putting to words the unspeakable shock caused by the separation from Siobhan, the letter also aims to make it clear that they take full responsibility for the events and are ready to engage in deep self-reflection, unfolding neatly aligned with the sequence of *jiantao*. Not only do they unforgivingly and harshly claim themselves to be “not competent parents,” but they go to great lengths to detail the shortcomings they came to realize through the practice of self-criticism. In a section titled “Our Reflections,” they summarize their failures by acknowledging their mistakes, analyze their causes and label them in the following manner:

First, our deep inner lacks inspiration with awe to life and lacks consideration. We took for granted that only if we guarantee them sufficient material supply, only if we are together with our children, they could grow naturally and well. Our unconscious

conduct of favoring our younger daughter, makes our relationship worse with [Siobhan], misunderstandings conflicts cause us to lose our most precious love and respect, which are the most urgent requirements of [Siobhan]. All those doomed that our hearts stay further and further away from [Siobhan], we are not competent parents. What's more, we lack of scientific psychological knowledge. We don't equip ourselves with the methods and abilities to cope with the conflicts between the two daughters. Need to learn about communication methods. We need to get the efficient ways of communication with [Siobhan] through specific study and continuous practice in our lives. We naturally became parents because we gave birth to kids, but the birth of children doesn't mean we could be competent parents. The ways of dealing with things in a self-centered, unfair, parental-authority way will end with failure.<sup>75</sup>

Given the genre of the letter-statement, on the one hand, it can be read as the Hui couple's quest to decipher what the Hungarian child welfare authorities might want to hear, while on the other, it is an act of self-inspection. As the excerpt from the statement reveals, the Hui couple labeled and grasped the crux of their wrongdoing as emotional misconduct: losing their "most precious love and respect, which are the most urgent requirements of [Siobhan]." They accuse themselves of assuming that providing the "material" circumstances would be enough for the "natural" growth of the child, without proper consideration of and consequently the failure to attend to the (postmaterial) inner self, the emotions of Siobhan. They blame themselves for "taking for granted" that by giving birth to their children, they would "naturally" become parents, and failed to exert the effort and investment in equipping themselves with professional, "scientific" expertise to become "competent parents."

Doing so, their self-criticism articulates what Lasch calls the proletarianization of parenthood (1977, 12–21), and engage in a process of explicit self-proletarianization. Echoing the argument put forward by Lasch (1977), by pointing out their "lack of scientific psychological knowledge" as the root cause of the problem identified as their failure to attend to the psychological self of their child, the interpretation of their failure offered by the parents boils down to not living up to the expectations posited by the "therapeutic emotional style" (Illouz

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<sup>75</sup> Excerpt from Tara's and Bill's statement to the authorities. 2021. 04. 28.

2013). Ultimately, the arbiter of their failure is that they have exercised a “self-centered, unfair, parental-authority way” style of parenting, in other words: they have not been child-centered enough. What is striking in this narrative is that child-centeredness reached such a peak in their sociocultural imagination, that failure to live up to its standard is seen as a rational and legitimate basis for having their child removed from the home.

### 7.2.2 Proposed remedies for not being child-centered enough

In the hope of putting an end to their “temporary alienation” quite literally manifesting in the forceful separation from their child, the letter-statement continues with a section titled “What are we going to do?” This section introduces the Hui parents’ proposals aiming to prove both the sincerity of their self-reflection and their willingness to correct the mistakes they identified:

First of all, we will reflect deeply, we will use the fair, comfortable mode of communications instead of communications under the influence of our parent-centered way. We will show our endless love, generosity, sincerity to warm [Siobhan], to give her support, to understand her.

Second, we have already connected with professional psychological aid, we would like to listen for suggestions, get wise methods, equip ourselves with professional knowledge, peaceful inner state, we can have efficient and scientific guidance.

Third, we will focus more and more on [Siobhan]’s thoughts and needs, listen to [Siobhan] patiently and carefully, remove our communication barriers. Setting up the child-centered mode of communication. Providing [Siobhan] with warm, friendly, and harmonious environment that is full of love and understanding from the parents. Let her all the time feel our firm support, gentle love and kind understanding.<sup>76</sup>

The proposed transformations within the family are again emphatically centered around emotions (endless love, generosity, sincerity, empathy) and outline the most significant shift in changing their conduct from parent-centered to child-centered. Given the emotion-centered nature of their pursuits, the couple promises to make up for their “lack of scientific

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<sup>76</sup> Excerpt from Tara’s and Bill’s statement to the authorities. 2021. 04. 28.



psychological knowledge” and equip themselves with “professional knowledge” to become the emotionally competent parents they envisage the Child Protective Services want them to be.

Child-centeredness in this situation is not an empty slogan, but the arbiter of state-approved parenthood. What it implies is a very significant and not the least meaningful transformation within the ecology of the family, a departure from what they self-critically described as the “self-centered, unfair, parental-authority way.” They acknowledge the shortcomings of the hierarchical, authoritarian relationship that had characterized their attitude toward their children as “unfair” and “self-centered” and promise to supplant it with a new arrangement that places children on an equal footing. This new arrangement pledges more room for Siobhan to express her thoughts and feelings, and let them be heard, finding emotional expression in the “warm, friendly, and harmonious environment that is full of love and understanding from the parents.”

### **7.2.3 Shouldering the penalty: surrendering privacy**

In the concluding section of the letter-statement, titled “Our Deepest Wish and Plea,” the couple writes:

Now we are awoken to what we had missed. We have fully realized our mistakes, we have realized how much pain we had brought to [Siobhan]. Please we plea: Give us one more opportunity, the only one more opportunity to thoroughly correct our mistakes, to compensate. Please, trust on our deep love of [Siobhan], we would like to show multiples of effort and sincerity to make up for the relationship between [Siobhan] and us. So, we are willing to learn the corresponding knowledge and lessons to get our ways modified to set up a family full of love to [Siobhan] from the beginning. We would like to write our letter of guarantee to ensure that when [Siobhan] is back home, we guarantee her a safe and healthy environment. We would like to accept the very strict supervision under related officers. We are willing to apply and do voluntary work in the related organizations to help the families who are in such deep suffering and are in great need of help.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Excerpt from Tara’s and Bill’s statement to the authorities. 2021. 04. 28.

In this concluding section, following the logic of “criticism and self-criticism,” the Hui parents “plea” for “one more opportunity to thoroughly correct [their] mistakes.” Their plea for “reintegration” is hoped to be achieved by executing a thorough act of self-criticism, identifying their major shortcomings, and proposing means to improve and correct them.

Driven by a desperate desire to restore their family life, they give up on its privacy – which is never a small feat but is especially weighty for a family that has been living a distinctly secluded life. By saying that they “would like to accept the very strict supervision under related officers,” they not only subsume to but invite the “guardians of public health and morality” into the privacy of their home life admitting that they, as a family failed to “provide for [their] own needs without expert intervention” (Lasch 1977, 12). They described their new conception of the family in the following poetic style:

Home is not a place to scold the members who made mistakes,

Home is not a place to request a lot,

Home is not a place for asking and pursuing success.

Home is just a place for love of each other;

Home is a place to fulfill the family members.<sup>78</sup>

### **7.3 The precondition of redemption: emotional work and the uncovering of unconscious patterns**

One of the conditions for Siobhan’s return to the family home was that the family had to take our weekly and later bi-weekly visits with the social worker. They treated these visits very

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<sup>78</sup> Excerpt from Tara’s and Bill’s statement to the authorities. 2021. 04. 28.

politely, always waiting for us smartly dressed by a set table where a bottle of water and a hand sanitizer were prepared for us, often alongside neatly packed presents of Chinese delicacies for our own children and families, as if we were not unwelcome intruders but invited guests. The family was also obliged to undertake family therapy, about which they always reported enthusiastically on our visits, admiring the “expertise” of their therapist, and started to learn more about psychology by themselves.

On these occasions, Tara and Bill never once failed to reflect upon their new apprehension of the family, assiduously sharing with us their latest revelations in theory and their attempts at putting their new knowledge into practice. “You know, before we didn’t think much about child-rearing, we didn’t reflect on it. But this has changed significantly, now we go to bed every day discussing our values and principles,” they commented. These reflections relied on a firm belief that the family is a unit, a system, leading to the revelation that if they want things to change, they ought to change themselves. As the first step, upon the social worker’s soft insistence, they confronted their naturalized beliefs about the hierarchy in the family, through a thorough reexamination of their own childhoods.

On an early spring morning, as we were sitting in the silence of the sunlit kitchen in their home, empty of children – one was in school, the other was in a temporary home – Szilvia prompted them to reflect upon their own upbringing. Quite understandably, the tension in the air was palpable, as it is rather unusual that you have to share the intimate details of your childhood with practically complete strangers. The Hui couple sat uncomfortably beside each other, constantly on the watchout for each other’s reactions. Upon exchanging mum gestures, they decided that Tara would embark on the road first. It struck me how they never interrupted each

other, but patiently and attentively listened to what the other had to say – a rare dynamic between long-time partners, especially in times of severe crises.

The wrinkles appearing on Tara's forehead spoke about a thick sense of distress as she began recalling her childhood. As the story slowly unfolded, she told us that she was born and raised along with her younger sister in inner Mongolia by their grandmother, while their parents were never around, as they had to carry out strenuous labor to provide the family enough to scrape by. Born in the years of scarcity in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (that bore an unprecedentedly cutting impact on the province even to the standards of the general turmoil), the socio-historical environment Tara describes foregrounded a fundamentally different context for child-rearing. Although she was very economical with her vocabulary, the short sentences clearly revealed that emotions did not have a place in this harsh environment, providing an explanation for her hardship in expressing her feelings and intimately bonding with her own children in the absence of a prior example.

The sociocultural environment of her upbringing also taught her at a young age that if she wanted to break out from the cycle of poverty, she would be the only one on whom she could rely. Thus, as she emphatically pointed out, responsibility became central to her understanding of life and emerged as a major – though unreflected – expectation toward Siobhan. To her, responsibility was necessitated by survival and was the only way of moving ahead. As the eldest (*laoda* 老大) of two sisters – just like Siobhan – Tara took great responsibility for her sister and grandmother and did all at her disposal to serve one to help the other. Moreover, she took great responsibility for her own advancement as well. The educational environment in late 1970s China gave her a means to pull herself up with her bootstraps, which she did: she tested into the prestigious Beijing Foreign Studies University, and majored in one of the most coveted

tracks, English, without any external support. Expectations toward Siobhan to be a responsible older sister, who must restrain her needs and desires when conflicts with her younger sister arise; and expectations toward her to be responsible for her studies fed off from these experiences. Tara concluded by remarking on her failure to realize that “things changed a lot since, and children are also very different. Those child-rearing values do not hold up any longer.”

