

The Politics of Childhood

Why the low productivity of our country's enterprise economy and the situation of the inability of our products to compete have not changed in a long time, why agricultural science and technology have not achieved wide dissemination, why precious resources and the ecological environment have not been fully used and protected, why the increase in population has not been effectively controlled, and why some bad social conduct cannot be stopped despite repeated bans undoubtedly have many reasons, but one important reason is that the *suzhi* of laborers is low.

STATE COUNCIL, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA,
 "Zhongguo jiaoyu gaige he fazhan gangyao" [An outline for the
 reform and development of Chinese education], 1993

AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, some books written by somebody named Huang Quanyu describing school and family life in the United States hit the market in China, making this author a household name in Chinese cities. Titled *Education for Quality in America* (1999) and *Family Education in America* (2001), they are filled with vignettes describing Huang's experience of raising a son during his years as a graduate student in the United States, admiringly showcasing American educational practices. Decidedly nontheoretical books aimed at a popular audience, they describe family life, bake sales, and soccer games—mundane middle-class Americana meant to reflect everything Chinese educators are supposedly doing wrong.¹

To illustrate, the first chapter of *Education for Quality in America* tells a story about how Huang first perceived his son's art class with disapproval and how he eventually understood the logic behind what had first appeared to be a complete lack of structure and purpose. Huang uses this experience to question whether creativity can be taught, linking something as mundane as a child's extracurricular activities to national destiny. The art class story is emblematic of the kind of transformation educators are being asked to make in embracing the ideals of the *suzhi jiaoyu* movement, aimed at improving the

human “quality” of China’s population by modernizing the human subject. The assertion Huang makes in telling the story could not be more culturally significant: he performs a complete reversal of a deeply rooted logic regarding how to teach.

Once, before his wife and three-year-old son joined him in the United States, Huang got a letter in the mail from his family. It contained a traditional Chinese brush painting, a beautiful drawing of a bamboo “with scattered leaves and bending stalks, balanced composition, fine shading, and perspective” (1999: 12). It was so good Huang could not believe his three-year-old son had produced it. When his wife and son arrived in the United States a couple years later, the couple continued their son’s art education and sent him to an art class organized by a university. After no more than five classes, their son began to express discontent with the class and reported that his art teacher did not even teach: “She just gives us a subject and then lets us draw. You just draw however you want to draw, the teacher doesn’t even care. When you’re done the teacher only knows to say ‘Great! Great!’” (16).

At first, the couple did not pay much attention. But when their son continued to complain, Huang decided to investigate the matter for himself. He used having to bring his son something warm to wear as an excuse to visit one day, and he came upon a scene that looked to him like utter chaos. Huang recalls, “The instructors on duty were three art department graduate students. One male student sat on the podium staring at the ceiling with his legs crossed, a female student paced around chewing gum, another stared out the window at the snow absentmindedly” (17). Meanwhile children were drawing while standing, kneeling, and lying prone. The drawings Huang saw lacked in proportion, composition, structure, shape, and discipline. The students, he felt, did not even know how to hold a brush. He subsequently withdrew his son from the class, thinking it was the kind of class that “leads the young astray.”

Following a conversation he had with an American primary school art teacher who had lived and taught art in China and who described how her Chinese students were unable to draw something without a model, Huang began to rethink art education. He came to see that his son’s artistic competence was merely the product of a “photocopying” process (*fuying de guocheng*). He writes, “I began to carefully observe my son, and I realized that no matter what we gave him to draw, he could pretty much draw it to perfection, or you could say ‘copy’ it, ‘clone’ it. But if you wanted him to creatively draw something according to an assigned topic, that was difficult” (1999: 21).

Huang argues that this was because his son had been taught according to a simple transmission process: a teacher draws a model on the blackboard, students look at it and reproduce the drawing on paper by hand. Though his son had the technical skill to produce a traditional painting quite elegant for his age, he was stumped when given free rein. He could reproduce something someone else had already done, but he could not create something of his own.

Huang's story is meant to encapsulate the putative differences between Chinese and American education. The moral is that the seeming chaos of American education is precisely what promotes creativity. Huang came to realize that whether a child's art piece exhibited proportion, composition, and structure was beside the point. By providing little direction, American educators encouraged children to use their imagination. Creativity cannot be taught, but it can be facilitated with a change in educational style that promotes subjectivity in the child.

The *suzhi jiaoyu* movement to which Huang's efforts belong is the most recent iteration of an old debate, going back to the late nineteenth century, over how to modernize education against a historically entrenched tendency to privilege rote learning. Such debate strikes deep at the heart of Chinese conceptions of personhood and the nature of reality. Huang's characterization of traditional art education as a kind of "photocopying" process obscures the indigenous logic that gives copying its meaning. There is a strong cultural belief in the importance of internalizing models of various kinds through imitation—whether the good deeds of a cultural hero or the artistic production of an exemplary teacher. Over time, imitation and repetition—undertaken in the manner of *linmo*, copying in the close presence of great work—gives rise to enlightened understanding and originality (Bakken 2000: 134–37, 145–46). It is in the individual's total submission to external forces that creative spontaneity can arise.

It is significant that Huang Quanyu refers to this process in terms of photocopying (*fuying*), which shares the character for "to repeat" with other phrases related to repetitive learning. Unlike reviewing (*fu*) or repeatedly (*fanfu*) trying something, photocopying derogatorily suggests a mechanical process with little meaning and vitality, where doing is of no consequence. Thus Huang articulates the modern liberal view that locates subjectivity in the interior depths of the human person, rather than in the dynamic between influence and response so central to indigenous Chinese thought.

What is the context that has conditioned such a reversal in logic? What made such a critique possible? Cultural transformations that follow the his-

torical experience of grand humiliation can often involve coming to “hate” what one has (Robbins 2004: 9). In the case of China, this humiliation is commonly traced to the nineteenth century, when China lost the Opium War. Why a great civilization found itself in an inferior position on the global stage is a question that has inspired various attempts at modernization since, including redefinitions of a proper childhood. In the early twenty-first century, the mundane details of domestic life have become especially fraught with political significance as China gears itself up for adapting to a global, knowledge- and information-based economy.

CHILDHOOD IN MODERN CHINA

Since the beginning of the economic reforms of the late 1970s, “the child” has been and continues to be linked in thought and practice to the destiny of the nation through the notorious one-child policy. Perceiving population size to be a threat to goals of economic modernization, and perceiving a mismatch between available resources and need, the Party-state implemented the one-child policy as a solution. This policy was positioned to solve, in fact, two problems at once: population size reduction and improvement of overall population quality. In this context, the single child came to embody hope and became a privileged subject of investment and care, in contrast to the “unwashed masses” who were supposedly responsible for China’s backwardness (Anagnost 1995).

Concern for and attention to children in the present are part of a longer history of China’s struggle for dignity in the face of foreign powers. Late Qing intellectuals looked to the West for ideas, with a Chinese translation of Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* serving as a critical lens for thinking about the national situation (Bai 2005: 175). With another defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, reformers began to argue that the education of children was “critical to China’s survival or extinction” (175). The traditional education system was seen as preoccupying the nation’s youth with useless studies that did nothing for military strength or scientific invention. A series of reforms was promulgated in 1898 in an attempt to abolish the civil service examination system and establish a modern school system. Liang Qichao, an important reformer in this era, had concluded that the Chinese were not necessarily inferior to Western people; rather, the rote learning required in Chinese education stunted the development of a child’s “brain power”

(Bai 2005: 187). Furthermore, Liang felt, Chinese education treated pupils like prisoners, which was harmful to their physical development (195–96). A set of regulations announced in 1904 officially abolished the civil service examination system and stressed the importance of gymnastics in the primary school curriculum.

