

## Concerted Cultivation from Afar: Wealthy Chinese Families and Their Children at Swiss International Boarding Schools

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*Abstract:* Situated in the literature on China's economic elites and Early Study Abroad, the study employs interviews to explore how wealthy Chinese families cultivate their children through schooling at Swiss international boarding schools. It reveals their approach to education as extending beyond academics and strategies for concerted cultivation from afar. By focusing on the parenting of the wealthy, it thus adds to the discussion on concerted cultivation, highlighting the lack of class anxiety and pivotal role of economic resources in such practices.

*Keywords:* Concerted cultivation, parenting, studying abroad, international education, Swiss international boarding schools

### L'apprentissage concerté à distance : les familles chinoises aisées et leurs enfants dans les internats internationaux suisses

*Résumé:* S'inscrivant dans la littérature sur les élites économiques chinoises et les études précoces à l'étranger, cette étude explore au travers d'entretiens la façon dont les familles chinoises aisées éduquent leurs enfants en les scolarisant dans des internats internationaux suisses. Elle révèle leur approche de l'éducation comme allant au-delà des aspects académiques et des stratégies de culture concertée à distance. En se concentrant sur l'éducation parentale des personnes aisées, l'étude contribue au débat sur la culture concertée, en soulignant l'absence d'anxiété de classe et l'importance des ressources économiques dans de telles pratiques.

*Mots-clés:* Apprentissage concerté, parentalité, études à l'étranger, éducation internationale, internats internationaux suisses

### Abgestimmte Kultivierung aus der Ferne: Wohlhabende chinesische Familien und ihre Kinder an internationalen Internaten in der Schweiz

*Zusammenfassung:* Auf der Grundlage der Forschung zu wirtschaftlichen Eliten Chinas und zum Phänomen Early Study Abroad behandelt die vorliegende Studie mithilfe von Interviews die Frage, wie wohlhabende chinesische Familien ihre Kinder mittels Besuch internationaler Internate in der Schweiz erziehen. Es wird gezeigt, dass der Bildungsansatz der Familien über akademische Aspekte und Strategien abgestimmten Kultivierung aus der Ferne hinausgeht. Indem Erziehungsstile von Wohlhabenden mit dem Phänomen abgestimmter Kultivierung zusammengebracht werden, werden die Abwesenheit von sozialer Abstiegsangst und die Wichtigkeit wirtschaftlicher Ressourcen hervorgehoben.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Abgestimmte Kultivierung, Erziehung, Studium im Ausland, internationale Internate in der Schweiz

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

China is the largest sending country of international students worldwide (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2023). From 2003 to 2019, the number of Chinese students abroad increased almost sixfold, reaching 703 500 (MOE 2004; 2020).<sup>2</sup> The growing figure coincides with the country's economic development over the past decades and the rise of household income, making overseas education increasingly financially accessible to Chinese families (Fong 2011). However, the literature often labels study abroad as a “middle-class” practice in the Chinese context, thus collapsing more economically privileged families into the “middle” category (Zhou et al. 2019; Wang 2020). In fact, China's wealthy had joined the tide of study abroad long before it was popularized in the country.

In a study of successful Chinese entrepreneurs, 80 percent planned to send their children abroad for education, and about 60 percent were considering overseas education as early as primary and middle school (Hurun 2014). This Early Study Abroad (ESA) practice, defined as “the education exodus of pre-college students” by Kang and Abelman (2011), sets it apart from the Chinese mainstream, where students go abroad for higher education (New Oriental 2023). While ESA is rather nascent in China, it is growing rapidly. Chinese students have become the largest group of international students in secondary schools in Australia, Canada, and the US (Farrugia 2014).

