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Transnational class anxieties and intensive parenting: middle-class Chinese immigrant parents 'doing security' in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores middle-class Chinese immigrant parents' childrearing aspirations and strategies in Singapore. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with 31 professional middle-class immigrant parents from China in 2022, it examines how these parents intensify their childrearing as a strategy not only to cope with the structural insecurities they face in the host country but also to mitigate their perceived uncertainties evoked by the larger world beyond the host society. Through the conceptual lens of 'doing security', the paper unpacks the emotional dynamics and moral anxieties involved in the parents' efforts to maintain and improve their middle-class positions in the host country through childrearing. While these parents seek to secure better futures for their children through migration, they are confronted with continued anxieties and new challenges in passing on their newly achieved class status to the next generation. Their childrearing aspirations are also complicated by the changing geopolitical order with China's rise on the global stage. The paper contributes to a better understanding of middle-class migrant subjectivities and insecurities as well as of an emerging trend in reproduction-motivated migration from China.

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Introduction

The first author met Audrey in a café outside a tuition centre when she was waiting for her elder daughter who was attending a supplementary class. She apologised that week-ends were the busiest days of the week for her so she could only participate in the interview when her children were attending classes. After the elder daughter finished her class, Audrey would drive her across the city to pick up the younger daughter who was learning ballet in an art school. The mother said sympathetically that her girls had to hurriedly consume the lunches she prepared for them inside the car on the commute to their classes. 44-year-old Audrey graduated from a top university in China and worked for a multinational corporation in Shanghai where she met her husband. After their elder daughter was born, unsettled by the increasingly fierce academic competition in China, the couple made the decision to move abroad in order to give her a happier childhood and a better future. For this, her husband secured an opportunity to transfer to the

Singapore office of the company while Audrey chose to temporarily suspend her promising career to become a stay-at-home mother. Aside from its geographical and cultural proximity, the couple chose Singapore to relocate mainly because of its bilingual education system which they thought could help their children maintain Chinese language and cultural identity while receiving a cosmopolitan education. However, worries soon emerged upon registering their elder daughter for primary school. As immigrant parents, they found out that they stood little chance of getting their children into 'good' schools. Audrey's daughter was finally posted to a 'neighbourhood school'.¹ Though she studied very well, Audrey and her husband worried that she might not be able to achieve as high grades in PSLE² as those who attended higher-ranking schools. From time to time, however, Audrey had doubts about whether she should continue to push her children to study so hard in order to get the best scores. 'I feel that we have brought the parenting style in China with us', she said, 'but the reason why we moved to Singapore was to escape it'.

Audrey's anxieties and emotional ambiguities in raising her children as well as the heavy investment in her children's education are not uncommon among the middle-class Chinese migrant parents we interviewed in Singapore. Most of the parents had a high level of involvement in their children's education, both economically and emotionally.³ Some parents even wished they could have devoted more time and energy to children's education when children were much younger. However, at the same time, they claimed that they relocated to (or remained in) Singapore in order to avoid the intense competition and academic pressure in China, though ironically, many seemed to continue engaging in an intensive and even upscaled parenting and holding higher aspirations for their children's educational success after they settled in Singapore. Thus, they often found themselves struggling with feelings of ambivalence, confusion and stress.

Recent research has shown a new trend in international migration from China which is increasingly dominated by the middle class who migrate to 'secure a better life' for their families and their children, which has been referred to as 'reproduction migration' (Xiang 2022). Compared to the earlier trend of migration dominated by the wealthy Chinese families who relocated to western developed countries as a strategy of flexible capital accumulation (Ong 1999), the urban middle class tends to deploy migration as a strategy to secure reproduction, especially to 'save' children's happiness and well-being from the competitive Chinese education system (e.g. Beck and Nyíri 2022; Li, Sisi, and Siriphon 2023; Xiang 2022) as well as to be free from concerns over food security and air pollution. However, unlike the capital-rich, the middle-class are more likely to be subject to varying degrees of insecurities and uncertainties generated by the host labour market and the tightening immigration policies in destination countries (e.g. Zhan and Zhou 2020). Also, recent studies have shown that while the middle class is consciously rejecting the highly competitive environment in China and pursuing a happy childhood for their children through migration, such effort often uneasily coexists with constant anxiety for their children's future after migration (Beck and Nyíri 2022). This paper is situated within the context of Chinese middle-class immigrant insecurities. While middle-class Chinese parents migrating across the world may experience some common concerns in terms of childrearing, the circumstances in which they are situated are different and thus the ways in which they manage their anxieties could also vary.

In this paper, we draw on the conceptual lens of ‘doing security’ (Cooper 2014) to unpack middle-class Chinese immigrant parents’ anxieties and emotional struggles with their childrearing in Singapore. In recent years, a burgeoning body of sociological work examines how economic insecurities and the ensuing job precarity brought by neo-liberal globalisation have profoundly affected the intimate lives of individual families. Scholars show that parents tend to channel their anxieties evoked by the larger world into their everyday childrearing practices, and intensify their parenting efforts as a security strategy to cope with the uncertainties they face in their lives (Katz 2012; Pugh 2015; Lan 2018). While the notion of security strategy usefully points to the structural linkage between relations of production and practices of social reproduction, it also risks reducing everyday experiences to the order of political economy and overlooking the doubt and puzzlement of parents as they negotiate different and sometimes conflicting cultural scripts and moral values embedded in the societies (Kuan 2015), especially when they traverse international borders (Lan 2018). As such, in this paper, we turn to the notion of ‘doing security’ proposed by sociologist Marianne Cooper (2014), as it allows us to further unpack the emotional dynamics and moral anxieties involved in parents’ efforts to build security and prevent falling out of achieved class status in the new country through childrearing. We seek to answer the following questions: What are the major sources of anxieties and insecurities for Chinese migrant parents when they raise and cultivate their children in Singapore? How are these insecurities connected to the larger structural contexts in and beyond Singapore? How do middle-class migrant parents manage stress and forge security through their childrearing choices and practices?

