

May 2019

Challenges and Opportunities in Parent-Teacher Relationships in Contemporary China

Yan Guo

University of Calgary, yanguo@ucalgary.ca

Xueqin Wu

University of Calgary

Xiaoli Liu

University of Calgary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci>

Recommended Citation

Guo, Yan; Wu, Xueqin; and Liu, Xiaoli (2019) "Challenges and Opportunities in Parent-Teacher Relationships in Contemporary China," *Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol47/iss2/5>

This Research paper/Rapport de recherche is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact wlsadmin@uwo.ca.

**Challenges and Opportunities in Parent-Teacher Relationships
In Contemporary China**
Défis et possibilités dans les relations parent-enseignant en Chine contemporaine

Yan Guo, University of Calgary
Xueqin Wu, University of Calgary
Xiaoli Liu, University of Calgary

Abstract

This study explores how market economy affects parent-teacher relationships in China. Guided by Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory, we interviewed 21 teachers and 20 parents in China. The study reveals that the market economy has impacted changes in parent-teacher relationships in several aspects. First, modern technology such as the Internet and WeChat has facilitated communication between parents and teachers with fast pace and convenience. Moreover, the study makes an original contribution to the field by challenging stereotyping assumptions towards Chinese parents who are either completely not involved or partially involved in their child's education at home. The study shows that contemporary Chinese parents are actively involved in their children's education both at home and at school. Furthermore, the market economy has shaken the high social status that teachers enjoyed in the past. As a result, parents prefer to adopt pragmatic approaches to parent-teacher relationships. Finally, the urban, middle-class parents whose social capital, alongside cultural, symbolic, and economic capital enable them to mobilize their social networks in interacting with the school. They appear to be more likely than previous generations of Chinese parents to challenge teachers' authority, and there have been more serious conflicts between parents and teachers. The study focuses on China, but these rare insights highlight current and emerging dangers to parent-teacher engagement with relevance to many other countries.

Résumé

Cette étude explore la façon dont l'économie de marché affecte les relations parent-enseignant en Chine. Nous inspirant de la théorie du capital social de Bourdieu (1986), nous avons interrogé 21 enseignants et 20 parents en Chine. L'étude révèle que l'économie de marché a occasionné des changements dans les relations parent-enseignant par rapport à plusieurs aspects. Tout d'abord, les technologies modernes telles que Internet et WeChat ont rendu plus facile la communication entre parents et enseignants du fait de leur rapidité et de leur dimension pratique. De plus, l'étude apporte une contribution originale au domaine en remettant en question les suppositions stéréotypées selon lesquelles les parents chinois ne sont pas du tout impliqués ou seulement partiellement impliqués dans l'éducation de leur enfant à la maison. L'étude montre que les parents chinois contemporains s'impliquent activement dans l'éducation de leurs enfants, que ce soit à la maison ou à l'école. En outre, l'économie de marché a remis en question le statut social élevé dont les enseignants jouissaient dans le passé. En conséquence, les parents préfèrent adopter des approches pragmatiques vis-à-vis de leurs relations avec les enseignants. Enfin, les parents de milieux urbains, membres de la classe moyenne, dont le capital social, de pair avec le capital culturel, symbolique et économique leur permet de mobiliser leurs réseaux sociaux en interagissant avec l'école, semblent plus enclins que les générations précédentes de parents chinois à remettre en question l'autorité des enseignants, d'où davantage de conflits graves entre parents et enseignants. L'étude vise la Chine, mais ces quelques témoignages soulignent les dangers actuels et émergents des interactions parent-enseignant et s'appliquent à de nombreux autres pays.

Keywords: parent-teacher relationships, China, market economy, parental involvement, school-based involvement, home-based involvement

Mots clés: relations parent-enseignant, Chine, économie de marché, implication des parents, implication du milieu scolaire, implication à la maison

Introduction

The “open door” policy since 1978 has gradually shifted China from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy. Over the past four decades, China has experienced an economic miracle, and a massive, protracted, and unexpected economic upsurge. In 2010, its economy became the second largest in the world after the United States in terms of gross domestic product. Under China’s market economy, education is also undergoing processes of marketization and privatization in terms of orientation, provision, curriculum, and financing (Chan & Mok, 2001). Chan and Mok identify four features of education under China’s market economy: the rise of private or non-government schools, funding from non-state sectors, increasing number of self-paying students, and market-driven curricula. In this process, efficiency, effectiveness, and economy take priority over fairness, justice, and equality.

The marketization and privatization in education have brought significant changes to parent-teacher relationships in China. Since the time of Confucius, teachers have enjoyed honoured standing in China, except during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). However, under China’s market economy, teaching has become a commodity that can be traded in the market (S. Guo, 2016). In some schools, particularly private and *minban* schools run by entrepreneurs and community associations (Ding, 2011), the relations between teachers and parents have become like those between business and clients (Y. Guo, 2016). This study explores the changes in parent-teacher relationships under China’s market economy from both parents’ and teachers’ perspectives. The study makes an original contribution to the field by challenging stereotyping assumptions towards Chinese parents who are not involved or only involved in their children’s education at home (Gu, 2008; Lau, Li, & Rao, 2011). The study shows that modern Chinese parents are actively involved in their children’s education not only at home but also at school. It highlights some of the creative ways technology in China is being used to enable meaningful communication and learning between parents and teachers. At the same time, it shows how China’s market economy is widening gaps between families, especially those able to pay for tuition of their children and those unable to afford it. These rare insights highlight current and emerging dangers to parent-teacher engagement with relevance beyond China.

We begin by discussing Bourdieu’s (1986) social capital theory and reviewing the literature on parent-teacher relationships in China. Second, we note the method of data collection and analysis. The third section presents findings and analysis of this particular study. Four major themes are highlighted with excerpts from the interviews in relation to the impact of the market economy on parent-teacher relationships. The fourth section concludes with a brief summary and recommendations.