This study focuses on the burgeoning ESA practice of Chinese families sending their children to Switzerland for an international boarding school education. On the website of Nobel Wings (2022), a Swiss education consulting company serving the Chinese, Chinese families can choose from 23 Swiss international boarding schools (SIBSs), including 16 in the French-speaking region, 6 in the German-speaking region, and 1 in the Italian-speaking region. These schools are characterized by a nationally diverse student population, ranging from 17 to 120 nationalities. Six of these schools accept kindergarten-aged students as young as three, but most offer an upper primary through high school education. The majority provide the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, with additional options such as A-levels, the US high school diploma, the French baccalauréat, and the Swiss maturité. The annual tuition fees and boarding expenses range from around 70 000 CHF to 150 000 CHF. This high fee constrains SIBSs to the Chinese upper class, as those who can afford such schools are in the top of China's economic strata. No statistics exist on the exact size of the Chinese student population at SIBSs; although, a news article states that

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2 The number of Chinese students abroad plummeted between 2020 and 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and government-imposed international travel restrictions. The Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China has yet to release any updated statistics since 2020.

from 2013 to 2017, the number of Chinese students in Switzerland for middle- and high-school increased from 308 to 432 (Foppa 2018).

Based on seven in-depth interviews with Chinese mothers whose children were currently studying or had studied at SIBSs, this exploratory study addresses the research question of how wealthy Chinese families cultivate their children through schooling at SIBSs. The paper starts with a brief literature review on study abroad practices among wealthy families in China with a focus on parental intent. It then introduces the theoretical framework of outsourced concerted cultivation (Ma and Wright 2021), built upon Lareau's (2003) concerted cultivation. After a brief discussion of the study's methods, the bulk of the paper presents findings from the empirical research, divided into two themes: 1) The wealthy Chinese mothers in the study did not focus exclusively on their children's academic performance and instead were drawn to the diverse cultural pursuits and opportunities for socio-emotional development at SIBSs; 2) They practiced concerted cultivation from afar during their children's studies at SIBSs with their economic resources, time, and cultural dispositions.

This study contributes to the existing literature by filling gaps in research on parenting and study-abroad practices of wealthy Chinese mothers. In addition, it builds on the ongoing discussion of concerted cultivation, especially the newly proposed framework of outsourced concerted cultivation, by confirming the absence of class anxiety and highlighting the importance of economic resources in concerted cultivation. The study concludes by calling for further research to spotlight other parties in ESA, namely fathers.

## 2 Literature Review

While the lives of the wealthy have been perennial topics for social scientists in the West, there is less academic attention given to economic elites in post-Socialist countries, as individual wealth accumulation there is a relatively new concept (Schimpfössl 2018). This study focuses on the wealthy Chinese who have lived through China's economic transition over the past few decades. China was under a state redistributive economy for nearly 30 years. It was not until the Economic Reform and Opening Up of 1978 that the country was gradually transformed into a market economy "with socialist characteristics", followed by large-scale privatization and economic development. In recent years, the blooming of e-commerce and technology has led to an explosive growth of high-net-worth individuals (Lu et al. 2021). According to the Credit Suisse Research Institute (2022), China has 9.9 percent of the world's US dollar millionaires, ranking it second after the US.

Drawing on data from the Hurun China Rich Lists from 2000 to 2018, Lu et al. (2021) outline some common features of high-net-worth individuals in China. Most

individuals on the list are first-generation members of the economic elite, coming from humble family backgrounds. Political resource possession is not uncommon, enabling them to make profits or improve their socio-political status – rather than to wield political influence on policy formulation. The education level of these individuals continues to increase, with 48 percent of the 2012–2018 cohort holding a bachelor's degree or above. Few on the list studied abroad, but that number has already experienced a big leap from merely 2 percent in the 2002–2011 cohort to 10 percent in the 2012–2018 cohort.

The small percentage of high-net-worth Chinese individuals with an overseas education background is consistent with the fact that studying abroad was a practice on a much smaller scale in the country only two decades ago (MOE 2004). Currently, China leads the list of countries with the most students abroad (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2023), and much literature exists on this education practice, especially on the mainstream trend of students going to Anglophone countries for higher education (New Oriental 2023).