Middle-class insecurity, intensive parenting and transnational migration

Around the globe, middle-class subjectivities are infused and characterised by ‘the feelings of insecurity’, and a ‘longing to secure’ is said to be central to the ontology of middle-class subjects across cultural and national boundaries (Heiman, Liechty, and Carla 2012, 20). Feminist scholars argue that motherhood was itself invented by middle-class households as a coping strategy to deal with the uncertainty brought by the expansion of capitalist economy and prepare their children for successful adulthood (Fox 2006). Unlike the upper or lower social classes where membership is often inherited, class reproduction in the professional middle class is arguably secured primarily through parenting and education (Ehrenreich 1979, 83).

In recent years, under the new political economic conditions of globalisation, a burgeoning body of literature examines the particular ways neoliberal globalisation, especially the ensuing job insecurity, infiltrates the domestic practices associated with social reproduction, and how families and parents devise various strategies to adapt to the rapidly changing global economy in order to secure reproduction (e.g. Katz 2012; Douglass 2006). For example, drawing primarily on the realities and experiences of neo-liberal western societies, scholars have examined how parents tend to displace their concerns about larger insecurities onto their children, which propels them to expand and intensify their parenting efforts (Pugh 2015). In particular, mothers are found to engage in a highly involved form of strategic motherhood in order to create securities in their lives and forefront their relationship with children as ‘an antidote to the

world's ills' (Villalobos 2014). Through the notion of global security strategy, sociologist Pei-Chia Lan (2018) extends the concept of security strategy to the studies of immigrant parenting, highlighting the global contexts and the changing geopolitics that affect immigrant parents' sense of insecurity and childrearing strategies. While situating studies within the global political economy, these ethnographic studies draw our attention to the role of feelings and emotions in shaping parents' approach to seeking security in their lives. As Cooper (2014) argues, how families go about building security is not simply a practical matter of choices regarding work or school, but also an extraordinarily emotional process. The notion of 'doing security' allows us to unpack the emotion work (and the moral and ethical work, see Kuan 2015) involved in families' search for and establish security in the uncertain world and the affective labour that goes into the management of middle-class subjectivities (Heiman, Liechty, and Carla 2012).

This paper further situates the discussion of Chinese migrant parents' 'doing security' within the studies on Asian/Chinese transnational migration. In the past several decades, a burgeoning literature has examined how affluent and upper-middle-class families from fast-developing Asian countries deploy migration to developed countries as a strategy to help their children accumulate global cultural capital and ensure their global success in the future (e.g. Waters 2005; Ong 1999). Most of the studies focus on the experiences of transnational split-household families whose members are distributed in two or more countries for the sake of their children's education (e.g. Lee and Koo 2006; Waters 2002). Meanwhile, another strand of literature that is primarily concerned with settled immigrant families tends to adopt an assimilation perspective, focusing on the sociocultural factors that affect immigrant children's educational performance and social mobility prospects in host countries (e.g. Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou and Wang 2019). Situated in transnational contexts, Pei-Chia Lan's (2018) work examines Chinese immigrants' childrearing strategies and emotional struggles in America as they negotiate structural constraints and cultural differences in the host country. While most of the existing literature is based on the experiences of Asian/Chinese migrants in the West, thus far we know little about the childrearing experiences of migrant parents in the Asian context. Some significant exceptions have examined Asian developed countries such as Singapore as a new destination for (lower) middle-class Asian families' transnational educational mobility (Huang and Yeoh 2005; Kim 2010), though they tend to focus on transient split-household families whose childrearing strategies are often different from settled immigrant families. But these case studies also point to the sense of insecurity that propels middle-class Asian parents to invest in their children's overseas studies which they believe will promise 'guaranteed returns in the age of uncertainty' (Kim 2010, 275). The merit of English-Chinese bilingual education and the safety and security of staying and studying in Singapore are also mentioned in the research as an attraction for Chinese/Asian migrant parents. More recent studies on the transnational migration of Chinese new urban middle-class tend to emphasise parents' dissatisfaction with the overly competitive education system in China and their pursuit of a happy education for their children through migration (Beck and Nyíri 2022; Li, Sisi, and Siriphon 2023).

Built on these studies on middle-class parenting and transnational migration in the era of globalisation, the paper investigates the particular kinds of insecurities the Chinese immigrant parents face in and beyond Singapore and how they come up with specific security-seeking strategies. We argue that the parents' childrearing concerns and

strategies are not only shaped by migrant insecurities generated by the disadvantaged situations they encounter in the host country but also intensified by their self-perceived uncertainties in a rapidly changing global economy, especially with the rise of China as a global power. Through intensive parenting, they seek to secure their children's competitive advantage in an uncertain time and ensure the reproduction of middle-class status in the host country as well as home country.