Theoretical Framework and Prior Research

This research is informed by Bourdieu’s (1986) capital theory. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes capital into three forms: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital includes resources that are directly convertible into monetary value and can be owned such as stocks and properties.

Cultural capital incorporates knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person has from the family heritage. Bourdieu contends that cultural capital can be unconsciously acquired and passively inherited from family over time through socialization of culture and tradition. This explains the unequal academic achievement of children from different social classes. Moreover, people can build their cultural capital by engaging in activities that generate knowledge, skills, and educational qualifications. Academic qualification as a special form of cultural capital certifies an individual with “cultural competence” and gives them “a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). In addition, institutional recognition in the form of academic credentials “makes it possible to establish conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital by guaranteeing the monetary value of a given academic capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248).

Social capital consists of social connections or networks and the benefits that individuals reap from such relationships. It is the sum of all actual and virtual resources that an individual accumulates through associations or networks based on mutual acquaintance and recognition. The relationship between a group and its group members is reciprocal in that group members contribute to the formation and development of the group with their economic, cultural, and social capital, and in return, they are entitled to credit the collectively-owned capital of the group for their own benefits. The amount of social capital an individual possesses depends on the size of connections that they have access to and the capital that their connections possess. Bourdieu further points out that a social connection or network is not a natural given. Rather, it is “the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term” (1986, p. 249). In the context of school education, a typical network would be a class made up of teachers, students, and their parents. It is formed based on the common interest of promoting students’ intellectual and personal growth. Generally speaking, the more immersed a member is in the group, the more social capital they can potentially build.

According to Bourdieu, all forms of capital are transformable, with economic capital at the root of all the other types of capital. Take education for example. In a family, parents invest economic, cultural, and social capital for their child to acquire knowledge and skills which boost the child’s cultural capital. The increased cultural capital then enables the child to get a well-paid job which brings immediate economical return in terms of a high salary. Meanwhile, by displaying the cultural capital, the child is more likely to gain acceptance and status in society and acquire social capital. In return, the social network can bring more opportunities which allow the person to obtain more economic capital which can be re-invested in cultural capital.

It is well documented that, in the past, teaching as a profession was held in high esteem in China. Historically teachers were listed among the five categories of those most respected by society: the God of Heaven, the God of the Earth, the emperor, parents, and teachers (天、地、君、亲、师) (Zhou, 1988). As an educator and teacher, Confucius (孔子, 551–479 B.C.E) was himself venerated as a sage by generations of Chinese people. A Chinese proverb illustrated, “Once a teacher, you are a father figure for a whole lifetime” (一日为师, 终身为父). Chinese parents viewed teachers as professional authority and believed that it was teachers’ responsibility to educate their children. As a result, “most Chinese parents are either completely not involved in their child’s education or particularly involved at home settings” (Gu, 2008, p. 576).

Previous studies showed that there were two most prominent models of Chinese parent involvement: “no involvement” and “home-based involvement” (Gu, 2006, 2008, Gu & Yawkey, 2010). The “no involvement” model referred to that parents were not involved in their child’s

education. Parents believed that education is the function of schools and teachers. Parents were only responsible for providing living necessities such as providing food and clothes to their child. The "home-based involvement" model referred to that parents were mainly involved in their child's education at the home settings, such as reading before bedtime and helping with homework. Chinese teachers did not encourage parents to participate in school settings, but preferred home-based involvement. In Lau, Li, and Rao's (2011) study of the parent involvement model of 431 parents of kindergarten students in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, they found that Chinese parents practised more home-based than school-based involvement.

Probing further, Gu (2008) found several reasons why Chinese parents refrained from involvement at school. First, teachers were highly respected in Confucian tradition. Parents viewed teachers as experts of education. To parents, it was not necessary to get involved at school. Second, the education system in China was highly centralized and structured. It provided little space for parent involvement. Third, there was a long history of separation between family and school in China. Chinese parents lacked knowledge of school operation and were unaware of the importance of active parent involvement. Fourth, many Chinese parents tried to avoid any conflict with teachers. When disagreements or concerns with school or teachers arose, they would rather find alternative resources to compensate for it, than discussing the concerns with teachers directly (Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2004). Fifth, the test-orientated education system evaluated students only through academic scores. Many Chinese parents believed that their children's future would be guaranteed since they could get high scores in academic studies.

Gu (2008) also stated why contemporary Chinese parents valued their children's education more than before for two reasons. The first reason was that traditional Chinese culture valued interdependent relationships between parents and children. The traditional culture believed that parents should provide abundant educational resource and enhancement. When they were getting old, they would be better taken care of by their children. The one-child policy (which has been changed to two children policy in 2016) since 1979 served as the second reason. The one child represented the only hope and dreams of the family. Chinese parents were willing to do anything they could in order to provide the best education for their only child (Ming & Abbott, 1992).

Moreover, Chinese parents believed that academic success would determine their children's future. Therefore, they focused more on academic development, especially scores. They were more inclined to engage in homework support, which was directly related to schoolwork and school grades, but less in intellectual improvement if it was considered as conflicts with the academic performance by affecting the tests scores (Kim & Fong, 2012).

When facing the home-based parent involvement model, Chinese teachers appeared to be paradoxical. On the one hand, they recognized the benefits of active parent-teacher communication and suggested more parent involvement to children's educational activities. On the other hand, Chinese teachers took a historical dominate role in the decision-making process of educational activities, as well as in the communication process. Moreover, they were unwilling to lose control (Quan & Dolmage, 2006). They considered themselves as the experts in education and did not welcome parent involvement at school. Some of them only communicated with parents when there were learning and behaviour concerns of students (Xie & Postiglione, 2015). However, younger teachers with higher education degrees were more willing to engage parents in both school- and home-based activities (Gu & Yawkey, 2010).