While most empirical research focuses on students' experiences (Zhu 2016), a few articles spotlight families' roles. Bodycott (2009) surveys parents and students at an international education fair in China and finds that the deep-rooted Confucian notion of filial piety significantly affects the decision-making process of studying abroad. A student's educational decisions are not just individual choices, but ones that combine with family expectations and needs, especially as parents are often the leading investors in an education abroad. Similarly, Wang (2020) collected data from undergraduate Chinese students in the US but used their narratives to construct the motivations of their families. Three-fourths of the participants identified their decisions to study abroad as made jointly by them and their parents. This again highlights the importance of parental intent in children's overseas education. Additionally, using Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1986) as the conceptual framework, Wang (2020) illustrates how studying abroad in the US is seen by participants and their families as a way of marking their middle-class *habitus* and reproducing their social position through the educational field.

Parental intent likely plays an even more critical role in ESA because of the students' young ages. Although ESA is still a relatively new practice in China, it can be dated to the late 1980s in other parts of the Asia-Pacific. It also takes various forms, such as boarding schools, day schools with homestays, and "wild goose families" with mothers accompanying children abroad and fathers staying in the home countries to ensure the families' financial security (Shin 2013). For example, Min Zhou (1998) focuses on the "parachute kids" from Taiwan who seek schooling by themselves in Southern California. Her research reveals a series of inherent risks in these transnational families, such as the lack of direct parental support on the student side and high emotional costs on the family side. Shin's (2013) ethnographic research examines ESA as a strategy for class mobility for Korean middle-class "wild

goose families” in Toronto, Canada, and explores how these families deal with their anxiety by negotiating the meanings of success.

Limited literature exists on ESA among the Chinese, with the majority focusing on students’ perspectives. Jing et al. (2022) makes an exception in that they interview both Chinese students and parents on their motivations to pursue a secondary education in Canada and present the results as push-pull factors on micro- and macro-levels. Push factors include poor academic performance in China, desire for cultural exploration, dissatisfaction with Chinese politics, pressure in Chinese schools, and intense competition for university entrance. Pull factors include opportunities to improve foreign languages, recommendations from friends and families, higher-quality education, lower tuition fees, greater potential for immigration, greater safety, and a better natural environment.

The current study delves into the research question of how wealthy Chinese mothers cultivate their children through schooling at Swiss International Boarding Schools. It adds to the literature discussed above, foregrounding discussions of parenting in the research on China’s economic elites and ESA practices.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

Outsourced concerted cultivation, as proposed by Ma and Wright (2021), is built upon Lareau’s (2003) concerted cultivation, a concept that describes an intensive, attentive parenting strategy among the middle class. Concerted cultivation is characterized by parents’ active intervention in children’s schooling and the organization of enrichment activities. This is contrasted by the accomplishment of natural growth among the working class and poor families, in which children are given more control over their leisure activities. Under concerted cultivation, middle-class children learn to act, talk, and get their way in institutional settings.

Over the past two decades, researchers have used concerted cultivation in various settings. For example, Maxwell and Aggleton (2013) employ the concept to examine young women’s experiences at private schools in England. Their research shows that concerted cultivation has influenced their families’ decision to pursue private education. Although private education produces various forms of privilege in these young women’s lives, that decision is less associated with a strategy of class reproduction, as suggested by some previous studies, than with the families’ concern for their children’s socio-emotional well-being. Sherman (2017) uses this concept to illustrate conflicted attitudes toward childrearing among wealthy families in New York City. Those parents consciously constrain their children’s entitlements and expose them to less advantaged others in an effort to produce morally good people, but these strategies come into tension with the conventional imperative of expanding children’s selfhood and opportunities.

Ma and Wright (2021) apply concerted cultivation to an international education context, in their examination of Chinese “new rich” families that outsource concerted cultivation to international schools and education consulting companies in China. With high educational aspirations for their children, these parents aim for top-ranked universities abroad, especially in the Anglophone West, to enhance their children’s career prospects and produce social status and cultural prestige. Since the parents lack knowledge and experience in international higher education, they seek external support by enrolling their children in international schools and hiring education consultants in China.

