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Responsibilised Parents and Shadow Education: Managing the Precarious Environment in China

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Abstract: Growing literatures highlight global shifts in education brought by spreading neoliberal values and marketisation. Parallel literatures address parenting styles. Parents, these literatures observe, are increasingly made responsible and/or voluntarily take responsibility for educational inputs alongside mainstream schooling. Much parental investment is in the so-called shadow education sector of private supplementary tutoring.

Examining Chinese patterns, this paper notes longstanding high enrolment rates in both academic and non-academic supplementary education prior to government restrictions that

brought a sharp marketplace jolt. The paper then employs parental interview data to show the rationales for such investment despite efforts by the Chinese authorities to retain schooling as a fully-sufficient form of education. The strengthened government policy altered the picture, but it seems likely that in the competitive society many parents will still secure supplementary support to manage what they feel to be a precarious environment.

Keywords: China, parenting, private tutoring, responsabilisation, shadow education

1. Introduction

A significant literature has developed on the social forces of ‘responsibilisation’ in the context of neoliberalism. Peters (2005), for example, reviewed neoliberal welfare regimes that were no longer focused so much on citizen rights as on citizen consumers making investments. Responsibilisation, he indicated (p.131), ‘refers to modern forms of self-government that require individuals to make choices about lifestyles, their bodies, their education, and their health at critical points in the life cycle’. Choice under neoliberalism, he added (p.131), ‘is not simply “consumer sovereignty” but rather ... a regulated transfer of choice-making responsibility from the state to the individual in the social market’. Other writers have also examined the concept as it applies to education (e.g. Halse et al., 2020; Oyarzún et al., 2021); and in this journal Doherty and Dooley (2018) employed the lens to view the so-called shadow education sector of private supplementary tutoring.

The core of Doherty and Dooley’s work, on which the present paper builds, is awareness that in some parts of the world what Rose (2004, p.174) had called ‘a double movement of autonomization and responsabilization’ has shifted the responsibility for security and risk management from the state to consumers. Thus responsabilisation in the education sector pushes parents to secure insurance strategies that minimise risk and maximise benefit. Doherty and Dooley, with data from Australia, focused on individual or group tutoring by private actors to supplement state schooling. They cited the US work of Buchmann et al. (2010, p.439) in explaining that: ‘Like a shadow, it generally goes unnoticed and takes the shape of formal schooling in both purpose and curricula.’

Related to this theme are literatures on ‘concerted cultivation’ (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Lareau, 2011) and ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays, 1996; Park, 2013). These literatures focus on parenting strategies, particularly in the middle classes, to enable children to manage and excel in competitive environments. Education is a core component, in many cases involving not only

schooling but also shadow tutoring in both academic and non-academic domains. Within these studies, cultural as well as economic and political contexts are important. Much literature refers to the Western cultures of North America, Europe and Australasia, but a related literature focuses on ‘tiger parenting’, especially in Chinese communities within those Western contexts (Cheah et al., 2013; Chua, 2011; Sriprakash et al., 2016).

At the same time, the intentions of the state must be considered carefully. While autonomisation and responsabilisation may have been state-led processes in Western settings and countries such as Chile (Oyarzún et al., 2021), elsewhere the expansion of shadow education exemplifies what Verger et al. (2016, p.7) called ‘privatisation by default’. This has certainly been the case in China, where shadow education has boomed despite rather than because of the state.

Nevertheless, Chinese patterns have moved through different stages. Until the 1990s, parents generally considered state-provided education adequate to meet needs. Patterns then changed, in large part because of intensified capitalist forces albeit with ‘Chinese characteristics’ (Weber & Qi, 2021). Private supplementary tutoring emerged as a strong instrument alongside schooling, with parents feeling the need to manage an increasingly precarious environment characterised by social competition and uncertainty. While initially the state simply allowed this to happen, later it increased controls leading to a particularly radical policy in 2021. Yet many parents still felt that it was their responsibility to secure tutoring for their children, and found secret ways to continue (Jin, 2021; Liu, 2021). One element has been cultural, reflected not only in the perspectives of minorities of Chinese ethnicity in Western countries but also in China itself (Zhang, 2020). Another element has been continued belief in the power of shadow education which, once it entered the ecosystem, could not be simply eradicated.

To present and analyse these forces, the paper commences with the broad conceptual framework. Then, turning to China, the paper elaborates on the context and changing eras. The empirical component includes both nationally-focused quantitative data and qualitative data from one region. Within the qualitative component, attention is given to interviews of both urban and rural parents across a range of social classes. The paper presents this analysis in the context of considerably increased household incomes, families restricted to one child or at most two, and the forces of neoliberalism and globalisation. Most of the data are from the era before the radical 2021 regulations, but some are from the period after issue of these regulations. The final section shows ways in which the paper contributes to wider literatures.

2. Responsibilisation and the Shadow Education Marketplace

Elaborating on the above remarks, the increasingly-pervasive neoliberal ideology around the world asserts that education is a service that should be at least partly subject to market principles (Ball & Youdell, 2008; Okuma-Nyström, 2009). Public schooling remains protected from full marketisation, but shadow education is in most cases a completely private service in the marketplace. Further, shadow education and the mainstream may operate in concert, since one affects the other (Aurini et al., 2013; Duong & Silova, 2021). When shadow education enrolments expand, mainstream teachers increasingly assume that the students who need tutoring are receiving it, which in effect pushes low achievers towards the sector. At the other end of the ability range, high achievers excel further with well-targeted shadow education – though for all ability-groups a danger of overload arises from the combination of both schooling and shadow education. In Turkey, Altinyelken (2013, p.200) described such overload as a component of ‘compromised childhood’.