Chi and Rao (2003) interviewed 13 rural families in China. Their research found that rural parents did not communicate with teachers or schools at all. They focused on instrumental purposes of education, such as to get a secure job or increase the family living standard. They

believed the importance of effort in children's academic performance and recognized the limitation of innate ability and environment. Wang (2008) found a different phenomenon in urban China. Urban parents took steps to communicate with teachers in hopes that teachers could help their children more in learning. They often visited teachers in private and gave them gifts. Xie and Postiglione's finding (2016) suggested that rural parents had few opportunities to get involved in school activities. Therefore, only parents with advantaged SES background, such as cadres, professionals, and economic elites could employ *guanxi* (social networks) in the communication between schools and families.

Gu (2008) reviewed research on the changes in parent involvement in China's public schools, and found that many public schools in China provided more opportunities and options for parents to get involved, such as "curriculum design, athletic games, picnics, school events, classroom clean-up, fundraising and field trips" (p. 571). Also, new technologies were applied to develop and improve teacher-parent relationships. For example, teachers used telephone calls, emails, and newsletters to communicate with parents (Chinese Education Resource Support, 2007).

The extant literature highlights that Chinese parents are not involved or only involved in their children's education at home (Gu, 2008; Lau, Li, & Rao, 2011). As mentioned above, under China's market economy, education is undergoing processes of marketization and privatization. In light of this, it is important to ask: how do the marketization and privatization impact parent-teacher relationships in contemporary China? How does the decline of teachers' social status (Y. Guo, 2016) influence parents' attitudes towards teachers? There is little empirical research conducted in China that investigates how the market economy influences parent-teacher relationships. This research intends to address this gap by answering the following questions: How do parents communicate with teachers in contemporary China? How does market economy impact parent-teacher relationships in China?

Method

Data for the study were collected from individual interviews with 21 teachers and 20 parents in China. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted from thirty to one hundred minutes. The interviews were translated from Chinese to English by two researchers and was verified by the lead author who is an experienced bilingual researcher.

Participants

We purposefully selected Guangdong because economically it was one of the most developed provinces. It was here that Deng Xiaoping started the experiment of the market economy in the 1980s. Jiangxi was a relatively small province in terms of both population size and geographic area, but had a strong economy. Shandong was selected because it also had a strong economy. Our study explores how the parent-teacher relationships in China have been impacted by the market economy, involving the perspectives of both parties. We believe these places and approximate equal number of teachers and parents are well selected and the data collected provide a glimpse of changes of parent-teacher relationships under China's market economy.

The teacher participants were from Weihai, Jinan, and Zhaoyuan of Shandong province, Xinyu of Jiangxi province, Shunde and Zhuhai of Guangdong province, Tianjin, and Shanghai. Initially, several participants were recruited via the researchers' personal contacts. The rest were recruited through snowball sampling (Patton, 2015). The parent participants were from Weihai, Qingdao, and Zhaoyuan of Shandong province, Xinyu of Jiangxi province, Shunde of Guangdong

province, Beijing, and Shanghai. All of the parent participants were recruited through personal contacts.

Of the teacher participants, three were male and 18 were female. All of them held teaching certificates and worked full-time. One of them was a government administrator in charge of education policy research and management; one was the vice principal in a key senior high public school; and the rest worked as teachers at primary, junior high, and senior high schools. All the teacher participants completed post-secondary education. Fourteen of these teachers had bachelor's degrees, four had master's degrees and three had college diplomas. Their teaching experience varied from 6 to 32 years. Eighteen of them worked at urban schools and three at suburb schools. In addition, 11 participants had the experience of being a head teacher (班主任). Their monthly salary ranged from RMB4,000 (about USD600) to RMB10,000 (about USD1,500) (see Table 1).

As for the parent participants, three were male and 17 were female. Nineteen of them worked full-time and one was housewife. The parent participants were well educated. Eight of these parents had bachelor's degrees, five had master's degrees, four had college diplomas, two had high school diplomas, and one had a PhD degree. Their children came from primary to senior high schools. Two were at rural schools and 18 were at urban schools. Five parents sent their child to private schools. The parent participants reported about the similar range of monthly salary as the teacher participants, except one mother, who had her own business, earned millions annually (see Table 2).

Findings and Analysis

Four significant themes emerged in the analysis of interviews: Daily communication between teachers and parents via WeChat (微信), parent involvement both at home and at school, pragmatic approaches to parent-teacher relationships, and challenges of parent-teacher relationships. These themes were analyzed with excerpts from the interviews in relation to the impact of the market economy on parent-teacher relationships.

Daily Communication Between Teachers and Parents Via WeChat

One of the benefits that teacher and parent participants reported is using the new technology for daily communication. The advancement of technology in the Internet, Wi-Fi, and smart phones has significantly changed the way of communication between teachers and parents in China. In the past, teachers and parents communicated mainly by phone, agenda books, or face-to-face meetings. Sometimes, teachers visited students' home to learn more about the students' family situation and their activities at home. In this way, teachers tended to steer the communication between home and school, and parents became passive participants.

In recent years, teachers and parents have turned to instant chatting such as QQ (similar to Skype) as well as School Texting Platform (家校信息平台) to communicate with each other. School Texting Platform only allows a unidirectional communication from teachers to parents. Most teachers used QQ to send daily homework to parents. Parents restrained themselves from responding to teachers. Even though QQ allows a two-way communication, but in practice parents seemed to be passive receivers of information. In 2011 WeChat (China Daily, 2015), a mobile app, was invented by a Chinese company in China. Due to the feature of WeChat that requires identification of communicators, WeChat gradually replaced QQ and School Texting Platform to become the most popular, informal means for parent-teacher communication in China.