Not long after the fall of the Qing dynasty, intellectuals of the New Culture Movement (1915–21) located the child—as well as women, workers, and the family—as a site for cultural transformation and national revitalization (Barlow 1994; Glosser 2003). For these intellectuals, modernity could be achieved only by radically breaking with the past, challenging traditional forms of authority, and promoting social democracy. Their project was mainly a literary one. Though they worked to reform writing practices and experimented with realism (Anderson 1990), many New Culture intellectuals also wrote about and for children. They expressed their concerns over national strength and character through the figure of the child, as in the essay “Shanghai Children,” where Lu Xun contrasts the Chinese children with their “tattered” clothing and “lackluster expression” to the “splendid, lively foreign children” nearby (quoted in Anagnost 1997a: 201). Some debated proper childhood and embraced the developmental models of child psychology, which categorically separated children from the world of adults. Zhou Zuoren, who created a modern children’s literature, argued that Chinese adults were unable to understand children and their age-specific needs, instead “forc[ing] as many of the ‘classics of the sages and annals of the worthies’ down their throats as possible” (quoted in Jones 2002: 710). Others worked to reform family relations and child-rearing practices, as exemplified by the foreign-trained child psychologist Chen Heqin’s *Family Education*, Lu Xun’s essay “How Are We to Be Fathers Now?”, and Zhang Zonglin’s “How to Be a Parent That Conforms to Current Trends.” This discovery of modern childhood would go into hiatus in the Maoist era, when the “rural masses displaced the child as the principal object of a revolutionary pedagogy” (Anagnost 1997a: 213).

A focus on the child was revived in the post-Mao period, as was eugenics in the form of a campaign that went hand in hand with the implementation of the family planning policy.² Eugenic thinking and practice in this period were relevant not just to intellectuals but also to ordinary people in a way that yoked their intimate and everyday practices to a collective project (Anagnost 1995). The *yousheng youyu*, or “excellent births, excellent rearing” campaign, focused a general concern with population quality on the body and mind of

the individual mother and child. Marriage and even one's reproductive cycle were important state business, with the latter monitored by birth-planning cadres who were responsible for dispensing birth control (Rofel 1999: 149).

The "excellent births" campaign involved mass pedagogy: medical knowledge concerning reproductive health was widely disseminated to the public. From advice on timing conception so as to conceive intelligent children, to advice on diet and nutrition during pregnancy, much of this literature gave enormous responsibility to parents, especially mothers, in the production of quality persons.³ Certain aspects of the "excellent births" campaign aimed to minimize "defective" births in ways that echoed eugenic campaigns in the West decades earlier (Dikötter 1998: 160–75). But much of the campaign in post-Mao China constituted a form of positive eugenics, one that emphasized adding rather than subtracting, educating rather than eliminating. The use of cassette tapes in fetal education provides a clear and material manifestation of the way in which "excellent births" and "excellent rearing" blurred. Developed by a doctor from Beijing Medical College, one set of three tapes playing Western classical music was to be used at different stages of reproduction: before conception, during pregnancy, and during the first years of a child's life. These tapes, the doctor concluded in a follow-up research study, birthed and reared more intelligent children who hit developmental milestones earlier than those in the control group (Milwertz 1997: 131–32).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, there was a strong preoccupation with not only the nutrition and physical constitution of children but their intelligence as well. Susan Champagne found child-rearing manuals from the 1980s to be full of practical advice for producing intelligence in children. The literature provided "charts and tests so that parents can assess their children's intelligence, elaborate etiologies so that the causes of low and high intelligence can be better understood, and explanations of the terminology of intelligence, to better help parents classify their own children" (1992: 5). Though moral education was also important, Champagne argues that the preoccupation with intelligence in the advice literature may be attributed to an idea that intelligence was systematically attainable and measurable. Intelligence education was to be "administered in formalized situations through discrete activities which ideally should be carried out on a regular basis, and according to a fixed schedule" (153).

A factory-style production of the child, which later education reformers criticized, was quite literally undertaken and then described in the best-selling book *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting* (Liu and Zhang [2000] 2004).⁴ Liu

Yiting was born in 1981. Her mother, Liu Weihua, who coauthored the book with Yiting's father, had a plan for Yiting's "scientific" child rearing starting at conception. She kept a diary throughout her daughter's development from which she drew in writing the book *Harvard Girl*. Child rearing was a concerted project: "When the baby was only two weeks old, Liu began training her daughter's attention span by using her fingers and stuffed toys to track the child's vision. By the age of nine months, Liu was deliberately putting objects out of Yiting's reach, requiring the baby to work ever harder to grasp what she wanted, in order to teach her persistence and to overcome difficulties" (Woronov 2007: 37). When Yiting was handed over to other caregivers, her mother provided "copies of the manuals she used to implement early child education, requesting that they read these materials, carry out their directions on a daily basis, and write frequent reports to her on the child's development" (38).

A shift in emphasis occurred in the 1990s from "excellent births, excellent rearing" to *suzhi jiaoyu*, in parallel with a number of historical developments: Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, renewed market reforms, an economic boom, the privatization of public goods, decentralization of birth planning, a shift from a focus on reducing population quantity to a focus on raising population quality, optimization of government performance, and a general—though not complete—movement toward neoliberal governance and the fostering of population vitality.⁵ *Suzhi jiaoyu* first appeared in 1988 but became more generally used after the Ministry of Education promulgated an official policy entitled the "Resolution for Fully Moving *Suzhi Jiaoyu* Forward" (Kipnis 2006: 300; State Council 1999b). *Suzhi jiaoyu* was originally a concept that education researchers used in professional journals such as *Middle School Education*, *Scientific Education Research*, and *Compulsory Education Research* to describe how to teach competence (Kipnis 2006: 299). It has since become a relatively common phrase for ordinary families, thereby taking on a looser meaning that associates human quality with learning in general.

If the "excellent births, excellent rearing" campaign of the 1980s and the more recent *suzhi jiaoyu* movement have in common a mark of scientific legitimacy, they differ in that the *suzhi* of *suzhi jiaoyu* links many disparate domains of governance, beyond biological reproduction and child rearing. *Suzhi* discourse is found in domains as disparate as rural development, domestic migration, private business, and corporate culture. It constructs the problem of national strength and economic development in terms of human

improvement and encourages individuals to be more personally responsible by acting on their desires. Although *suzhi* is often invoked as a potential that one can nurture and cultivate through personal effort, *suzhi* discourse typically serves to justify social and geographic hierarchies and even undue use of force.⁶ The child—especially the urban child—serves to sustain *suzhi* hierarchies in being constructed as a “repository of value,” an antithesis to those who cannot embody value (Anagnost 1995, 2004). As a recipient of *suzhi jiaoyu*, the child carries the hope for national transformation, while the rural migrant symbolizes the *raison d’être* for the population improvement project. As such, *suzhi* discourse obscures—through symbolic violence—the tremendous contributions migrants have made to China’s breakneck development.⁷

In sum, the history of linking the child to the destiny of the nation is long, and it is against this broader context that efforts to reform education must be situated. The most recent iteration of problematizing Chinese education is connected to the expansion of population governance and China’s aim to more fully adapt to a global, knowledge- and information-based economy (Greenhalgh 2011). For a popular expert like Huang Quanyu, modernization can easily be seen in China’s many skyscrapers and freeways, but the country has a long way to go before the human subject becomes fully modernized (2001: 4). His concerns are shared by other popular experts in China, and importantly, they are found at the highest level of government. Improving the human quality of China’s population by raising *suzhi*, starting with children, has been a concerted project pursued by the state since the implementation of the one-child policy. In this context, the mundane details of everyday life are connected to what is quite literally a social engineering project informed by cybernetics and systems theory (Greenhalgh 2003, 2011) and guided by a series of official policy documents. These documents are a form of political technology, and they demonstrate how the state—like ordinary people in general and parents in particular—is striving and aspiring for a better future to come.