In the remainder of this article, we first provide the local context of the study and relevant details about the study's methodology and data. Then, our findings unfold in two parts: firstly, we unpack the sources of Chinese immigrant parents' insecurities, and secondly, we illustrate how they engaged in intensive parenting as a security strategy. Finally, we summarise our key findings and contributions to advancing the literature on transnational migration and middle-class insecurities.

Background, methods and data

Situated in Southeast Asia, Singapore is one of the most developed economies in the world and a major migration hub in Asia despite the city-state's tiny land area. As of mid-2024, Singapore had a total population of slightly over 6 million, of which just over 70% were 'residents', made up of about 3.64 million citizens and 0.54 million Permanent Residents (PRs).⁴ This puts Singapore among the countries with the highest immigrant percentages in the world. Singapore's resident population is officially categorised under four major 'racial' groups: Chinese 76%; Malay 15%; Indian 7.5%; and 'others' 1.5%. This so-called 'CMIO' multiracial framework is regarded as fundamental to Singaporean society and identity and, consequently, immigration is regulated in a way that the ethnic backgrounds of immigrants broadly mirror that of the resident population. As such, ethnically Chinese migrants far outnumber migrants of other ethnicities in Singapore. According to the statistics from UN in 2020, migrants from China made up close to 20% of the city-state's total migrant population, the second largest group after Malaysian migrants, which are mostly ethnically Chinese as well. In addition, Singapore's immigration regime favours highly skilled professionals but has shown signs of tightening over the past decade (Zhan and Zhou 2020). This latter development constitutes a crucial context of the insecurities felt by the immigrant parents we studied in Singapore.

Education is perceived as central to economic development in Singapore, which is not simply a result of the strong Confucian heritage culture of the Chinese-majority country. As a country without natural resources, human capital development through education has been a significant policy priority over the decades (Osman-Gani 2004). As for the educational system in Singapore, two aspects are particularly relevant to this study. First, the official bilingual policy requires students in public schools to study a mandatory 'mother tongue' language associated with their ethnic identity. Second, while Singapore's streaming system has been recently reformed to lessen the stratifying effects, high-stakes examinations (especially the PSLE, as mentioned in the introduction) remain a reality in Singapore education and continue to powerfully shape the perceptions and actions of various stakeholders. Scholars have highlighted the stratifying nature of these 'highly differentiated programmes' and their potential to exacerbate social inequalities (Ho 2012, 409).

This paper is derived from an ongoing research project on immigrant parents' influences on children's education in Singapore. The project targeted immigrant families with both parents not born and raised in Singapore and children attending mainstream government schools locally.⁵ The study focused on immigrant parents from major nationality backgrounds (China, India, the Philippines, and Indonesia)⁶ and sought to include a sample with socioeconomic diversity. The findings in this paper draw on the Chinese subsample ($n = 31$), which comprised 30 mothers and only one father.⁷ These Chinese parents were aged between 38–53, with 77% of them in their forties ($n = 24$). According to the self-reported household incomes, most belonged in the middle - to higher-income ranges with 41% reporting a household monthly income of \$11,000 to \$17,999 ($n = 13$) and 32% reporting \$18,000 and above ($n = 10$). The Chinese subsample was also highly educated, with 48% holding bachelor's degrees ($n = 15$), 19% having master's degrees ($n = 6$), and 16% having doctorates ($n = 5$) as the highest educational attainment. Commensurate with their high education levels, most worked in professional fields such as finance, information technology, education, and engineering, with the most common occupations being teacher ($n = 11$, 35%) and manager ($n = 5$, 16%). Only three of the 30 mothers were full-time housewives at the time of interview. More than half of these parents reported having only one child ($n = 20$, 64%). With regard to residential status, among the 31 parents, 13 were naturalised Singapore citizens, 16 were permanent residents and two were long-term visit pass holders. Most of their children held Singapore citizenship, only four were permanent residents and two were on student pass at the time of interview.

Participants in this study were mainly recruited through personal contacts, advertisements (digital and printed) and snowball sampling. Prospective participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire that collected descriptive demographics, which were followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out one-on-one. Among the 31 Chinese participants, 23 interviews were conducted in-person and the remaining eight over Zoom between August and December in 2022. While the default interview language was English, Chinese-background participants were given the option to be interviewed in Mandarin. Most Chinese-background immigrants opted to be interviewed in their native language Chinese, which added to the richness of the data. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in the original languages, with the Chinese transcripts subsequently translated into English by a research assistant and further proofread by another research assistant to ensure accuracy.

The sources of Chinese immigrant parents' insecurities in Singapore

In this section, we first explore the particular structural insecurities and challenges faced by Chinese immigrant parents as they pursued their childrearing aspirations and goals in Singapore. Then, we explore how the parents' intensive childrearing is also a response to their perceived insecurities evoked by the larger world beyond the host society.