Elaborating, literature from diverse societies shows common threads though also variations. In Korea, for example, Park (2013, p.116) highlighted the ‘shared sense of anxiety among mothers’ in the face of neoliberal transformations that had caused family expenditures for private after-school education to reach almost the same volume as government expenditures on education. She noted generational shifts in which contemporary mothers faced challenges that had not been faced by their own mothers, and added that the after-school market demanded ‘much more of mothers than formal schooling ever did’.

A pair of different settings was presented by Das (2017), of middle-class parents in India and the USA. Those in India were in Kolkata, West Bengal; and those in the USA had migrated from India to Edison, New Jersey. Das had expected to find that the Kolkata parents would follow traditional modes of parenting with intergenerational and family assistance, but he found that parenting was commercialised and even supported by ‘mom-assistance agencies’ that advised and trained mothers how to operate. By contrast, the Edison mothers, who were spouses of elite professionals in the globalised economy, managed the challenges of parenting in a foreign country through community rather than commercial support. Nevertheless, both sets of parents engaged in the sorts of concerted cultivation identified by Lareau (2011) and converted economic capital into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Das explained the commonality by

referring to the forces of globalisation and of economics in neoliberal societies. Such forces, as will be demonstrated, have also applied in China and have not disappeared even in the face of the fierce 2021 regulations.

Returning to the definition of shadow education, much literature restricts the focus to academic subjects that are also taught in schools (e.g. Bray, 2009; Tan, 2017; Kobakhidze, 2018). This fits many purposes, but at least some agencies in Australia and elsewhere offer broader support in study skills. Further, for present purposes about concerted cultivation it is pertinent to include music, sports, chess, calligraphy and other domains that may or may not be taught in schools. These domains are commonly viewed by parents as valuable alongside academic subjects for building teamwork, problem-solving and persistence. Balances sought by parents between academic and non-academic usually shift as children get older. The spread may be broad at young ages, partly because parents are exposing children to diverse possibilities in order to identify their interests and abilities but also because academic pressure is less intensive at this stage. Then when the children grow older, the non-academic classes are commonly dropped (see e.g. Das, 2017, p.139).

Within the marketplace, the nature of tutoring suppliers may vary widely. At the informal end may be university students, retirees and other part-time providers. Supplementary tutoring may also be provided by regular teachers in public schools to secure extra incomes. More formally, tutoring may be provided by officially-registered enterprises operating at local, national or international levels. As such, the range of provision is much wider than in the school sector.

Formats for tutoring also range widely. Much tutoring may be one-to-one in the homes of the students or tutors, or in public facilities such as libraries or cafés. Other provision may be in small groups or large classes, and increasingly over the internet. Thus the possibilities facing responsibilised parents may be considerable. Tutoring providers are adept at marketing their services to make parents aware of the choices, perhaps in the process deliberately raising anxieties in order to expand demand (see e.g. Dierkes, 2013).

3. The Chinese Context

This section commences with economic and social factors, before turning to structures and the scale of both schooling and shadow education. It then outlines a far-reaching quality-oriented reform in education implemented in the 2000s.

3.1 Economic and Social Factors

China has achieved huge economic growth in recent decades, providing greatly increased household resources for multiple forms of consumption including shadow education. In constant 2010 prices, per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew from US\$381 in 1978 to US\$10,431 in 2020 (World Bank, 2021). This growth far outstripped that in most countries. It was achieved through a shift from centralised socialism to the market economy (Weber & Qi, 2021).

A further factor in which Chinese patterns were distinctive was the one-child policy, launched in 1979 and leading to the phenomenon of the ‘priceless child’ on whom aspirations and resources were concentrated (Liu, 2016). Adjustments in the mid-1980s permitted rural parents a second child if the first was female, and in 2013 two children were permitted in all families in which at least one parent was an only child. Then in 2015 all families were allowed two children, with the number raised to three in 2021. Yet despite these adjustments many families continued with only one child; and family expansion from the 2015 and 2021 revisions had not yet worked through to the age group considered in this paper.

3.2 Schooling and Shadow Education

The economic growth also permitted considerable public investment in the quantity and quality of schooling (Vickers & Zeng, 2017). Education was universalised at primary and lower-secondary levels, and much expansion was achieved at upper-secondary and post-secondary levels. Although private schools grew in number (Guo & Guo, 2016), the public system remained dominant, especially in Beijing, and continued even to attract elite families.

Concerning the structure of schooling, most parts of China follow a 6+3+3 model with six years of primary, three years of lower-secondary, and three years of upper-secondary. At the end of lower-secondary schooling, students sit the *zhongkao* examination to compete for upper-secondary places; and at the end of upper-secondary schooling they sit the *gaokao* examination to compete for post-secondary places. Between 1990 and 2019, the transition rate from lower- to upper-secondary schooling rose from 40.6% to 94.5%; and post-secondary

enrolment rates rose from 3.4% to 51.6% (China, National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This expansion much reduced bottlenecks within the system, but ironically it increased competition for prestigious institutions.

Alongside these changes was considerable expansion of shadow education (Zhang & Bray, 2021, p.50). Prior to the turn of the century, most shadow education was provided by public-school teachers seeking additional incomes, perhaps in conjunction with their schools. The following decade brought institutionalisation with companies of various sizes hiring teachers, university students, and their own professional tutors. In due course the institutionalisation proceeded with specialisation and stronger marketisation. The government had long been uneasy about serving teachers providing tutoring, and instituted a national prohibition in 2018 (Zhang, 2019).

