

## **A Division of Labor Perspective on Mothers Who Accompany Their Children's Study—A Case Study of Student Guardianship among M Town's Working Families**

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在现代社会，身处不同阶层的女性家长都卷入以教育参与建构母亲身份的过程中。但是不同阶层的母亲却有不同的行动方式。在日益激烈的教育竞争中，普通劳动家庭的母亲迁居学校附近，照料面临高考的子女，并在陪读劳动中建构其“陪读母亲”身份。本研究以典型的高考陪读群落聚居地M镇的陪读母亲为研究对象，从性别和阶层视角结构化地分析“陪读母亲”的教育劳动及生产关系特征。“陪读母亲”的教育劳动是家庭性别分工下新的“家务劳动”。从分工内容看，母亲们的服侍子女生活的陪读劳动属于学校教育劳动分工链溢出的“低端”劳作。一方面，由于缺乏文化资本，家长与学校的关系是“陪”与“服从”，另一方面，她们自觉远离“素质教育”，与学校有效的“应试教育”形成有机配合；传统“望子成龙”和现代“儿童本位”养育观联合塑造了陪读母亲配合学校教育的服务型母亲形象。陪读，既是在当前教育与社会劳动分工下中下层女性家长不得不以“照料子女生活”的方式参与的教育劳动，又是中国劳动阶层母亲为争取子女教育成功所做出的能动的、理性的行动策略。

**关键词：**教育劳动 分工 陪读 阶层与性别

In modern society, female parents from different strata are involved in the process of constructing their motherhood through education. But mothers of different social classes have different ways of acting. Amid increasingly fierce educational competition, the mothers of ordinary working families move into the school neighborhood to look after their children as the college entrance examination (*gaokao*) approaches, and construct their “student guardian motherhood” status through their task of accompanying their children's study. This paper takes as its subject mothers as student guardians in M Town, a typical *gaokao* community, providing a structural analysis of the features of such mothers' educational labor and production relations from the perspective of gender and class. Seen in the light of the family's gendered division of labor, the educational work of student guardian mothers is a new form of housework. In terms of the content of its division of labor, the student guardian

work of mothers dedicated to their children's well-being counts as "low-end" work, an overflow from links in the division of labor in school education. On the one hand, due to their lack of cultural capital, the relationship between parents and schools is one of "accompanying" and "submission." On the other, these parents consciously keep their distance from "quality education" and form an organic compound with the schools' efficient exam-centered education. The traditional Chinese idea of "hoping one's sons become dragons" [achieve greatness] and the modern "child-centered" concept of nurturing jointly shape the image of student guardian mothers who work as service-oriented mothers in tandem with school education. The function of student guardians is not only the educational labor of "looking after the children" enjoined on middle- and lower-class female parents by the current division of education and social labor, but also an active and rational action strategy adopted by working class Chinese mothers striving for their children's academic success.

**Keywords:** educational labor, division of labor, student guardian, strata and gender

## I. Literature Review and Research Background

Modern society, with its intensified educational competition and emphasis on home-school cooperation, makes it necessary for parents to become involved in the process of their children's school education. In this process, it is female parents (mothers) who express greater readiness and expend more energy. Studies of "extensive/intensive motherhood," "the motherhood goalkeeper effect" and "motherhood brokerage" focus on mothers' educational responsibility.<sup>1</sup> However, mothers from families with different socioeconomic status express their involvement in education differently. *Unequal Childhoods* by Annette Lareau, a US sociologist, shows us the pattern of involvement of parents in different strata of America. Her proposed "natural growth" working-class style and "concerted cultivation" middle-class style are considered to provide an important perspective on the role and involvement of family members in different social strata.<sup>2</sup> Related studies in the US, the UK and Israel have focused on the differing involvement of mothers from different strata in their children's school education.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, Chinese research on the involvement of urban middle-class female parents in education has shown that middle-class mothers characteristically perform the roles of "intensive motherhood," "motherhood broker" and "familialism."<sup>3</sup> This nomenclature expresses their involvement in their children's education as "managers"

1 K. Christopher, "Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers' Constructions of the Good Mother," pp. 73-96; Zou Shengqi, Wu Xinchun and Liu Chang, "The Motherhood Goalkeeper Effect—Conceptual Structures, Theoretical Explanations and Research Prospects," pp. 41-49; Yang Ke, "Motherhood Brokerage: The Change in Motherhood against the Background of Education Marketization," pp. 79-90.

2 A. Lareau, "Concerted Cultivation and the Accomplishment of Natural Growth," pp. 1-13.

3 L. Einat and B. Orly, "Working-class Mothers' School Involvement: A Class-Specific Maternal Ideal?"; Jin Yihong and Yang Di, "Competition of Maternal Backgrounds' in Education: The Prevalence of Familialism and Motherhood Redevelopment," pp. 61-67.

and “educationalists.” They are authorities on parenting. In addition, middle-class families shift part of the schoolwork to their families, and parents (purchasing educational services) undertake this part of the work of education.<sup>4</sup> In working families, however, involvement in education is considered to be expressed at the level of emotions and expectations; their investment in action falls short.<sup>5</sup> However, Peggy A. Kong found in her research on parenting patterns in rural China that these parents earn money to support their children’s education, exempt them from household chores, allow them to spend more time doing homework, use kinship networks to obtain information about school education, and even transfer their children to better schools. These actions indicate an involvement in education that has been neglected by school teachers, officials and even many researchers.<sup>6</sup> Parents in working families support their children’s upward mobility through their hitherto neglected involvement in education. “*Gaokao* student guardians” emerged in China in the context of achieving upward social mobility through the *gaokao*. Working family mothers give up paid work, rent lodgings near the high schools and engage in the unpaid work of caring for their children; as part of the logistics of schools’ education production, they become involved in an education production alliance to improve their children’s academic achievements.