The fear of 'losing at the starting line'

The middle-class Chinese parents migrated to Singapore to escape the overly intense competition and academic pressure in China, but they soon found themselves confronted

with a stratified education system that streams children into different educational tracks even earlier than the education system in their home country. While the Singapore education system is globally well-known for its high academic standards and excellent results, it also has the reputation of being highly rigorous and competitive. Like China's exam-centric education system, it foregrounds test scores in high-stakes national examinations (such as PSLE) which segment students into different types of schools and, as many believe, different life trajectories further down the road. The primary school leaving examination (PSLE) has been a major concern among Singaporean parents (Teo 2023). It plays such a prominent role in shaping Singaporean parents' childrearing that parents' activities and time are all centred around it (ibid., 2023). As such, Singapore's education system is seen as a co-existence of meritocracy and parentocracy (Tan 2017), since children's educational success to a larger extent relies on parents' involvement and competence in steering and monitoring their educational trajectories.

Chinese migrant parents perceived Singapore's PSLE exam somewhat akin to China's college entrance examination (*gaokao*), only that in the case of PSLE academic streaming starts much earlier at the age of twelve. The pressure for their children to perform at an earlier age is exacerbated by the fact that it is difficult for their children to secure a place in their preferred schools of choice from the outset. As mentioned in the introduction, Singapore's primary school enrolment policy prioritises children who have pre-existing affiliations with the school, such as having parents who are former students in the school or siblings who are currently studying in the school. Without such connections, children of new immigrants are largely excluded from priority admission. Due to the intense competition of primary school registration, they are required to ballot over the remaining vacancies after all children of local Singaporeans have been allocated seats.⁸ Thus, this enrolment system further induced immigrant parents' worries about their children's educational prospects. They tended to strongly believe that parental involvement is of the utmost importance in their children's educational success, especially when their children are in primary school. Intensive parenting thus emerged as a strategy to ensure that their children excel in an ordinary neighbourhood school and obtain the best scores in the PSLE in order to enter a top-performing secondary school. 42-year-old Lucy, a mother of two children, said,

As new immigrant parents, we have little choice of primary school for our children. We can choose only when native-born parents have selected the schools they are satisfied with. You don't even have the right to compete with them. Our children have already lost at the starting line.

Apart from the differentiated treatment for primary school admission, many parents also explained their intensive parenting as a response to the insecurities they face as a new immigrant in Singapore. While most of the parents initially came to Singapore as highly skilled migrants or college/post-graduate student migrants, many felt stress when it comes to cultivating their children in the new country due to the lack of local cultural knowledge and the unfamiliarity with the Singapore education system. This often caused them to feel doubt about whether they were steering their children in the optimal direction. In addition, they noted that the education system *per se* has been evolving to cope with the rapidly changing world. For example, the Singapore education system has taken steps to move away from the narrow focus on grades and academic

achievements to a more inclusive system that aims to promote students' holistic development (Ng 2020). However, without first-hand experience of the education system and socio-cultural resources in the local society, migrant parents often met such changes with worries and doubts, which propelled them to further intensify their parenting as a coping mechanism.

40-year-old Cecilia, a mother of one child, found that most of the Chinese immigrant parents she knew were more 'pushy' than local-born parents. She attributed this to 'the feelings of insecurity' (*bu an quan gan*) they experienced as new immigrants. She took herself as an example:

My biggest concern is that I don't know about the local education system. As the first-generation immigrants, in contrast to local-born parents who have grown up through this system, we have no first-hand experience and knowledge about it. To me, the education system is complicated and everchanging. Every step is high-stake, you must be very clearly aware of how to navigate through it, including how to apply for primary school, which extracurricular activities to choose, how to prepare for PSLE and how to apply for secondary school, and so on. Everything is new to me. I need to seek help from my circle of friends, but most of them are Chinese immigrants too.

The parents' sense of insecurity is also compounded by other aspects of precarity that they experience as immigrants in Singapore. As studies suggest, highly skilled immigrants in Singapore are increasingly subject to job insecurity and settlement uncertainties, due to the uncertain global economy as well as the tightening of immigration policies in the past decades (Zhan and Zhou 2020). Many mothers, despite holding professional occupations in China, became stay-at-home mothers or ended up taking middle-skilled, lower-waged jobs such as part-time Chinese language teachers after migrating to Singapore with their families. They mentioned the difficulty they encountered in landing a professional and well-paying job that matches their skills and qualifications in Singapore, due to various barriers such as lack of English proficiency and recognised qualifications. While most of the parents obtained permanent residency relatively quickly, some encountered repeated rejection when they progressed towards citizenship applications, even though their children were granted citizenship in their own right after experiencing milestone events such as the PSLE. As will be discussed later, the parents' fear of downward social mobility in the host society not only propelled them to devote more time and energy to children's education but also affected their childrearing aspirations and directions.

The 'status anxiety' of the newly affluent Asian parents

The Chinese immigrants' intensive childrearing is not only exercised as a strategy to deal with the structural insecurities they face in Singapore but also to cope with the uncertainties they perceive in and beyond Singapore. Sociologist Margaret Nelson (2010) argues that professional middle-class parents generally engage in intensive parenting because they tend to *feel* greater uncertainty and a stronger sense of crisis based on the ways they perceive and make sense of their own positions in the world. Similarly, Lee and Koo (2006) find that a significant factor in why the 'wild geese fathers' in Korea are willing to sacrifice so much to send their children to study overseas was their perception of what is required for future success based on their own work experience in a highly competitive environment.