With both voice and instant messaging functions, WeChat has facilitated communication between teachers and parents with fast pace and convenience. Usually a head teacher (班主任) creates a chat group and invites all the subject teachers and parents whose students are in the same class to join the group. In this way, both teachers and parents can send and reply to messages instantly. One parent explained how WeChat enabled parents and teachers to communicate on a daily basis and keep parents updated on their child's activities at school:

We have a WeChat group... The teachers communicate with us every day. In the WeChat group, they upload videos of lessons or pictures. If it is about an individual student, the teacher will chat one-on-one with the parent. If I have any questions, I can also contact the teacher via WeChat anywhere anytime. (P3, Shunde, Elementary)

In addition to fast pace and convenience, this example illustrates multimodality of communication between parents and teachers via WeChat. They can send voice or written messages, share information from the Internet, and attach photos and videos instantly. Group chat is convenient for teachers to send students' daily homework notification, bad weather alerts, emergency or school event notices. It also allows teachers and parents to share resources. Teachers use this channel to address topics of interest to parents, such as "how to communicate with your children?" "What do you do with your teenagers' rebellion?" Group chat also enables parents who were reluctant to attend parent-teacher conferences due to their low level of education in the past to participate in their communication with teachers. Besides, parents and teachers can also initiate a one-on-one private chat. This is very useful when the teacher wants to discuss with a parent about his/her child's performance, or vice versa. Particularly, the teacher uses the private chat to discuss some students' misbehaviours or other concerns.

WeChat also enhances the communication among parents. In the past, parents met each other only at the parents' meeting which was held once or twice every semester. Even when they were at the parents' meeting, many of them did not have the opportunity to talk to each other because most of the time, they listened to teachers who reported the students' performance in different subjects. However, with chat group function of WeChat, the parents communicate more frequently and collaborate more efficiently, as is shown below:

For example, a teacher asked children to bring some brooms to school. When a parent read the message on WeChat, she happened to be in a grocery store, so she bought the brooms for all the children in the class...We have a parent who volunteered as the accountant for the class and managed the class expenses, so the accountant just transferred the money to the parent who bought the brooms through WeChat from the class expenses collected from the parents...The chat groups are very convenient for communication among parents. We even added parents' phone numbers after their names and then the communication became easier. (T20, Weihai, Junior high)

WeChat enables communicators to transfer money instantly. One parent bought all the brooms for the children. In this way, she saved other parents time and made it easier for the teacher. WeChat allows parents and teachers to build a mass network.

The WeChat groups can be understood as a form of social capital. The more active a parent is in communicating with the teachers and other parents, the more information they would get and the better relationships they would build with the teachers. This adds to the parents' social capital in relation to the education of their child, which would then contribute to the child's cultural capital.

Yet new technology also has a negative side. One challenge concerns the backlash on parent-teacher relationships. For example, some parents expressed concerns that some teachers used WeChat groups to sell products for their relatives and parents felt pressured to purchase these

products in order to please the teachers. This seems to threaten parent-teacher relationships. Another challenge is that not all of the parents have access to these chat tools or are free to check, respond to, and share information online all the time. Parents in rural areas may not have access to WeChat or may not know how to use them. Also, when parents work in cities and leave their children to the care of the grandparents in villages, the grandparents usually do not use the online chat tools. This result is consistent with the findings of Mu and Hu (2016), who found that left-behind children were left to the care of grandparents, some of whom were illiterate and did not know how to use WeChat to communicate. A further challenge is that parents (such as factory workers) whose work conditions do not allow access to online chat app during work, as we can see below:

Parents who work in factories can't use online communication. Only those in administrative institutions who have time and access to the Internet would often use online communication. (T18, Zhaoyuan, Senior high)

Therefore, while we acknowledge the positive role that modern technology has played in facilitating parent-teacher communication, it is also important to note the inequality in social capital it has widened among different groups of parents. Parents whose family and work conditions allow them to take advantage of the online chat tools would build more social and cultural capital for their child, whereas those in rural areas or working in labour-intensive industries would be further alienated and marginalized. This result is consistent with the findings of Papapolydorou (2015), who found inequalities among middle- and working-class parents. She suggested that middle-class parents whose social capital, alongside cultural, symbolic, and economic capital enabled them to mobilize their social networks in interacting with the school (Bourdieu, 1986).

Parent Involvement Both at Home and at School

Beyond daily communication with teachers, parents also helped teachers organize all kinds of activities outside class, which brought closer connections between school and family education:

For example, it is now around the Moon Festival, so some parents took the children to a special place to learn how to make mooncakes. Last term, one of the parents worked at the fire station, then he arranged a tour for the whole class to the fire station to learn about firefighting knowledge. If a parent worked in the health department, she then organized activities for the children to learn first-aid. All these activities were recorded by the head teacher and posted on the school website. They helped to reduce the teachers' workload. They would also help to promote the recognition of the teacher's performance. (P5, Shunde, elementary school)

Some parents were able to share their knowledge and talents at school. For example, a parent who is an expert on robot, brought a dancing robot to perform for the children in the classroom. The children were delighted to dance with the robot. The parent also taught the children basic coding system about how the robot operates. This activity inspired some children to explore their potentials of becoming creators of robots in the future. At the same time, this finding should be treated with caution because this parent is a highly educated, middle-class parent who can afford to get away from work during the day. In contrast to the findings of Gu (2008) and Lau, Li, and Rao (2011), who found that Chinese parents were more likely to engage in learning-related activities at home rather than at school, parents in this study were also actively engaged in their children's education at school.