#### *1. The student guardian concept and the evolution of the student guardian phenomenon*

Broadly speaking, “student guardianship” refers to parental participation in the whole educational process, ranging from the students’ daily lives to their studies.<sup>7</sup> In the narrow sense, it refers specifically refers to the migration of parents, especially female parents, from their original place of residence to urban centers, where they rent accommodation near their children’s school so they can take care of the children’s learning and daily lives.<sup>8</sup> In this study, student guardian mothers as are those who rent accommodation in the vicinity of the school to attend to their children’s daily needs, so that their children can devote themselves to the high-intensity study required as preparation for the *gaokao*.

Student guardianship has gone through three broad stages. The first was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the increased emphasis on education for the first generation of one-child families and the heavier burden of primary and secondary schoolwork meant that student guardianship appeared in China’s urban middle class: after students came home from

4 Xue Haiping, “From School Education to Shadow Education: Educational Competition and Social Reproduction,” pp. 47-69, 188-189.

5 A.B. Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*; Xiong Heni and Wang Xiaofang, “The Educational Power of the Family Language of the Working Class: Based on the Narrative Analysis of Rural College Students,” pp. 47-55.

6 Peggy A. Kong, *Parenting, Education, and Social Mobility in Rural China: Cultivating Dragons and Phoenixes*.

7 Chen Feng and Liang Wei, “The Experience of Rural Student Guardians and Their Influence from the Perspective of the Life Course: Based on Fieldwork in Hua County, Gansu Province,” pp. 55-63, 139.

8 Wang Jiang, *Migration to Undertake “Student Guardianship”: The Unequal Distribution between Urban and Rural Educational Resources*; Zheng Yanna, “Sociological Interpretation of the Phenomenon of Mothers as ‘Student Guardians’ in Rural Areas,” pp. 790-791.

school, parents accompanied and supervised them and guided their homework. The second stage began in the late 1990s, when ordinary urban workers, laid-off workers and small town residents became student guardians at chosen schools in their quest for better quality educational resources. When studying abroad became really fashionable, junior middle school students and even primary school students started studying abroad. Over the past ten years, there has been marked fall in the age at which students go overseas to study, so their guardianship has become an increasingly prominent issue.<sup>9</sup> More and more urban rich and middle class families have begun to seek a route to success in life other than the *gaokao*, so are sending their children to study abroad, while parents at the bottom of society, especially rural parents, are increasingly joining the contingent of student guardians in the highly competitive *gaokao*. The third stage has seen the rapid growth of the rural student guardian group from about 2003 to the present. At the compulsory education stage, the policy of “abolishing and merging schools” meant that migratory student guardians came into being. At the same time, as higher education widened its admissions, the phenomenon of working families’ *gaokao* student guardianship appeared at the senior high school level.

## 2. *Related research on student guardianship: an interpretive perspective*

In recent years, there has been a growing number of studies on student guardianship in rural areas employing quantitative and qualitative research methods. Some scholars have used data on student guardians from the Rural Education Research Institute’s 2012 survey of primary and secondary schools in 20 counties (10 provinces) across the country. They found that student guardianship is widespread in rural areas, especially in county and township schools. Mothers from families with lower socioeconomic status form the main body of the student guardians.<sup>10</sup> Other case studies of student guardians have focused on China’s central and western provinces, including Hubei,<sup>11</sup> Shanxi,<sup>12</sup> Shaanxi,<sup>13</sup> Gansu,<sup>14</sup> Sichuan,<sup>15</sup> Chongqing City,<sup>16</sup> Henan<sup>17</sup> and

9 Research Group of China Youth Research Center, Fang Yi, He Ling, Liu Xiuying and Wang Peng, “Research Report on the State of Development Younger Students from China Studying Abroad,” pp. 5-25.

10 Xi Bing, “A Different Kind of Rural Boarder—A Survey of the Rural Student Guardian Phenomenon.”

11 Zhang Man, *Research on the Behavioral Choices of Student Guardians Prior to the College Entrance Examination and an Analysis of Their Impact*.

12 Zhang Caiyan, *A Study of the Social Adaptation of Student Guardians in Rural Areas—A Case Study of L County in Lüliang, Shanxi*.

13 Pang Xiaopeng, Jin Jin and Dong Xiaoyuan *et al.*, “On the New Features of the Rural Student Guardianship of Primary School Parents Who Rent Apartments and Their Families’ Economic Conditions—New and Unfair Conditions in Rural Primary Education after the Adjustment of School Distribution,” pp. 97-112, 143.

14 Tang Jia, Liang Jinlian and Mu Liping, “A Gender Perspective on the Effect of Student Guardianship on Rural Women: A Case Study of B Town in Luzhou of Sichuan Province,” pp. 52-58.

15 Li Hongdan, *On Student Guardians’ Behavioral Choices and Social Adjustment: A Case Study of Student Guardians in Yuexi Town, Kai County, Chongqing City*.

16 Wang Man, *A Study of Student Guardians Going to Town from the Perspective of Social Action*.

17 Li Nana, *An Investigative Report on the “Phenomenon of Student Guardianship.”*

Anhui,<sup>18</sup> and surveys of student guardians have also been done in some ethnic minority areas, including Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and the Tujia area southeast of Chongqing.<sup>19</sup>

These surveys show that student guardianship is not unusual in China, especially in the central and western provinces; indeed it is extremely common. Further, it is mothers from families with lower socioeconomic status who have become the main force of student guardianship.