Nevertheless, the shadow education sector remained vibrant, with many companies developing technological tools to expand their geographic scope and impact. A 2017 household survey found participation rates of 21.8% across all levels of schooling for rural children and 44.8% for urban ones (Wei, 2020). Much investment occurred even at the pre-school level (Yang, 2018), evidenced in a 2013 finding that among 1,641 parents in 12 cities, 65.6% had already invested in private tutoring for their children aged three to six (Yi, 2013). In this environment, parents had to navigate opportunities and persuasions from entrepreneurs and other ‘advisers’ in the marketplace for supplementary education.

3.3 The Quality-Oriented Reform

In 1999, the government launched a reform for Quality-Oriented Education (QOE) to strengthen the creative spirit and practical abilities of new generations (China, State Council, 1999). This provided further context for parental decision-making, creating some emphases that were widely welcomed. Yet in conjunction with other reforms, the dynamics of the labour market, and other forces of social stratification, the policy created an educational environment that many parents felt precarious. Specific components included goals of all-round development, curriculum reform, reduced academic burdens, and prohibition of examination-oriented admission to different levels of schooling.

3.3.1 Promoting all-round development

During the 1980s and 1990s, China’s primary and secondary education was widely criticised for lacking relevance to social reality, for learning approaches that stressed rote-memorisation, and

for excessive emphasis on test preparation. Even successful students were sometimes described as high in scores but low in abilities. All-round development of every student, the main QOE goal, pushed parents to a broader vision for their children's development (Lin, 2019). Schools were required to strengthen physical education and sports, and to improve aesthetic education. However, test scores remained the lifeblood for most students. Few schools with long histories of examination-oriented education convinced the public that they were also good at all-round development (Wang, 2018).

3.3.2 Curriculum reform

The QOE initiative required new curricula, emphasising application of knowledge to real-world situations (Yu, 2003). At the core, approaches were shifted from teacher-centred to student-centred (Guo, 2012). The QOE encouraged students to engage in active enquiry and collaboration with classmates, and teachers were required to acknowledge students' individual differences and learning needs.

However, the reform encountered implementation challenges and aroused parental anxieties. Constraints arose from centralisation and limited class time, and many teachers retained teacher-centred approaches except during official inspections (Wang, 2018; Wu, 2016). Even when teachers tried hard, many parents worried about effectiveness because it was easier to handle form than substance. Students could discuss, inquire and cooperate, but might not learn much in the process (Lin, 2019).

3.3.3 Alleviating academic burdens

Another significant QOE focus was alleviation of the academic burden. The reformers argued that students could more easily become 'higher-quality people' if they spent less time on study and more time on other meaningful activities (Woronov, 2008, p.413). In 2000, the Ministry of Education issued the 'Urgent Notice on Alleviating the Excessive Academic Burden on Primary Students', and subsequently released similar notification for secondary students.

Then in 2018, nine government bodies including the Ministry of Education jointly issued the 'Notice on Measures to Reduce the Academic Burden on Primary and Secondary Students'. One commentator called the 30 burden-reduction measures an 'unprecedentedly severe order' (Li, 2019). Scheduled teaching and learning hours were limited to six in primary school, seven in lower-secondary school, and eight in upper-secondary school. The regulation caused a 'Half-Past-Three Problem' for working parents when schools closed earlier than previously. To address this matter, after-school programmes offered by schools were encouraged. However,

many parents worried that time would be wasted, and instead sent their children for tutoring. The 2021 policy further extended school-based after-school programmes but still with ambivalence in parental responses.

Other reforms focused on homework and assessment. Regulations prohibited written homework in Grades 1-2, and permitted no more than 60 minutes of written homework for Grades 3-6 and 90 minutes for Grades 7-9 (China, Ministry of Education, 2018). The old examination system was considered to ‘severely hamper student development as a whole person, stunt healthy growth, and limit opportunities to cultivate social responsibilities, creative spirit, and practical abilities’ (China, Ministry of Education, 2019). Assessments were restricted to one unified examination per semester for Grades 1 and 2, and no more than two per semester for other grades. Selective examinations were prohibited in primary schooling; and assessments were limited to curriculum standards that did not exceed the syllabus. Schools were advised to use ratings rather than scores to assess performance, and publication of rankings was prohibited (China, Ministry of Education, 2018).

3.3.4 Forbidding examination-oriented admissions

With scarce resources in the 1950s and 1960s, in order to accelerate the training of talent for China’s modernisation the government created a key-school system, mostly in urban areas (Wang, 2007). Key schools received extra funds and better qualified teachers, selected high-performing students through examinations from a larger pool than ordinary schools (Wu, 2008), and achieved much higher admission rates to prestigious institutions at the next level (Wang, 2018, p.185).

Key schools and other relatively prestigious institutions were eagerly sought by parents to boost their children’s life chances, and competition contributed to the ‘national frenzy for getting better test scores’ (Zhao, 2014). The phenomenon of school choice at primary and secondary levels that had emerged in the late 1980s, and had become common in the 1990s, was widely criticised as ‘school choice fever’ (Dong & Li, 2019). In 2006 the government officially ended the key-school system at primary and lower secondary levels, but the label remained in common parlance and perception.

Accompanying the policy of forbidding examination-oriented admissions during the period of compulsory education was a policy to admit students from immediate neighbourhoods. However, selection of students through examinations continued overtly and covertly, and the government decided to reinforce orders (Li, 2012). In 2006, the revised Compulsory Education

Law made recruiting students through examinations illegal; and in 2019, the Ministry of Education restated that both public and private schools at primary and lower-secondary levels should recruit students without entrance examinations (China, Ministry of Education, 2019). The scenario showed continued wrestling between schools' desires to select high-performing students and the policy to prohibit such selection. Despite the tightened prohibition on school choice, some parents still found hidden opportunities to choose key schools – and the successes of a few parents stimulated others to compete.