The Chinese immigrant parents' self-perceived insecurities are not only associated with their status as professional and highly educated middle class but also heightened by the historical and transnational contexts in which they are situated, which is marked by the rise of China as a global power. First, their childrearing orientations are strongly shaped by the ways they understand their own experience of class mobility and migration. Growing up in an era of China's rapid socio-economic transformation and globalisation, most of the parents achieved upward social mobility through education. They successfully survived *gaokao* through academic excellence, and many became the first-generation college graduates in their families. As they migrated to Singapore as highly skilled migrants, educational qualification also served as the foundation on which they established a foothold. However, migration stimulates anxieties about how they maintain and improve their newly achieved class status and pass it on to the next generation who are raised in a foreign land. These all propelled them to intensify their parenting.

40-year-old Stella was a consultant and a mother of two sons. Her husband was an Indian immigrant whom she met when she did her PhD at a local university. When asked if she and her India-born husband have different childrearing styles and cultures, she replied without hesitation,

My husband and I are the same. We are all 'Asian' parents ... For my husband and I, education is the most secured path we can choose for our sons, as this is how we acquired our own social positions. We have come here [in Singapore] with great efforts (*hao bu rong yi*) through hard work and self-discipline. We hope that our children will be better than us, at least maintain our hard acquired middle-class social status.

Second, unlike their counterparts in western developed countries (e.g. Lan 2018), the Chinese immigrant parents in Singapore tend to be more concerned about their positioning in the world beyond the city-state of Singapore, which added to their intensive parenting. They viewed Singapore as a more advanced country and a desirable place of settlement, especially because it is a Chinese majority country adopting a bilingual education policy. However, when it comes to their expectations of their children's educational achievement and future success, many assigned Singapore, albeit one of the most developed economies in the world, to a 'lower level' position as an Asian country on the global hierarchy, compared to developed countries in the West. This is most evident in their common aspiration for their children to attend elite western universities and become a 'global talent' in the future. Audrey said that she and her husband wished their child to study at the best universities in the world and become a 'global talent' who can 'act as a bridge between East and West'. 'The best universities' she pursued were all based on so-called global university rankings. She said,

We certainly hope she [her elder daughter] can get into the best universities in the world such as Harvard and Yale one day. If she can, we will spare no effort to support her ... If she can't get into the top universities in the west, at least she has to secure a position in the best local universities in Singapore such as NUS and NTU, and then pursue a master's degree in higher-ranking universities in future.

To be sure, unlike the middle-class Chinese families who relocated to semi-peripheral destinations such as Hungary for opting out of the global competition (see Beck and Nyíri 2022), the parents who migrated to Singapore only for raising a more globally

competitive child. They believed that studying in Singapore can make their children stand a much better chance of getting into world-renowned universities, which they considered essential for their children's better futures in and beyond Singapore. Audrey continued,

Although the education system here [in Singapore] is competitive, the chances of getting into a prestigious university are much higher than in China! We heard that at least 30% of high school graduates in Singapore can enter the world's top universities every year including best universities in Singapore, which is unimaginable in China ... this made us even more convinced of our choice [of migrating to Singapore].

Third, and interestingly, China's rise in the global economy also further heightened the parents' anxieties about their children's educational success. Chinese immigrant parents were commonly worried that living abroad (even in a bilingual education environment like Singapore) would make it difficult for their children to maintain proficiency in Mandarin and thus lose their competitive edge in the global race. Even though their children normally performed well in 'mother tongue' subject and took 'Higher Chinese' curriculum in school, the parents tended to compare them with their peers in China when evaluating their Chinese language abilities. Thus, as will be shown below, preserving children's Chinese language and cultural heritage became as important and urgent as acquiring English skills and global cultural capital on their parenting agenda.

Securitising transnational class reproduction through intensive parenting

The section above examined the major sources of Chinese immigrant parents' feelings of insecurity that intensify their childrearing in Singapore. This section looks at how they seek and build security through their childrearing practices. It not only shows how the parents make strategic moves and pragmatic calculations on their children's educational success but also highlights their emotional and moral work which is integral to the process of 'doing security'.

'We have to work hard in all aspects'

As discussed earlier, due to the differentiated primary school admission policies, 'losing at the starting line' becomes one of the biggest concerns of Chinese immigrant parents. In order to secure a place at a 'good' primary school with no connections, many immigrant parents started their preparation as early as their children were just born or even before birth. 44-year-old Pamela was a professor at a private university in Singapore. When her son was just born, influenced by her Chinese immigrant friend circle, she and her husband bought an old resale public housing flat closer to a prestigious primary school at a premium price, with the hope of securing a place for her son when he reached school age. Pamela's husband also tried to apply as a parent volunteer in the primary school, which could earn some brownie points for school registration, though his application was rejected due to an overwhelming supply of parent volunteers that year. When her son was six years old, Pamela decided to take the further step of applying for Singapore citizenship together with her son, as she thought becoming a citizen 'can be more secure (*bao xian*) to get a chance to enter the school'. However, the school ran out of vacancies after the first registration phase which prioritises candidates with alumni

affiliations. In spite of all the efforts they made, Pamela's son was eventually assigned to a neighbourhood school. Their frustration about not being able to secure a 'good' primary school for her son only propelled her and her husband to make greater efforts and investment in her son's education until he was admitted into a top-performing secondary school with excellent academic performance.