The interpretative perspective on student guardianship is based on the life course and analyzes the life experiences and process of social adaptation of rural student guardians<sup>20</sup> as well as the changing division of labor, from migrant worker to student guardian, and its effect on the women concerned. This perspective adopts a social gender approach.<sup>21</sup> A further analysis from the perspective of educational equity finds that the imbalance in rural and urban education is an important cause of the rise of student guardians.<sup>22</sup> Social mobility theory analyzes the consolidation of the social power system and the narrowing of social mobility in the period of China's social transformation, conditions that led parents to further emphasize investment in education.<sup>23</sup> But these perspectives neglect the significance of the student guardian as providers of support for their children's studies in the course of their participation in the division of labor in school education. Our research selected M Town, which is renowned for its "gaokao student guardians" as the locus of research, and studies the process and significance of mothers from working families engaging in unpaid labor as student guardians in terms of the division of labor in education production.

## II. Research Issues and Methods

### 1. Research issues

This study attempts to analyze mothers as student guardians and the relationships between

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18 Gegen Tuya and Hu Chunmei, "On the Phenomenon of Student Guardians in Primary and Secondary Schools and Problems It Causes," pp. 72-76.

19 Tan Xiaojing and Tan Huazhang, "An Anthropological Interpretation of Student Guardians in Minority Areas: A Case Study of Longqiao Tujia Township, Southeast Chongqing as an Example," pp. 89-95.

20 Chen Feng and Liang Wei, "The Experience of Rural Student Guardians and Their Influence from the Perspective of the Life Course: Based on Fieldwork in Hua County, Gansu Province," pp. 55-63, 139; Li Hongdan, *On Student Guardians' Behavioral Choices and Social Adjustment: A Case Study of Student Guardians in Yuexi Town, Kai County, Chongqing City*.

21 Tang Jia, Liang Jinlia and Mu Liping, "A Gender Perspective on the Effect of Student Guardianship on Rural Women: A Case Study of B Town in LuZhou of Sichuan Province," pp. 52-58.

22 Wang Jiang, *Migration to Undertake "Student Guardianship": The Unequal Distribution between Urban and Rural Educational Resources*.

23 Wang Wenlong, "The Rheology of the Chinese Student Guardian Phenomenon and Its Sociological Interpretation," pp. 126-132.

parents and children and between family and school that arise in the course of these mothers' student guardianship. Our analysis is presented in terms of work and the division of labor. For this reason, we chose M Town, a classic locus of student guardianship for the college entrance exams, and took the guardian mothers as our research subject. The issues involved are as follows:

- (1) How is student guardian work carried out, and how do student guardian mothers see their own labor value?
- (2) What kind of family/school relationship, parent/child relationship and action rationality are implied in working families' choice of student guardianship?
- (3) What position do student guardian mothers have in the division of labor between family and school?

## 2. *Research methods and sources of material*

We adopted the case study method, selecting M Town, which is renowned for its large-scale *gaokao* force of student guardians, for our fieldwork. The fieldwork involved surveys, interviews, observation, etc. We shared the student guardians' lives, observed their daily routine, and interviewed parents, students, teachers and others. In order to understand the group characteristics of student guardians, we distributed 500 questionnaires on this topic, of which 401 valid questionnaires were returned for different grades (senior high school first, second and third year classes and the repeating class).

## 3. *Description of the case study field*

Although student guardianship generally and for the *gaokao* in particular are a common phenomenon in China, it is precisely because it is so universal that case study selection poses difficulties. If the selection is random, it may well be influenced by irrelevant factors. Therefore, a study of the actions of student guardianship can more appropriately be carried out by selecting typical cases and conducting in-depth analysis. M Town is located in the northwestern part of A Province in China's central economic belt. It is a typical student guardianship community, made up of families from other places who are attending school there because of the presence of schools known as the Asian *Gaokao* Factory—a state-run M Senior High School and a private J Senior High School. The former owes its fame to its *gaokao* remedial center, which is located in J Senior High School. Students who fail the *gaokao* will sit for the next year's exam after a year of remedial study. M Senior High School, J Senior High School and the *Gaokao* Remedial Center have attracted a large number of students from other places because they have high university admission rates<sup>24</sup> following each year's *gaokao*. Because the schools adopt a teaching mode characterized by high intensity

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24 In 2018, according to the M Town Government Bulletin, the college admission rate of M Senior High School reached 95.7 percent; that of J Senior High School was 78 percent; and that of the *Gaokao* Remedial Center was 87.3 percent.

and long hours and emphasize improving one's score, students need to devote maximum time and energy to their high-intensity studies; hence the phenomenon of student guardians, who respond to this situation by looking after their student children so that they can dedicate themselves to learning.

M Town's student guardianship started around 2005. As the reputation of the key university admission rates obtained by M Senior High School's *gaokao* spread, transient students came from other places to repeat their previous studies and attend supplement classes, with their parents following as student guardians. Student guardianship peaked in 2015; by then, student guardians were numerous and the rental housing offered by local residents was in short supply, to the extent that there was no accommodation to rent. According to statistics for registered student accommodation at M and J Senior High Schools in September 2018, the number of students in M Town who had student guardians reached 14,701, accounting for 64.78 percent of the total. Among students in the last year of senior high school, the proportion of students with student guardians in M Senior High School reached 89.23 percent and in J Senior High School reached 80.3 percent of the total number of students. Student guardian parents renting accommodation accounted for 96.68 percent of the total number of students accompanied by guardians.

#### 4. Basic social characteristics of mothers as student guardians

According to the results of our sample survey, the demographic and social characteristics of student guardian mothers are as follows:

##### (1) Most student guardian mothers have rural household registration (*hukou*)

We ascertained through frequency statistics (N=401) that the proportion of student guardians who were female was 88.8 percent. Of the women, female parents with rural *hukou* accounted for about 71 percent of the total. In terms of position in the family, 67.85 percent were mothers. This shows that among the student guardian group accompanying their children's preparation for the *gaokao*, mothers with rural *hukou* are the main force. Of these mothers, 60.58 percent have two or more children, but 91.28 percent of them were accompanying a single child.