BLUEPRINTS FOR CONSTRUCTION

In an essay on school-based efforts to raise the moral *suzhi* of children, Terry Woronov writes, “A study of how children today are learning to govern themselves using the discursive and material resources at their disposal shows how the state sets the conditions of possibility for raising high-quality children,

but also demonstrates the limits of the state's power to fix boundaries around the concept of 'quality'" (2009: 569). Woronov found a large gap between official and adult expectations and the lives young people actually live. One lesson in the morality class that she observed set out to inculcate love of regular exercise, which would require hard work and discipline, but students cited logistical issues such as busy parents as the reason why they rarely exercised. In another example concerning the reception of a news story about junk food-carrying Youth League members on a wilderness trek, adults expressed horror at the inability of its participants to go a few days without luxurious junk food. Yet junk food is part of the larger consumer culture in which the *suzhi jiaoyu* movement is implicated, as officials, teachers, and the media exhort families to consume a variety of commodities—food, books, supplies, and life experiences—commodities that promise to raise other aspects of their overall *suzhi*. For Woronov, these examples indicate that *suzhi jiaoyu* is an "inherently contradictory project, one in which state-led efforts chafe against disciplines of the market economy" (569).

The *suzhi jiaoyu* project is indeed contradictory, and the state does play a crucial role in promoting the reform, since it has prioritized education as a key strategy for national revitalization. But it is important to keep in mind that the state is only one node in a larger network of activity. Putting aside for the moment the intricacies of actual policy implementation, I take official documents related to education reform as literal blueprints for construction in a social engineering project that enacts state striving.

The contradictory nature of the *suzhi jiaoyu* project and the lack of specificity in the 1999 Resolution led Terry Woronov to argue that the reform is less a blueprint than an imaginary (2009: 572–73). She is right to relate this lack to the sweeping breadth of the policy, but I would argue that documents such as the 1999 Resolution are *relatively* specific for what they aim to do and that such documents are themselves contradictory. In other words, official documents are hardly as simple as the Ten Commandments with complexity emerging only in the process of implementation. Tensions are inherent, as the documents are responding to and acting within a complex historical situation: the Party-state's legitimacy rests on economic success, which in turn rests on opening up to the world and increasing the country's store of human capital. To maintain the former while promoting the latter is a tricky matter. For example, official documents related to guiding education reform insist on modernization and facing the world, and they encourage pedagogy that promotes independent thinking and curricula pertinent to the realities of

students. Yet the very same documents lay out a program for ensuring, protecting, and promoting the legitimacy of socialism and the Party-state, and they insist on the continued importance of socialist ethics. That such contradictions pervade even official discourses shall serve as a reminder that the state, like human actors, is situated in history.

There is in fact a history to be read from the official documents pertaining to the adoption of the *suzhi jiaoyu* concept by the state. The State Council's "Outline for the Reform and Development of Chinese Education" (1993) is an important document because it was formulated in the wake of a watershed in post-Mao history, namely the establishment of the term *socialist market economy* and official calls for deepening economic reforms. The document attributes a series of social and economic problems to the low *suzhi* of laborers, but it never uses the phrase *suzhi jiaoyu* in proposing a solution to the *suzhi* problem. The phrase first appears in the 1999 "Action Plan for the Vigorous Development of Twenty-First-Century Education" (State Council 1999a), which lists the promotion of *suzhi jiaoyu* as one of its main goals. The 1999 Resolution is a response to this "Action Plan," intended to "accelerate the implementation of the strategy of national revitalization through science and education."

Starting in 1999, the cause of advancing *suzhi jiaoyu* begins to appear in various other documents concerning other aspects of education, children, and youth. In August 1999, the Ministry of Education issued the document "Recommendations for Strengthening Psychological Health Education in Primary and Middle Schools." The opening paragraph relates psychological health education to the *suzhi jiaoyu* reform and quotes from the 1999 Resolution: "[We] must cultivate dauntless will in students, a spirit for working diligently in the face of difficulty, and strengthen the ability of youth to adapt to social life." A "Guiding Outline" for psychological health education published by the Ministry of Education in 2002 reiterates that psychological health education is an important aspect of *suzhi jiaoyu*, combining a concern for mental health issues with the promotion of socialist virtues such as the ability to endure in the face of difficulty.

Promoting *suzhi jiaoyu* and the holistic development of students, as well as their "consciousness for innovation, practical ability, and scientific spirit," is one of the items under a section on education in a ten-year development plan titled "Outline for the Development of Children in China, 2001–2010." But *suzhi jiaoyu* was not mentioned in the State Council's "1990s Program Outline for the Development of Children in China," issued approximately

ten years earlier in 1992. *Suzhi* itself does, however, appear a number of times, as in the first sentence of the document: “The children of today are the subjects of the twenty-first century, and the survival, protection, and development of children are the foundation for raising population *suzhi*.” There is also an item devoted to highlighting the importance of “whole development” (i.e., moral, intellectual, and physical). But otherwise these two “outlines” for the development of children devote space primarily to issues such as lowering infant and maternal mortality, combating malnutrition, universalizing compulsory education, eradicating illiteracy, and constructing healthy social environments for children.

Two important policy documents concerning “family education work” (*jiating jiaoyu gongzuo*), which includes the education of parents, reflect a similar development. The tenth five-year plan for family education work (National Women’s Federation and Ministry of Education 2002) directs that such work should be implemented in the spirit of the 1999 Resolution. But the ninth five-year plan for family education work makes no mention of *suzhi jiaoyu* (National Women’s Federation and State Education Commission 1996). *Suzhi* itself, however, is mentioned, as in a sentence found under a discussion of main goals: “Guide parents in establishing a correct orientation toward child rearing, and raise the *suzhi* of parents through their mastery of scientific education methods” (National Women’s Federation and State Education Commission 1996).

This short history of how the concept of *suzhi jiaoyu* entered the official language is important because it reminds us that the state is just as subject to the dynamic of influence and response as any kind of actor in a web of causality. Of course the state is a significant center of power, but it too participates in an even larger world crossed by multitudinous lines of force, affecting the world that has affected it. Education reform is directed at a changing world in which China is eager to be a major competitor, and the relationship between education policy and modernization is deliberately made. The gradual entry of the *suzhi jiaoyu* concept into official discourse reveals how the official discourse has been influenced by what first started out as the concern of a globalizing education profession. In turn, the state—namely the State Council, the Ministry of Education, and the National Women’s Federation—acts back upon the world by issuing directives and guidelines explaining why and how education reform will transform national destiny.

As a socialist state, the Chinese government has always taken an active role in the engineering of society, using political technologies that have

existed since the formation of the People's Republic in 1949. Various genres of policy making issue directives and guidelines for action, including "notices" (*tongzhi*), "suggestions" (*yijian*), "outlines" (*gangyao*), "resolutions" (*jueding*), and "action plans" (*xingdong jihua*). Some documents are promulgated to set concrete goals to be reached within five-year or ten-year periods. Such plans may be understood as tools of strategic design, a bastion of central planning in an era of political decentralization (H. Kuan 2013: 19).

"Socialist construction" is a key concept in post-Mao governance, and social engineering is no mere metaphor. China's ruling elite is largely composed of technocrats who very earnestly believe in the promise of science in designing and planning an orderly society. In the first decade of reforms especially, the technocratic elite took great interest in the small details of human conduct and in the development of new fields of study that would generate knowledge about human improvement. Such knowledge, they hoped, would then be implemented to form modern individuals. The technocratic elites strongly believed that modernization and human development went hand in hand, and they applied their engineering backgrounds to formulating solutions to social problems. For example, the aerospace engineer Qian Xuesen proposed a system for engineering culture that would involve the development of "education, science, literature and art, press and publication, radio and TV, public health and physical culture, libraries, museums, and recreation and other activities and institutions for raising the educational level of people" (Bakken 2000: 58). Qian's plan demonstrates that the notion of "human technology" is not simply the theoretical invention of governmentality theorists, a dispassionate instrument for piercing beneath the surface. Human technologies are consciously planned out for the practical management of the empirical world.