Although primary and lower secondary education was more equalised under these policies, upper secondary education remained stratified. When key upper-secondary schools ambitiously recruited high-performing students from wider areas and then improved their *Gaokao* results, other upper-secondary schools lost out. Higher education also became more stratified. Parental anxieties increased, with intensified feelings of responsibility to help their children stand out from the equalised compulsory education.

4. Methodology

The empirical part of this study utilised mixed methods to secure the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative component deployed data from a nationwide household survey by the China Institute for Educational Finance Research (CIEFR-HS), which focused on enrolments and expenditures from pre-school to higher education. The 2017 CIEFR-HS iteration collected data through three-stage probability-proportional-to-size sampling from 40,011 households in 363 counties of 29 provinces (Wei, 2020). Within the total sample of 34,851 students, 7,485 were primary students on which this paper focuses.

Based on the general picture of demand for private tutoring from the CIEFR-HS and related literature, follow-up qualitative research examined parental decision-making.¹ This component is the main focus of the present paper. Data were secured from Beijing Municipality, which (despite its name) has both urban and rural areas. The main data were collected from November 2015 to January 2016, with follow-up interviews of some parents and expansion of the sample during the subsequent two years and again after issue of the 2021 regulations. The follow-up interviews provided information both on the impact of regulations and on how demand for tutoring changed as the children grew older.

¹ For the qualitative research, ethics approval was sought from the Human Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Faculties (HRECNCf) in the University of xxxx. HRECNCf's Reference Number: EA1505004.

Maximal variation sampling was adopted to recruit parents with and without experience of seeking private tutoring for the semi-structured interviews. The sample included parents of different socio-economic status (SES, identified by their educational attainments, occupations, and household incomes) with children ranging from Grades 1 to 9. The majority of children were in ordinary urban or rural schools, but a significant number were in urban key schools. The parents were approached by the first author through her own network, her personal contacts' networks, and referrals by teachers, principals and participants. The main study covered 51 parents, among whom 12 participated in follow-up interviews. A further nine parents were interviewed in 2017 and 2018, making a total sample of 60 (Table 1). Among these parents, 47 were mothers and 13 were fathers (but of separate families – i.e. not both parents in one family). Six parents had two children, and the remaining 54 parents had only one child.² The repeat interviews in 2021 covered five parents. The CIEFR-HS had its own sampling frame, and did not make available the specific identities of the respondents. For the interviews on which the present paper reports, the authors operated within the spirit of the CIEFR-HS and did not check during the interviews whether the interviewees had taken part in the survey since overlap (or no overlap) would not impact the findings.

Table 1: Parent participants for in-depth interview

Children's Grade*		Children's School Type*			Parental SES		
		Rural Ordinary	Urban Ordinary	Urban Key	Low	Medium	High
Primary education	Grades 1-3	2	10	9	2	15	4
	Grades 4-6	6	7	5	7	7	4
Lower secondary education	Grades 7-9	7	3	11	5	10	6
Total		15	20	25	14	32	14

* For parents interviewed more than once, children's grade and school type referred to those at the first interview.

Parents were asked about each experience of seeking private tutoring from the very beginning to the time of interview, and about underlying motivations. For those who had not sought tutoring, the reason was also inquired. Interview durations ranged from 20 minutes to two hours, mainly depending on how much tutoring they had sought. In addition to the parents, 15 teachers covering different grades across the school types and six (co-)managers of five

² One parent had twins (which of course was not covered by the one-child policy). Two families had been permitted by the rural policy to have a second child since the first was a girl. The remaining three had pre-school children, having been permitted a second child under the 2013 policy change.

tutorial centres were interviewed for their views on why parents sought private tutoring. These interviews helped to verify and triangulate the parental perspectives.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese with tape-recording and transcribed by the first author. The transcripts were analysed with open coding, axial coding and selective coding using NVivo11 software. To fit the focus of this paper, data analysed here from parents of lower-secondary children were only about the tutoring demand when their children were in primary grades.

5. Managing Children's Education through Private Tutoring

5.1 Parents' Perceived Responsibilities

The value attached to education in China has deep cultural roots, reflected in the phrases 'wishing the son to become a dragon' (望子成龙) or 'the daughter to become a phoenix' (望女成凤). The principal path, following traditions, is high academic performance at school followed by a university degree and then a professional or managerial career.

The QOE reform and accompanying policies sought collective social wellbeing, i.e. creative spirit, practical abilities and strong national competitiveness. Many parents welcomed these notions, but constructed their roles in cultivating children through wellbeing including admission to key schools and elite universities. Observing government efforts in equalising compulsory education but being aware of increasingly stratified post-compulsory education, parents did not dare to rely only on schools for their children's careers. In this way, parents become responsibilised to mobilise their social and economic resources to support. As Tian, father of a Grade 6 boy, said:

We fully support the QOE reform. But we dare not risk my son's future. If we provide no extra support, he may study in an ordinary school with poor academic performance and may not enter university. Then how can he survive in such a competitive society? An old saying states that the father should be blamed if he rears children without instructing them. Nowadays, seeking better education opportunities and resources both in and out of school has become a major responsibility.