##### (2) Their annual family incomes are concentrated in the 10,000-50,000 RMB and 60,000-100,000 RMB range

According to the sampling statistics (N = 392), the highest proportion (37.1 percent) of student guardians had an annual family income in the 60,000-100,000 RMB range. Those of the sample with annual family incomes of 10,000-50,000 RMB accounted for 33.0 percent.

##### (3) Student guardian mothers' previous occupations had no labor market advantages and their pay was either low or zero

The sample survey (N = 392) indicates that student guardian parents are mainly engaged in low-income work. 38.1 percent of them have regular jobs with quite low incomes; another 24.5 percent have no regular jobs and quite low incomes. It is noteworthy that the proportion who have never worked is as high as 21.0 percent. Prior to



becoming student guardians, their top five occupations were self-employed (23 percent), agriculture (15.1 percent), manufacturing (14.1 percent), individual micro-businesses (12.0 percent) and services (5.2 percent). These occupations or work types have no labor market advantages.

(4) Student guardian mothers have a low level of education

The sample statistics (N=382) indicate that the student guardian mothers' educational level was concentrated in junior high school (42.52 percent), and primary school (32.65 percent); that is, their education tended to be confined to the nine years of compulsory education. The effective size of the screening sample "educational level higher than primary school" was 186, with parental attainment falling mainly into the upper middle (38.17 percent) and middle levels (41.94 percent).

Overall, student guardian parents and families belong to the lower strata of society; they mainly comprise student guardian mothers with rural *hukou*, and their educational level is not high. They are working class women who make a living through their own exertions. The phenomenon of student guardianship examination preparation shows that even though the absolute value of Chinese working class families' educational investment is not equal to that of middle class families, they make great efforts to support their children's academic success through the unique strategy of student guardianship.

### III. Student Guardian Mothers' Work in M Town

The household chores entailed in looking after children are the student guardians' main occupation. According to the survey responses, chores such as washing clothes, making beds, buying food and cooking for one's child take an average of about three hours a day. If the parents need to deliver meals, another one or two hours will be required.<sup>25</sup> Our on the spot observation and interviews indicate that student guardian work tends to be meticulous, intricate and time-consuming. This kind of student guardian work, which requires a lot of time, energy and human input, is mainly carried out by female parents.

#### 1. Mothers' daily work schedules

(1) 5:50 a.m.-6:10 a.m.: woken by their internal biological clock, they prepare a nutritious breakfast

Guardian parents have to get up before their children to get breakfast before six o'clock every morning. As the children have to be in class by 6:20, they have to be woken on or before six o'clock to have breakfast.

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25 Apart from the full-time student guardian parents, some guardian parents work concurrently with their guardianship. The large and small garment factories of M town are the main source of concurrent work. Of the 406 valid survey responses, 71 parents filled in the time they spent on concurrent jobs. About 34 percent of those who worked on concurrent jobs worked eight hours or more per day.



“At 5:30 in the morning, I start cooking breakfast—sometimes noodles or sometimes rice mixed with soup. It’s pretty fast, no trouble. I wake him up just before six to wash his face and brush his teeth. Once breakfast is finished he goes to class, where their class teacher will be checking on any late arrivals every morning. He has to go to class immediately he’s finished eating,, and he’s got to be there by 6:20.” (Parent F12)

Once a child embarks on stressful school studies, the parent temporarily suspend these morning tasks.

(2) 7:00-11:00: Laundry, cleaning, grocery shopping, lunch preparation

At seven in the morning, the parent will clean up and wash the dishes after eating her breakfast alone, and begin to wash clothes and buy vegetables. For those parents who rent space in a local resident’s block, any unnecessary washing of clothes will involve using well water to wash the clothes by hand. After washing the clothes, she will start for the vegetable market to buy vegetables; mostly this will be done before 9:00, as the market’s peak period is over by 9:30. Then she will have to go back to pick up the vegetables, wash them, and match them to what she’s cooking. Not until ten or half past ten will she begin to prepare lunch. Parents who live in run-down buildings and courtyard houses cook in the yard. Each family has a separate stove and gas tank; parents cook while chatting about what their children do or don’t like to eat.

(3) 11:20-12:00, 17:00-17:30: meal delivery

The parents waiting at the school around 11:20 throng round the East Gate of J Middle School and M Middle School. At 11:35, the children file out. Because parents can’t enter the school, children have to go to the school gate to find their parents and eat lunch. To save them time, the parent delivering the meal prepares it at home and carries it to the school. Some parents use an emulsion paint tin to hold the lunch box, so that the tin can be used as a seat while their child is eating.

At 16:00 o’clock, the parent will have to hurry back home to prepare dinner, so as to send her child another meal at 17:00. While waiting for their children, the parents chat about things like their children’s academic performance, *gaokao* policies, the difficulties of student guardian life, etc. This brief but regular exchange of information allows parents to obtain news about education for their children, enabling them to better support their children’s studies. The parents do not need to use words to express their hopes for their children; their love and educational expectations for their children are expressed through this kind of devoted care.

(4) 20:30-late at night: supper, advice, watching over the children’s homework

At about 8:30 p.m., parents come home from recreational activities and wait for their children to come home. They cannot go to bed immediately, because they have to wait until 10:30 p.m. for the children’s return from school (for the third year of senior high school and repeating students the time is 10:50 p.m.). Some parents, worried about their children’s safety, hurry to the school gate to bring them home. When the child does get home, the parent will

prepare a simple late night supper and make sure the child washes, so the parent won't go to bed until midnight.

"When I get home in the evening (after dancing), I do some washing and cleaning until about 9 or 10 o'clock, and then wait for my son to come home. Sometimes I have to make him a late night snack. Usually I can't go to bed until midnight." (Parent F22)

Some parents have to watch over their children's homework until 1 or 2 a.m.