Bill on the other hand was more lighthearted and long-winded on the matter of his upbringing. He described a relatively jolly childhood he enjoyed in a South-Easter Chinese province in a big family to which he was born as the oldest (*laoda*) among five siblings. Although he was born throughout the first years of the Cultural Revolution and effectively spent his formative years amidst its most chaotic period, living in one of the country’s major rice-producing areas spared his family from extreme poverty and hunger. The picture of the family he recounts – historical circumstances notwithstanding – is one of love and happiness, and of a starkly different environment from the rigid and rough upbringing recounted by Tara.

However, as not only the *laoda* but also a boy, while he admittedly enjoyed greater privileges, he was nonetheless subject to great expectations as well – though, unlike Tara, for him, these expectations came from the outside. The whole family heavily invested in him and had high hopes for his excellence in the field of education. He lived up to the expectations, tested into a prestigious university in the capital majoring in economics, and launched a successful career in business management and playing the stock market right after completing his degree. He even started a PhD in economics, but he fell in love with Tara and decided to allocate his time to her instead of his PhD and dropped out. As he concluded, “up until this day, my family is the proudest of their *laoda*, and thinks highly of me.”

What they both share was the experience of growing up in a strictly hierarchical family model, where the younger generation was to obey the older without hesitation and contestation, and where they themselves, as the oldest among the young, had to shoulder a wide set of responsibilities and faced mounting expectations. Their upbringing unconsciously informed their parenting, loading high expectations and heavy responsibilities on the shoulders of Siobhan, their oldest child. Siobhan's grievances mostly grew from her sense of unfairness, which in the letter-statement the parents described as their "unconscious conduct of favoring [their] younger daughter" as follows:

In most cases, we naturally thought [Siobhan] was the bigger one, she should have more responsibility and be more modest. We would complain or criticize her if she comp[e]ted or compared [herself] with her younger sister. What's more, we considered that during arguing, [Siobhan] was always quite sharp in words. She was bigger, which we thought she should be more self-restrained, for no doubt, [Siobhan] each time got more complain[t] and criticiz[m]. But from her point of view, it was definitely unfair to her. We didn't think a little bit for her, we didn't understand her, we didn't provide her with the intellectual instructions, for most of the time, we left [her] sulking, without knowing how to react! Our attitudes helped nothing to solve the problems but may ar[o]se others.<sup>79</sup>

As the parents switched perspective to focus on Siobhan's "point of view," they came to understand that growing up in a radically different environment, in a bilingual school populated by upper-scale Hungarian children, Siobhan did not understand why it should be always her, who surrenders to her younger sister. The parents, assisted by the social worker, reasoned that Siobhan found her unequal treatment to be completely unjust and unjustifiable, which gradually led to the development of her well-outlined anger toward her parents. Living in Budapest for four years (more than a third of her whole life), they concluded that Siobhan simply felt like her parents were hopelessly unfair to her, letting her do all the hard work, while her younger sister, Maeve,<sup>80</sup> could simply enjoy her life. Adding to Siobhan's infuriation, Maeve was not

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<sup>79</sup> Excerpt from Tara's and Bill's statement to the authorities. 2021. 04. 28.

<sup>80</sup> Giving birth to Maeve before the introduction of the two-child policy, the Hui parents adopted the widely popular strategy of Hong Kong "birth tourism" (see Chee 2017). Their different citizenship status was also

even that much younger, the age difference between them is roughly a year, and they are both enrolled in the same grade (although in different schools). She wanted justice, the correction of her parents' wrongs, and equal treatment with Maeve – just like all her Hungarian sibling-friends around her would have.

## 7.4 Siobhan

Given the nature and schedule of our visits, even after her return home, Siobhan was rarely present at our meetings for she was in school, so I initially got to know her only from Tara's and Bill's descriptions. From their portrayal, Siobhan came across as an exceptionally talented and rather introverted personality, a bookworm spending all her time reading novels from all regions and ages. But what I could see for myself from her at this point were the rather astonishing paintings covering most of the wall space of their home, bursting with a refined palette of vibrant colors. These artworks seemed to be inspired by real-life experiences in real-life sceneries, but whimsically transformed them into fabulous scenarios, resulting in what could be described as a form of juvenile magical realism. Tara and Bill proudly showed us four little booklets, short novels written and illustrated by Siobhan at the age of 9 to 10 (Figure 18). Simultaneously shining with pride gloomed over by their unfaltering grief, they told us how they shared Siobhan's passion for fiction and that their most important bonding activity was telling a story together, each going on for months. They were telling a story in the present during their visits to the temporary home as well.

During these weeks, while the parents reflected on their own shortcomings and wrongdoings, Siobhan also had to confront her own reality in the temporary home. According to the telling

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conductive of their different educational trajectory in Hungary, for Siobhan was enrolled in a public bilingual school, while Maeve attended a private international one. However, Siobhan did not see this as a manifestation of their parents' unfairness, and was very content with her public school.

of the social worker who accompanied her to the temporary home (Szilvia also joined the case later), she was smiling as she had been escorted out from her family home. Yet, eventually she came to realize that despite its “temporariness,” her removal bore more permanent consequences, with which she had to struggle continuously – as we will see, even long after her homecoming. Facing up to the reality that she could not go back home at her own whims, she felt increasingly desperate in the temporary home. Although for a children’s temporary home, the environment was relatively nice and appropriately provided the basic living conditions, Siobhan quickly realized that it was a far cry from the free and autonomous life she imagined, and repeatedly expressed her wish to return home.<sup>81</sup>

By the time Siobhan was finally allowed to move back home after the six weeks she spent in the Children's Home, the summer had already begun. Szilvia decided that it was best if we gave the family some time to accommodate to the situation and recover on their own. We restarted our visitations in September, with the same regularity. I briefly met Siobhan on a few occasions, and her parents’ description seemed fitting: she was always smiling very kindly but was extraordinarily shy and never said a word either in Chinese or Hungarian, and the only way of connecting that seemed comfortable to her was through her artworks. What I saw about her from the excellent artwork was her insistence on shaping the world to her liking. I could also see how she made Tara’s and Bill’s rope dance balancing between legitimate and illegitimate authority a very tight and increasingly difficult one.

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<sup>81</sup> For I have not been in direct communication with Siobhan while she was kept in the temporary home, I could only assess her experience through the narrative of the social worker and the parents. A report by the UN Commissioner for Fundamental Rights about the temporary home from the period Siobhan resided there provides an accurate and detailed assessment of living conditions. According to the report, between January 2021 and December 2022, 19 “extraordinary events” took place in the Children's Home: there were several cases of peer theft and peer abuse, the lightening of a smoke bomb, several cases of drug and alcohol consumption, and on one occasion, physical abuse committed by a social worker.





Figure 18. Siobhan's self-written and illustrated booklets. Photos made by the Hui parents.

## 7.5 New life: “Listen seriously to the child”

After Siobhan’s return, our visits revolved around the family’s everyday life, throughout which the social worker attempted to assess how the Hui couple puts their new parenting-theoretical convictions into practice. These new principles most importantly involved letting go of their high expectations (*yaoqiu*) of the children to become “socially useful members of the society”

and to be generally “outstanding” (*youxiu de* 优秀的), which they unreflectively carried on despite their intentions, and to genuinely shift focus on what the children need instead. The Hui parents concluded that the best way to provide their children with a healthy and happy life was a more careful assessment of their emotional states and inclinations – a field that they wrongfully neglected before, as the letter-statement also expressed:

When the conflicts occurred, we always took everything for granted that we did things for the best for [Siobhan], for her future, we were self-centered so that we neglected [Siobhan]’s requests, didn’t listen patiently [to] her point of view, didn’t treat her feelings seriously from her angle, our communication lacked understanding, gentle and very necessary explanations, and appeasement.<sup>82</sup>

This quotation reveals an implicit connection between temporalities, emotions, and rationalities. When analyzing their parenting decisions, they point out that that they adopted a *zweckrational* approach to child-rearing by conceiving Siobhan’s “best interest” displaced to the future. They identify this *zweckrational*, future-oriented attitude as fundamentally erroneous and “self-centered,” and imply that the right choice would have been turning their focus on the present, affective state of the child – in other words, adopting a *wertrational* approach. They recounted past events, when Siobhan would have needed their empathy (*anwei* 安慰) and only received their expectations instead as memories of great regret (*houhui* 后悔).

For example, when she was first enrolled in school in Budapest and struggled with a great frustration of not being able to understand and express anything, instead of providing the comfort (*anwei*) she needed so much, as they see it with hindsight, they just expected her to get quickly integrated. This erroneous attitude persisted and got worse with the unfolding of the pandemic. They failed to register the emotional distress the great changes bore on Siobhan and did not help her understand why their lives turned upside down. To make up for their

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<sup>82</sup> Excerpt from Tara’s and Bill’s statement to the authorities. 2021. 04. 28.

shortcomings, the Hui parents embraced a new motto: “Listen seriously to the child” (*renzhen di ting haizi shuo hua* 认真地听孩子说话), claiming that “whatever was good for the children, was good for [them].” However, as the following sections illustrate, their whole-hearted embrace of the child-centered way of parenting – what they understood as the precondition of their “reintegration” into Hungarian society – came into an unexpected conflict with the expectations articulated by Szilvia, the social worker.

### 7.5.1 A room of her own

The first issue to tackle was what came to be seen by the parents as the root cause of the conflicts between the sisters and Siobhan’s unhappiness: her desire to have a room of her own. Despite her incessant pleas, initially, the parents thought (embracing a *zweckrational* perspective) that it was best for the girls to share a room for it would teach them necessary skills such as “cooperation, compromise, and the skill of helping each other.” They rejected Siobhan’s request on the grounds that as adults, they know what is best for children, leading to her growing frustration.