Although the spirit behind the *suzhi jiaoyu* movement reflects the humanism of the 1990s rather than the technocratic logic of the 1980s, the official documents that endorse its importance are themselves technological, as policy documents in general are meant to provide building plans. Like "engineering," "technology" is not a metaphor—if understood as any human-invented means for channeling energy and attention in a certain direction. Prayer is a form of technology that focuses a devotee's energy and attention inward toward the self. A midterm exam is a form of technology that directs the concerted attention of a class to a particular subject. Irrigation is a form of technology that channels the flow of water in a certain direction. A survey of frequently occurring active verbs in PRC government policies indicates

that these documents channel energy and attention by orienting its readers to a set of priorities. Frequently occurring verbs include to implement (*guanche*) policies, to establish (*jianli*) systems, to lay a foundation (*dianji*), to create (*chuangzao*) conditions, to concentrate (*jizhong*) resources, to persist (*jianchi*) in a priority, to prioritize (*zhongshi*), to further (*jin yi bu*), to push on (*tuijin*), to promote (*cujin*), to put into effect (*luoshi, shishi*), to optimize (*youbua*), to launch (*kaizhan*), to develop (*fazhan*), to broaden (*tuokuan*) the scope, to deepen (*shenhua*) reform, to popularize (*puji*) knowledge, and of course, to raise (*tigao*) *suzhi*. Interestingly, many of these verbs encourage an intensification of existing effort, which suggests that national projects are given their “steely quality” with the encouragement of sustained actions over time.⁸

The *suzhi jiaoyu* project does not begin and end with the state—state projects themselves are embedded within affective relations, and the official documents indicate that policy usage of this phrase begins ten years after its first appearance in professional education journals. Moreover, textual analysis demonstrates that the contradictory nature of the *suzhi jiaoyu* project can be traced to the official documents themselves, setting guidelines for both facing the world and ensuring the continued legitimacy of socialism and the existing Party-state. Contradictions pervade the entire education field in China. They are not found only in the ambivalence of ordinary parents, in classroom pedagogy, and in the process of policy implementation. The agendas set by the state are themselves contradictory and as such render the task of constructing “socialist modernization” contingent and unpredictable. In a surprising case I once came across, a city government tried to engineer innovation by making a detailed official plan: in 2011, Ningbo invested 50,000,000 RMB in a project that would “forge” ten Steve Jobs within a five-year period.⁹

Disseminating Child-Rearing Knowledge

If China’s nation-building project links macro-level agendas with the micro-level efforts of self-improvement among ordinary people, what is the actual material that activates this link? What mediates the coming together of political ambitions and personal aspirations?

One crucial link can be found in popular advice for good parenting, widely available in urban China. The one-child policy, rapid social transformation, and intense competition have created a situation in which young urban parents are eager to consult expert advice. “You have never been a

parent before and you definitely cannot use the methods your parents used on you,” is a sentiment I often heard. Meanwhile, the publishing industry is eager to exploit the market demand for titles related to child rearing. Publishing houses have only recently (relative to their counterparts in capitalist countries) become financially independent with the withdrawal of government support, so that what gets published in China is determined less by Party interests and ideological agendas than by popular interest and market demand (Kong 2005).

When Huang Quanyu’s book *Education for Quality in America* became a best seller in 2000, sharing the list with the wildly successful Harry Potter series, publishing houses noted the commercial appeal of *suzhi jiaoyu*, and Huang’s book was studied for the making of future best sellers. Huang himself reports in the sequel *Family Education in America* that his first book was reprinted eighteen times in a single year. If both legitimate and pirated copies are counted, there were—in 2001—seven hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand copies in circulation (2001: 1–2).

Books bearing the slogan of *suzhi jiaoyu* provided relief to a publishing industry that had been negatively affected by the “reducing burden” policy of 2000, which specified restrictions against the organization of book purchasing at schools (Ministry of Education 2000), ordinarily a channel for selling children’s books. One president of a publishing house noted with hope that the “hotness” of *suzhi jiaoyu* provided a solution to the challenges posed by government restrictions on book selling in schools and an already competitive book market (Li Yuanjun 2003).

I felt the market demand for books related to child rearing and education most keenly when shopping at Kunming’s book-cities, multistory superstores. These establishments dedicated a substantial amount of space to books related not only to child rearing and education but also to the related genres of popular psychology and self-help. Some offered free lectures given by authors of new books. I once attended a lecture on “social transition and psychological adjustment” by a local psychologist at a Xinhua Bookstore. It was a highly engaging standing-room-only event that ended with a book signing and the opportunity to purchase the speaker’s works. The current popularity of psychology contrasts starkly with its former status as a capitalist evil.

Beyond the books are also the Internet; the serialization of best sellers in daily newspapers; popular magazines such as *Must-Read for Parents*, *Family Education*, and *Child Psychology*; and CCTV programs that sometimes

address parenting issues, such as “Psychological Interviews” and “Tell It Like It Is.” Local governments and public schools also play an important role in disseminating popular advice. Parents of school-age children attend lectures that are organized by their schools, with content that resonates with commercially channeled advice—namely how to understand and promote a child’s subjectivity. I once attended a lecture for parents of first-year students at one of Kunming’s key-point middle schools. The title was “Helping Children Pass through Adolescence,” and the speaker lectured on the psychological needs of adolescents and the unique social pressures they face, the changes in self-awareness they undergo, and of course, how to help them sort out academic difficulties.

In Kunming, parents of children preparing to enter the first grade are required to attend “preschool training classes.”¹⁰ Speakers vary in what they concentrate on and have covered topics such as managing expectations, the importance of showing affection, and how to work with the school, as well as practical advice for academic survival (e.g., how to make the transition from reading pinyin to reading Chinese characters). These training classes are organized by the Women’s Federation of a local district and are held a month or two before a child enters school. They grant a certificate, which then allows a parent to proceed with primary school registration. Once a child is in primary school, he or she brings home a paper called *Family Education Digest*, a division of Kunming Daily. Like *Population and Family*, an advice-giving newspaper distributed by birth-planning offices until its termination in the early 2000s, *Family Education Digest* is free of charge.

That parenting advice flows through so many channels is largely a result of the state’s investment in what it calls “family education work,” a throwback to socialist era mass mobilization. Discussed in the “1990s Program Outline for the Development of Children in China” (State Council 1992) and a series of subsequent documents principally authored by the National Women’s Federation (National Women’s Federation and State Education Commission 1996; National Women’s Federation and Ministry of Education 2002, 2004), family education work aims to raise the “proficiency” of parents by using multiple channels for the dissemination of “scientific methods” of education, to provide “correct” knowledge and methods to parents.¹¹ The “National Plan for Family Education Work in the Ninth Five-Year Period” is especially worth noting (National Women’s Federation and State Education Commission 1996). It gives further directions for running “parent schools” and calls for strengthening theoretical research and “fully utilizing

modern communication media to disseminate family education knowledge.⁹ The document specifically names television stations and periodicals as having to take responsibility. As discussed in the previous section, these documents—depending on their publication date—situate the importance of their agendas in relation to *suzhi jiaoyu*.

If improving population quality by cultivating a cohort of well-rounded, entrepreneurial human talents has become a major political preoccupation in the post-Mao era, then popular expertise serves as the mediating technology that harmonizes state agendas with private aspirations. In sponsoring and endorsing the circulation of child-rearing expertise, the state—as embodied in official documents concerning family education work—exercises a modality of power that is expressed in acting on the actions of others. But this mode of power is nothing new in the history of Chinese statecraft, as widely circulated texts for guiding human conduct in general, and the conduct of educators in particular, have been around since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–AD 220).¹²

Creating a pedagogical environment rather than imposing force from above generates effects spontaneously by acting upon the human capacity to act upon oneself. In the case of contemporary popular advice, sheer exposure to its aesthetic properties can generate transformation, even if minute and ephemeral. If raising population quality is said to be a foundation-laying engineering project, one that—I would add—assembles persons (readers) and things (texts), then popular expertise constitutes a mediating technology that channels the energy and attention of parents in a certain direction. The next two chapters explain how this actually takes place—that is, how the advice generates change as well as new dilemmas. The next section considers the function of ambiguity in the *suzhi jiaoyu* movement.