"He does his homework and wants me to sit beside him and watch. I said, I don't understand your homework and I can't tutor you. What's the point of me watching? I'm dying for a sleep. My child says, 'I'll make you a cup of coffee.' Well, it's already after one o'clock in the morning, and basically, he'll be studying till one or two in the morning. Dear heaven! I'm not the one preparing for the college entrance exam. My son said, 'In those days, didn't you not take the college entrance exam? Then you know how I feel.' Right from the first few days I was so sleepy ..." (Parent F7)

Student guardian work mainly takes the form of housework, but unlike the vague aims of ordinary housework, student guardian work is explicitly aimed at education support (education participation). As one of the class teachers said, parents as student guardians support the school's high-intensity teaching; getting "more students into to college" is a joint endeavor.

"What (parents) mainly do is take care of the kids. Moreover, when some children aren't happy with how their school lives are going, they don't necessarily talk to the class teacher, but they do go home and talk to a parent or guardian. Parents as student guardians can give us feedback about what the children are learning, and that lets us know if they have any psychological changes so we can have a chat with them in good time... Anyway, all of us should try our best to create the right conditions for the children, and try to make sure they throw themselves into learning as much as possible in the time available. Over the course of the year, we all need to cooperate and get their marks up so they can get into university. It's true that not everyone can get into university, but we do our best to make sure more students can." (Teacher M-3-1)

Student guardian work itself is a service form of work with an educational involvement. Female parents "serve" their children's daily needs so as to allow them to maximize the energy and time they spend on high-intensity study. In this way, working class families cooperate with the schools' strict time management, high-intensity teaching and an education model focused on improved scores.

## *2. The values of student guardian work*

### *(1) Supporting children's studies by "looking after" them*

During interviews, parents often used such verbs as "taking care of" (Parents F1, F6, F7, F26, F34), "looking after" (Parent F16), "serving" (Parents F6, F23), and "attending to" (Parents F3, F18, F26) to express their work as student guardians. These words clearly

show the parents' attitude: their lives center on their children and their whole energy goes into being responsible for their children's daily lives. Working class mothers throw themselves into serving and looking after their children on a daily basis. In exchange for the children's expenditure of energy and time in arduous study for the exam, a mother offers her work as a student guardian in an attempt to prevent her child from repeating her own "tough life."

This is different from the image of the "strict mother," "tiger mother," "broker" and "familialism" of middle-class mothers. Research on motherhood among urban middle-class families indicates that middle-class mothers are fully responsible for their children's upbringing; they have a firm hold on their children's education and plan their development. However, our study found that working class mothers who throw themselves into being "gaokao student guardians" support their children in a low-profile service-oriented manner to allow them to devote themselves wholeheartedly to diligent study.

#### (2) The construction of motherhood in student guardianship

Student guardian work is an important way female parents construct their image as well qualified "student guardian mothers." In M town, a student guardian mother who spends too much time playing mahjong and other diversions instead of looking after her child is thought to be falling down on the job and will invite other people's criticism. For example, some parents censure the morals of neighbors who often play mahjong:

"That kind of thing means that they don't care about their children. Other student guardian mothers cook this or that for their children every day; they take good care of their children so they can be at ease while they're studying. But [in her case] the result is that she's enjoying herself going out to play mahjong every day; but sometimes her child will get home and find she's not back yet. The child comes back and mother's nowhere to be found. Isn't it a shame?" (Parent F6)

Mothers who measure up to guardianship standards can help their children make academic progress by providing them with a better learning environment through their attention to their children's daily needs. Although various entertainment items can make guardianship less meaningless, the mothers' construction of identity is founded on wholehearted devotion to their job. Student guardian mothers develop a parental image involving throwing everything into looking after their children, going along with what their children have in mind and keeping them company. This kind of parental image is the flip side of their work of service.

#### (3) "Logistical support" for school education production

Parents refer to their student guardian work as "waiting upon," "serving," "caring for," and "looking after." These verbs represent the basic attributes of their works as student guardians. At the same time, they see their labor status as "logistical."

"We are engaged in logistics. All she needs to do is do a good job of learning; we parents do the rest. While she's studying hard, we provide her with a good learning environment and a material foundation." (Parent F18)

Positioning oneself in terms of logistics implies that parents acknowledge their roles in the division of educational labor. They use “logistics” in two contexts: to express the fact that in the division of family labor, parents work on household chores to give their children a better living environment than they would have in school accommodation, i.e., to give them a “material basis”; and to express the institutional arrangements by which the parents serve the school’s education production, taking on the work of managing the students’ lives in order to fit in with the high-intensity teaching with which schools aim to improve students’ academic performance. For example, the parents refer to routine tasks other than study as “other things.” Guardian parents call all aspects of daily life that do not revolve around students and study “other things”; they do these things for their children to allow them to put all their time and energy into high-intensity study. The student guardian community formed around the school has become an extension of the institutionalization of the school’s educational production, in which parents participate as “logistical support.”

#### **IV. Student Guardianship: Serving Children or Serving Schools?**

The student guardian work of working class female parents is an important part of the educational division of labor. In the course of this work, guardian mothers maintain the tradition of respecting teachers and valuing education and at the same time, as participants in the lowest level of the educational division of labor, they submit to the authority of the school. The communities of student guardians who have grown up around the schools are not only involved in modern “child-centered” parenting; they also consciously flee from the “quality education” that suits the middle class and instead devote themselves to “exam-centered education.”