The Beijing home they left behind was very spacious and would have easily allowed for allocating separate rooms for the girls, but they still did not, for the above reasons. Bill added, that by this time the children were so little that they did not have a “sense of the self” (*ziwo gan* 自我感). When moving into their Buda home, it had not even occurred to the parents to provide separate rooms for their daughters: they simply allocated the biggest and sunniest room to the children, spared the only other private room for Tara’s office, leaving the parents with the living room as their bedroom. However, as Bill pointed out, the older the children got, the stronger their sense of the self (*ziwo gan*) became, leading to increasingly frequent and dramatic conflicts between them. Bill attributed Siobhan’s yearning for her own room to her “very strong

sense of the self,” and thereby portrayed the conflict as one between (unfounded) parental authority and the child’s longing for autonomy. As the parents later assessed: “Perhaps she wanted a room of her own so much that she thought if she ran away, she would get enough attention from us to acquire it. The escape would not have been a goal but a means.”

Thus, the room issue emerged as the first test of one of the Hui parents' newly avowed principle: “Listen seriously to the child.” They carefully discussed with both children their takes and arrived at the solution that Tara handed over her tiny office to Siobhan and moved in with Maeve to the children’s room. This new arrangement made Siobhan very happy and took over the small room that would not only be her space of privacy but also, more importantly of sovereignty. As Bill sensitively assessed, the room also stood as an allegory for Siobhan’s yearning for autonomy, a yearning to which up until these times they turned a deaf ear: “Before we assumed that we would know everything better than her because we were grown-ups. But you know, she is a very autonomous (*zizhu de* 自主的) child. I came to think more and more, that this was the real problem, that we didn’t treat her as one.” The parents reasoned that ultimately it was Siobhan’s inability to act on her remarkable autonomy that led to the frustration that caused the dramatic events.

### **7.5.2 A master of her own life**

Bill went on to explain how, according to the notion of the family-as-a-system he changed his own ways to facilitate change in the system as a whole: “You know, as a manager and as a stockbroker, my job has basically been making decisions, and it never occurred to me that I should hand over decision making to my children. But now I realize that they are just as fully capable of making decisions for themselves.” They introduced a new system in which they completely handed over the control and management (*guanli* 管理) of her life to Siobhan: she

is in charge of her sleeping, eating, learning, and free time schedule, and even her conflicts with Maeve. Though conflicts between the girls are just as plentiful as they used to be – “they can get into a fight about everything!” Tara declares, “from who gets more mushroom to who sucks her nose louder – they are really ridiculous.” But the parents live according to the new rule of non-intervention, and let the children sort out these matters by themselves, reducing their effort to the preservation of their inner peace.

A rather symbolic articulation of the parents’ awareness and recognition of Siobhan’s autonomy was presented in a recount of their latest hiking adventure. Although Siobhan got completely bored of hiking after the long years of the pandemic when their hitherto diverse family outings got reduced to this single activity, lately this family hobby took a new turn by casting Siobhan the role of the tour guide, which she thoroughly enjoyed. The parents interpreted their acceptance of the child in the role of the guide who “can tell the family which direction to go” as a symbolic discarding of hierarchy and were very proud of Siobhan for living up to the role and having no trouble navigating the route and guiding the family.

All family members expressed their satisfaction with the new arrangement: according to the parents, Siobhan handled her life reasonably and responsibly, and even if she went to bed late, she got up in time for school. And what is more important, she was visibly happier. The Hui couple experienced the new system as a “relief” (*qingsong de* 轻松的) since now Siobhan took over shouldering the responsibility of control over her life, leaving them with plenty of free time to pursue their own interests: Tara learns new languages and trains herself to be an English teacher – while she keeps volunteering online English classes for children under the Shanghai lockdown, and Bill uses his abundant free time to dwell deeper in his studies of Chan Buddhism. They also point out that their relationship with their daughter also benefitted from this new

arrangement a lot, since by shaking off the hurdles of management, now it was practically exclusively about affection and intimacy: “Nowadays, she only seeks me out for telling stories” Bill commented happily.

## **7.6 Contradiction between embracing childhood autonomy and the norm of intensive parenting**

Despite the family’s apparent happiness and pride in their new way of life, ironically, the social worker, who was an avowed representative of middle-class morals, had her reservations about this turn. She anxiously asked: does this mean that there are no rules at all? Failing to register the critical undertone of the question, Tara responded with a peace of mind saying that they let go of rules entirely and expressed the dismissal of rules with a wave of her hand – to Szilvia’s complete dismay. Bill deciphered the undertone more accurately and quickly jumped in to save the day, asserting that obviously, there are rules of cohabitation that they observe, such as not engaging in any loud activity when others are sleeping, and the like. Tara’s face expressed honest surprise – she never thought of those as “rules.” To her, rules would have been the number of tests the child should fill every day, or the like. This encounter revealed a fissure, a discrepancy between what the Hui couple conceived as fulfilling the expectations of “Western-style” child-centeredness and the middle-class intensive parenting promoted by the social worker.

Szilvia kept pressing them on the issue of what she conceived as too much autonomy by posing questions that betrayed her disavowal: Don’t they think that Siobhan reads *too much*? The Hui parents were perplexed by the question and started to utter excuses claiming that they did not see anything wrong about that – they indeed supported her in this activity, with regular excursions to bookstores and libraries. Szilvia wove her head disapprovingly, saying that

“reading is nice, very nice, but this is just *too much*” she emphatically added. This led Szilvia to press another issue, – attesting to her endorsement of the distinctly middle-class value of concerted cultivation – the issue of extracurriculars.

Why does not Siobhan have any extracurriculars, what happened to her piano classes for example? – she asked with unconcealed criticism, considering that this reflects the Hui parents’ neglectful attitude toward Siobhan and represent their lack of care. At this point, the Hui parents appeared to be clearly at a loss for being pushed into a corner where they have to account for *not* overburdening their child. Feeling cornered, they explained with great embarrassment that they decided that they would not push Siobhan to pursue anything outside of her interest, and her interests bind her to her room. In a desperate attempt to convince the social worker that their attitude is not an expression of neglect, but an admiration of Siobhan’s autonomy, Tara quickly rushed into Siobhan’s room and took out the latest artifacts she made at home, accompanied by praises of her creativity.

In the American context, journalists and researchers revealed the porose nature of the boundary between neglectful and “free range” parenting and pointed out the classed and raced disposition of child welfare services indicating a far-reaching double standard. If educated middle-class parents aim to teach their children independence by endowing them with more autonomy, it is an accepted and indeed legal activity, while if poor working-class families engage in the same practices out of necessity, they are frequently accused of child neglect (Pimentel 2012; Calarco 2018). From this perspective, the Hui family’s experience was once again very interesting: since even though they fulfill the classed expectations of being in a position to intellectually corroborate their stance, their racial difference seemed to inhibit them from doing so.



### 7.6.1 Eating Problems: Anatomy and Autonomy

For our later sessions, Tara devised a strategy to prevent the persistent misinterpretations of Szilvia by preparing PPTs that aimed to stand proof for their caring and balanced family life and showcase the ways in which they attempted to cater to Siobhan's inner needs and desires and to enable her wholesome development. Among photographs documenting happy family adventures exploring locations such as a small lake they spotted on Google Maps, professional swimming classes, or the latest acquisitions from the bookstore; less cheerful and exciting images of grocery store receipts frequently appeared in these presentations, attesting to the lingering fear of being accused of starving their child. Siobhan's extremely thin figure was among the number of problems that led to Siobhan's removal and continued to be a neuralgic point of discussion. It also proved to be an issue more difficult to resolve, especially in alignment with respecting her autonomy. Her fragile figure was partly due to anatomy, but also to her extraordinarily picky eating habits:

The truth is that [Siobhan] is very picky and a poor eater. If she likes the food, she will eat, but if not, she won't take even a bite. It would be a herculean task for any parent to prepare a meal for every single mealtime that suits her tastes. And as her parents, we cannot simply force her to eat! [Teacher] Aunt [Emőke]'s testimony also touches on this: although she is very picky, her nutrition is adequate.<sup>83</sup>

Siobhan's autonomy in the realm of eating posed the Hui parents with an unresolvable contradiction. As they claimed, they would not want to "force her" to eat, and yet they were also incapable of living up to the "herculean task" of providing something to her liking every single mealtime, resulting in a stalemate. Reverting to defense, the Hui parents set out to collect testimonies from schoolteachers about the "mouthwatering" snacks they packed for Siobhan for school and a statement from the family's pediatrician proving that despite her fragile figure, Siobhan is neither starved nor undernourished. They also asserted that a teacher from the

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<sup>83</sup> Excerpt from Tara's and Bill's testimony to the police. 2021. 11. 18.



temporary home reached out to them for advice on what kind of rice they should buy for Siobhan for she refused everything they offered, and that whenever they got to speak with her, she always said she was hungry. In addition, they also pointed out that Siobhan showed no sign of malnourishment: she was rarely sick and was never too “frail” in school. They emphatically rejected this accusation: “We never starved her, quite the contrary, we always plead with her to eat a little more. At home, we also try to cater to her food preferences: we keep a variety of foods, both Chinese and Hungarian, and we go to the Chinese market weekly to get her favorites.”

Despite their repeated claims against this accusation, Szilvia kept insisting on the question of eating. Since the only thing Siobhan was keen on eating were jellybeans and the like, her parents decided to close their fight with her on this front – to uphold one against buying her a smartphone. They considered the latter more harmful and dangerous in the long run and therefore of greater significance. Interpreting their decision as a tradeoff, the Hui parents laid up a handsome pile of gummy bears in a kitchen cabinet, from which Siobhan could serve herself according to her judgment. This once again ignited Szilvia’s disapproval, who remained seemingly unconvinced by Tara’s and Bill’s argument for gummy bears to be only short-term damage which is a worthy sacrifice for having less disagreement over the smartphone that would pose the threat of long-term damage.

Szilvia continued to explore the issue and asked whether the variety of foods that Siobhan accepts expanded over the past few months. Upon this question, something snapped in Tara, she could not bear the accusation of starving her child any longer. Leaving her hitherto unshakably graceful poise behind, she jumped up and rushed off to the fridge, starting to unload it frantically, in an attempt to demonstrate to Szilvia that they had food at home. Bill also got

up and quietly tried to calm her down in a movingly emphatical manner. Eventually, this scene reached its goal in the sense that after this incident, Szilvia carefully avoided the topic of Siobhan's eating habits.