Ma and Wright (2021) thus propose outsourced concerted cultivation as a new framework to capture this specific kind of concerted cultivation practice, one distinguished by parents’ limited cultural engagement in their children’s schooling. While the parents studied were able to convert economic investments into desired educational opportunities without much cultural engagement, that process was filled with intense anxiety, as the parents were left with few resources beyond complaints when providers failed to meet their expectations.

The Chinese mothers in this study also “outsourced” concerted cultivation to education providers: Swiss international boarding schools. However, doing so entails significantly more economic resources than using international schools and education consulting services in China. In addition, most children in the current study are in the early stages of their educational journeys, still a few years away from university. The findings section will further discuss whether outsourced concerted cultivation adequately captures how wealthy Chinese parents cultivate their children through SIBSs.

## 4 Methods

Seven participants who fulfilled two criteria were recruited: 1) self-identified as Chinese<sup>3</sup> and 2) had children who were studying or had within the past five years studied at SIBSs. Three participants were recruited from within my social network, and four, through snowballing after the first round of data collection. I identified the participants as “wealthy” as they could fund their children’s SIBS tuition without financial aid from the schools, which cost from around 70 000 CHF to 150 000 CHF per year.

The fact that I was only able to recruit seven participants reflects the hard-to-reach nature of this economically privileged population in China. That said, as an exploratory study, this research aims not to identify a representative sample but rather to better understand a phenomenon through first-hand reporting of partici-

3 I used the general term “Chinese families” (中国家庭) in the recruitment post to avoid probing their immigration status, which could be considered a sensitive topic.

pants’ experiences (Small 2009). It thereby contributes diverse views and important insights to the literature.

In-depth interviews, conducted in late 2021, were the primary data collection method. Only the first interview with Zhou was conducted face-to-face at her rented apartment in Switzerland, as she was there to take care of her son. The other interviews were audio calls since I could not travel to China, where the rest of the participants lived, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were semi-structured. I asked open-ended questions about their decision-making processes, parenting experiences, and changes witnessed in their children. I also added follow-up questions when necessary. All interviews were in Mandarin Chinese, both my mother tongue and that of the participants, and were audio-recorded with their permission. They lasted between 40 and 166 minutes, with a median of 63 minutes. I transcribed the interviews using iFlyrec, a Chinese automatic audio transcription platform, and manually checked the transcriptions for accuracy, adding markers of non-verbal communication such as pauses and laughter.

My coding process was both deductive and inductive. First, I generated an initial list of codes from reviewing the literature on concerted cultivation, such as class anxiety, extracurricular management, and institutional involvement. Then, I engaged in a first round of coding in which I applied the deductive codes and, at the same time, noted down further codes that emerged inductively, such as competitive parenting in China, visits to Switzerland, and frequent communication. In the next round of coding, I organized the deductive and inductive codes into groups and subgroups and eventually generated initial themes and sub-themes. In the last round of coding, I further examined the themes in relation to the research question and refined them into the two main themes presented in the findings section.

Table 1 presents the participants’ profiles and other relevant details. The names in the table are pseudonyms. Biographical details, if not mentioned during the interviews, were collected through a short online survey afterward. At the time of the study, all participants lived in top-tier Chinese cities except for Zhou, who

Table 1                      Profile and Relevant Details of Participants

| Name    | Age | Location   | Occupation       | Partner’s Occupation | Child’s Gender | Child’s Age | Child’s Years Spent at SIBS |
|---------|-----|------------|------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Zhou    | 50  | Ollon (CH) | Housewife        | N/A                  | M              | 11          | 2.0                         |
| Ting    | 50  | Shanghai   | Housewife        | Business Owner       | F              | 18          | 6.0                         |
|         |     |            |                  |                      | M              | 15          | 3.5                         |
| Sherry  | 50  | Shenzhen   | Housewife        | Business Owner       | F              | 13          | 1.5                         |
| Ann     | 40s | Shanghai   | Business Partner | Business Owner       | F              | 17          | 2.0                         |
| Hai     | 40s | Shanghai   | Public Sector    | Private Sector       | F              | 17          | 5.5                         |
| Jessie  | 30s | Shanghai   | Housewife        | Private Sector       | M              | 14          | 3.5                         |
| Rebecca | 30s | Shanghai   | Housewife        | Business Owner       | F              | 10          | 3.5                         |