##### *1. Respecting teachers and valuing education in the division of educational labor*

Parents and teachers position themselves as helpers of students’ learning; the teachers foster students’ academic achievement through their teaching and administration, while the student guardians assume the task of looking after their children’s needs so the children have the time and energy to engage in time-consuming and arduous study. In the result-oriented alliance for educational production, the relationship between parents and teachers retains the traditional principle of respect for teachers. For example, parents have to obey the school’s strict control of timing; they are in awe of teachers’ professional status and do their best to help their children adapt to the pressures of school. This attitude of “respecting teachers and valuing education” is influenced are not only by traditional culture but also by the mothers’ social stratum and their lack of cultural capital, which determines that they can only “accompany” their children and “obey” the schools that symbolize cultural capital.

##### *(1) A compact for the unequal division of labor*

In M town, schools and families cooperate for the shared purpose of getting the students

into college (university, especially a key university). However, there is an invisible and silent compact between teachers and parents: the parents rely on the teachers, and teachers need the parents' support. Student guardian parents undertake the task of looking after their children's daily needs, while schools undertake the task of teaching in a way that will improve students' performance. But in this state of cooperation, power resides with the schools, which are not only authorities by virtue of their professionalism, but also provide a discipline that shapes parents' time and daily routines. In our interview with S6, a graduate of the repeating class of 2016, he told a story he'd heard while he was attending a class: "One particular thing that happened to another parent that my mother once told me was that a student was late for school. His teacher asked him why he was late, and he answered that the alarm didn't work. Then the teacher asked why his mother didn't wake him up. He said his mother liked dancing. To punish the student, his mother was told to come to the school, where we study, and dance in the yard, and they put on music for her." (Graduate S6)

The finale of the story is that the mother actually did dance in the school and submitted to the class teacher's punishment. Although this story is quite unusual, it reflects the fact that parents are in a subordinate position in the family-school relationship. Student guardian parents have to accept the school's rigorous time management to ensure that their children's study remains central.

## (2) Professional teachers and helpless parents

The parents are engaged in looking after their children's daily needs outside the school wall while the teachers ply their trade of improving students' academic performance within the school wall. For parents, the wall surrounding the school leaves them on the outside, but more than that, there is another wall dividing off educational and intellectual capital. Although mothers exit the labor market to look after their children and support their study, their support has no direct function in that study. This gives them a sense of inferiority; they become distressed about not being able to help their children learn, and pin their hopes on the teachers as helpers in the task of their children's learning. In the lead-up to the Mid-Autumn Festival and National Day, fathers come from elsewhere to see their wives and children, and during this time, husband and wife go to see the class teacher together. Because of the narrow distance between each desk, the parents will often be standing beside the desk, while the seated class teacher turns the child's report card up for the parents. The parents have a very respectful attitude towards the class teacher; the class teacher has the discourse power in their dialogue. The parents mostly ask questions and nod their heads. For example, in Grade 1 of Senior High School J, the parents of a student came to the office and saw the class teacher to inquire about their child's performance in school:

Student's mother (standing at the class teacher's office desk with the child's father): Is my child still talking in class?

Class teacher (sitting at his desk, opening the report card): He's OK right now. His results, now...they're down a bit lately. He got 75 in the last English test. He always

used to get over ninety. He did well enough in the Chinese exam, that's really not too bad...

Student's mother: Well, we can't help him at home. We're counting on you, sir, to show him what he should do at school.

Class teacher: Hmm. Anyway, let's get in touch again when we have some time? We'll see how things are going a bit later. What else? If there's nothing, let's leave it at that. OK?

Student's Mother: Hmm, hmm. OK.

The class teacher and the parents walk outside the office. The parents whisper to each other and thrust a red envelope at the class teacher.

Parents and teachers are unequal culturally and in terms of educational capital and educational information, and this leads to inequality in the attitudes of parents to teachers and teachers to parents. In front of the teachers, who are education professionals, parents have no educational authority. Student guardian mothers only undertake the task of looking after their children's daily needs, a task that does not involve professional teaching; their position in the work of education is low-end, marginal and non-professional.

## 2. Modern "child-centered" attitudes and traditional "cultivating dragons and phoenix"

Where the parent-child relationship is concerned, parents have both modern "child-centered" concepts and the traditional idea of "hoping their sons become dragons" [achieve greatness]. Influenced by the two concepts, parents not only attend to their children's material needs but also care about the "achievements" that will affect their future development. This view of bringing up children drives women to invest in child-rearing.

When women are confronted with a contradiction between working and looking after their children, they choose the latter as long as it does not affect the main source of family income. Therefore, after a struggle, female student guardians give up their work and careers to accompany their student children. The life of a student guardian has "no freedom, I'm tied down the whole day and can't go anywhere," but then they turn round and say they chose to be student guardians "for my child" (Parent F27), because they couldn't "rest easy" (Parents F3, F7, F18, F26) or because "It wouldn't do not to accompany my student child" (Parents F1, F6, F27). "I would like to keep on working. My boss is really good. On holidays, she gives us supermarket cards or fruit, and the wages are OK; if we do a good job, the pay can reach three or four thousand yuan a month. Losing that was a real pity, but there was no way round it, for my child's sake, I had no option! She needs to have someone do things for her. Her study schedule is very tight. She's going from morning to night, how can she find time to look after herself? She (the child) is not strong, and she was often sick from childhood on. If I wasn't with her, how could I rest easy?" (Parent F18)

The women encounter complexities and contradictions when they are faced with choosing a career or providing company for children who are facing the *gaokao*. In the end, however,

maternal identity is based on “for the sake of the child.”

We conducted word frequency analysis on the answers to two questions: 1) what made parents happiest and 2) what annoyed them most. For the first question, the frequency of “child” reached 241 (317 valid samples), followed by the related phrase “making progress” (including improved results or advancement). For the second question, the word frequency of “child” reached 205 (317 valid samples), followed by the related phrase, “marks going down.” Other annoying things were boredom, economic pressure and so on.

