

In the course of the past three decades the Chinese government has been promoting a new discourse on childhood and childrearing which is influenced mainly by Western ideas, and supports the rearing of children in a “scientific” and “modern” manner. Contemporary Chinese academic publications, mass media reports, and popular childrearing guides emphasize three distinct, but closely related, topics: 1) Children are autonomous human beings who should be treated as equals to their parents; 2) Children are unique sort of people with distinct psychological characteristics; and 3) Parenthood skills are based on scientific knowledge. Based on 12 months of fieldwork among parents, grandparents and children in Beijing, I will discuss the way in which young Chinese urban parents translate all these ideas into their everyday interactions with their child, and how they "digest" all the information, while trying to both absorb and push away the variety of the "new" and "old" ideas they encounter.

### **Young Parents Resist Grandparents’ “Old” Methods**

While the new discourse on childhood allocates the responsibility of childrearing and education to parents, grandparents today continue to serve as major agents in children's lives. Despite the powerful role that grandparents play in perpetuating traditional modes of education and values, young parents tend to resist the grandparents' attitudes and practices. Statements concerning the difference between Western and traditional Chinese caretaking methods were very common during conversations I had with young mothers and fathers, who stressed that the traditional Chinese methods should change. The following statements serve as representative examples:

"Western children have more freedom (*ziyou*)... "

"China's education system is different from the West because China is still very traditional... but, among the young parents there is already a big change..."

Many mothers with whom I spoke told me that the grandparents' style is old-fashioned; that they are too protective, do not let the children move around, and that as a result Chinese children are dependent. As opposed to the grandparents' caretaking style, mothers emphasized that they wish their child will grow to be independent. One mother told me that grandparents never let children experience: "It is very important to me that he will grow to be open and independent. I really don't mind that he touches things; I don't tell him that everything is dirty. I let him touch everything..." She claimed that as opposed to the grandparents, obedience is not important to her, and added: "I let him do whatever he wants."

### **The Child's Kingdom**

The home was also a space young parents let their only child experience. When I first entered Liu Hong's house I was surprised to discover that the whole house looked like a "child's room" and that Yueyue was aloud to freely play in every room with few limitations. I noticed that there were children drawings on the walls and stickers on some of the furniture.

Children usually played in the living room and almost never played alone in other rooms. That way, the adults could answer any demand or question raised by the child. Every request or whim that the children had was answered with great understanding, patience, and a will to help. The fact that the child does not have his/her own room also means that s/he does not have a space which is private. Yet, my ethnographic data demonstrates that parents' main aim is not to monitor their child's actions at home; the child is provided with personal freedom to act and play as s/he pleases, with very few restrictions.

This approach to handling children within the home echoes the psychological discourse about giving children an opportunity to experience all sorts of sensual and other experiences, considering their will, and giving them freedom. The house is a space which is mostly dedicated to the child and the products related to him/her, including toys, accessories, clothes, and pictures. There is not one particular space which is defined as a "child's room," where they are supposed to sleep, play, and keep their things. The fact that the whole house is dedicated to the child teaches us that the child is allowed to move around the house freely and that his/her freedom to act is rarely limited.

### **Young Parents' Ambivalence Regarding Obedience**

The new discourse on childhood and childrearing advances the idea that the relationship between a child and his/her parents should not be based on hierarchy. For example, on the internet site "Happy Baby" (*Kuaile baobao*) an article entitled "Respect Your Child's Independence" (*zunzhong haizi duli de geti*) appeared criticizing the fact that in Chinese culture, there is no respect for the child's independence, but only for the child's obedience. The article emphasizes the idea that children should be their own masters and not their parents' attachments. According to this article, a child's independence should be nourished so as to become a whole person who can make his/her own path and walk in it.

As opposed to harsh methods, the state has been promoting that "explaining with reasoning" (*jiang daoli*) is the correct educational solution when trying to convey any message to a child. Young mothers usually stated that *jiang daoli* is the best way to educate children. However, in practice, young parents were usually impatient when their child was disobedient. The next situation illuminates this point.

Although it seemed that Yueyue, a two year old boy, was given almost complete freedom to act in the house, when he did not act according to his mother's expectations, she did not hesitate to yell or hit him. During one of the dinners we had at their house, Liu Hong discovered that he had urinated on the floor. She immediately put her hand in the air and hit him lightly on his behind. After dinner, I asked what her opinion was on hitting children. She explained that she thinks it is OK to hit a child as long as he is not obedient. Most mothers with whom I spoke told me that they considered hitting children to be wrong and that they never hit their own child. However, Liu Hong explained that, in fact, most of her friends, including those who claimed they never hit their child, do so occasionally.

The gap between what mothers told me and the way they acted in practice derives from the fact that according to the new discourse, hitting children is considered negative, and unprogressive. This gap reflects the dilemmas with which parents must cope in China today. Young mothers are aware that the "correct" behavior is to "explain with reasoning," and they apparently want to be "progressive" mothers, but the traditional value of obedience is rooted very deeply in their perceptions. The dilemmas are also rooted in the fact that these are young mothers who, as any other "new parent," face challenges in achieving a style of parenthood. However, since the Family Planning Policy was implemented in China, parents have only one opportunity, which probably increases the pressure even further.