Although the parents are calculating actors in their children's educational future, their strategic choices and pragmatic considerations are deeply embedded in moral emotions and family obligations. 41-year-old Tessie's eldest daughter was posted to an ordinary school. Although she studied very well, she was still unable to enter a desirable secondary school because of her PR status, as her scores were the same as those of a Singaporean student who was admitted. While before this point of time, Tessie and her husband had never thought of changing citizenship, after a serious discussion they came to the decision that one of them had to apply for Singapore citizenship for the sake of their children. Tessie said as parents they felt guilty about not making every effort to pave the road ahead for their daughter. She recounted,

We felt that we owe her a lot. We felt that we neglected our duties as parents ... So, my husband decided to convert to Singapore citizen for the sake of our children. We don't want our younger daughter to experience similar things again.

From purchasing school district properties to offering parent volunteering to changing citizenship, the parents deployed various resources at their disposal and sought to 'make up for the disadvantages they (as immigrant parents) brought to their children', although their attempts and efforts were often futile. While most of the children of our respondents ended up entering 'neighbourhood schools', the parents did not give up seeking alternative pathways to a prestigious school. Among such pathways, the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) was regarded by many Chinese immigrant parents as an opportunity to compensate for their loss 'at the starting line'. In the Singapore education system, the GEP⁹ is a screening test conducted at primary 3 to select the top students from the entire age cohort as intellectually 'gifted' children and offer them a more demanding curriculum.¹⁰ From the immigrant parents' point of view, GEP offers a chance for their children who initially enrolled in a 'neighbourhood school' to enter into their preferred school at the start of primary 4. In order to ace the test, they invested heavily by enrolling their children in very costly and intensive coaching classes outside of school.

44-year-old Lilian registered her son in a high-end enrichment class on which she spent almost all the salary she earned as a part-time tutor every month. She shared her perspective in the interview:

Most of the children who participate in this coaching class are from the families of new Chinese immigrants. The reasons are obvious – we all hope our children can get into a good school through the GEP exam. (Interviewer: But this exam is designed for the gifted, right?) Yes, but all parents believe that their children are blessed with gift and potential. The more time and resources you invest in them, the better they can achieve.

However, this intensive exam-oriented coaching also generated doubts from the parents. Lilian confessed that she often found herself struggling with the guilt of pushing her son too hard, especially after she noticed that her Singaporean neighbours raised their

children in a ‘free-range’ style and encouraged children to follow their own interests. She regretted discouraging her son’s passion for basketball, instead pressuring him to focus on test preparation. Despite the intensive tutoring classes, her son showed little progress in his grades and began to feel bored with his studies. One day, she decided to take him to a musical concert to help him relieve exam stress, unexpectedly, he imitated her voice and said, ‘Mom, don’t you know you’re wasting my time? Don’t you know how precious my time is?’ Embarrassed, Lilian did not know what to reply. The event caused her to reflect on her autocratic childrearing style and reconsider her ambition for her son’s educational achievement. She finally decided to stop the coaching classes for him and try to appreciate the positive sides of studying at a neighbourhood school where her son felt much happier and often received praise from teachers. As a teacher herself, Lilian was keenly aware that a child’s development is a process. ‘It is really cruel for children to face such intense academic competitions at such a young age’, she added, ‘especially for boys, who are generally late bloomers’.

Like Lilian, most of our respondents engaged in self-reflection from time to time, but simultaneously they felt the pressure from peers and compelled to equip their children with the best resources to secure a successful academic path out from the lower starting point for them. In many cases, the parents not only made heavy economic investment in their children’s education but also actively participated in their children’s learning and closely supervised their progress.

40-years-old Sam, a father of one son, came to Singapore to attend college and then continued his master’s studies in the UK. He returned to Singapore with his wife when she was bearing their son. For the sake of his only son’s education, Sam turned down a lucrative job offer from a company in China and chose to stay in Singapore as an engineer. He shared that he devoted almost all his spare time to his son’s education. Despite this, when asked about his self-assessment of parental involvement, he gave himself 7 points out of 10 only and said that he could have done better. Sam and his wife were not only focused on his son’s academic performance but also filled his schedule with various extracurricular activities in order to help him develop a broad range of skills and seize future opportunities. He said,

Since we know little about the system and are not sure about which direction is correct, we must ask our children to work hard in all aspects ... When he studies speech and debate, I help him think about topics. When he practices fencing, I play as an opponent for him. When he plays badminton, I learn how to play badminton to play with him. We want our son to develop a broad range of skills and be prepared to seize the opportunities in the future.

Leveraging WeChat and Chinese cultural identities

Recent studies demonstrate how Chinese social media platforms, particularly WeChat, not only enable Chinese diaspora to continue their Chinese ways of life abroad but also offer them a means to address their local concerns and engage in place-making to cope with displacement (Su and Yu 2022). Due to the lack of local cultural knowledge and social networks, most of the Chinese immigrant parents relied on migrant social networks and online media platforms such as WeChat to gain information and resources in terms of childrearing. Sam and his wife were involved in many Chinese immigrant parent online groups on WeChat. He said,

They are very important to us in dealing with the difficulties and puzzles we face in raising our son in Singapore ... Through WeChat, you can find hundreds of online parenting groups and official accounts dedicated to sharing Chinese immigrant parent's successful childrearing experiences and various information and resources you need including exam materials in Singapore. They offer a very good channel to learn about the local education system too. Otherwise, there are no other channels available.