Effecting the Affective Subject

China anthropologists have noted the ambiguity and flexibility of *suzhi jiaoyu*, pointing to the concept and program's lack of definition and specificity. It is true that what gets stuffed into the *suzhi jiaoyu* frame can often be surprising, a reflection of the official status of *suzhi jiaoyu* and the legitimacy it confers on those who invoke its language.¹³ But ambiguity is not only a contingent accident, nor does it necessarily point to the limits or inconsistency of discourse. Reform advocates and even parents themselves insist on leaving the definition of *suzhi jiaoyu* ambiguous. Thus the question I would

like to raise is whether this ambiguity might be the logical consequence of a broader historical tendency.

For popular writers such as Huang Quanyu, *suzhi jiaoyu* is an attitude, an orientation, and a way of thinking. Following the success of *Education for Quality in America*, Huang Quanyu was pressed by reporters, parents, and educators to give more concrete instructions for how *suzhi jiaoyu* might be carried out. But Huang refused to comply just as strongly as his interlocutors pressed him. Everyone wanted “a reduction of complexity” and “invariably concrete plans or measures” (2001: 8–10). Huang insisted that *suzhi jiaoyu* could not be summarized and operationalized. That he met with so much pressure to come up with a list, he argued, revealed the “utilitarianism and impetuosity of Chinese society” (2001: 10). In such an environment, *suzhi jiaoyu* would lose not only its meaning but also its vitality (10). If creativity, understood to mean the breaking of rules and routines (92), was at the heart of *suzhi jiaoyu*, then what *suzhi jiaoyu* ought to entail had to remain an open question because creativity was really nothing more than a potentiality.

I believe Huang Quanyu is genuinely concerned with the well-being of children and feels troubled when his audiences demand a prescription that would yield quick results, or, as he put it, a “golden touch prescription” (9). For writers such as Huang, advocating education reform can provide a means of critiquing the problems of Chinese society at large, in this case a widespread gain-seeking mentality. At the same time, however, the correspondences between the style of parenting he encourages and shifts in political reason at the highest level of government are undeniable. Reforms are intended to release the human and economic potentialities that have supposedly been suppressed for too long. Given this, governors of all kinds must rethink their approaches and remake themselves as facilitators rather than direct rulers.

Starting in the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals, officials, businesses, and ordinary people began to critique administrative intervention—rewards, punishments, quotas, and commands—as “overly heavy-handed,” producing passive objects of instrumental reason (Sigley 2006: 499). The 1992 introduction of the term *socialist market economy* into official policy represented a significant conceptual shift that embraced the market as “conducive to creating superior subjectivities” (500). Just as intellectuals and officials argued that a planned economy restricted economic development and productivity, education reformers argue that hierarchical authority limits human development. Just as the market came to be understood as “conducive to forging superior

citizens and enterprises” in contrast to the passive subjects of the planned economy, education reformers understand *suzhi jiaoyu* as doing the same in contrast to the passive subjects of education for exam taking (500). Just as the planned economy came to be seen as overlooking “the importance of economic levers such as price, monetary [*sic*], and taxation to shape and guide the economy” (501), education reformers argue that the importance of the child’s subjectivity has been overlooked. Both levels of reform share an emphasis on nonintervention, so as to enable and promote the internal mechanisms of a given object of government (T. Kuan 2012: 1098–99).

If economic development has to come from technological breakthroughs, as Deng Xiaoping theorized, then the ambiguity of the *suzhi jiaoyu* project is functionally related to the nature of the breakthrough: it is unforeseeable. A major theme in the *suzhi jiaoyu* movement is a broadening of the definition of success, which is related to the movement’s emphasis on facilitating the expression of potentialities to the greatest extent possible. In an important speech given at a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo in February 2000, Jiang Zemin stated, “One does not necessarily have to go to college in order to succeed. Society needs multiple kinds of human talent. ‘Three-hundred and sixty occupations, every occupation has a *zhuangyuan* [top scorer, or the very best in the field]’” (2001: 5). Then President Jiang was alarmed by a series of new stories about youth violence, but the idea that society needs “multiple kinds of human talent” had already been a policy concern. Diversifying the education system through the development of vocational and technical schools was positioned as a strategy for meeting the needs of economic diversification, and there have been attempts on the part of central officials as well as local governments to improve the appeal of vocational and technical training.¹⁴

Huang Quanyu also seeks to widen the definition of success. In the opening pages of *Family Education in America*, he clarifies: “This book is not merely for the cultivation of a Harvard genius or an Oxford talent; my own child will not necessarily be able to attend these schools, so I really do not dare to speak irresponsibly. This book is for the proletariat masses; it is written for the *suzhi jiaoyu* of the children of tens of thousands of ordinary families” (2001: 13). To make the idea of ordinariness compelling, Huang draws comparisons between Chinese and American education. Whereas Chinese family education, under the prompting of the exam-centric system, aims to cultivate “geniuses,” American family education puts more emphasis on cultivating “real-life successes” (23).

Although the *suzhi jiaoyu* movement is often situated in relation to the puzzle of why Chinese education has failed to produce a Nobel Prize winner, popular writers like Huang Quanyu commonly stress the value of ordinariness. The following statement is illustrative: “The purpose of *suzhi jiaoyu* is to tap a person’s potential to the greatest limit, so as to let a person’s *suzhi* fully develop. Therefore, we should tell our children with the assumption that justice is on our side: ‘As long as your potential has been expressed to its greatest limit, and your *suzhi* has been able to develop fully, then you have succeeded!’” (2001: 14). Education experts in China commonly insist that simply having the right attitude is both enough and crucial for facilitating the full expression of human potential, and they repudiate offering something more concrete and defined. This fuzzy logic, if you will, is expressed even by ordinary parents. A father I knew, in explaining how he understood the meaning of being “outstanding,” said that in Chinese society today one does not necessarily have to become the best in a field to be an outstanding person. “As long as you have an acquired specialty,” he told me, “and then you find a position that suits you, something you find interesting, something you are willing to do, and something that allows you to contribute to society, then you are a successful person. That is good enough.” Another parent expressed her understanding of the phrase “become useful,” what she hopes for with respect to her daughter, in similar terms: “Becoming useful is, actually, I think becoming useful does not necessarily have to accord with something I have designed for her. Rather, whatever she is interested in, I want to let her freely express it.”

This notion of potentiality generates moral and financial responsibilities of a new kind. If a person will find his or her appropriate place in society as long as that person’s unique potential is expressed, and as long as that person has had a chance to explore his or her interests, then parents are to take responsibility for doing “excavation” work (*wajue*). They have to excavate their child’s potential by providing as many chances to explore and develop personal interests as possible. The more opportunities given, the more likely it is that a given person’s potential will find expression. The cultural logic here is less a technocratic one that presumes a manufacturing system with quantifiable inputs and outputs than an affective logic that follows environmental feedback loops. Citing Howard Gardner Wang Lingling, a popular expert in Kunming, optimistically claims that “there is surely a special talent that suits your child” because every child is intelligent (2004: 71).¹⁵ In a chapter titled “Establishing a Market Economy Child-Rearing Mentality,” taken from a

manual intended to help her readers adapt to the times, Wang argues that parents have no right to make decisions on behalf of their children. “Parents may only research their abilities and interests, so as to create the conditions that would foster and make real their abilities and interests” (112).

The notion that parents ought to do research expresses a historical tendency some would identify as “post-Fordism” or “Toyotism,” in which the relationship between the producer and consumer becomes a rapid feedback loop. Under Toyotism, communications between the factory and the market are constant and immediate. While the Fordist mode of production manufactured goods to sell, the Toyotist mode of production maintains “zero stock,” producing goods only after a market demand has been communicated (Hardt 1999: 93–94). Not dissimilarly, parents are to maintain a “zero stock” in terms of their expectations, creating conditions only after the child’s wishes have been communicated. An open-ended approach to working with a child’s interests thus corresponds to the open-endedness required by information-, knowledge-, and innovation-driven economies. Exercising flexibility, understanding, and tolerance as a parent facilitates the diversification and specialization such economies depend on. To diversify—economically, educationally, or individually—is to create layers of intensity from which something unexpected might emerge: a special talent, a competitive advantage, maybe even a Steve Jobs.