had accompanied her son to Switzerland for one and a half years. Ting was the only other parent who had accompanied her children long-term to Switzerland (two years), though she had returned to China at the time of the study. Five participants identified themselves as housewives. Five participants had two children; two had one child. Only one participant sent both her children to SIBSs.

While I did not specify any gender preference when recruiting participants, all participants happened to be mothers. Park's (2018) study with Korean students at elite US universities highlights the role of mothers, mostly stay-at-home moms, as "concerted cultivators" before children's high school years, managing all kinds of organized activities, and as "emotional experts" at all stages, taking care of children's emotional well-being. The mothers' intensive involvement in their children's early years contrasted with the fathers' more distant role as mediator and study-abroad counselor.

Participants in this study seemingly assumed the role of both "concerted cultivator" and "emotional expert." During interviews, they generously shared logistical details about the school selection process, visits to Switzerland, management of extracurricular activities, and so on. They also seemed emotionally engaged in their children's schooling, sharing both joy at learning about their children's growth and worry at seeing their children struggle. If the participants had been fathers, the interview data might have revealed other aspects of parental involvement, which would have required a different theoretical framework.

Of the participants' eight children who had studied at SIBSs, three identified as male and five as female. Six were studying at SIBSs at the time of the study; two were not. The age at which the children started school at a SIBS ranged from 7–15, and they had spent 1.5–5 years at SIBSs at the time of the study. A total of six SIBSs are represented in the sample, including three junior SIBSs, which provide an education until the age of 13 or 14, and three SIBSs with high school divisions. Four are in the French-speaking region of Switzerland; one, the German-speaking region; and one, the Italian-speaking region. Children at the high school level were all enrolled in an IB curriculum although their schools also provided other options, such as the US high school diploma and French baccalauréat. Four children changed schools during their time in Switzerland. Two graduated from junior SIBSs and moved to SIBSs with high school divisions. Two had studied at a Swiss international day school when their mothers lived in Switzerland to care for them.

In qualitative research, it is essential for researchers to be transparent about their positionality vis-à-vis the participants and research topic (Jones et al. 2022). I grew up in a middle-class household in a top-tier city in China, with both parents holding a bachelor's degree or above. At the time of the study, I was on a full scholarship to pursue my Master's in Anthropology and Sociology in Switzerland. I initially worried that the participants would perceive me as "interviewing up" because of my lower socioeconomic status (Smith 2006). However, I soon realized that our



age differences were more relevant than our social class ones. More precisely, it was the difference in our family roles that became important, with participants being mothers and me being a daughter. During the interviews, I sometimes leaned into my position as a “daughter” and shared my parents’ involvement in my education journey, to make the conversation more reciprocal. This often helped open up conversations and elicit related stories from the participants.

## 5 Findings

The following subsections present two main themes from the interviews, which answer the question of how wealthy Chinese families cultivate their children through schooling at SIBSs. The first theme captures mothers’ attitudes towards education as important but not exclusively so. In addition, they valued the diverse cultural pursuits and socio-emotional development offered by SIBSs. The second theme illustrates how these mothers continued practicing concerted cultivation from afar when their children were at SIBSs, something made possible by their sufficient economic resources, time, and cultural dispositions.