### **The Fetishization and Commemoration of Only Children**

Parents' everyday practices that I documented demonstrate that young urban parents invest all they can in their only child. Parents told me that the investment in the child is not a matter of choice, claiming that even the kindergarten which the child attends might have an effect on his/her career. This huge investment, claims Anagnost

(1997), turns the child into a fetish of the parents' hopes and dreams. The "fetishization" of children is also manifested in a practice I call "commemoration of the child and childhood." Young urban parents tend to take their child every few months to a professional studio, where they dress them up, put on makeup, fix their hair, and then hang the photos on the house walls. In addition to the large photos that decorate almost every room of the house, parents have albums of their child dressed up in different costumes. Many times when I visited a friend's house, the mother showed me the different albums that she had of her son or daughter. Besides the albums, parents usually also have a few calendars, with the child dressed in a different costume for every month of the year, sometimes according to the holiday or the relevant season.

The practice of taking the child's pictures every few months and hanging them around the house is part of a practice that I call the "commemoration of the child and childhood." By using the emotionally loaded word "commemoration," I attempt to draw attention to the mixed feelings of celebration and loss that underlie much of parents' attempts to capture every moment of their only child's growth and development. Given the social and political reality in China that entitles every family to have only one child, young parents have only one chance to experience every step of the child's development. Therefore, although life is a dynamic process, parents literally and symbolically try to freeze every moment and idealize it. The name of one of the websites that specializes in children's photos – "One Moment Forever" – illustrates this exact point, reflecting the parents' feeling of both celebration and loss.

### **Embodying Hopes**

Besides being their parents' main focus of hope, only children are also the parents' main focus of love and concern. My ethnographic data demonstrates that the

child's first few years before s/he enters kindergarten are the years in which parents invest all they can to ensure their son or daughter's happiness (*kuai*) and health (*jiankang*). However, in urban China, parents are well aware that their child's happiness might not last a long time and that as soon as their child starts school, s/he will be under great pressure to work very hard in order to get into a good university and find a good job. The indulgence and the freedom that children are given by their parents in their early years is perhaps compensation for what has yet to come.

Parent's desires concerning their child's education came up in many different conversations I had with young parents. One mother explained that the pressure on Chinese children is enormous and that from the moment the child is born, they have a fixed course. She claimed that as result Chinese children are "miserable" (*kelian*). She explained that Chinese people are obedient, and said she hoped her child would have "individual personality" (*gexing*): "I want my child to be special; that he will have his unique character and that he will be happy (*kuai*). I don't care if he learns mathematics or grammar; I want him to study what he loves. From the first time my son went to kindergarten, he changed. I think that when a child does something s/he does not love it is not the worst case; the worst is when you do not know what you want to do. Chinese children are "not given any choice." I want my son to have a choice in his/her life!"

When young parents discussed their only child's future with me, these kinds of comments were common. However, despite the criticism of the Chinese educational system, parents acknowledged the fact that in general the child who studies the most has better opportunities. Most parents I spoke with seemed to conclude that there is no other choice in China (*meiyou banfa*). Liu Hong explained:

Chinese education is based on obedience; it's a fixed educational method...  
When the government tells you what to do, you need to listen to the

government, when the party tells you what to do, you need to listen to the party, in the home, you need to obey your parents, and outside you ought to obey your leader. It has always been this way, and it has not changed in contemporary society. That is why we turned out to be a society which appreciates children who are *guai*. It is not that Chinese parents want their child to be an *obedient guai child*; *it is what society and the government have been demanding for generations*. An obedient child will get candies, only an obedient child will succeed on his exams, only an obedient child will turn out to be the talented person our country needs. *If a child wants to develop, s/he needs to learn to be obedient*.

The promotion of autonomy and individualism represents a great shift from traditional conceptions of childhood. However, similar to the importing of Western humanistic ideas during the May Fourth Era, it seems that the new ideas and values are in the context of a discourse involving the nation's future. In a speech by Jiang Zemin in 1998, he claimed that:

The construction of spiritual civilization ultimately demands *raising the quality of the entire nation*, to develop the new socialist person with ideals, morality, education and discipline. Developing education and science is a hundred year strategy that has great and far reaching significance for raising society's forces of production and the nation's quality.

This speech serves as an example of the "Quality Education" policy which emerged in China during the 1980's. The policy promoted the idea of developing *a new socialist person* through the improvement and development of each person's ideals, morals, education, and discipline.

The two main discourses on childhood, that of "Quality Education" and the new psychological discourse, contradict one another. While one discourse promotes obedience for the nation's sake, the other promotes autonomy and individuality. From what parents have told me, it is apparent that these contradictions comprise a major part in young parents' caretaking style. From Liu Hong's words we learn that when she thinks of her own little boy, she wishes that he will grow up to be intelligent, open and happy. However, she seems to acknowledge the fact that in order to succeed in

Chinese society, children must be obedient and grow up according to the state's agenda.