As their life seemed to slowly go back to normal both Szilvia and I increasingly started to feel like nuisances, invaders in their healing family lives, incessantly asking questions about the intimacies of their everyday life. Since for her part, in alignment with the other children welfare officers and experts (such as the family therapist), Szilvia concluded that the Hui parents consistently and comfortingly proved themselves fitting the parental role. She considered the Hui family's case closed, and our visits gradually got reduced to mere formalities, in fulfillment with the inflexible condition of the one-year follow-up.

## **7.7 Incrimination: From docile subjects to assertive actors**

Right around the time when the family reassuringly embarked on the road of its own private and autonomous life, unencumbered by the intrusion of the social worker and the other child welfare experts, a call from the police upended their tranquility. They were being accused of violating child protection laws through physical abuse and were called in for interrogation. This resulted in the worst possible dramaturgy: after the shock and the therapy, when the social worker practically considered their case closed giving the parents the impression that the whole tumult was finally settling down, the police investigation just peaked, – with hearings, indictments, and evidence – making losing their daughter a real possibility again.

And there we were, standing on a windy corridor in the dilapidating brutalist building of the 2<sup>nd</sup> district police headquarters, which has not seen a renovation in the past four decades the least. The investigation procedure I have thus far only seen in American series – entailing the

collection of a DNA sample, shooting crime photos completed by a surprisingly meticulous collection of all ten fingerprints, palms, and the edges of hands – somehow seemed like a parody of itself in the run-down scenery.

Tara bore her criminalization with an unlikely dignity, which did not break as she slowly walked toward the end of the corridor to a doorless bathroom (or rather something that once used to be a bathroom) to wash off the black paint covering her hands – making the hands accused of physical abuse look guilty beyond doubt. The investigation seemed to be way too serious for the allegations, and the scenery way too flippant for carrying it out. Standing in front of the peeling plaster, Tara compliantly turned to the camera and adjusted her chin to the frame, moving her body upon instructions as if she were a puppet, without any sight of indignation. After the procedure, we walked down the stairs to tell Bill that it was his turn. Abruptly, Tara broke into tears on the stairs, saying that it was all her fault that Bill must go through this, and worried that “Bill’s heart would not be able to deal with such humiliation.” As Bill saw us, he immediately rushed toward Tara, frightened that something had happened to her, and he was visibly relieved realizing that it was only Tara’s worries for him that took such an expressive form. He consoled her and ensured that his heart could bear anything for his family. True to his word, he went through the process completely resigned.

The first set of hearings otherwise went by completely uneventful, as, upon their lawyer’s advice, they lived with their right to remain silent – the lawyer suggested that the police did not have any evidence. As it turned out the lawyer was wrong about that, and the police did have substantial evidence: a thick pile of prints of a Facebook messenger chat between Siobhan and a classmate, in which Siobhan describes with an astonishingly elaborate and strangely

archaic style (especially for a beginner Hungarian speaker) how her parents beat her with a stick, and how they denied food from her, all because they favored her younger sister.

When the parents saw the messages the eve before the second police hearing (as part of the evidence, the police were required to present them before the interrogation), they decided to devise a very interesting defense strategy. They compiled a list of novels Siobhan has been reading recently (Figure 19) and presented the list alongside Siobhan's own novels (Figure 18) to the police to prove that the message exchange was more the display of Siobhan's literary talent and power of imagination, than evidence for their deeds. I had to translate one such message Siobhan sent to her friend to Bill on his hearing reading "Are you acquainted with the sensation, that relentless and repeated affliction, when the stick descends upon you time and time again?"<sup>84</sup> Bill looked at me with delight, his mouth shaping an 'I can't believe this is really happening' smile, and said to me, not for translation, just as a private comment: "see, she is an exceptional literary talent."

To keep the narrative under their own control and avoid misunderstandings, the Hui parents prepared a written statement for their second hearing (including the illustration Figure 19 and Figure 18). In this testimony, they put their own defense strategy building on Siobhan's artistic talent into the following words:

We feel it is important to say something else about [Siobhan]'s correspondence with [her friend,][Móni]. [Siobhan] has a special talent for literature and drawing: she wants to be a writer and painter when she grows up and is blessed with an extraordinary imagination. She has read the following books, several of them more than once, because they had a great impact on her, and we think they could have influenced her imagination as well: For a child blessed with such exceptional imagination, reality is never

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<sup>84</sup> Since the original message was in Hungarian, this version is my failed attempt at reconstructing the 19<sup>th</sup> century style Siobhan was mastering way better in Hungarian than I do in English.

satisfying, and she did not receive as much attention from her parents as she desired. We believe that she shared her anger related to this with [Móni].<sup>85</sup>

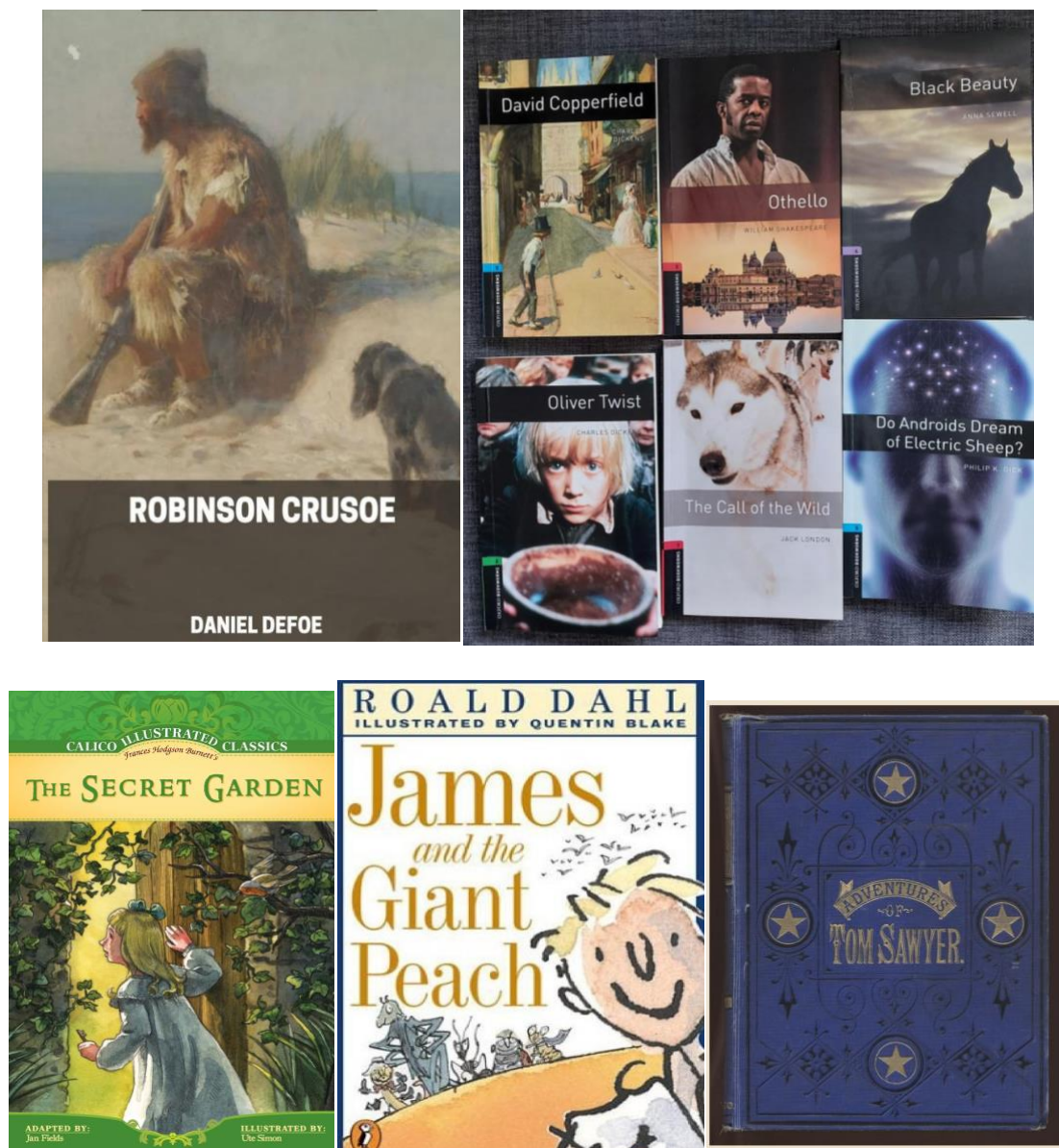


Figure 19. Evidence for Siobhan's inspiration. Compiled by the Hui parents

<sup>85</sup> Excerpt from Tara's and Bill's testimony to the police. 2021. 11. 18.

### 7.7.1 Autonomous parents

Their self-devised defense strategy attested to an increasing sense of autonomy the Hui parents acquired through the case while also showcasing their substantial command of psychological knowledge. Standing in sharp contrast to their first letter-statement addressed to the unknown “Dear Officer” in which they rebuked themselves as incompetent parents for their “lack of scientific psychological knowledge,” in the testimony prepared for the second police hearing a year later, they used their psychological expertise in defense of their appropriate parenthood:

Abused children usually cannot pay adequate attention to their studies and perform poorly in school. This cannot be said about Siobhan at all: she excels in school, has exceptional talent in drawing, and has even participated in the school's drawing competition. She gets along well with her classmates and maintains close relationships with them.<sup>86</sup>

Equipped by this knowledge, they not only found self-comfort in proving to themselves (alongside the police) that whatever they did to or failed to do with Siobhan, she was not a traumatized child; but drew so much courage and self-confidence that they even proposed ideas to the police regarding how they should get to the bottom of this clue: “We would like to request that you ask Siobhan's classmates about their impressions of Siobhan. For example, in this form: What is your impression of Siobhan? A) Optimistic, cheerful, and happy. B) Cold, pessimistic, and downhearted.” The active stance they came to embrace in standing up for themselves marked a significant departure from the submissive role they had previously accepted as docile subjects exercising self-criticism.