Word frequency cloud for happiest things	Word frequency cloud for most annoying things
children, grades, improve grades, performance enhancing, work hard, obedient children, sensible children; spend more time with kids, make friends	children, poor academic performance, poor marks, children are stressed, time pressure, boring life, economic pressure, poor communication, diet condition

The demand for well-educated skilled labor in modern industrial capitalist society means that children’s production value is useless. At the same time, children become the family’s “priceless” private treasure, and their emotional and consumption value for the family is magnified.<sup>26</sup> The traditional child-rearing view of “hoping their sons become dragons” includes the utility function of child-rearing. This view of children adds weight to the mother’s function of bringing up sons and daughters.

### 3. *Working class consciousness: not falling for the trick of “quality education”*

The construction of motherhood for student guardian mothers is different from the pursuit of quality education by middle-class female parents. Rather, they become assistants in exam-oriented education. This involves not only the background to China’s reform of basic education but also the choices made by different strata in the face of educational reform.

In the course of China’s reform of basic education, the reform of modern education, with its watchwords of “quality education” and “lessening the burden,” is founded on resistance to educational tradition and the pursuit of an idealized vision of modern education. Quality education has become a key concept in educational reform discourse since the 1990s.<sup>27</sup> However, given China’s highly competitive education model, the students produced by “quality education” still need to participate in the *gaokao* competition for results.

26 Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing for Priceless Children*.

27 Yan Guocai, *Introduction to Quality Education*, p. 13.



In the course of China's reform of basic education, with its discourse of "lessening the burden" and "quality education," schools have reduced the time students spend in school, but they have not reduced course content. Basic education offers a bridge to higher education—the *gaokao*, which is still the checkpoint for most students to progress to better quality higher education. In these circumstances, though urban middle-class parents do participate in the exam system, they rely on their families' economic, social and cultural capital to choose studying abroad or investing in "shadow education" to maintain the shining vision of "quality education," that is, academic success. Chinese families at the bottom of society, on the other hand, have fewer and fewer chances to make a choice. In the *gaokao* struggle for the survival of the fittest, families at the bottom of society have to rely on investing in exam-centered education to gain a chance of upward social mobility.

The College Entrance Examination Tutoring Center of J Senior High School is the main drawcard for students from other places. It recruits large numbers of repeating students every year, the ones whose *gaokao* marks were not good enough to get into university or who were accepted by an institution with a lower ranking. They enter the Tutoring Center and take part in the next *gaokao* after intensive cramming. In addition, graduating senior high school students from other places can improve their *gaokao* scores by participating in the intensive cramming of J Senior High School. For example, the two nieces for whom Parent F8 was student guardian had attended a key senior high school in the city. Despite this, however, their poor scores in the *gaokao* had made it difficult for them to enter a top university. Their mother therefore decided to have them study in M Town's J Senior High School, 200 kilometers from their hometown. According to the students themselves, their grades had indeed risen there. In their previous high school, on the other hand, they'd "learned nothing."

"I feel like I didn't learn anything in my first year of senior high school [at her previous key city high school]. In my first year of senior high there I just messed around nearly the whole day and learned nothing. The teacher didn't care if I was on my cell phone all day. There was just a mid-term exam and an end of term exam, they didn't even have monthly exams. This school gives exams every day and every week, and puts [the results] up and so on. Teachers here are better than the old ones. Anyway, I feel like my old teachers all used PPT for the lessons, but here the school has all the teachers use the blackboard, and I think this way is better. The key thing is that in my old school I used to fall asleep every day, as soon as I got into the class I'd fall asleep. Here, if we sleep in class, we have to stand for a day as punishment." (Student S1)

Working families rely on this kind of school education, with its strict management of student behavior and emphasis on high-intensity learning investment, to make up for the disadvantages the family suffers in terms of their child's academic achievement. Parent F22 of a science student in the third year of senior high school said: "It (the school) is very strict.

The children don't surf the Internet in Internet bars. The other students are all studying, so when he sees them studying, he studies too. He got great results in junior high school, and then passed the examination for No. 1 Senior High School. His results there were no good. The teachers didn't really supervise their studying; they were less responsible than the ones here. Children aren't self-aware. If you don't keep an eye on them, they'll just play with their cell phones." (Parent F22).

Since working class parents lack cultural, economic and social capital, they cannot participate in quality education through an "education broker" as middle-class parents do. They can, however, redress their disadvantage in access to higher education by investing in exam-centered education. This type of school is directed towards improving exam results, and adopts a time-consuming but efficient teaching model of doing a large number of practice exams and revision exercises. Working families rely on this educational model to achieve upward mobility through the *gaokao*. Therefore, they strip away from students' experience everything unrelated to learning, and have them devote an enormous amount of time and energy to the production of exam results. The community of student guardian parents, chiefly represented by mothers from working families, participate in the division of labor in the work of educational production through "service" in the form of the logistics underlying the educational production of the *gaokao*. In this division of labor, the family takes on responsibility for attending to their children's daily needs, with the female parent supporting her child's studies through physical labor.

## V. Student Guardian Mothers: Their Role in the Division of Labor

The distinctive feature of student guardianship is that working-class women give up productive labor and support their children's studies through the unproductive work of attending to their daily needs. Student guardian work involves not only family but also education work. On the one hand, in terms of labor content, student guardian work includes housework, child rearing, management of emotions and so on; on the other, in terms of the purpose of their work, they serve education, especially education aimed at improving performance in the *gaokao*. This is the result of the joint action of the family division of labor and the educational division of labor.