A story the famous expert Sun Yunxiao tells ties some of these themes together. It concerns a vibrant teenager he once knew named Autumn, who was exceptionally talented in many things, including choreography and songwriting. So when Autumn committed suicide in her second year in senior middle school, Sun was shocked. In the process of co-writing a report inspired by her passing, he discovered that she had some academic weaknesses in junior middle school and that, understanding her own limits as well as interests, she had decided she would attend a normal school for kindergarten teaching. Her parents were strongly opposed, however, and pushed her onto the college prep path toward university. So when she failed two of her subjects in her second year of senior middle school, which led to some disappointments in a relationship with a boy, she took her own life without a second thought.

At the end of the story Sun gives parents this advice: “Ask children what they think,” and pay careful attention to what their emotions communicate about their feelings without demanding to know their every thought (2006: 150). For the tragedy of unresponsive parents, in Sun’s eyes, is the failure to notice potential. Sun tells us that at Autumn’s funeral her classmates

lamented that “Autumn could have lived a happy life given any one of her special talents. That she kept failing in her weak areas was forced by her parents” (149).

The parents I knew commonly claimed to respect their child’s interests and would choose classes according to their wishes. “Like piano,” my friend Zhang Xin told me with regard to her son, “he would come home and practice and practice and practice. And then he didn’t want to practice anymore. He thought it was very monotonous. So I said, if you can’t do it, forget it, who cares.” But they are staying with Olympic math “because he is still willing to learn it. And there is no burden. It’s not like he has to do something when he comes home. They just take care of business right then and there.”

Developing a child’s special talent does not usually require much more than accommodating a child’s request or expression of interest, but I have encountered instances where parents debated more supernatural techniques. I once observed a group of mothers engage in a passionate discussion about a palm-reading test that could divine a child’s potential and identify eight major skills as early as the first year of life. One mother explained, “It could help decide which aspects of the child you should foster.” One thought it made a lot of sense considering that fingerprints never change, and another attributed the test to “someone from Harvard.” Still another wondered about the test’s relationship to the *Book of Changes*, an ancient manual for divination. An exchange of public stories about geniuses who were born with disabilities concluded the conversation, to demonstrate that everyone had hidden potential. It was the job of adults to excavate it.

The parents I knew would send their child to as many “special-talent classes” (*techang ban, tese ban*) as possible, as many as a child could tolerate. These would include badminton, Chinese calligraphy, Chinese chess, the study of Chinese classics, composition, dance, drawing/art, electric keyboard, English, Go, Olympic math, piano, ping-pong, the Chinese lute, swimming, and violin. Since the Hongta Sports Center opened in 2000, middle-class children in Kunming could also learn ice-skating, and some parents would enlist private coaches to teach a particular sport. Parents felt that pursuing as many learning opportunities as possible would fulfill their responsibility for helping the child to develop an interest. The more information children received, the more abundant they might become. Parents also commonly insisted that the point of these various classes was not to raise, say, a professional artist or a professional pianist—these were utilitarian aims. The point of special-talent classes was to help the child become well rounded, a

goal that corresponded to official agendas and to the hopes of reform advocates.¹⁶

A logic of potentiality resonates throughout the whole of the education field, demonstrating a certain cohesion to the reform project. To liberate human and economic potential, administrators and educators are to provide as many channels for diversification as possible, whether this means expanding educational options and opportunities or building as many capacities into the child as possible. The more variations layered into the field, the more possibilities for the expression of potential. The more potential expressed, the higher likelihood that something unexpected might emerge. In the hands of the popular experts, *suzhi jiaoyu* is anything but technocratic. But these experts share with the technocratic elite a vision of a glorious future to come.

Importantly, however, the logic of potentiality in the context of family life is blended with the struggle for social recognition (Anagnost 2004: 194). The arrangement of special-talent education may carry an intention of facilitating the expression of potential and of fostering a child's interests, but parents are also motivated by middle-class concerns and the acquisition of cultural capital. Importantly, such competition is less an expression of rational calculations made in the pursuit of self-gain and class status as ends in themselves than an expression of the will to survive what Allison Pugh has called the "economy of dignity," where social visibility and recognition are most at stake (2009). In this context, special-talent education is seen as having the potential to confer not only a competitive edge but also confidence—the lack of which may generate psychological discomfort in the future. "When she goes off to college and meets people of various classes, she won't feel bad," one mother explained. "She won't feel inferior."

Indeed, one could say that middle-class parents in urban China, like those in the United States, practice what the sociologist Annette Lareau (2011) has called "concerted cultivation," as they elicit children's opinions, develop interests, try to foster potential, and organize family life around scheduled activities expected to confer benefits in later life—practices that conform to expert definitions of good parenting and middle-class norms that reproduce socioeconomic inequalities. But the experience of middle-class Chinese parents differs from the experience of middle-class American parents in significant ways—largely because of factors that are unique to China's social and economic context. Special-talent classes eventually take a backseat by the time children get to lower middle school, when they begin to prepare for one

of two key entrance exams, which serves to decide the fate of each individual test taker.

THE EXAMINATION REGIME

Every other Saturday, I offered English classes to some of the children in my study. I had two separate groups over at different times of the day, and I worked hard to create lesson plans that would involve more game playing than formal instruction. The last thing I wanted to be was yet another learning burden, so I tried to make our time together fun.

One nine-year-old named Abby liked my activities so much she came to both groups. Because she seemed to always come so eagerly, I was surprised when she arrived in a bad mood one Saturday in July. She started to complain about how tired she was as soon as she arrived, how she had two other English classes in addition to mine, as well as a pile of summer homework to do. I tried to cheer her up by saying, “Well if you finish it now maybe you can play when August comes.” She retorted, “I will have more to do in August!”

A few months later, while visiting with Abby and her mom and dad one weekend after a Mid-Autumn Festival dinner, I learned more about why she was complaining. Abby’s parents had been explaining that they do disagree about special-talent classes in what is otherwise a very collaborative parenting relationship. Abby’s mom explained, “Her dad feels that with special-talent classes there’s no need to go to so many. But *I* feel like the reason why the kid turned out as great as she has today has to do with going to special-talent classes.”

Abby estimated that in the nine years of her life she must have attended at least twelve different kinds of classes. She tried to list them for me and then threw her arms into the air. “I can’t even keep track anymore!”

Then Abby’s father spoke up, “The reason why I have this point of view is, I think with learning special talents, it’s like what the experts say, go according to the kid’s interest, don’t force more burden on them. It’s like they say, the kid’s naiveté is still really important. Maybe it’s good enough to create an easygoing environment that’s beneficial to her body-mind health. Maybe she can’t even absorb everything you’re trying to teach her with so many special-talent classes so suddenly.”

But they *were* chosen according to interest now, Abby’s mom said to her own defense, prompting me to ask Abby about that one weekend. As it

turned out she still remembered—she knew which weekend I was talking about.

“What happened with you?” her mom demanded to know.

“Well the night before was Friday, right? I had gone to an English class. And then in the morning I went to a calligraphy class! And then in the afternoon I went to your class!”

Surprised, her mom asked her, “You see going to Teacher Kuan’s as going to class?”

“Right. I do see it as going to a class!”

“But didn’t you say you really liked what Teacher Kuan was doing?”

“Right! But the vocabulary words that Teacher Kuan taught, I have to remember all of them! And then you *test* me when I get home! When I can’t answer you *scold* me! You say,” Abby began to impersonate her mom, “*Aiya!* She doesn’t even take money, and you don’t take it seriously! I’m not letting you go anymore.”