### 5.1 Education is Important, but Not Exclusively

Like the middle-class English parents in Irwin and Elley’s study (2011), the wealthy Chinese mothers in this study seemed assured that their children would inherit their class advantages. Hence, although they valued their children’s education, they did not exclusively focus on academic performance. Ting attributed her decision to send her son abroad for school to insufficient academic opportunities in China: “What he could learn, no matter English, Chinese, or mathematics, as a third grader in China, is very limited. So, my thought then was to send him out [of the country].” However, when asked what concerned her during his studies at a SIBS, Ting claimed, “I don’t care what kind of university he gets into in the future because I’ve never heard of any of the kids studying at international schools in Switzerland worrying about jobs. Most of their families have their own businesses. If they go back [to China], they may take over their family businesses. So, it’s unlikely that they need to worry about job hunting. Quite unlikely.”

Indeed, while the “new rich” Chinese families in Ma and Wright (2021) display high aspirations and intense anxiety over their children’s university admissions overseas, with the ultimate goal of reproducing class advantages, there was little evidence of this type of class anxiety among the mothers in this study. These participants instead frowned upon the competitive parenting strategy prevalent in China, which they described using the Internet buzzword “involution” (*neijuan*). Initially coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1969) to describe how greater input does not necessarily yield proportionally greater output, the term captures

the excessive educational competition that parents witnessed in China (Si 2023). Involution, according to Chinese sociologist Fei Yan, is a middle-class practice that originates from a class anxiety about downward mobility (Zhou 2020). From a place of confidence in the continuation of their class status across generations, the wealthy mothers in this study labeled involution as “cruel” and “aggressive”.

Nevertheless, a few participants confessed that this parenting strategy was so prevalent in China that it was difficult not to adopt an education-above-all mindset when their children were in Chinese schools. They looked into schooling options abroad to bypass educational competition for their children and to avoid emotional exhaustion for themselves. Ann recounted a critical moment when she decided to send her daughter abroad. After her daughter finished fourth grade, she heard from another parent that many of her classmates had enrolled in after-school tutoring that summer to prepare for the middle school entrance exam. “I was initially very nervous hearing that,” Ann recalled, “very nervous. I thought, how come I didn’t know about this information? All the kids but mine were in tutoring now. She’s left behind!” Ann continued, “I thought about it later and realized, no, I cannot just go with the flow... I didn’t want to bear this pressure, nor did I want my kid to bear it.”

The parents in the study cited the diverse opportunities available as SIBSs as the main reason for sending their children there, which corresponds to the idea of concerted cultivation for the present (focused on children’s development) rather than the future (focused on reproducing class advantage) in Irwin and Elley (2011). Instead of exclusively focusing on academic performance, the mothers in this study believed their children’s schooling at SIBSs was “holistic”, “comprehensive”, and “all-rounded”. When asked for elucidation, they gave lengthy descriptions of their children’s various cultural pursuits at school, including sports activities, language lessons, music performances, and international excursions.

Regarding academic learning, the focus was not so much on their children’s performance but rather on their motivation and interests. Hai, whose daughter was about to start college applications, was proud of her being independent and making her own decisions about majors and universities: “Regardless of her college (admissions) results, I think her attitude towards learning is what I hope to see – that she learns because she loves to learn and wants to learn.” Indeed, like the English parents in Maxwell and Aggleton (2013), the mothers in this study primarily wished for their children to “try their hardest and enjoy school” rather than achieve particular academic outcomes. In addition, when asked about major changes they have witnessed in their children since enrolling in SIBSs, they primarily emphasized changes in character, saying that their children had become more mature, independent, emotionally stable, tolerant, courageous, and courteous. This again mirrors the parents in Maxwell and Aggleton (2013), who mainly care about their children becoming “happy, sociable individuals” at English private schools.

## 5.2 Concerted Cultivation from Afar

In her work on Taiwanese “parachute kids” in the US, Min Zhou (1998) details a few specificities of ESA, including the lack of direct support from parents and the large financial expenses required of parents. As the wealthy Chinese mothers in this study sent their children thousands of miles away for schooling, they strived to make up for a lack of direct support by practicing intensive, attentive parenting from afar, made possible by their sufficient time, economic resources, and, in some cases, cultural dispositions.