In anticipation of the police investigation, they set out to collect evidence themselves. In the testimony quoted above, they recited one of Siobhan’s teachers as a witness claiming: “She did not seem [abused] at all. She was seemingly a perfectly balanced child. Everyone likes her, she

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<sup>86</sup> Excerpt from Tara’s and Bill’s testimony to the police. 2021. 11. 18.

is friendly, open-minded, diligent, and benign. We got to know a wholesome, healthy child. We were completely at a loss with my colleague upon reading her messages – we would never have noticed anything like that based on her behavior.” These two legs of their defense, Siobhan’s “exceptional imagination” – emphatically interpreted as a “blessing” or a “talent” – contextualized by the scientific psychological approach pointing to her wholesome and balanced character, seemed to convince the investigators, who eventually dropped all charges against them.

Although perfectly docile and compliant throughout the process, by devising and executing their defense without any help from the outside, the Hui parents also exercised a significant level of sovereignty and autonomy. Yet, their incrimination brought the Hui parents to the edge. Facing criminal charges prevented them from leaving the country either to enjoy a much-needed recreational holiday abroad or to visit relatives and friends in China. The latter carried immediate significance because their incident with the child welfare protection services severely encumbered their social ties in China. As the parents admitted, they did not dare to share the situation with any of their family members and friends in China at all, not Siobhan’s removal, their life under the scrutiny of a social worker, or their police interrogations: “they would not have understood.” Thus, they experienced the “temporary alienation” caused by the collective criticism articulated by the Hungarian Child Protective System as a more permanent alienation from their Chinese bonds. Paradoxically, the burden of a shameful secret, which loomed over their most intimate ties in China, counterintuitively reinforced their rootedness and sense of belonging in Hungary.

The whole procedure of separation and thoroughly supervised reunion also contributed to strengthening the ties between the family members, making their alliance firmer than it has

ever been. Eventually, they decided to arm themselves with the love for their family to endure the remaining months of investigation before they could finally be free and live in the spirit of their own call, articulated in the letter-statement half a year before: “We are the parents who are suffering the torture of being separated from our own daughter, we want to tell the world: cherish your family, cherish your family members, that is the most essential meaning of this world of human beings.”<sup>87</sup>

## **7.8 Siobhan’s interrogation: lost in autonomy.**

Siobhan was not spared from the investigation process either, learning a tough lesson that one’s words can have grave consequences, and not necessarily in the direction one hoped them to be. As previously noted, I barely got the chance to get to know Siobhan more closely throughout our visits, but I understood that she was surprised and traumatized by her removal and once in the temporary home, she expressed her wish to return home as soon as possible. The examinations by police psychologists (as part of the police procedure in prosecuting the charges against her parents) offered me a deeper insight into her struggles to make sense of her own agency. Despite her longing for independence, she felt increasingly insecure about managing it, overwhelmed by the unforeseen and possibly profound repercussions of her actions.

We were waiting in a well-kept, though claustrophobically small waiting room surrounded by a host of closed doors at the top of a police building located in the scenic neighborhood of Viziváros, waiting for Siobhan’s psychological examination. The time scrawled by excruciatingly slowly, none of the doors opened, and there was no movement whatsoever that would indicate that it indeed passed at all. Though we arrived punctually to the scheduled

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<sup>87</sup> Excerpt from Tara’s and Bill’s statement to the authorities. 2021. 04. 28.



appointment, no one bothered to let us know why we were still waiting and how long we still had to, but apart from me, no one seemed to bother. Mother and daughter sat by each other in silence, Siobhan immersed in her phone, playing, while Tara was poised and reserved as always. Tara was like a meditating Chan Buddhist, and Siobhan was probably hoping that the examination would never come to happen. When I asked whether they were nervous – I very much was – Tara responded not at all: they agreed that this time they would not try any tactics. Last time the lawyer told Siobhan not to say anything and it made Siobhan very anxious, while it most likely made an impression on the investigator that she had something to hide. So, this time Bill and Tara told Siobhan that she was free to say whatever she wanted, and that she did not have to worry about anything.

After a longer while, while we discussed the weather and the ongoing protests against lockdown in Shanghai, Siobhan quit playing on the phone, her legs stomping nervously, and bent over to Tara. They engaged in silent chatter I could not overhear, but to my relief, the two erupted in laughter, and Tara cuddled her affectionately for the first time. Her hesitant and unrefined gesture revealed her unfamiliarity with physically expressing her affection for Siobhan in a manner she believed to be publicly appropriate in this setting—even though I was the sole spectator. Shortly after, a door finally opened, and Siobhan was asked to enter. I accompanied her into the room on the ground of being her interpreter – I was not entirely sure whether she needed one after having been schooled for five years in Hungary – but my presence was a solace to both her and her parents.

Throughout the entire examination, Siobhan remained deeply absorbed in the first task of sketching a tree, seldom glancing at the examiner. In stark contrast to the lively, colorful paintings that adorn their home, she chose a somber willow, carefully detailing each leaf and

even adding a burrow—the imagery stereotypically associated with a troubled soul. My hope was that the examiner would not read this as a sign of abuse, but rather understand that for Siobhan, whose reserved nature was intensified by the immense pressure of her statements' potential impact on her family, it was the situation itself that was profoundly distressing to her. As intensely she tried to avoid eye contact with the investigator, as often she sought my gaze looking for encouragement or guidance especially when questions got thorny, working toward the possibility of parental abuse. Since becoming acquainted with her, this was the first occasion I heard her speak more than simple affirmatives in Hungarian.

Only when our gazes locked did I come to realize how very ambiguous my position was, for I should not have appeared to intervene in her way of speaking when she seemed to be able to express herself, but I could sense that she did not always express what she meant to say. The Hungarian investigator might have not even noted these minor grammatical slips and thus failed to construe them for what they were: the result of improper knowledge of the language. I was increasingly worried that she would take Siobhan's sentences at their face value, despite the subtle but meaningful differences these grammatic slippages implied. For example, I noted that whenever Siobhan wanted to describe a one-time, singular situation or occurrence, her grammar tended to express generality, a usual course of affairs. In a conversation like this, such nuances carry a heavy weight. I decided to hold my breath till the end of the investigation not to appear as the “agent” of the parents and told my insights to the investigator after the examination concluded.

Throughout the interview, Siobhan consistently sought to palliate any comments about her parents, eager to avoid giving the examiner a negative impression. For instance, upon claiming that her parents were strict, she was quick to compliment and nuance the statement by

contextualizing it as a cultural norm: “This is a difference of cultures. Chinese parents are very strict because they want their children to grow up be good people... But [my parents] have already adapted to the Hungarian way!” she clarified hastily, aiming to endear her parents to the psychologist. When the investigator asked what her wish would be if she met a fairy, she pondered briefly and responded: She wanted to undo this terrible cascade of events in which she implicated herself and her family, she would ask the fairy to make this unhappen. Expressing her affection for her parents, she also chose her parents as the company on a desert island, for she loved them, and thought they were very entertaining.

After we finally got out of the room, Siobhan did not seem relieved at all, rather to the contrary, she seemed even more anxious than before the investigation. This impression was confirmed by an upset call I received from them later that day, with both parents on the other end asking for my impressions. Since I felt Siobhan was troubled because of the entire situation, fearing the possibility that the unwelcome turn of events would occur again and she unequivocally expressed her fondness for her parents, I responded that I would think it did go well – and I could hear as both released a sigh of relief, as Siobhan told them she was very worried that she „messed up” again. To me at least, her responses showed that she was fond of her parents and was devastated by the potentiality to be detached from them once again. Yet Siobhan seemed to be completely at loss in assessing how she could avoid or prevent that by her own actions. It appeared that despite her parents' dedicated refusal to hold her accountable for the unfolding events, she felt a profound sense of responsibility for them. Despite her yearning for autonomy, once it was granted, she struggled to navigate its appropriate use and experienced an acute sense of uncertainty over its consequences.

## 7.9 Concluding remarks

After completing our yearlong continuous inspection of the Hui family's intimate family life, the Child Protective Services arbitered that the family was ready to live on its own without external help. Throughout this year, the only occasion when the Hui couple did not show complete docility in the face of the authorities was the notably minor case of the fridge incident. Other than that, not only did they willingly subject their private life to public scrutiny, but never once failed to express their gratitude for our "help." Throughout our encounters, there was an apparent antagonism between the way the Hui parents wholeheartedly embraced their children's autonomy, while at the same time almost fully surrendering their own autonomy – both to state authorities and to their children.

Szilvia, the social worker on the case, who assisted the family as they went through the excruciating and often deeply humiliating interventions concluded that "if all families complied like the Huis, child protection would have reached its end goal." A year after the conclusion of the events culminating in the dropping of charges and living an unencumbered, happy, and balanced family life, they paid me a Christmas visit. They brought beautifully wrapped presents to my children whom they got to know throughout the process when they were out of school and accompanied me to the regular visits, spending the time I helped the social worker and the Hui parents gain mutual understanding with playing with Siobhan in her room. As we were sitting by my kitchen table for a change, without the authoritative presence of the social worker, when reporting about their present family harmony, they still credited the Child Protection Services for helping them achieve their present condition.

This state of affairs changed significantly when, as part of closing their case, they received an advice package provided by the child welfare experts working on their case. The advice

package contained several elements that the Hui couple found unalignable with their new principle of “listening seriously to the children” and respecting their autonomy, and eventually plainly rejected the recommendations on these very grounds. Acting so, they emerged as the parents who implemented child-centeredness and the recognition of children’s autonomy the most comprehensively and conscientiously among all participants in this research. In a dialectical manner, by genuinely bestowing autonomy on their children, they also emerged from completely docile subjects to autonomous ones, who dare to say no to authorities had they gone against their principles.

First, the experts suggested that the two girls should go to the same school. Although it would have made the parents’ lives easier, they discarded this recommendation because both girls expressed fondness for their present institutions and had no desire to change. The parents asked why they should force them to change against the children’s wishes. Second, and quite unexpectedly to me, was the advice urging the parents to “be proud of Chinese culture.” The Hui parents were also at a loss in trying to make sense of this recommendation, addressing biculturalism as though it were a problem. Ironically, the parents’ observance of “Chinese culture” was partly what put them in “trouble” in the first place: the traditional Chinese home remedy called *gua sha* was responsible for the red mark on Siobhan’s body that was mistaken as a mark of physical abuse. Tara’s thorough knowledge and everyday application of traditional Chinese remedies alongside Bill’s fondness of Chan Buddhism all indicated that the parents have not turned their backs on “Chinese culture.” They were willing to impart this knowledge to their daughters, but only if the girls were interested. However, since they sincerely exercised “listening to their daughters,” they understood that the girls preferred to be “ordinary” (*putong de*). Again, the parents expressed that they saw no reason to force them otherwise and rejected this advice as well. Third, the parents turned down the recommendation for an overnight

psychological assessment of Siobhan, fearing that the process would be excessively traumatic for her to endure. They claimed that they acquired psychological knowledge and subsequently felt confident in their ability to understand and address Siobhan's mental state. They further supported this argument referring to her environment (classmates and teachers), who observed her as balanced and happy in recent months, standing proof for their successful engagement with her "inner needs and desires" and their eventual becoming of emotionally "competent parents." Lastly, in some form the advice package also brought up the question of Siobhan's twiggy build, driving the Hui parents to emphatically withdraw from what they called "the violent fattening" of their child.