Naturally, this caused embarrassment to Abby’s mom, creating tension in the room. But this moment was also highly revelatory. I had always felt guilty about being complicit in the overscheduling of children, but I did sneak in a little vocabulary here and there to please the parents. I had no idea Abby was getting tested at home.

Abby’s mom, Zhao Haihua, was a well-educated professional woman who believed in the importance of maintaining a friendship with her daughter. She tried to promote her daughter’s subjectivity in a way that accorded with expert advice. For example, she once told me a story about taking her daughter out of her “little lunch table” group—one of the supervised lunch groups that schoolteachers arrange for busy parents who are willing and able to pay the extra fee. The “little lunch table” teacher had been complaining that the other children imitated whatever Abby did. If she ate two bowls of rice, they would eat two bowls of rice. According to Zhao Haihua, Abby’s teachers generally had a problem with her having a personality, and although there was not much she could do to prevent the conflict between the culture of school and her daughter’s individuality, she could at least take Abby out of the lunch group to protect her from being “flattened.”

Zhao Haihua always spoke proudly of the closeness and mutual affection she shared with her daughter, but the logic of China’s examination regime compromised her efforts to be a friendly parent. It is always a tricky matter to balance the demands imposed by a rigorous education system with the provision of “warmth” in the home, as Zhao Haihua once put it.

As much as reform advocates and policy makers strive to change an educational system that measures primarily according to test scores, exams remain firmly entrenched, with individual futures hinging upon how well a test taker performs on the ultimate college entrance exam (*gaokao*) and the penultimate senior middle school entrance exam (*zhongkao*). The centrality of exams in the lives of Chinese children and families cannot be overestimated. While middle-class Chinese parents *want* to do what the experts advise, the pressure to ensure academic survival becomes more and more intense as a child grows older and as that child comes closer to confronting key entrance exams.

The *zhongkao*—a citywide test—determines whether one goes on to senior middle school past the state-mandated nine years of compulsory education and what kind of high school one will attend (college prep or vocational). The national *gaokao* determines not only the kind of college or university a student will end up at (academic versus vocational, elite “211” versus non-211) but also one’s major. Because so much hinges upon these two exams, parents feel that it is extremely important to gain admission to the right junior middle school, the stage that prepares students for the *zhongkao*, which then sets the stage for how well a student is prepared for the *gaokao*. Seeking admission into a reputable school expresses not merely an empty obsession with status but more importantly a practical concern with efficacious teaching methods and, for some, the securing of some modicum of life quality for one’s child. Students take the same standardized entrance exams, so the schools that are overly dependent upon review classes and assigning large amounts of homework without producing high rates of promotion are avoided. Meanwhile, reputable schools mitigate the intensity of studying for these exams with talented teachers who use clever methods.

In Kunming, most of the families I knew had their sights set on the junior middle school affiliated with Yunnan University because it had been ranked number one for promoting their students to senior middle school year after year. This junior high has such a strong reputation that people now joke that the university is an affiliate of the junior high. As a private institution (*min-ban*), it charges families who are not affiliated with the university 7,000 RMB a year, totaling 21,000 RMB for three years of schooling. And they hold an entrance exam consisting of two subjects—Chinese and math—to select their student body.¹⁷ According to the Compulsory Education Law, all children have the right to a free education, free of entrance examinations for the first nine years of their academic life at a school within their neighbor-

hood district. But many Kunming parents are willing to “school-select” (*zexiao*), to seek a school outside of their assigned district and to try for admission at this junior high even though the 21,000 RMB price tag is an enormous expenditure for the average double-income family. One of the families I followed decided not to send their daughter to this school even though she got in because it would have been too much of a commute. They ended up regretting this decision because their daughter is now drowning in homework, and passing the entrance exam was not an easy achievement.

The standardized entrance exams for which schooling prepares students are intense because they test three years of cumulative knowledge in multiple subjects over the course of three days. The amount of material students have to learn and memorize by rote—whether thousands of years of historical facts and figures or the infinite varieties of math problems that may or may not appear on a test—is simply unimaginable to anyone who did not come of age in this system. It is common for schools to spend an entire semester simply reviewing rather than teaching new material, because there is so much to stuff into the brain.

The contemporary system is rooted in the imperial civil service examination system that originated in the Tang dynasty: *keju*. This was a standardized, merit-based, empirewide mechanism by which governmental officials were selected—and there was no greater glory than to succeed and secure gentry status through *keju*. Candidates had to memorize over four hundred thousand characters to master a curriculum that included classic Confucian texts, while making appeals to deities and using mantic devices to cope with the pressure (Elman 1991: 16; 2000). That superstitions remain commonplace to this day points to the sense of anxiety and uncertainty that surrounds the standardized exam: parents will propitiate at local temples and cook with ingredients homonymous with words like *smart* and *calculate* (i.e., green onions and garlic). Students meanwhile, will avoid ingesting any food or drink inauspiciously homonymous, and they even avoid getting haircuts, lest one “start from the beginning” (*congrou kaishi*). One young woman I knew wore matching red undergarments for good luck. It was her mother’s idea.

The *gaokao* is infamously torturous and constitutes a system that pushes students to the limits of human endurance (Kipnis 2011). But the *zhongkao* is just as generative of anxiety because unlike the *gaokao*—which one can theoretically take multiple times until a satisfactory score is achieved—students may take the *zhongkao* only once. In 2007, to give a sample year, the *zhongkao* tested six subjects: Chinese, physics, math, politics/moral education, English,

and chemistry. The total score was 660 points, with the cutoff lines of Kunming's key-point high schools predicted to fall somewhere around 600 points. Students were to register their preferences of high schools after they took the test without knowing their scores, on the basis of estimates derived from the results of practice tests as well as the different cutoff lines of different high schools from previous years, which change from year to year depending on the total number of applicants and how well they perform on average. For this reason, entrance exams have this additional layer of work, as the registration of preferences requires the ability to weigh factors and predict outcomes. Ideally, indicated preferences should correspond to performances on mock exams, because a school that you may have tested into but that ranked low in your preferences will not look kindly upon you.

For the *zhongkao*, a student who tests above a given school's cutoff may attend as a publicly funded student (*gongfei sheng*). Meanwhile students who fall 10 points below the cutoff of a given school have the option to try for admission as a "school-selecting student" (*zhexiao sheng*), with actual places limited by permitted quotas. Like attending a junior high outside one's residential district, attending high school as a school-selecting student is expensive. (Such students are sometimes also referred to as self-funded students—*zifei*.) I was never able to verify exact fees in any concrete way, but I repeatedly heard and read that school-selecting students had to pay 10,000 RMB for every point below the cutoff.

School selection is widespread, first, because the desire for a good education is strong, with good schools setting high admission score thresholds and requiring nonpassing students to pay extra fees; and second, because the disparities in pedagogical quality between schools even within the same city create a situation in which everyone is scrambling to get into the better schools despite the exorbitant fees associated with going outside one's district. This second factor has less to do with the existence of high-income and low-income neighborhoods than with the specifics of educational policy in China.¹⁸ Good schools are able to reproduce their popularity and status by investing the revenue that school-selecting families bring into institutional development—alongside other sources of revenue—to improve infrastructure and compete for top-notch teaching personnel. Institutional development in turn strengthens a school's educational resources, justifying high fees and selectivity.

Supporters of school selection see the phenomenon as a much-needed market mechanism that diversifies funding channels while benefiting the

public as well as the individual. They argue that school selection simply reflects a desire for good schooling on the part of the masses, a desire that is met through the rational disposal of resources through the market system, while at the same time making up for deficiencies in state funding (Working Committee 2005). Critics, meanwhile, argue that school selection violates the principle of educational equality, deepens existing disparities between schools, facilitates corruption, and puts too much of a financial burden on the masses (Working Committee 2005; Yang Dongping [2004] 2006, 2006). Because sending one's child to a desirable school often involves paying school selection fees, families feel the pressure of having to cobble together whatever resources they have. Because performing well on an entrance exam could make the difference between paying or not paying tens of thousands of RMB in extra fees, students feel intense psychological pressure to study hard. Because teachers and schools are evaluated on the exam-based success rates of their students, the delivery of education becomes a narrow project in "teaching to the test."