Although Chinese teachers did not encourage parents to participate in decision-making about school governance (Gu & Yawkey, 2010), parents in this study attempted to influence the appointment of teachers. Parents had a discussion among themselves in WeChat groups and then put forward a collective request:

For example, some parents heard from other parents in another grade about the bad reputation of a new life teacher, such as her rude behaviour towards students. Another case would be when a physical education teacher treated our children inappropriately. We made requests to the head teacher to replace the teacher or ensure the teacher would rectify his/her behaviours. (P6, Shunde, elementary school)

From the schools' side, there had been encouragements on parents' involvement in different ways. For example, some schools had parent committees at the school level whose responsibilities included assisting in the arrangement of school events such as sports meet, lunch supervision, and participating in school management including changing school timetables. In comparison with public schools, private schools took a more proactive approach towards parents' involvement. A parent in Shanghai described how well she was kept informed of her son's performance at school and how it helped her to be more effectively involved in her son's education:

In public schools, teachers focus on children's academic achievements but do not care about their personal growth and emotions. Teachers in private schools are different. Now in Grade 1, the teacher would tell every parent the changes his/her child had at school, what they did at school. Sometimes the teacher would tell us your kid had emotional changes at school, so maybe the mom needed to spend more time with the child in that evening. Or if they had a Chinese martial arts class and the kids were happy, the teacher would upload pictures for us to see. (P7, Shanghai, Elementary)

Meanwhile, it should be noted that these changes in parents' involvement took place mainly at urban schools and among families that possessed sufficient economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Shunde and Shanghai were the most developed areas in China, and the parent participants quoted above all had at least a bachelor's degree. They not only cared more about their child's education, but also financially and culturally invested more in it. They were willing to spend a lot of money to send their children to a private school. Besides, field trips to a fire station or a health department were only possible when the class had parents who either worked or had a connection in these departments. In these cases, parents mobilized their networks to support their child's education and build positive relationships with teachers. This finding supports Papapolydorou's (2015) argument:

parental social capital, in relation to Bourdieu's framework, was seen as comprising the social networks possessed by parents and the participation and/or membership of parents in associations that might benefit their children's education, for example their educational achievements and opportunities (p. 85).

In comparison, parents in rural areas or having relatively low education and poor financial conditions tended to have no or little involvement in the child's education both at school and at home. A teacher participant who worked at a rural school in Zhuhai compared the parents in urban schools and those in her school as below:

Parents in urban areas appear to be educated, well-mannered, and they have free time. Generally speaking, they do not need to work on weekends and during public holidays, or some families have good financial conditions so that the mothers do not need to work. They would volunteer at school such as telling stories, helping with classroom decorations or class performances. However, parents

in the suburban do not seem to have those qualities mentioned above. They are vendors in the market, factory workers, or doing small businesses. Their education is not high, and they spend a lot of time earning a living. They do not know how to treat their children, either spoiling them or scolding or using corporal punishment. (T9, Zhuhai, elementary)

In China, students have homework every day. Parents who have low level education face the challenge of supporting their children in both academic subjects and personal growth. For example, an English teacher participant said that parents who did not know English could only help to make sure that the child listened to or read the assigned English text at home, but they did not know if the child's pronunciation was correct or if the child understood the meaning of the text correctly.

Some rural parents migrated to cities for employment and their children were left behind under the care of their grandparents, who might be illiterate. They agreed that their grandparents could not provide homework supervision or enough emotional support to their children. Similarly, in Mu and Hu's (2016) study, they found the grandparents of left-behind children were diffident about their homework supervision capacity due to the low-level education. Rural parents in this study also agreed that their communication with teachers was limited. Their children were at particular risk of emotional and academic difficulties. A teacher confirmed such views:

Generally speaking, their marks are lower than other students, and there are differences in personality as well. Some left-behind children would become introverted, feeling a lack of parents' love. They would feel a sense of loss when they see other students' parents picking them up at school. They tend to have poor study habit and submit their homework late because of lack of supervision. Some do not even hand in homework. (T10, Xinyu, elementary)

This study confirms earlier research about differences in parental involvement between urban and rural settings in China (Chi & Rao, 2003; Wang, 2008). This study shows a widening gap between the amount of time, efforts, and the patterns that parents get involved in their children's education between urban and rural areas (Y. Guo, 2016). Parents in the rural areas remain largely non-involved. For those who have to leave the child to the care of the grandparents, they are not only non-involved in the child's study, but also the emotional growth of the child. This is consistent with the findings of a previous study (Mu & Hu, 2016). On the contrary, parents in the urban areas, especially those who have better financial resources and more free time, are able to take advantage of the diverse opportunities prompted by the market economy such as private schools and private tutoring to help their children accumulate social and cultural capital. They are more involved in their children's education both at home and at school.

Pragmatic Approaches to Parent-Teacher Relationships

Despite the frequent communication and parent involvement at school, teacher participants felt that parents in this study adopted pragmatic approaches to parent-teacher relationships in hopes that teachers could help their children more in learning. China has a long history of valuing education and respecting teachers. Having a good education has long been regarded as an important stepping stone to a successful career and a better life in China. As a matter of fact, this is still the predominant view among Chinese parents nowadays. However, the market economy has brought significant changes to parent-teacher relationships. Some people were able to take advantage of the opportunities in the market economy and became rich quickly. This led to the belief that education was not necessary to gain wealth and a bright future. As a result, some wealthy parents tend to devalue education as well as teachers. One parent remarked:

Some parents think that when they were students, they did not get good marks. However, now that they are richer than the teachers. Although their child does not achieve good grades now, maybe in the future their child will become rich as well, maybe richer than their parents. Thus, these parents may not communicate with the teachers...They do not treat the teachers seriously. They do not go to meet the teachers when they are asked. They even do not bother to answer the teachers' phone calls. They reverse the relationship between parents and teachers. This is the impact of market economy. That's why teachers' status has decreased. (P1, Xinyu, Junior high)

Under the planned economy, all the schools were state owned. Teaching was a secure and permanent job. Teachers' income came from their salary. They may spend extra time after class helping students with their study, but they regarded it as part of their responsibility and would not charge students for extra money. As a result, teachers were highly respected. However, the introduction of market economy, especially the emergence of private tutoring, has turned education into an industry. Wealthy Chinese parents in the present study sent their children to private tutoring lessons or one-on-one tutoring. Some teachers tutored their own students after school hours even though it is either legally prohibited or publicly discouraged by the local Education Bureau. This is problematic since teachers may treat the students receiving tutoring with favour (Zhang & Bray, 2017). Silova (2010) argued that as private tutoring is expensive, it is not accessible to all students, and "it can create disparities in student achievement" (p. 334). Private tutoring provides an opportunity for teachers to generate additional income. In this way teachers are complicit in their erosion of their social position because they turn teaching into a commodity (Y. Guo, 2016).