### 1. *The familial division of labor: men go out to work, women mind the home*

Student guardian labor reflects the division of labor in the family. Mothers take on the main responsibility for guardianship, while "absent" fathers have the main responsibility for family income. Frequently, one member of a student guardian family will leave home to earn money elsewhere while the other rents a separate dwelling near the school to take care of their child, forming a semi-separate family structure. Student guardian parents see their child's study as far more important than other family matters. Our survey question on the importance of family affairs for student guardian parents included five options: A. increasing family income:

B. managing the husband-wife relationship; C. child making progress in school, D. caring for the elderly, E. caring for the sick and disabled. The options' average compound scores= $(\Sigma \text{ frequency} * \text{ weight}) / \text{ number filling in the question}$ , are A = 2.99, B = 2.73, C = 4.49, D = 2.84, E = 1.59. The results show that "C. child making progress in school" is considered the most important family affair, scoring far higher than the other choices, followed by "A. increasing family income," "D. caring for the elderly," "B. managing the husband-wife relationship, and "E. caring for the sick and disabled." Thus, for the parents, their child's studies are considered to be the key item, transcending other routine family matters. The relationship between husband and wife yields to the parent-child relationship; their child's studies are a matter of deep concern.

In terms of family economics, the division of labor in each family is a rational strategic choice based on consideration of income and cost. The family division of labor has two main aspects: market activities, including investment, employment, production and operation; and non-market activities, including housework, leisure activities, parenting activities and so on. Both require time, manpower and material resources.<sup>28</sup> When families carry out the division of labor, they often rely on the principle of maximizing benefits and minimizing risks. The disadvantages female student guardian parents face in the labor market make them more likely to become the mainstay of non-productive labor in the family division of labor.<sup>29</sup> Women are forced to withdraw from the labor market to undertake the unpaid work of looking after their children's daily needs. As low-profile service providers who lack authority, they serve their children and submit to the arrangements of the school education system so as to raise their children's competitiveness in the *gaokao*.

## 2. *The internal division of labor in the education industry: assistants in the education factory*

In modern society, schools, as bodies with the status of legal persons, to some extent mean that the family's personal social capital is no longer the only avenue allowing their children to raise their social status; families entrust their children's education to the school and correspondingly, school education gives them qualifications that enable them to enter the knowledge-based labor market. In traditional society, familial inheritance centered on property and an economic legacy. However, in modern society, the educational production mode is particularly important. Educational capital plays an important role in the acquisition of social status for individuals and families, and school education in particular serves as an important channel for obtaining credential-led educational capital. Parents need to evaluate their education strategy through the cumulative academic capital acquired by their child at school; that is, family investment in education must take into account the educational

28 Qian Wenrong *et al.*, *The Chinese Rural Family under the Impact of Population Migration*, p. 17.

29 Guo Yanli, "Theory of Comparative Advantage and Division of Labor within the Family," pp. 79-81; I. Garcia, José Alberto Molina and V.M. Montuenga, *Intra-household Time Allocation: Gender Differences in Caring for Children*.

benefits given by the school.<sup>30</sup> Because the exchange of social resources is now reliant on organizational rather than individual strength, the family's dependence on the school has increased.<sup>31</sup> The school's teachers have mastered a classroom teaching technique that lifts the students' marks. However, the families cannot thereby lessen the burden of education. On the contrary, both middle-class and working-class families have to assume the burden of working with the school in their own way.

The involvement of working families in their children's school education is manifest in the fact that they undertake everyday tasks that have nothing to do with learning or are even thought to hinder learning. In M Town's whole school education model, with its longstanding focus on examinations and the acquisition of knowledge, the teachers' task is to use their professional skills to teach classes. They keep up the "blackboard" technique, rigorously manage student behavior and give priority to traditional teaching methods. Their teaching upholds their authority and they control the rhythm of student learning. The students' task is to spend enormous amounts of time and energy on the heavy burden of schoolwork, doing review exercises and practice exams, so as to improve their academic performance. The parents, then, help the students learn by cooking them food and providing emotional support so that they don't have to waste time on daily needs. Thus a family-school alliance for educational production centered on the *gaokao* takes shape.

To improve their *gaokao* college admission rate, the schools concentrate their resources on teaching, objectively shifting on to the family's shoulders the function or work of looking after the student and carrying out the tasks that are unrelated to teaching. Student guardian families become school assistants, or as the parents say, "logistical support." By taking care of the students' daily needs, the parents can minimize their routine chores, allowing them to devote maximum time and energy to their studies and thereby improve their results.

### 3. Conclusion: the logic of capital and labor

Student guardian parents have clear ideas about gender and class. They belong to the lower strata of society, and most of them are rural women, lacking cultural and social capital. When the capital-dominated labor market colludes with educational competition, a highly competitive form of education encroaches on almost all sectors of society. Parents of different sexes and classes have different coping strategies. Mothers in upper middle-class families have many alternatives (spending money on choice of school, hiring private teachers, having extra tutoring, sending their children to study abroad), but ordinary working families can only invest in educational competition at the cost of increasing the time and intensity of the mothers' unpaid work. Mothers move to the neighborhood of the school, wholeheartedly cooperate with and obey the school's educational production, with its emphasis on improving students' marks, and support their children as they plunge into the hard, lonely and

30 François de Singly, *Contemporary Family Sociology*, pp. 18-25; Fan Yunxia, "Educational Capital: Definition, Model and Operational Analysis," pp. 51-57.

31 James S. Coleman, *The Foundation of Social Theory* (Part 1), p. 386.

monotonous work of *gaokao* competition. The involvement of working families in education is precisely through the participation of female parents in the division of labor in education production, as they become “logistical support” “serving” the children’s daily needs and the high-intensity teaching of the schools in order to support their children’s studies and achieve the goal of having them “get into university.”

Faced with social inequality, modern risks and the huge edifice of knowledge power, working families are not satisfied with the status quo. Through their mothers’ student guardianship, children devote themselves to a unique form of high-intensity schooling to seek the chance of social mobility through education. To date, we can see that the resistance of working families to the fate of class reproduction is in fact a deeper involvement in education production. The educational model of maternal student guardianship enables working families to cooperate with the school’s production of results and engage in this unpaid educational labor as service providers.

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