Notably, they refused to take this advice package on the grounds of safeguarding their children's autonomy and sovereignty over decisions considering their education, culture, and body. In doing so, they reappropriated their parental authority to discern what best serves their children's interests. Nevertheless, they did take home some important messages that changed their family life once and forever. Replacing the hierarchical, "parental-authority" *zweckrational* approach to child-rearing focusing on future outcomes; they adopted a child-centered, *wertrational* attitude, focusing on the present, affective quality of their children's lives. Their new understanding of the family as a system prompted them to change their own ways of thinking by "listening seriously to their children" instead of expecting their children to change. In conclusion, Bill and Tara once again expressed their gratitude toward Szilvia and me, practically for helping them become their better selves. Their systemic transformation brought much happiness to all members of the family, who came to cherish their unison after the traumatic event of separation as "the most essential meaning of this world of human beings."

## CONCLUSION: STRIVING FOR THE GOOD ENOUGH

The stories told about the Zhang, Chen, and Hui families are as much about migration as they are about changing family life and the ethics of parenting in China; and the emergence of a novel, and what I believe to be a potentially political subjectivity. Their journeys through space are also traversals through the moral landscapes of child-rearing and in turn are suggestive of how these changing theories and practices might collude in configuring political subjectivities. These geographic transitions, as these stories suggested, also embody a distinct temporal orientation, that is primarily oriented toward the well-being of both children and their parents in the *present*. Standing in sharp contrast with the *zweckrational* pursuit of a better life in the future that either implicitly or explicitly dominates conventional approaches to migration, this presentist orientation foregrounds, as I argued, a distinctly *wertrational* approach to decision-making, drawing the contours of a qualitatively new reproduction-oriented migration.

The overarching unifying aspect of these stories – as well as many of those told in interviews with others – is an unambiguous embrace of child-centeredness. On the one hand, this points to the global dispersion of child-centeredness as a practically universal *structure of feeling*; while on the other, upon closer examination, it reveals a unique articulation of this sentiment that distinguishes it from China’s state-sponsored “neo-familism” (see Section 3.4.4.1) as well as from the global middle-class norm of intensive parenting (see Section 3.2.1). Although this migration both discursively and practically is “all for the child,” to the extent that parents leave the realm of production as much as they can afford behind to become full-time caregivers, instead of channeling their liberated capacities into a full-force “chickening” of their children by engaging in (over)intensive parenting, they practice a form of *tang ping*-parenting and strive to realize “Buddhist parenthood” – a profoundly non-interventive approach that promotes the unhampered development of the child’s autonomy (see Section 3.4.5).

Prioritizing their children's present happiness at the cost of potentially jeopardizing their future success, these parents make a drastic choice amidst an ever more involutioned global competition for status. This suggests a shift in the global middle class's aspirational tendencies, as they cast aside the West and move to countries not for economic or symbolic gain, but in search of a freer, healthier, and more autonomous life—thereby creating a new dynamic in global migration indicative of the emergence of a potentially political subjectivity. In renouncing both the global mandate of intensive parenting and the Chinese mandate of cultivating prodigious overachievers, their parenting practices serve as an implicit critique not only of the authoritarian developmental state but also its form of capitalism. By voting with their feet, they assert a position as much against the increasingly authoritarian political system as they are against the profound commodification and fierce competition that capitalism imposes on reproduction in general and family life in particular. In these concluding paragraphs, I summarize the most important findings that resulted from a deep engagement with what I identified as a novel type of mobility and point out its most significant implications.

## 8.1 A personal note

As a mother, I largely share similar values with these parents, striving to resist the hegemonic mandates of intensive parenting compelled by the market to incessantly enhance my children's development and choose to cultivate the unencumbered development of my children's autonomous personalities instead. The stories of these families reveal the everyday difficulties that lie on the one hand in aligning one's own autonomy with the child's recognized autonomy, in other words negotiating the boundary of legitimate parental authority, resonate closely with my experience and posits a universal challenge in parenthood. On the other hand, the social and educational environment also makes it difficult to engage in practicing such a parenting



philosophy and reclaim parenthood. The past decade's Governance of National Cooperation in Hungary has seen a gradual but profound dismantling of the education system, systematically undermining the sovereignty and autonomy of institutions, educators, and parents alike (Radó 2022). This retrograde movement favors a return to an old-fashioned, frontal, content-oriented, disciplinarian educational model that aggressively champions nationalistic and conservative values, squeezing out any room for practice, enrichment, or fulfillment-related activities that would be conducive of children's independence in thinking and acting for themselves. And precisely for this reason, the decision of these like-minded parents to settle in Hungary has been, from the outset, utterly perplexing to me.

As I watch my children navigate this restrictive educational landscape that is designed to incentivize mindless rote learning instead of autonomous, critical thinking, I cannot help but see its detrimental effects on my children's autonomy, while step by step chipping away their natural curiosity in history, math, or nature. When I talk with my close relatives who moved to Stockholm and Zurich to raise their children, sharing idyllic stories of their mud-splattered, carefree childhoods, aided by an educational (and social) environment that is designed to build upon and fulfill children's curiosity and be conducive of their autonomous thinking, the sharp disparity with my own children's experiences is painfully evident, making me feel jealous and even guilty at times. To meet parents in this social microcosm of mine who share my philosophies on child-rearing yet choose to move half across the globe to settle in Hungary — the very place I am contemplating leaving for the same reasons they are drawn to it — is a profound paradox. The preceding chapters are, in many ways, my effort to grapple with this contradiction.

On the one hand, this encounter brings the issue of relativism viscerally to the fore. To me, the Hungarian educational system exemplifies the rightward populist nationalism embraced by the government that goes directly against my principles, and I conceive this system with its book-and-discipline-based curriculum to be destructive to my children's wholesome development. Yet, when viewed through the lens of the grueling demands of middle-class educational life in Chinese metropolises, its eight-hour school day and negligible homework assignments suddenly appear more like a sandbox than a detrimental educational system of an authoritarian regime.

On the other hand, this perplexing juxtaposition also indicates that reproduction climbed to the rank of the uppermost values motivating migration decision-making – coinciding with the ever more pronounced “upward concentration” (Xiang 2016) in migration, with both emigration and immigration policies selecting for the more affluent classes (see 1.3.1). As the freedom to move becomes an ever more scarce and unequally distributed commodity (Bauman 2009), the aspirations that drive these mobilities reflect the values of the still mobile privileged classes, increasingly dominated by the centrality of their “priceless children” (Zelizer 1985; Hays 1998). It appears that in the late modern state of disembedding and internationalization of reproduction, the sandbox is always happier on the other side – and entry is granted only to those who can afford it.

## **8.2 Reclaiming parenthood**

Against the backdrop of the hegemonic norms of intensive parenting and prodigious overachievement, these three families adopted a conception of child-centeredness that strives to acknowledge their children's autonomy. The notion and recognition of the child(ren)'s autonomy lies at the heart of the irreconcilable contradiction between the ideologies of the “Buddha” and the “chickener” parent and their corresponding rationalities of *Wert-* and

*Zweckrationalität*. By assuming the role of the manager, the “chicken parent” recognizes children’s autonomy only to the extent to which it can be manipulated into realizing the goals predetermined by the manager. In sharp contrast, the “Buddha parent” bestows autonomy on the child out of a firm belief that under benign and subtle moral guidance, the child is capable of setting their own goals.

In the vein of Lila Abu-Lughod (1996), I reconstructed these parents’ arguments about, justifications for, and interpretations of what they themselves and others are doing. This reconstruction showed that although the terms of their discourses may be set, yet, within these limits, they contest interpretations of what is happening, live their lives, and outline the direction in which they want them to go, thus formulating new definitions of what a “good enough life” means. The terms that weave through and through their discourses – such as *suzhi*, *touzi*, or for that matter the emphatical notion of psychology – are rooted in the paradigm of the of raising quality children that is increasingly infused with norms dictated by global intensive parenting. These terms can be unarguably traced back to the propaganda born at the collusion between the authoritarian Chinese state and its market economy in configuring identity, desire, and aspiration culminating in parenting.

However, as the preceding chapters aimed to illustrate, these parents reappropriated and resignified these terms and notions to align with their individually defined meanings of life. In Yunxia’s parlance, *suzhi* no longer signifies prodigious overachievement, but the moral quality of goodness. For Jake, *touzi* does not designate an investment in the competitiveness of his child but embodies a distinctly postmaterialist ideal of togetherness and intimacy. All three families have adopted the notion of psychology and mental health as a pivotal dimension of parenting, coinciding with its increasing prominence in Chinese state discourse on child-

rearing (see 3.4.4.6). Yet, instead of adhering to the state's technocratic approach to psychology as a technology of the self, they embrace it from a *wertrational* perspective and turn it into a central dimension of their lives for its inherent well-being enhancing value. By resignifying its central notions these parents reclaim the discourse on parenthood and, by doing so, attempt to reclaim their competence in identifying and acting upon their children's interests.

Best illustrated by the vicissitudes of the Hui family, this pursuit extends beyond the narrow confines of child-rearing and implies profound consequences for one's selfhood. By granting autonomy to their children, in a dialectical manner, the Hui parents themselves transitioned from completely docile subjects to autonomous ones. After a prolonged period of being "proletarianized parents" (Lasch 1977), stripped of their parental rights and competencies, when it came to safeguarding their children's autonomy and sovereignty over decisions considering their education, culture, and body; they reclaimed their parental authority to discern what serves best their children's interests, and dared to say no to authorities had they gone against their principles. In my interpretation, Yunxia and Jake are also paragons of autonomy. By rejecting the imposed roles of housewife and breadwinner and refashioning themselves as a "house matriarch" and a "*háziapa*", they have redefined the private sphere of family life and parenthood as a societal domain where one's power is just as valuable as in the monetarily rewarded public sphere.