The education marketisation, including the boom of private tutoring, gave parents avenues to assist their children's education. Seeking private tutoring became a form of responsibility based on individualistic rationality of self-benefit. Thus, in line with statistics about shadow education enrolments even among pre-school children (Yi, 2013), many parents in the present

study expressed fears about losing at the starting line. In the words of Juan, a medium-SES mother of a Grade 1 child:

Educating children is a one-way process which can never be repeated. The questions what kind of education the school provides and what kind of person you wish your child to become must be addressed as early as possible. Then you can plan strategically what and how to invest to promote your child's educational career.

5.2 Managing Children's Education through Private Tutoring

According to the CIEFR-HS, in 2017 47.7% of primary students received private tutoring with average annual cost of CNY2,537 (US\$390). Academic tutoring dominated (33.4% of all children), compared with non-academic (27.9%). On average the children spent 6.4 hours per week in private tutoring during term-time and 14.7 hours per week during the summer vacation.

Elaborating, Table 2 shows variations by urban/rural location, household income and mother's educational level. As expected, enrolment rates were considerably lower in rural than urban areas, especially for non-academic tutoring. This was a function not only of demand but also of supply since rural incomes were generally lower and entrepreneurs were less likely to target lower-income and thinly-populated locations. Nevertheless, 20.8% of children were enrolled in academic tutoring even in rural areas. As expected, the next category shows that more tutoring was acquired in households with higher incomes, but even in the poorest quartile 16.6% of children received academic tutoring. A similar remark applies to the data on mother's educational level.

Table 2: Enrolment rates in private tutoring among primary students, China, 2017

		Enrolment rates (%)	
		Academic tutoring	Non-academic tutoring
Location	Urban	40.0	38.8
	Rural	20.8	6.8
Household income	First quartile (poorest)	16.6	6.6
	Second quartile	26.0	14.1
	Third quartile	34.2	29.8
	Fourth quartile (richest)	44.9	49.4
Mother's educational level	Illiteracy	16.4	3.8
	Primary education	22.6	8.2
	Lower secondary education	34.0	22.5
	Upper secondary education	41.4	39.1
	Higher education	45.3	63.9

The following sub-sections, based on the interviews in Beijing Municipality, explore how parents of primary students strategically invested in private tutoring with the three core motives of supplementing school education, facilitating the primary to lower-secondary transition, and promoting children's all-round development.

5.2.1 Supplementing school education

Most interviewees agreed that the QOE stress on creativity, practical ability and comprehensive quality was essential for children in the long run. Yet parents also felt that their children needed high scores to compete for admission at each stage of the educational ladder, especially since the *zhongkao* and *gaokao* watershed examinations had not changed radically. The burden-alleviation policy aggravated the worry not only for parents but even for teachers. As explained by Ms Wang, a teacher of Chinese in an urban key school:

Grade 1 students are required to learn 350 Chinese characters in the first semester, and 750 in the second semester. Among these characters, some are polyphones or homophones, very difficult for students to distinguish.... Each primary-school lesson has 35 minutes. Within that time, I not only have to teach new characters and text, but must also allocate time for written exercises because the burden-alleviation regulation forbids written homework for Grades 1 and 2. I therefore have to rush to cover the curriculum. If students completely rely on the 35 minutes each day to learn Chinese, they cannot fully master.

The teacher added that:

Whatever the policy says, parents must help their children to learn better and lay a solid knowledge foundation. Parents can either tutor children by themselves or send children to tutoring class.

Parents commonly invested in tutoring for children to learn the textbook content, perhaps significantly in advance. For example Jie, an urban medium-SES mother, sent her son for tutoring one year before his primary schooling started, and even displaced the kindergarten that was considered insufficiently academic:

I heard from my friends that curricula are taught very fast in primary schools, and that it is difficult for children to master all the content if only learning in school. Parents have to help them. I pulled my son out of kindergarten and sent him to a tutorial centre where tutors taught Chinese, mathematics and English according to school textbooks and assigned

lots of exercises to consolidate. In this way, my son had learned much knowledge before entering primary school, which greatly helped him to cope.

It was not a rare case: four classes in this kindergarten serving mostly medium-SES parents had been reorganised into two classes since many children had quit to receive tutoring at least half a year before primary education. Although Jie was an urban parent, some rural counterparts operated similarly. As explained by Yuan, rural father of a Grade 3 boy: “It was more useful for my child to learn some knowledge in tutoring class than playing in kindergarten.”

While Jie had sought tutoring in Chinese, mathematics and English, the priority both for her and others was English. Dominant schooling practices had been widely criticised as teaching ‘mute English’ with an emphasis on literacy and grammar. Curriculum reformers sought to address the phenomenon in which learners could read and understand written English but were poor in listening and speaking. Rote memorisation was discouraged for early primary students, and grammar was no longer taught systematically. However, many parents feared that their children’s proficiency would be inadequate without solid vocabulary and grammar, and sought private tutoring to compensate.

Private tutoring also provided homework, since many parents valued the activity for consolidating learning, deepening understanding and constructing knowledge. As explained by Dong, rural mother of a Grade 1 girl, in line with the teacher quoted above:

My daughter has almost no written homework assigned by teachers.... I wonder how a Grade 1 child can grasp all the content without written assignments. According to my own experience, Chinese characters and English words must be copied many times to remember, and maths must be practiced to master. The tutoring centre helps my daughter to review what was taught in school and then to do assignments. She goes there every day after school for about three hours, and I pick her up when I finish work.