An inadvertent consequence of a system oriented around test taking is the tendency of schools and teachers to focus on promising students while "discriminating" against others in the form of treating them unfairly, holding them back, suspending them, and expelling them (Man [1996] 1997). Such discrimination is more prominent at elite key-point middle schools that have reputations to protect, but it can begin as early as primary school. I often heard stories about children who were either pressured or asked to leave a school, or parents who transferred a child to a different school because of a conflict that had arisen with a teacher in a primary subject. One of the worst things that can happen to a student is a teacher who no longer cares, a phenomenon rooted in the pressures teachers are under and the competitions they are engaged in. Classrooms in Kunming, from primary to middle school, are quite large. With fifty to seventy students to shepherd toward success, teachers too feel a tremendous burden and have little patience for deviance.

I emphasize school selection because it is this manifestation of China's exam-centric education system that parents experience as *the* most pressing moral and practical issue. They want their child to live a good life, which means ensuring that the child will become a respectable person someday by finding a "good job." For their child to find a good job, they have to ensure that they set him or her on a path toward the kind of university that will confer a recognizable degree. To set their child on the right path, they have

to sharpen the child's test preparedness with cram classes and daily monitoring and find ways to pay for admission into the right schools. If conflicts or misunderstandings with a teacher arise, they have to either help the child get back into the teacher's good graces or find a new school, because in the view of ordinary parents a good or bad relationship can make or break an academic career.

From a global perspective, anxiety is an intrinsic part of being middle class, a status that must be secured in each and every generation through educational achievement (Kremer-Sadlik and Gutiérrez 2013: 137–38). Like American middle-class mothers, Chinese middle-class mothers actively intervene in unfavorable situations related to school (although classroom situations do differ) (Lareau 2011). The craze for testing into the right school in China also resonates with something Allison Pugh calls “pathway consumption,” found among families from both upper- and lower-income brackets in the Bay Area of California. Pathway consumption aims to create opportunities that shape life trajectories and to ensure “comfortable” environments for learning (2009: 177–214). Thus, from a comparative perspective, the intense anxiety of middle-class Chinese parents is not entirely unique. The global economy encourages individuals to “regard themselves as a portfolio of human capital assets that they can manage and develop” (Anagnost 2013: 13). Individuals, and individual families, are the ones expected to absorb “shocks” stemming from systemic contradictions (15). Job markets are precarious, and the specter of graduate unemployment haunts many countries the world over. Investing in human capital by investing financially and energetically in education does not guarantee a return, but it is something a middle-class family can control.

In China, the factors contributing to competition and uncertainty are rather unique to recent history. I began my fieldwork in early 2004, not long after the graduating class of 2003 hit the job market. This was a significant year in the history of higher education in China because this cohort enrolled in 1999, the year the central government decided on an expansion of the higher education system that included a dramatic expansion in enrollment. Between 1998 and 2004, nationwide enrollment into colleges and universities jumped from 9.8 percent to 19 percent. From the perspective of the Ministry of Education, this was an achievement because the goal had been set at 15 percent with a target date of 2010.¹⁹ From the perspective of job seekers, however, this meant nearly 50 percent more competition in a job market where opportunities were constrained not only by the sheer number

of competitors but also by their own aspirations for high-paying, high-status work (concentrated in coastal cities), by the country's rigid household registration system, by the preference for locally registered graduates among employers, by a strong bias in favor of graduates from key-point or even elite "211" universities (which themselves have preferences for local applicants),²⁰ and by the structural mismatch between the number of educated laborers and an economy still predominantly oriented toward construction and manufacturing rather than knowledge and services.²¹ As one professor at Peking University's School of Management has pointed out, "High-end jobs that should have been produced by industrialization, including research, marketing and accounting etc., have been left in the West."²²

Originally a decision that was made in the interest of stimulating domestic consumption, the expansion of higher education has led to academic inflation. In the context of oversupply, relatively arbitrary processes—alongside or even in place of the rational mechanisms assumed by human capital theory—serve to divide the winners from the losers. One researcher has explained this situation with the help of screening theory: "When the number of applicants with the same level of education increased significantly, it correspondingly increased employers' screening costs" (Chan 2012: 35). In such a context, an applicant is hired not necessarily because he or she is the most employable but rather because the applicant's diploma sent a stronger "signal" to the employer. For this reason, students in elite universities "can start celebrating the moment they begin their studies" (35). Meanwhile, parents raising primary school-age children are already thinking about what they need to do to ensure a child's competitiveness in the long term, because not all roads lead to Rome.

TWO MONKS AND A WELL

When I visited Kunming in 2010, I caught up with a group of mothers that had been friends with one another since their children were in the second and third grades. Their children had just finished their first and second years of junior middle school. It was mid-July, and everyone had just gotten out for the summer.

Yet the children going into their third year of junior high were already enrolled in cram classes in anticipation of the *zhongkao*, which would take place the following summer. The third year of junior middle school is a

critical year. “*Xiaoyan miman!*” (A cloud of smoke hangs over the battlefield!), a school official might announce to start off an academic year at a parents’ meeting.

One day I followed Wu Linlin and Phoebe to a one-week intensive Chinese cram class, where I watched a charismatic teacher lead a discussion and critique of essays students had written the night before. Students shared their essays by reading from them aloud, and the teacher used them as examples in illustrating *zhongkao* expectations for composition writing, which elements would earn you a certain score, and what you would get marked down for. She reminded them on at least two occasions that “you’re writing your compositions for hamburger-brain teachers,” using Kunming slang (*banbao*) to make a point about the importance of clarity and organization and fitting oneself to the standard.

Hanging out with this group of mothers, who now faced the pressures of coaching and preparing their children for their first standardized entrance exam, I got a very strong sense of the at-stakeness of the moment. They used all sorts of vivid metaphors for describing the significance of hard work at this stage of life—“plowing and weeding” (*gengyun*), “spreading a cushion” (*pudian*), and “laying in stock” (*chubei*). One mother told me a story to further explain what they meant by some of these terms. It concerned two monks who ran into each other every day, fetching water from a well. They did this for many years, hiking up and down to and from their monasteries for water, until one day one of the monks stopped showing up. The other monk wondered where his buddy could have disappeared to and worried that he had gotten sick. Out of concern, he visited his friend’s monastery and, to his surprise, found him sitting cross-legged, meditating peacefully. He asked his friend why he wasn’t going down to draw water anymore, and his friend answered, “I don’t have to anymore. I have spent many years digging my way to the water source. I don’t have to go to the well anymore.”

Class tension and anxiety were expressed in these conversations, with one mother explaining that the *zhongkao* will determine what school you go to, whether you will meet good teachers, and what kind of people you will surround yourself with, and another stating more bluntly that a good high school determines “which level [*cengci*] you will live at.”

Later chapters in this book will further contextualize these classist expressions in the context of ethics. For now, I should note that, unlike the ideological subjects imagined by anthropologists inspired by Althusser, parents are quite aware that the whole system is arbitrary. Yet they feel there is no

other choice but to “adapt” (*shiyi*ng), since they see no alternative and have no luxury to permit the kind of chaos Huang Quanyu admires so greatly about American educational practices. I want to argue that parental intensity expresses a kind of moral agency that takes timely and situationally appropriate effort as a crucial element of being efficacious in this world. It is a kind of agency derived in conformity rather than resistance, offering a folk philosophy of practical action that speaks back to debates in anthropology over the positioning of the subject versus the experience of the person, and to Western assumptions concerning authenticity and identity. While child-centered popular advice for parents reverses deeply rooted cultural logics concerning personhood and the nature of reality, the practical wisdom of parents—mothers especially—continues to assert a different way of being-in-the-world. The story about the two monks and the notion of “plowing and weeding” or “laying in stock” invoke the logic of *shi*—potential born of disposition. Small actions will gather force over time, and the incipient will give way to the actual.²³