### **8.3 Ambiguities: the stress of being relaxed**

These chapters attempted to illustrate that becoming a "Buddhist parent" against the global currents is more difficult to realize in practice than it sounds in theory. Best illustrated by the changing symbolism of the sandbox that goes from the ideal of childhood happiness to the source of anxiety over wasting time; becoming relaxed parents amidst the social reality

increasingly defined by risk and uncertainty, surrounded by an infinite amount of reference frames compelling incessant comparison, is hard, and often stressful work. By choosing to relocate to Hungary, these parents gave up on hoarding ever more resources, while they acquired capitals – such as the Hungarian language capital – the turnout of which is ambiguous the least. The *zweckrational* cost-benefit analysis of these pursuits is far from obvious.

Haunted by an all-pervasive imaginary of competition and a fear of losing out, anxiety inevitably resurfaces. These fears manifest in heightened attention to the future and a *zweckrational* approach to the present, taking shape in a fervent interest in “managing” (*guanli* 管理) the child’s time. The changing discussions of the *Home Educational Sharing Salon* WeChat chat group (see Section 4.6.3) also attest to these ebbs and flows of “overseas *suzhi* anxiety.” Initially started as a platform to exchange tips for leisure activities, over time, under the firm-handed guidance of Yu *Laoshi*, the group slowly transitioned into a hotbed of anxiety over losing out and reignited a second-tier educational involution. As an educational service provider, group administrator Yu *Laoshi* was economically incentivized to stir the discussion toward these grounds since it was her interest to have more children enrolled in her International Baccalaureate preparation classes. This resulted in a contradiction within the group, for many parents had their children in Hungarian public education, effectively cutting themselves off from the transnational English higher education track epitomized by the International Baccalaureate. This contradiction was the source of countless interesting debates over the meaning and goal of education, with both *zweckrational* and *wertrational* parties striving to guard their positions against the other.

However, as the administrator, Yu *Laoshi* was in a position to give more voice to those who represented both her values and her economic interests. Unarguably feeding “overseas *suzhi*

anxiety,” she organized “experience sharing sessions for parents of excellent students” (*youxiu xuesheng jiazhang jingyan fenxiang* 优秀学生家长经验分享). By design, these sharing sessions were not only appraisals of educational excellence such as scoring full points on the centralized higher education exam but aimed to focus attention on the parental efforts behind cultivating outstanding achievements. These sharing sessions were always followed up by mothers praising not only the “whiz babies” (*niuwa* 牛娃) but most importantly the “fairy mothers” (*xiannü mama* 仙女妈妈) seen responsible for their outstanding achievements, while simultaneously drawing a comparison with their own and their child’s shortcomings. Standing in a clear parallel to the “quality child” and the “sacrificing mother,” these sharing sessions invigorated exactly the state- and market-imposed identities many of the participants in the group discussion sought to leave behind.

Notably, many of the presenting mothers cast in the role of the “fairy mother” by design used their presentations and the ensuing group discussion to discredit themselves as prodigious overachievers and to point to the contradiction inherent in their pursuits. For instance, a mother, Alisha gave a widely popular experience-sharing presentation around time management (*shijian guanli* 时间管理) and the raising of “efficient babies” (*gao xiao de wa* 高效的娃). The flyer introduced Alisha as “a long-time practitioner of time and efficiency management,” and as a “self-chickened mom” (*ziji mama* 自鸡妈妈). This designation implies that complementing “injecting the baby with chicken blood,” Alisha also “injects” herself by engaging in continuous self-development. The professional technocratic self-management implied by the flier notwithstanding, the group discussion revolved around the realizability and indeed necessity of executing rigorous schedules, with Alisha herself aptly pointing out the inherent antagonism: “Hahaha [Face with tears of joy] I am also a strong man of planning

(*jihua de qiangren* 计划的强人) and a Buddhist in action (*xingdong de foxizhe* 行动的佛系者).”

The inherent contradiction of feeling compelled to adopt a *zweckrational* approach to children and to “chicken the child,” while also trying to insist on the *wertrational* conviction of letting the child grow at its own pace as a “Buddhist parent” speaks to the experience of all three families introduced in the previous chapters. Most importantly, it points out that at the end of the day, if parents are to provide their children with a happy, free, autonomous, and relaxed childhood, in a dialectical manner, they themselves are required to undertake the hard work of changing their habits and habitus to become freer, happier, more autonomous, and relaxed individuals as well. As the preceding chapters illustrated, this is by no means a simple and even evolution, and the road of these parents in becoming “Buddhist parents” was met with challenges in varying forms and to varying degrees. However, my longitudinal access to these families' intimate lives revealed that the ebbs and flows of “overseas *suzhi* anxiety” over time tend to shrink in their amplitude. Eventually, the Zhang, Chen, and Hui families all accommodated more to the “Buddhist” end of the spectrum, gradually leaving the “chickener” behind.

## 8.4 Turning contingency into choice

I approached this mobility in a way that attempted to account both for the economic structuring and the distinctly anti-economically oriented agency as two sides of the same coin, incomprehensible without each other: on the one side there is the increasing marketization of reproduction needs and consequent individualization of responsibilities; while on the other side there is the individually stated, explicit renunciation of these processes. This allowed me to take my participants' need for escape, and their quest for a “good enough life” (*Wertrationalität*)

just as seriously as the economic exigencies that necessitated and enabled this to be pursued in a cheaper environment in the first place (*Zweckrationalität*), pointing to the ways in which these supposedly mutually exclusive rationalities in fact play out in an inherently dialectical and interdependent manner, mutually implicated upon and constituted by each other. From a structural point of view, this reproduction-oriented mobility is a direct consequence of the disembedding and the subsequent internationalization of social reproduction. However, as the preceding pages aimed to illustrate, reproduction-related problems and responsibilities are often self-contradictory in themselves, and as a result, their global displacement follows counterintuitive and perplexing trajectories.

#### 8.4.1 Structure

What made it possible to realize the distinctly postmaterialist orientation embodied in “Buddhist parenthood” embraced by these parents counterintuitively hinges upon China’s continued pursuit of state-led economic growth, foregrounding a much more complicated and complex relationship to the Motherland than the surging nationalism of many Chinese migrants that researchers have noted over the past decades (e.g. H. Liu 2005; Barabantseva 2011; Chong 2016; Sun and Sinclair 2016). Their pursuit of a mentally and physically wholesome environment though consonant with China’s discourse of national revitalization but, as I have shown, became decoupled from its original agenda and indeed triggered a new trend in international mobility. As such, it illustrates how the broader tensions in the relationship between China’s middle class and the state are externalized to the global stage.

This global stage, yet again rather counterintuitively is provided by the markedly anti-immigrant Hungarian government, bolstered by its amicable relationship with China. The main attractiveness of Hungary as a destination country lay in the remarkably smooth way it



provided out of China, while the amicable relationship between the two countries offered a guarantee of a discrimination-free life for would-be migrants. The Hungarian government's strategy to reorient its foreign capital dependency toward the East in conjunction with its intention to capitalize a "national class" taking shape in the residency bond immigration scheme thus turned out to be an unexpected exit door to the disgruntled masses of the beneficiaries of China's state-led economic growth (see 1.3.3).

Other than that, as I have shown, the apparent fondness of Hungary exhibited by these migrants speaks more to their disaffection and discontent with China than to the empirical reality of the host country, offering little more than a blank page onto which discontents can be projected. Their perception of Hungary as a socially, morally, psychologically, and environmentally pure land, an ideal place for making home and raising children, is a testimony against the empirical reality of the overt involution, excessive materialism, and ruthless competitiveness of contemporary urban China. Over time, the initial allure of Hungary met the stark realities of the "poor, small language country," leading some migrants to leave, disillusioned (Positive Energy [Pseudonym] 2018). Yet, many of the migrants gradually turned the accidental contingency posited by the scheme into deliberate choice and started to foster a genuine sense of belonging toward Hungary – despite their growing awareness of the imperfections within its educational and healthcare systems. The unfolding citizenship practices evidenced by numerous children taking up Hungarian nationality and renouncing their Chinese citizenship underscores that their belonging to China is as fraught with ambiguities as strong as they aspire to genuinely integrate into Hungary.

Their relocation to Hungary is unarguably a form of *geoarbitrage*, in the sense that it is a strategic decision to relocate their earnings and/or savings to a lower cost living environment

to raise their *quality* of life. However, I believe the unique position anthropology offers for a closer examination of the actual “quality” these families gain by moving is essential to make sense of this mobility. First and foremost, this quality is constituted by the excess time they gain, interpreting Hungary as an “oasis of deceleration” (Rosa 2013, 158) and most importantly as a “simple” environment these parents see conducive of the “good enough life.” Living decidedly simple lives in distinctly simple environments, deliberately refraining from extravagance and luxury, these parents step off the beaten path of success that is defined by material wealth; and opt instead to derive meaning to their lives from a postmaterial appreciation of individual self-actualization, self-expression, and autonomy. Doing so, they not only settle for the good enough but indeed strive for it.

#### 8.4.2 Agency

Flipping to the other side of this coin and looking into the agency enacted by these parents through a deeper exploration of their aspirations from a *wertrational* perspective I believe reveals significant tendencies that extend beyond the conventional scope of migration studies. These parents set out to the unknown to confer autonomy to their children and thereby became autonomous subjects of their own. This shift in identity, desire, and aspiration is what makes the seemingly apolitical realm of child-rearing a legitimate entry point for capturing emergent political subjectivities. The unarguably postmaterialist orientation toward child-rearing they embrace centers around individual rights understood as *temporal autonomy* achieved by governing one’s own time and the right to *free time*.

Again, these parents’ focus on *temporal autonomy* echoes official Chinese state discourse on children’s rights in which the right to free time has been a prominent theme for decades (Naftali 2014, 92), most recently emphatically articulated by the double reduction policy (see 3.4.4.6).