Another way in which private tutoring supplemented schooling was related to examinations. With the high-stakes *zhongkao* and *gaokao* examinations in mind, even though these watersheds were some years ahead, some parents sent their children to private tutoring for training in examination skills. ‘As long as the children have to take *zhongkao* and *gaokao*’, said Ning, a medium-SES mother of a Grade 4 boy in an urban ordinary school, ‘it would be better for them to acquire more exam skills and to get more experience’. She added that: ‘Schools are not allowed to test students, but private tutoring can.’

Related, some parents sought tutoring for detailed information about their children’s academic performance. They found the formative assessment in schools insufficiently explicit,

and thus felt uncertain about their children's learning progress. In contrast, quizzes and tests were common in tutoring classes. The leading tutorial company offered pre-class quizzes, after-class quizzes, tests for every three lessons, mid-term examinations, and final examinations. Parents were informed about their children's performance for each lesson in detail, and received 'pinpointed' advice from tutors who were advertised as 'experts at improving children's scores'.

In these processes, parents seemed to become professional agents for their children's education who outsourced their parenting to tutors (Kao, 2021; Yang, 2018). As stated by Ling, mother of a Grade 4 boy: "Teachers educate dozens of children in the classroom while we only take care of one or two children. It is us, not teachers, who have to manage our children's education. We are not able to control what children learn in school, but can arrange other learning opportunities. So, you see I serve my son's learning as an agent every day."

5.2.2 *Facilitating the primary to lower-secondary transition*

Entrance examinations were only kept for very limited numbers of lower-secondary schools approved by the government to select gifted students. For most schools, the entrance examination had been abolished and primary students were randomly assigned to neighbourhood institutions. Some parents purchased properties near the desired schools, but this was costly and had uncertainties. In any case, the schools still wanted high-performing students and commonly resorted to covert recruitment called *dianzhao* (点招). Previously, many schools had themselves organised tutoring classes and selected outstanding students among tutees according to their test performance. After such classes were banned, some schools secretly cooperated with tutorial centres to select students.

An alternative way was to screen applicants according to the quality and quantity of prizes they won. As explained by Cao, mother of a Grade 6 boy in a key school: 'If the children can win the first prize in mathematics contests like *Yingchun* Cup (迎春杯) and *Hua Luogeng* Golden Cup (华罗庚杯), they will be targeted by key schools.' Mr Dong, class teacher in a top lower-secondary school echoed: 'Primary students with excellent mathematics performance have indeed proven good at learning, so it is an efficient way to select students.' Some parents even arranged two or more mathematics tutors. Cao, the medium-SES mother quoted above, explained that: 'Taking mathematics tutoring in two or three classes is common among students in Grades 5 and 6.' She added that tutoring was needed to keep up with other mathematics tutoring provided by one of the major companies for top students.

Alongside mathematics was demand for English. A company called Cambridge English Qualifications (CEQ), associated with Cambridge University in England, ranked students into five levels. Previously the second-highest level was enough for primary students to prove their English proficiency to the key schools; but as the competition intensified and more students achieved this level of competence, the highest level became necessary (Qi, 2020; Feng, 2020). Packages of tutoring classes were commonly sought by medium- and high-SES parents with foci including vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and writing.

A further route was through admission as a student of special talent. Under the QOE, schools were encouraged to develop their own identities especially in sports, arts, or science and technology (Tan & Reyes, 2016). Colourful student clubs, great extracurricular activities, and prizes won by students became a symbol of school identity and quality (Lin, 2019). Usually key schools had more resources and enthusiasm to develop such characteristics, and recruited students with special talent in specific domains each year (Wang, 2018, p.3). This demand attracted much parental attention, though the opportunities were very limited. For example in Beijing's Haidian District, among the 26,845 lower-secondary places in 2018 only 1,025 (3.8%) were for students with special talents (Haidian, 2018). However, the possibility stimulated great demand for tutoring to cultivate such talents. Jiang, father of a Grade 6 boy in an urban key school stated that: 'Special talent means the competency that you have but others don't, or the thing that you can do better than anyone else; and both need training in tutoring class.'

Since the specific school identities varied, many parents maximised their chances through tutoring in sports, arts, and/or science and technology. They planned ahead and started early, since they were unsure which talents their children might have and so commenced with a range. For example, the Grade 6 boy mentioned above started tutoring in piano, violin and swimming when he was in kindergarten, and later registered for calligraphy, skating and ice hockey. His mother, Cao, explained that:

We don't know which talent could be developed and thus we let him try in different non-academic tutoring classes. The process of trying may last a long time, so we began as early as possible.

Gao, mother of a Grade 3 girl in an urban key school, echoed:

It is wise to let children fully explore their interests in different tutoring classes during pre-school or early primary, when they have less study load. They may discover which subjects they are good at and then concentrate time and energy to further cultivate, which become more and more limited as getting close to the transition point.

Based on this idea, she arranged tutoring in seven non-academic subjects in addition to English tutoring for her daughter. She decided not to secure external tutoring in mathematics, since she could herself handle that domain.

Nevertheless, admission through special talents faced much uncertainty. The enrolment plans for each school required annual approval, with the possibility of changing criteria. Parents, as explained by Yan, sought advice from their social networks:

Some subjects like piano used to be recognised as special but have now become very common.... I analysed the enrolment patterns over recent years and consulted a friend who teaches in this school. I found that science and technology were included in a more stable way than other subjects, so I sent my son for tutoring in robot from Grade 2.

This parent undertook the research to reduce the risk that her investments would have been in less valuable domains by the time the children came to apply for admission.

The primary to lower-secondary transition was the most critical point for parents to manage, and private tutoring was widely sought. “The *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao* results come from children’s talents and efforts,” said Chen, “while the lower-secondary transition depends on parents’ resources and efforts.” She added: “We should try hard to send children to strong lower-secondary schools where they can be better prepared for *Zhongkao* and then *Gaokao*, no matter how the policies change.”