Moreover, on traditional festivals or holidays such as the Moon Festival and the Teachers' Day, some teachers accepted gifts from the parents in various forms such as moon cakes, gift cards, or cash. According to Xie and Postiglione (2016), giving gifts to teachers by the new economic elite was a way to "produce interpersonal social connections with teachers" (p. 1026). Teachers in this study, however, felt that parents gave gifts to teachers because of a fear. One teacher explained:

In the past, parents highly respected teachers. This has completely changed nowadays. To put it bluntly, I feel good if they do not look down on teachers. I'd say that they rather fear than respect teachers. Where does this fear come from? It is from their concern that their child may not be treated fairly at school. (T13, Jinan, Senior high)

The act of accepting gifts from parents can invite corruption. Some teachers may treat students whose parents give gifts better than other students. In these circumstances, parents may be placed under pressure to invest in expensive gifts for teachers. This not only has increased inequality in the distribution of economic capital between students from rich and poor families, but more importantly, has changed parents' attitudes towards teachers. As a teacher participant observed, parents nowadays have become more pragmatic:

I feel in the past there was much respect for teachers and great emphasis on education. For example, in the past, students had very deep and sincere love towards their teachers. At that time, there were no tutors, and the teachers treated the students sincerely as well. Now the social environment is not that good. The relationship between parents and teachers is like when my child is your student, I will keep a good relationship with you. Once my child is not your student any more, the relationship is over. It is very pragmatic. (T7, Tianjin, Senior high)

Besides receiving gifts from parents, some administrators and teachers capitalized on parents' social networks. For example, a parent gave a gift to a teacher, but the teacher returned

the gift to the parent. Later, the school principal asked this parent who was a university computer instructor to tutor his son in college computer course free of charge. In return, the teacher paid more attention to this parent's child. This incidence exemplifies that parent-teacher relationships become more pragmatic in that the parent contributed to connections with the school with his cultural capital, his knowledge in computer science rather than his economic capital, his gift, and in return, the parent was entitled to receive the teacher's favourism for his child.

New Challenges on Parent-Teacher Relationships

Beyond pragmatic approaches to parent-teacher relationships, participants also reported other challenges which threatened relationships. One challenge was that parents and teachers seemed to hold conflicting views of educational goals and student discipline. An important principle that goes with the reform and opening-up policy is the emancipation of people's mind. This encourages parents to have different purposes of education and different ways to educate children. Moreover, young parents, especially those who were born after the 1980s (八零后), received higher education than previous generations. They tend to have a more open and liberal attitude towards their children's education. Unlike parents of older generations who mainly focused on their children's academic achievements, they pay attention to their children's academic achievements as well as personal growth. As a result, these young parents are more likely to challenge teachers' authority than in the past. A teacher noticed:

Parents who are of the same age as me (mid 40s) have similar perceptions on education. We hope the child would study well and be happy at school. However, I feel parents born after the 80s are pursuing different educational goals. For example, when a student talked in class, the parents thought it was the display of the child's personality, but the teacher thought that he disrupted the class. When you criticized the child for his disruptive behaviour, the parents would think the teacher had gone too far. (T8, Xinyu, Senior high)

How to respond to parents' conflicting views of student discipline at school has become a new challenge for the teachers. If handled inappropriately, a small conflict may turn into a serious dispute. This would hurt both the parents and teachers' feelings and damage the trust that have long been built between the two parties. As we can see, there have already been cases that parents skipped the teachers and went directly to the school principals or even the local Education Bureau to complain about the teachers. Moreover, there is a lack of recourses that help parents deal with their complaints, nor a clear procedure to ensure fair investigation and decision. As a result, teachers tend to take a passive attitude towards educating students, particularly dealing with student discipline, to avoid conflicts. Unlike in the past, they dare not criticize or physically punish the students. As a teacher participant commented: "Due to the economic development, there have been conflicts in the perceptions between the school and the parents, which is different from the past. Therefore, there have been more risks in the job of a head teacher." In our research, a teacher mentioned the following incident:

Then the head teacher told parents in the chat group on WeChat that the math teacher had problems with his cervical spine, so he didn't want to teach two classes. Because he was the head teacher of the other class, he wanted to quit this class. Parents were quite angry, since it was close to the end of Grade 4. Then some active parents in the chat group contacted about 10 parents, and went to raise their concern to the principal together. After several times, the principal still hadn't given a solution. Then they went directly to the Education Bureau. Finally, the math teacher told parents he would keep teaching till the end of Grade 4. (P3, Zhaoyuan, Elementary)

A parent who owned a wedding services company brought his own video camera to the principal's office. He threatened to video record the meeting between the parents and the principal if the principal did not take actions. Different from previous studies by Diamond, Wang, and Gomez (2004) and Gu (2008) who found that when disagreements or concerns with school or teachers arose, they would rather find alternative resources to compensate for it than discussing the concerns with teachers directly, parents in this study were able to successfully convince the math teacher to continue teaching their children. Similar to the middle-class parents in Papapolydorou's (2015) study, this group of urban, middle-class parents did not hesitate to intervene and challenge the teacher, the principal and powerful agents, namely the local Education Bureau, when they thought the system did not meet their children's educational interests, by mobilizing their social networks or social capital.