However, the ways in which these parents reinterpret these rights and their efforts to apply them in practice suggest a qualitative departure from the enduring emphasis on collective socioeconomic justice that dominated Chinese “rights talk” for the past two millennia (Perry 2008). Furthermore, it challenges another dominant approach to human rights and individualism proffered by Yunxiang Yan, who argues that modern Chinese society exhibits “egotism” rather than individualism, characterized by a disproportionate stress on personal rights while neglecting duties and the rights of others (Yunxiang Yan 2003; 2010). By formulating their critique of the overtly materialistic, ruthlessly competitive, and profoundly amoral Chinese society strikingly similar to Yan’s argument, these parents attest to the presence of a countering narrative, that increasingly gains a foothold among the new Chinese middle class. This segment of the new Chinese middle class might as well vote with their feet against these societal qualities and find solace in what they perceive as the lingering presence of strong communal ties in the supposedly moral and traditional Hungarian society. Their quest for a meaningful community of moral individuals presents an antithesis to the still dominant narrative that contrasts “Chinese collectivism” with “Western individualism.”

I suggest that this choice, albeit individual, can be construed as a form of private protest. By moving beyond the traditional dichotomies of power monopoly versus powerlessness or domination versus resistance, this study seeks to recognize people's role in both perpetuating and transforming the mechanisms of their subjugation (Ong 2010, 217). Similar to the subtle, anonymous acts of defiance performed by the Malaysian factory women in Ong’s pivotal research who damaged the very components that they had painstakingly assembled or stalled the machines and thus interrupted production; the act of emigrating represents a statement of dissent. And, these individually formulated critiques might have a cumulative effect and can make an impact as a form of collective individual action (ibid., 211).

The parents' valorization of autonomy and individual rights stands as a tacit rebuke to the increasingly authoritarian party-state. This manifests explicitly in Yunxia's encouragement of Ryan's outspokenness on sensitive issues like Taiwan, a stance bold enough to stir familial discord, and is evidenced by her deteriorating relationship with Dongheng. Similarly, Jake, as a house dad, demonstrates how the emphatically postmaterialist orientation of these parents is not only a retort to the state's dictates but also a repudiation of the capitalist reordering of the family that compels parents to approach child-rearing as a fundamentally *zweckrational* endeavor, an investment in the future. His staunch dedication to a life and parenting style defined by postmaterial values has even led to a rift with his wife, who, in his view, increasingly came to personify the Chinese materialistic ethos he wanted to distance himself from by moving to Hungary.

Anthropologists approach political resistance with caution, and I am mindful not to overstate the resistive nature of these pursuits of the good enough life. I do believe, however, that the subtle acts of critique these migrants formulate, while individual, might have a cumulative impact (ibid, 211), creating an effect akin to collective action when viewed in concert. However, even though their stance represents a rather clear take against China, both against the authoritarian state and its form of capitalism, it is rather unclear how this might translate into an explicit political stance in Europe, or more narrowly in Hungary. The explicit endorsement of the anti-immigrant politics of Fidesz expressed by both Yunxia and Jake, as well as by many other interviewees, suggests that their renunciation of materialism and authoritarianism in China has little correlation with, and thus limited explanatory power over their positioning within the context of Hungarian politics. Though they want access to a European education they perceive as conducive to autonomy and freedom they do not necessarily want to share it

with those who do not belong to the elite and thus support Hungary's hard-right politics directed against refugees, domestic ethnic minorities, and the poor. This suggests that these parents' aspirations for freer lifestyles and postmaterial values – often associated with endorsing liberal democracy (Welzel and Inglehart 2005) – are imbued with ambiguities and contradictions.

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## APPENDIX 1.

### GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS, NAMES, EXPRESSIONS

#### Chapter 1 - From production to reproduction

Chinese characters	Pinyin Transliteration	Meaning
新移民	<i>xin yimin</i>	new migrants
下海	<i>xiahai</i>	jump to the sea
出国热	<i>chuguo re</i>	leave the country fever
素质	<i>suzhi</i>	quality
小康	<i>xiaokang</i>	comfortably well-off
单位	<i>danwei</i>	work unit
内卷	<i>nei juan</i>	involution
躺平	<i>tang ping</i>	lying flat
润学	<i>runxue</i>	run philosophy
匈牙利国债投资移民项目	<i>xiongyali guozhai touzi yimin xianmgu</i>	Hungarian residency bond immigration scheme
麻烦	<i>mafan</i>	troublesome

#### Chapter 2 - *Zweck* and *Wertrational* Theories of Migration – A Literature Review

Chinese characters	Pinyin Transliteration	Meaning
外国垃圾	<i>waiguo laji</i>	foreign trash
素质教育改革	<i>suzhi jiaoyu gaige</i>	education reform for quality
双减政策	<i>shuang jian zheng ce</i>	double reduction policy

#### Chapter 3 - Toward a *Wertrational* Theory of Reproduction Migration

Chinese characters	Pinyin Transliteration	Meaning
鸡娃	<i>ji wa</i>	to chicken the baby
打鸡血	<i>da jixue</i>	to inject with chicken blood
佛系家长	<i>foxi jiazhang</i>	Buddha parent
小天地	<i>xiao tiandi</i>	little world
心理健康	<i>xinli jiankang</i>	psychological health

#### Chapter 4 - Malinowski's Tent Inside Out (Methods and Positionality)

Chinese characters	Pinyin Transliteration	Meaning
有文化	<i>you wenhua</i>	have culture
没有文化	<i>mei you wenhua</i>	not having culture

一线城市	<i>yixian chengshi</i>	first-tier city
新一线城市	<i>xin yixian chengshi</i>	new first-tier city
家庭教育分享沙龙	<i>jiating jiaoyu fenxiang shalong</i>	Home Educational Sharing Salon

## Chapter 5 – Yunxia and the Zhang family

Chinese characters	Pinyin Transliteration	Meaning
特别简单	<i>tebie jian dan</i>	extremely simple
可以一步到位	<i>keyi yibu daowei</i>	could be done in a single step
蓝卡	<i>lanka</i>	blue card
发达国家	<i>fada guojia</i>	developed countries
阿姨	<i>ayi</i>	auntie
偶然的	<i>ourande</i>	accidental
机缘巧合	<i>jiyuan qiaohe</i>	coincidence
贫穷小语种国家	<i>pinqiong xiao yuzhong guojia</i>	poor, small language country
二次移民	<i>erci yimin</i>	secondary migration
全职妈妈	<i>quanzhi mama</i>	full time mother
乱	<i>luan</i>	messy
难民	<i>nanmin</i>	refugees
黑人	<i>heiren</i>	black people
乱七八糟的人	<i>luanqibazao de ren</i>	riffraff
安全	<i>anquan</i>	safe
有自己的想法	<i>you ziji de xiangfa</i>	her own way of thinking
优秀学生	<i>youxiu xuesheng</i>	outstanding student
朴实	<i>pushi</i>	simple
复杂	<i>fuza</i>	complicatedness
社会最底层的人	<i>shehui zui diceng de ren</i>	lowest rung of society
落后	<i>luhou</i>	backwardness
三观：世界，家，人	<i>sanguan: shijie, jia, ren</i>	three views of the world the family, and the person
富二代	<i>fuerdai</i>	descendants of corrupt officials
吉卜赛人	<i>jibusai ren</i>	gipsy
困惑	<i>kunhuo</i>	confused
环境	<i>huanjing</i>	environment
浪费时间	<i>langfei shijian</i>	wasting time
轻松	<i>qingsong</i>	relaxing
看重孩子的想法	<i>kanzhong haizide xiangfa</i>	to attach great importance to children's thinking
氛围	<i>fenwei</i>	atmosphere

性格	<i>xingge</i>	personality
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## Chapter 6 – Jake and the Chen family

Chinese characters	Pinyin Transliteration	Meaning
独生子女	<i>dusheng zini</i>	only children
普通的工人	<i>putong de gongren</i>	ordinary workers
低层的人	<i>diceng de ren</i>	lower class
补习班	<i>buxi ban</i>	cram courses
竞争力	<i>jinzhengli</i>	competitiveness
高的期望	<i>gao de qiwang</i>	expectations/hopes
诚挚	<i>chengzhi</i>	sincere
诚实	<i>chengshi</i>	honest
懂得关爱	<i>dongde guan ai</i>	knows how to care
懂得享受快乐	<i>dongde xiangshou kuaile</i>	knows how to enjoy happiness
国内	<i>guonei</i>	domestically (in China)
紧张	<i>jinzhang</i>	stress
雾霾	<i>wumai</i>	air pollution
老移民	<i>lao yimin</i>	old migrants
对心理的伤害	<i>dui xinli shanghai</i>	psychologically damaging
比较传统的	<i>bijiao chuantong de</i>	relatively traditional
比较有信仰的	<i>bijiao you xinyang de</i>	relatively religious
老天	<i>laotian</i>	God
以孩子为中心	<i>yi haizi wei zhongxin</i>	put the child in center
孤独	<i>gudu</i>	lonely
要说话算话	<i>yao shuohua suan hua</i>	keep your word
赚钱	<i>zhuan qian</i>	make money
没意思	<i>mei yisi</i>	pointless/does not make sense
投资	<i>touzi</i>	invest

## Chapter 7 – Hui family

Chinese characters	Pinyin Transliteration	Meaning
检讨	<i>jiantao</i>	criticism and self-criticism
老大	<i>laoda</i>	the eldest child
优秀的	<i>youxiu de</i>	outstanding
认真地听孩子说话	<i>renzhen di ting haizi shuo hua</i>	listen seriously to the child
安慰	<i>anwei</i>	empathy, consolation
自我感	<i>ziwo gan</i>	sense of the self
自主的	<i>zizhu de</i>	autonomous

管理	<i>guanli</i>	control and management
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## Chapter 8 – Conclusion

Chinese characters	Pinyin Transliteration	Meaning
优秀学生家长经验分享	<i>youxiu xuesheng jiazhang jingyan fenxiang</i>	experience sharing sessions for parents of excellent students
牛娃	<i>niuwa</i>	whiz baby
仙女妈妈	<i>xiannü mama</i>	fairy mother
时间管理	<i>shijian guanli</i>	time management
高效的娃	<i>gao xiao de wa</i>	high efficiency baby
自鸡妈妈	<i>ziji mama</i>	self-chickened mom
计划的强人	<i>jihua de qiangren</i>	a strong man of planning
行动的佛系者	<i>xingdong de foxizhe</i>	a Buddhist in action