5.2.3 *Promoting children’s all-round development*

Despite the pressure for academic excellence, some parents felt that the QOE focus on all-round development should have gone further. Since it did not, they sought external coaching in domains including basketball, football, tennis, badminton, ping-pong, ice-hockey, golf, rugby, fencing, swimming, skating, running, and taekwondo. Other parents focused on music, chess, calligraphy, drawing, and painting; and yet others sought computer programming and aerospace modelling.

For some parents, demand for non-academic tutoring was encouraged by their children’s experience in the schools’ student clubs or extracurricular activities. A few parents even followed the tutors who were employed by schools to coach the clubs or extracurricular activities. For example, Shen, a rural-urban migrant father who worked on an assembly line, sought cello tutoring for his Grade 5 boy in an urban ordinary school since the boy was proudly appointed the principal cellist of the school orchestra. He paid the tutor who was employed by

school to train the orchestra CNY150 (US\$25, roughly equal to his daily salary) per hour each week for additional tutoring.

In addition to the specific skills, parents anticipated development of qualities such as persistence, optimism, self-confidence, teamwork, and problem-solving. Juan, the mother mentioned above, said:

I don't expect (my daughter) to become a professional pianist, but hope that she will learn how to enjoy music through piano tutoring.... I also expect her to develop persistence from playing piano every day, which is very important for her future.

Other parents secured multi-dimensional packages. Gao, the mother mentioned above who had arranged seven forms of extra-curricular tutoring for her Grade 3 daughter, said that:

Chess may develop her intelligence. Tutoring in piano and vocal music can help her to enjoy music. Tutoring in painting may cultivate her aesthetic sense. Dance tutoring can improve her body shape. Tutoring in hosting can train her to express herself and to become more confident. And basketball helps to improve physical strength and cooperative spirit.

This again is a striking list of ingredients for concerted cultivation. It was most evident among urban and middle- or high-SES parents, yet even rural parents secured tutoring to cultivate good qualities albeit in only one or two domains.

6. Impact of the 2021 Regulations

Although the full impact of the radical 2021 regulations that sought significant reduction in the scale of private tutoring cannot yet be assessed, some indicators are already evident from follow-up interviews with five parents of the original sample, press commentaries, and informal sources. The regulations targeted supply of tutoring rather than demand, and thus left untouched many of the underlying forces of social competition in the context of expanded incomes, one-child families and middle-class values. While some parents felt relief at reduced pressure on their children, others were unconvinced and in the absence of officially-approved tutoring turned to the black market. Thus, among the five parents who provided follow-up interviews:

- one had abandoned the quest for private tutoring but felt anxious;
- another felt a benefit insofar as the policy promoted a more relaxed family life, but worried that her son would not be productively occupied during the coming school holidays;

- the third still had her daughter in tutorial classes, albeit for fewer hours, and was trying to get a tutor to come quietly to her home;
- the fourth similarly continued with the existing tutoring, albeit in a renamed company; and
- the fifth had joined with two other parents and had already recruited a tutor to come to her home every Sunday.

Similarly, as reported for example by Ni (2021) three months after release of the policy, “a thriving industry of unlicensed tutoring centers has emerged, operating online or via classrooms hidden inside office buildings and residential compounds”. The prices had risen and the parents felt nervous about such covert operations, but they persisted. Further, since non-academic tutoring was still permitted, that sub-sector became even more popular than before.

The 2021 regulations served collective goals of promoting comprehensive and healthy development of students by reducing study burdens both in and out of school. However, some parents viewed them as a threat to their children’s individual wellbeing in the precarious environment, and resisted the regulations out of their sense of responsibility. Once the demand for private tutoring had been internalised as a responsible strategy, it was not easy to remove.