Migrant online chat group plays a crucial role in helping immigrants navigate through the unfamiliar local education system and cultural codes. It facilitates the formation of a kind of migrant social capital conducive to children's education (Zhou and Kim 2006). However, it also encourages academic competition among immigrant children and intensifies parental anxieties. According to the parents, intensive parenting (*jiwa*) was the hottest topic on every online parenting group, which often propelled them to further increase their economic and emotional investments in their children's education. Also, these transnational online groups tend to help sustain and reproduce the norms, values, and ways of parenting in the home country that they were trying to flee.

After her daughter was allocated to a neighbour primary school, Lucy, a 42-year-old mother, joined a WeChat group organised by other Chinese immigrant mothers of her daughter's classmates. At first, she found it very useful as the mothers who shared common concerns offered useful information and solutions about academic and after-school activities, which made her feel very supportive. However, only after one year, she decided to exit the online chat group. She remarked,

Online mothering group is a mixed blessing. I indeed got a lot of useful information from it, which was difficult for me to get from other channels. But the mothers [in the group] always like to compare with each other, which made me feel more and more anxious. My daughter is not a typical 'good' student who excels in academic performance, but she has many other hobbies and strengths. For example, she loves hip hop, and she can imitate any dance she watches from the YouTube. But most of the parents in the group focus on scores only. They would frown upon hip hop ... I feel that they reproduce the same ways of parenting in China. So, I left the chat group later.

Lucy left the chat group that gave her a lot of peer pressure since her daughter was not a 'typical' good student with academic excellence. But this event also made her more determined that she wanted to respect and protect her daughter as 'an autonomous subject' (*duli de geti*) who 'could pursue a different path from others'. Lucy's desire to teach her daughter 'according to her aptitude' opened up the possibilities for her to explore a different style of parenting and re-learn how to be a good mother. She acknowledged that parenting is a two-way process through which parent and children can influence each other, and said, 'I've learned a lot from my daughter, so I'm willing to develop an equal relationship with her'. As discussed earlier, parents' frustrations and pressures in raising children were often unexpectedly turned into an opportunity to redefine their parenting orientation.

Apart from leveraging migrant social networks through ICTs, the cultivation of children's bilingual and bicultural capital is another way to cope with the uncertainties they perceive in and beyond Singapore. For many parents, seeking a bilingual educational environment for their children motivated them to migrate to (or remain in) Singapore. But at the same time, since English is the dominant language in Singapore, they were also worried that their children could not maintain their Chinese language proficiency while

living abroad, especially when compared to their peers in China. This concern was only heightened with the ascent of China's position in the global economy.

When asked about the languages they used at home, 40-year-old Camila said that her husband used to place greater emphasis on their son's English skills as he had been working for multinational corporations and knowing that 'English is still the dominant language' in the world. But she insisted that they should prioritise their son's Chinese practices at home. She said,

I don't worry so much about his English because when he is at school or hang out with friends, he always uses English. But I'm more worried about his Chinese. So, I require him to speak Chinese at home ... I think, as a parent from China, Chinese is our advantage. We should create as many opportunities as possible for our kids to practice Chinese at home.

42-year-old Amanda, a Chinese teacher, also devoted tremendous time and effort to ensuring her children immerse in a total Chinese-speaking environment at home. She kept pasting stickers of Chinese words on almost every corner of their house to make sure they could learn new words at all times. She regularly purchased Chinese children's story books and textbooks through online shopping sites to help them learn Chinese more effectively. She also enrolled them in one-on-one online Chinese lessons taught by native-speaking teachers. In addition to going back to China for home visits during school holidays, she encouraged them to communicate regularly with relatives and friends in China via WeChat. She continued,

I tell my children that China will be the most economically developed country in the world, they should be proficient in Chinese, so that they can compete with their peers who grow up in China.

However, it was not always easy for Amanda to achieve her goals. At first, she was so strict that she did never respond when her children spoke to her in English at home but instead reminded them in Chinese, 'Please speak Chinese to mom'. Later, however, she found that her children talked less and less with her and would rather keep silent at the dining table. Amanda gradually realised that she could not push her children too far but had to patiently wait for themselves to develop an interest in learning a language. This in turn prompted her to constantly reflect on her teaching styles and experiment on how to make Chinese language learning interesting. In addition to cultivating Chinese language skills, the parents also emphasised the importance of maintaining connections with China for their children. Some wanted to send their children back to China for study if they could not get into higher-ranking universities. A mother said that since her daughter was already a Singapore citizen, she could bypass *gaokao* to attend top universities in China as an international students. She said, 'My husband thinks that China will be the largest market, so she must know about it. Through four years of college, she will be able to establish networks there, which will be useful for her if she develops career in China. Also, we have family members in China who can look after her'.

For some parents, however, the active cultivation of their children's bilingual capacity and transnational connections was more likely to be driven by the settlement uncertainty they faced in Singapore. The difficulties in acquiring permanent resident status and

citizenship along with the risks of downward mobility at work urged some migrant parents to consciously cultivate their children's bilingual skills as a strategy for educational and career prospects beyond Singapore (Zhou and Wang 2019; see also Zhan and Zhou 2020). 42-year-old Molly and her husband had become permanent residents about 6 years ago, but their citizenship applications have been rejected twice. Without citizenship, they had no intention to purchase their own flat in Singapore, especially when the housing prices rose so fast in recent years. They thought that once their only daughter attended university overseas (including China), they would retire back to China or move on with her to another country. Another mother Wendy (55-year-old) also mentioned she and her husband might consider returning to China for retirement, since the Singapore PR application of her eldest daughter, who was studying in Canada, kept being rejected. This made it very hard for them to live together as a family. She said that she also hoped her son, who was studying at one of the best secondary schools in Singapore, to join them by finding a job in China after attending college in the future.