Conclusion and Implications

The study reveals that the market economy in China has impacted changes in parent-teacher relationships in several aspects. First, modern technology such as the Internet and WeChat has facilitated communication between parents and teachers with fast pace and convenience. Parents reported that they communicated with teachers via WeChat anywhere anytime. The study highlights some of the creative ways technology in China is being used to enable meaningful communication and learning between parents and teachers. At the same time, there are issues of unequal access to technology and increasing inequality between urban and rural parents. In addition to social disparity, findings in our study also challenge stereotyping assumptions towards Chinese parents who were either completely not involved or partially involved in their child's education at home (Gu, 2008; Lau, Li, & Rao, 2011). Our study shows that contemporary Chinese parents were actively involved in their children's education both at home and at school. They checked their children's homework regularly, provided emotional support to their children at home, volunteered at school, and participated in school management such as influencing the appointment of teachers. At the same time, the study shows how China's market economy is widening gaps between families, especially those able to pay for tuition of their children and those unable to afford it. Families with high economic, cultural, and social capital are advantaged in supporting their child's education than poor families. Furthermore, the market economy has shaken the high social status that teachers enjoyed in the past and teachers' knowledge has become commodified in the form of private tutoring. Some uneducated and wealthy parents with strong economic capital appear to devalue education and teachers' professionalism. As a result, parents prefer to adopt pragmatic approaches to parent-teacher relationships. Finally, consistent with the results of Papapolydorou (2015), this study reveals that the urban, middle-class parents whose social capital, alongside cultural, symbolic, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) enable them to mobilize their social networks in interacting with the school. We have added to the current literature by arguing that contemporary urban, middle-class Chinese parents, who have confidence based on educational knowledge, appear to be more likely than previous generations of Chinese parents to challenge teachers' authority, to question teachers' actions and practices, schools' policy decisions and organizational decisions, and there have been more serious conflicts between parents and teachers. The study focuses on China, but these rare insights highlight current and emerging dangers to parent-teacher engagement with relevance to many other countries.

The findings in this study have implications for both educators and policymakers. To begin with, despite the benefits of new technology of WeChat, it remains plausible that fast pace and convenience cannot guarantee adequate communication. There could be misunderstanding which

threatens relationships. Real-life interactions cannot be replicated (Fu, 2013). Educators can't neglect face-to-face communication with parents, especially those who remain silent in the class chat group or have no access to the new communication tools. Schools should also provide support for parents who do not know how to use the new technology. In addition, as parent-teacher communication is moving from a unidirectional to a two-way communication, it is important for schools and Education Bureaus to provide training and support to teachers so that they know how to effectively communicate with parents and how to deal with conflicts between teachers and parents. Parents should also be allowed to address their concerns through adequate channels. As well, they should be encouraged to provide information about their children's extracurricular activities and emotional well-being outside the school so that the teachers and parents can work more closely on the development of the whole child. Furthermore, the teachers in the study expressed concerns that teachers' status has declined considerably in the last decade. Once conceived as the most glorious profession, teaching is now constructed as a commodity (Y. Guo, 2016) under the market economy in China. As such, teachers are seen as paid service providers. Our findings are in accordance with the findings of Guo and Pungur (2008) and Zhou (2002), who argue that the social status of the teaching profession, once so highly thought of and respected, needs to be reclaimed through renewed professionalism. The Chinese government needs to raise awareness among the public about the important role that teachers play in a knowledge-based society, introduce legislative efforts to improve the status of teachers. Finally, it is important that policymakers take measures to protect the rights of the teachers, the students, and their parents to promote equal and healthy parent-teacher relationships in the new market economy situation.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The form of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook for theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Chan, D., & Mok, K. H. (2001). Educational reforms and coping strategies under the tidal wave of marketisation: A comparative study of Hong Kong and the Mainland. *Comparative Education*, 37(1), 21–41.
- Chi, J., & Rao, N. (2003). Parental beliefs about school learning and children's educational attainment: Evidence from rural China. *Ethos*, 31(3), 330–356.
- China Daily. (2015). *WeChat becomes major platform for Chinese people*. Available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-06/29/content_21129418.htm
- Chinese Education Resource Support (2007). The power of parent education. Available at <http://www.cersp.com>
- Diamond, J. B., Wang, L., & Gomez, K. (2004). African-American and Chinese-American parent involvement: The importance of race, class, and culture. *FINE Network Research Digest at the Harvard Family Research Project*.
- Ding, X. (2011). *Policy metamorphosis in China: A case study of minban education in Shanghai*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Fu, J. (2013). ICT in education: A critical literature review and its implications. *International Journal of Education and Development using Information and Communication Technology*, 9(1), 112–125.
- Gu, W. (2006). *Teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement in selected government kindergartens in China*. The Pennsylvania State University. Doctoral Dissertation.
- Gu, W. (2008). New horizons and challenges in China's public schools for parent involvement. *Education*, 128(4), 570–578.
- Gu, W., & Yawkey, T. D. (2010). Working with parents and family: Factors that influence Chinese teachers' attitudes toward parent involvement. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 37(2), 146–153.
- Guo, S., & Pungur L. (2008). Exploring teacher education in the context of Canada and China: A cross-cultural dialogue. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 3(2), 246–269.
- Guo, S. (2016). Teaching under China's market economy: The experience of migrant teachers. In S. Guo & Y. Guo (Eds.), *Spotlight on China: Changes in education under China's market economy* (pp. 103–118). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Guo, Y. (2016). The impact of the market economy on English teachers. In S. Guo and Y. Guo (Eds.), *Spotlight on China: Changes in education under China's market economy* (pp. 119–136). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