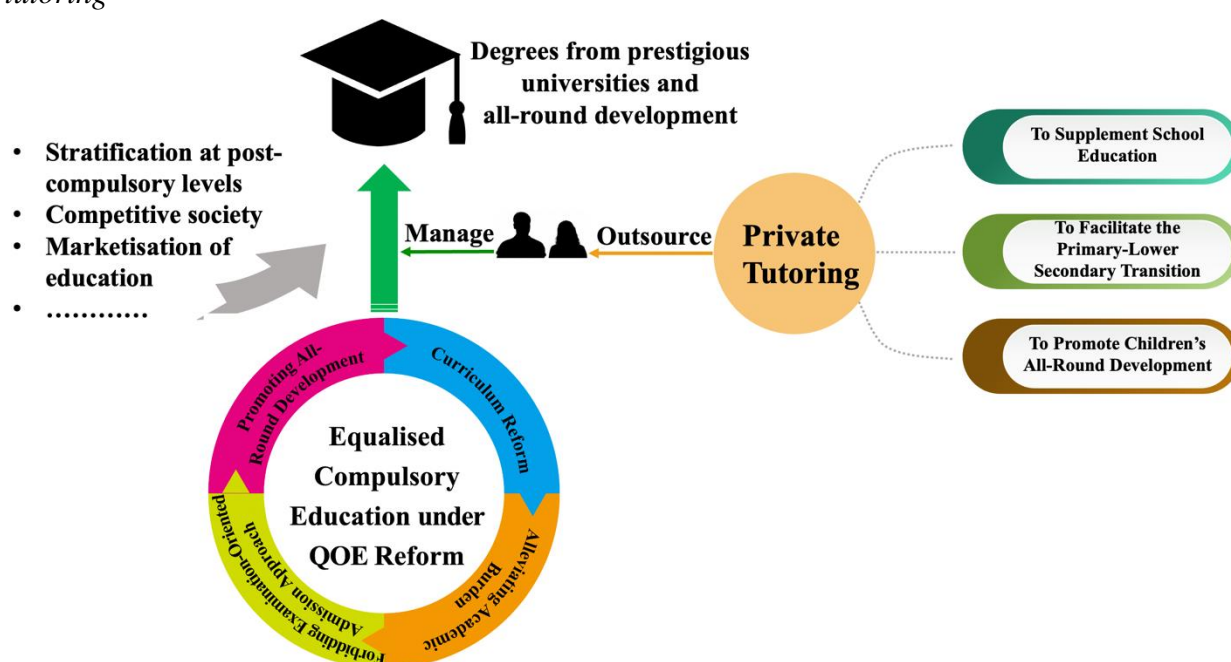
7. Conclusions

The 2017 data presented in Table 2 showed shadow education to be widespread in China, especially among urban, high-income and well-educated families but even among rural, low-income and poorly-educated ones. The 2021 regulations much reduced supply, and for some families permitted relaxation; yet much demand remained, even in the context of rising prices and the need to operate underground. In this respect, parallels were evident with Korea where the authorities prohibited tutoring in 1980 but found that it persisted (Bray, 2009, pp.50-53). The Korean prohibition was formally abandoned in 2000, and by the 2010s tutoring enrolment rates were far greater than they had been at the time of the prohibition. Indeed, it had become a core component of rigidifying social stratification (Bae, 2021).

As noted at the beginning of this paper, expansion of shadow education, alongside Korea, has been evident across countries as diverse as Australia, India and the USA (Das, 2017; Doherty & Dooley, 2018). Despite variations, the qualitative stories from Beijing resonated with stories in these other cultures, and reflected the globalised contexts in which contemporary

parents found themselves. Some components of China's QOE reform disguised stratifying shifts, but below the surface they were clearly evident. Education remained a crucial instrument for social advance and for maintenance of social status among those who were already privileged, and Chinese parents, like their counterparts across the globe, had to find ways to navigate the currents and counter-currents. Figure 1 illustrates these forces in diagrammatic form. The 2021 policy sought to protect the role of schooling and to displace the marketplace supplementary provision, but in many cases just sent tutoring underground as an even more shadowy activity.

Figure 1: Chinese parental management of children's education with the assistance of private tutoring



These forces operated despite government efforts to rectify previous patterns which, again to use the phrase of Verger et al. (2016), was a form of privatisation by default. Stratification that had been introduced in the 1950s and 1960s through the creation of key schools was officially removed in 2006, but the label remained in common parlance and perception. The QOE initiative promoted all-round development and reformed curricula. Most families welcomed these components, though they had uncertainties about restrictions on schooling hours and homework. Complexities also arose over the removal of entrance examinations for lower-secondary schooling and prohibition of entrance examinations for primary schooling. In Australia, Doherty and Dooley (p.555) highlighted the standardised testing of all students in

Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, suggesting that the testing increased pressures on families to perform and score. China had no such standardised testing below the Grade 9 *zhongkao* examination, yet families still felt much pressure.

Further, whatever actions the Chinese government took, families sought ways to maintain social advantages – perhaps demonstrating cultural traits that are evident among Chinese families that are minorities in other countries (Cheah et al., 2013; Chua, 2011; Sriprakash et al., 2016). The rural and lower-class families had more limited resources for concerted cultivation and intensive parenting, but the example of the migrant labourer who paid for cello tutoring at an hourly cost equivalent to one day's salary was striking. Further, that case showed a commitment and vision among fathers as well as mothers.

Elaborating on the contextual forces, a starting point was the longstanding value attached to education reflected in the previously-quoted phrases about wanting children to become dragons or phoenixes. Second was the combination of greatly increased incomes and single-child families, leading the 'priceless child' to receive even greater emphasis than traditionally. Third were the opportunities and pressures from the expansion of private tutoring in the 1990s and 2000s. Once such patterns had been established, they could not easily be eliminated even when the strong state decided to confront the strong market (Zhang, 2021, p.58). Peer pressure and fear of being left behind was a continued motivating force for parents.

At the same time the paper shows dynamics of globalisation that may be found in many countries, even in the specifics of the supplementary provision. English is not an official language in China, yet was in high demand as a key to access global knowledge and to permit cross-national communication. Further, even the content and labels reflected international marketisation, as evident in the Cambridge English Qualifications classes for Beijing students. This company also featured in Kolkata, as documented by Das (2017, p.122), and was itself a manifestation of marketisation within the education sector utilising the prestige of its parent university in England.

Also striking are ways in which the Beijing parents interviewed for the study had to keep up with (or preferably ahead of) changing times with their choices of extra-curricular activities. On the one hand were longstanding domains such as chess, piano and basketball, but alongside were technology, robots and even aerospace modelling. Yet all of these extra-curricular activities had

to be balanced with academic subjects, and parents had to shift weight towards the academic domain as their children grew older.

This paper has focused on a phenomenon that will persist both in China and internationally. Contexts differ across the world, here illustrated by Australia, India, Korea and the USA among other places; but all social classes in all locations increasingly feel that ‘schooling is not enough’. Variations of course remain according to cultures, government policies and economic forces, within and across individual countries. These variations call for further exploration of patterns and implications. Meanwhile, considerations of access to education and of the nature of teaching and learning must clearly take account of shadow education alongside and in conjunction with schooling.

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