Conclusion

Using the analytical lens of doing security, this paper examines how middle-class Chinese migrant parents seek security and assurance through intensive parental involvement in childrearing, especially in their children's education, in Singapore. By situating migrant insecurity within both local and global contexts, it shows how the migrant parents' senses of insecurity are not only generated by the structural constraints in the host society, e.g. the differentiated and stratified education system and restrictive immigration policies, but also caused by their transnational class anxieties and ambitious (or ambiguous) positioning in the rapidly changing world beyond the host country. Through intensive parenting, the parents wanted to make sure that they could pass on their achieved class status to the next generation who was raised in a foreign country. In particular, the paper foregrounds the tremendous emotional and ethical work involved in the process of building security through parenthood.

This paper contributes to the scholarship on the emerging trend in middle-class migration from China, which is featured by securing reproduction and pursuing better futures for their children. While most of the studies have focused on the push factors of the exodus such as the dissatisfaction with the educational involution (*neijuan*) in China, the paper highlights parents' class-based anxieties and the impact of the evolving global economy on their migration and childrearing strategies. It also enriches our understanding of middle-class immigrant insecurities. It not only foregrounds the social and structural constraints that the relatively privileged migrants may face in the host society but also shows how they tend to be subject to self-imposed and future-oriented insecurity. In addition, the paper also highlights how the historical and transnational contexts in which migrants are embedded complicate their project of securing a better future for their children. With China's rise on the global stage, they not only hope their children to receive a cosmopolitan education and Western degrees but also to maintain their Chinese language skills and cultural identities which become increasingly important for their future success. While the ideology of good parenting in China continues to shape their behaviours (mainly via social media platforms such as WeChat),

their encounters with different cultural norms and childrearing styles in the host society open up opportunities of embracing alternative childrearing and becoming ‘a better self’ through parenthood.

Furthermore, the paper calls for attention to the implications of middle-class intensive parenting. Firstly, it serves to sustain or even broaden the inequality in a local education system which already involves high levels of parental involvement and efforts (as well as connections such as alumni affiliations), rendering the capital-poor working-class (both migrant and local) parents vulnerable and disadvantaged. The parents’ anxious and ambitious pursuit of a ‘better’ education for their children also helps to reproduce the existing inequalities in global education as their goals are largely guided by established international educational hierarchies (Xiang 2022). Secondly, since parents’ tremendous energy, emotions, time and labour have been absorbed into childrearing and children’s education in the private sphere, they tend to be distracted from the underlying, systemic factors that cause their insecurities, such as unequal primary school admission policies (see also Katz 2012).

Lastly, the paper has some limitations. It draws primarily on the experiences of professional, highly educated middle-class Chinese migrant parents, excluding those who are less-educated, lower-skilled but qualify as middle-class based on their income levels. Also, more research is needed to incorporate immigrant fathers’ voices and perspectives. Currently, most of the participants were mothers as they tended to be the primary caregiver of their children in the family. But it should be noted that this is also partly due to our recruitment methods. The snowball sampling might lead to the overrepresentation of females in our sample. In addition, future studies should delve deeper into the effects of China’s rise into a global force on Chinese immigrants’ childrearing strategies and aspirations, and the impact of the recent migration waves of upper- and middle-class Chinese on host countries in Asia. As Martin (2024) reminds us, China’s rise is reshaping not only macro-level geopolitics but also the micro level of people’s everyday experiences.

Notes

1. See Foo (2021).
2. The Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) is an annual national examination taken at the end of final year of primary school education in Singapore. PSLE is widely considered very important as it determines to a significant extent a child’s education and career opportunities in the future.
3. Most of the parents interviewed chose scores above 8 when they were asked to rate their involvement in children’s education on a scale of 1–10.
4. Prime Minister’s Office. 2024. Population in Brief 2023. https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/Population_in_Brief_2024.pdf.
5. International schools and specialised schools were excluded from the sampling criteria on the grounds that the implication of international schooling for local integration is more complicated or the curricular content is too different.
6. Families in which both parents are from Malaysia were excluded on the grounds of the close cultural proximity between Malaysia and Singapore.
7. The mothers tended to be the main caregiver of their children whereas their spouses tended to play a secondary role in childrearing. However, this does not mean that the fathers were less anxious about their children’s upbringing and education. Many mothers mentioned that

their spouses shared similar views and concerns about childrearing. They also pointed out that their spouses were much more involved in childrearing compared to their peers in China, as the couple lived abroad without or with little assistance in childcare from their parents and in-laws who were in China.

8. See <https://www.moe.gov.sg/primary/p1-registration/understand-balloting>.
9. See <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/our-programmes/gifted-education>.
10. Data collection for this study took place before the Singapore government announced reforms to the GEP system in August 2024.

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Ethics statement

The project has been approved by Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review Board (IRB number: IRB-2021-612).

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