- Kim, S., & Fong, V. L. (2013). How parents help children with homework in China: Narratives across the life span. *Asia Pacific Education Review, 14*(4), 581–592.
- Lau, E. Y., Li, H., & Rao, N. (2011). Parental involvement and children’s readiness for school in China. *Educational Research, 53*(1), 95–113.
- Ming, Z., & Abbott, D. A. (1992). Preschool education in China. *International Journal of Early Childhood, 24*, 50–52
- Mu, G, M., & Hu, Y. (2016). *Living with vulnerabilities and opportunities in a migration context: Floating children and left-behind children in China*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Papapolydorou, M. (2015). Inequalities, parental social capital and children’s education. In M. Murphy & C. Costa (Eds.), *Theory as method in research: on Bourdieu, social theory and education* (pp. 83–100). Oxford: Routledge.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice: The definitive text of qualitative inquiry frameworks and options* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Quan, Z. De, & Dolmage, W. R. (2006). Four Chinese teachers’ perceptions of parent involvement in their children’s education. *EAF Journal, 17*(1), 95.
- Silova, I. (2010). Private tutoring in Eastern Europe and central Asia: Policy choices and implications. *Compare, 40*(3), 327–344.
- Wang, D. (2008). Family-school relations as social capital: Chinese parents in the United States. *School Community Journal, 18*(2), 119–146.
- Xie, A., & Postiglione, G. A. (2016). Guanxi and school success: an ethnographic inquiry of parental involvement in rural China. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 37*(7), 1014–1033.
- Zhang, W., & Bray, M. (2017). Micro-neoliberalism in China: public-private interactions at the confluence of mainstream and shadow education. *Journal of Education Policy, 32*(1), 63–81.
- Zhou, N. Z. (1988). Historical context of educational reforms in present-day China. *Interchange, 19*(3–4), 8–18.
- Zhou, Z. (2002). The teaching profession: To be or to do? *Journal of Education for Teaching, 28*(3), 211–215.

Table 1. Teacher Demographic Information

No.	Gender	Age	Education	Position	School	Location	Years of teaching	Monthly income in RMB
1	F	42	Bachelor	English & head teacher	Primary School	Xinyu, Urban	20	4000–5000
2	F	39	Master	Chemistry teacher	Junior High	Zhuhai, Urban	18	7000–8000
3	F	36	Bachelor	English teacher & Principal assistant	Junior high	Shanghai, Urban	15	7000–8000
4	F	50	College	Chinese & head teacher	Primary school	Xinyu, Suburb	29	4000–5000
5	F	45	College	English teacher	Primary school	Zhuhai, suburb	23	6000–7000
6	F	44	Bachelor	English teacher	Primary school	Zhuhai, suburb	22	10000–
7	F	54	Bachelor	English & head teacher	High school	Tianjin, urban	31	5000–6000
8	F	41	Bachelor	English teacher	High school	Xinyu, urban	18	3000–4000

9	F	55	Bachelor	Biology teacher	High school	Tianjin, urban	32	5000–6000
10	F	29	Bachelor	Political science & head teacher	Junior high	Shunde, urban	6	7000–8000
11	M	36	Bachelor	Administrator		Weihai, urban		5000–6000
12	M	34	Master	Electric engineering & head teacher	Technology School	Weihai, urban	12	4000–5000
13	F	35	Bachelor	English teacher	Senior High	Jinan, urban	12	5000–6000
14	F	35	Bachelor	Political science teacher	Senior High	Jinan, urban	14	5000–6000
15	M	35	Bachelor	Political science & head teacher	Senior High	Weihai, urban	14	5000–6000
16	F	33	Bachelor	Chinese & head teacher	Private Primary School	Weihai, urban	10	4000–5000
17	F	45	Master	Vice principal	Senior High	Weihai, urban	15	7000–8000
18	F	40	Master	Physics & head teacher	Senior High	Zhaoyuan, urban	17	5000–6000
19	F	40	Bachelor	Math & head teacher	Primary School	Zhaoyuan, urban	23	4000–5000
20	F	34	Bachelor	History & head teacher	Junior High	Zhaoyuan, suburban	11	5000–6000

21	F	39	College	Chinese & head teacher	Junior High	Weihai, urban	20	4000–5000
----	---	----	---------	------------------------	-------------	---------------	----	-----------

Table 2. Parents Demographic Information

No.	Gender	Age	Education	Position	Child's school	Location	Monthly income in RMB
1	F	40	Bachelor	Government staff	Grade 8	Xinyu, urban	4000–5000
2	F	36	Bachelor	Government staff	Private Grade 3	Shunde, urban	7000–8000
3	M	37	Master	Government official	Private Grade 4	Shunde, urban	10000–
4	F	36	Bachelor	Teacher	Grade 1	Xinyu, urban	4000–5000
5	F	42	College	Company staff	Private Grade 9	Shunde, urban	5000–6000
6	F	33	Bachelor	Marketing manager	Grade 2	Shanghai, urban	10000–
7	F	36	Bachelor	Housewife	Private Grade 1	Shanghai, urban	
8	F	41	Bachelor	Marketing director	Private Grade 4	Shanghai, urban	10000–
9	M	45	Master	Editor	Grade 9	Beijing, urban	10000–
10	F	41	Master	Company staff	Grade 1	Beijing, urban	10000–
11	F	36	Bachelor	Military	Grade 2	Beijing, urban	8,000–9000
12	F	40	Bachelor	Quality manager	Grade 9	Beijing, urban	10,000–

13	F	37	College	Self– employed	Grade 5	Zhaoyuan, suburban	5,000– 6000
14	M	42	PhD	Professor	Grade 7	Weihai, urban	8,000– 9000
15	F	34	Master	Instructor	Grade 6 & K	Weihai, urban	6,000– 7000
16	F	35	Master	Instructor	Grade 4	Weihai, urban	6,000– 7000
17	F	45	College	Office staff	Grade 11	Zhaoyuan, urban	4,000– 5000
18	F	46	College	Small business owner	Grade10 & graduate	Weihai, suburban	10,000–
19	F	40	High school	Farmer	Grade 10 & 4	Qingdao, suburban	3,000– 4000
20	F	36	High school	Worker	Grade 1	Weihai, urban	3,000– 4000

Dr. Yan Guo is professor of language and literacy in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. She has published in the areas of critical pedagogy of language learning, teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL), immigrant parent engagement, immigration, diversity in teacher education, transnational identities and translanguaging of immigrant and refugee children, language policy, and international education.

Dr. Xueqin Wu teaches at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, Calgary. Her research interests include second language education, especially English as a second language and Mandarin as an additional language, cultural diversity, learner engagement, language policy, and international education.

Xiaoli Liu is a PhD candidate in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. Her research interests include teaching English as an additional language and critical thinking in higher education. She is also a lecturer in the Department of Language and Literature, Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai), China.