Like the Chinese parents in Ma and Wright (2021), the mothers in this study lacked knowledge and experience when it came to overseas education, as none had studied abroad. However, while the parents in Ma and Wright (2021) could only rely on social contacts when selecting international schools and education consultants, which resulted in anxiety due to information gaps, the mothers in this study were able to make more informed school choices through on-site visits. Five of the seven parents had sent their children to SISBs for summer camp before full-time enrollment, during which they paid visits to several SIBSs either by themselves or on organized trips. Three parents had also sent their children to summer camps at US boarding schools to compare the two study-abroad destinations. When explaining how the final school choice was made, the mothers listed a number of reasons in detail, citing the opinions of their children and themselves. With more economic resources invested in the school selection process, the parents in this study could make more informed and, therefore, confident decisions than those deciding solely based on word of mouth (Ma and Wright 2021).

To compensate for the lack of direct socio-emotional support, the mothers in this study created ample opportunities to spend time with their children during their studies at SIBSs, either by visiting them in Switzerland or paying for their trips back to China during breaks. Two mothers even arranged to accompany their children long-term in Switzerland, resembling the “wild goose family” in South Korea (Shin 2013). It is worth noting that regardless of whether they were in Switzerland short-term or long-term, the mothers could only see their children for one to two days each week due to the nature of boarding schools. However, even though a few brought up the high costs of these frequent visits or long-term accompaniment, in general, the mothers saw those visits as necessary to take care of their children’s socio-emotional needs and deal with any problems in time.

Min Zhou (1998) shows not only that ESA children receive limited direct parental support due to the long distance from home, but also that parents pay high emotional costs for being separated from their young children. Park (2018) finds that in the case of Korean college students at elite US universities, it is usually their mothers, mostly housewives, who take on the emotional labor of managing the distance. Similarly, the mothers in this study demonstrated emotional struggles

around being physically away from their children while at the same time serving as the “emotional experts” for their children during their studies at SIBSs.

Sherry’s daughter encountered many problems during her first year at a SIBS, such as demotivation in learning and difficulties making friends, which deeply worried Sherry. Although she was a stay-at-home mom, she could not accompany her daughter long-term in Switzerland due to visa issues. Sherry strived to maintain frequent contact with her daughter over the phone and worked with an education consultant and a Chinese friend in Switzerland to closely monitor her emotional well-being. Sherry was finally able to travel to Switzerland for three months one summer. She shared her intense emotional struggles during her last week in Switzerland: “I sent her back to school but left a week later, during which I walked around her campus every day, hoping to see her once again. I secretly filmed her once when she was out on the playground for PE [physical education] classes. I cannot let go of how much I would miss her. However, you still need to push her forward on the path because you made the choice. You, as a parent, need to adjust to it.”

Besides managing their children’s emotional well-being, the mothers in the study actively engaged with their children’s schooling. This differs from the parents in Ma and Wright (2021), who seemed to wholly outsource concerted cultivation to international schools and education consultants, heavily relying on the guidance provided. Ann shared how she supported her daughter emotionally and strategically during a challenging world literature course. Not only did Ann stay up late every night to chat with her and encourage her, but she also gave her advice on how to deal with the challenges, such as adjusting her mindset and seeking help from her teacher. After the situation improved, Ann continued to help her daughter during the rest of the school year by buying her required books in Chinese, reading the books with her, and discussing the ideas afterwards. The two anecdotes above demonstrate that concerted cultivation from afar requires economic resources, time, and a cultural disposition to navigate educational settings overseas, which the “new rich” families in Ma and Wright (2021) might not have possessed to the same extent as the wealthy parents in this study.

The mothers in this study also actively intervened in institutional settings in different ways (Lareau 2003). Four of the seven parents hired private tutors for their children when they returned to China on school breaks to compensate for areas that they perceived to be insufficient at the SIBSs, including Chinese, mathematics, writing, and SAT preparation, the standardized test for college admissions in the US. Ting revealed that she paid nearly as much for her daughter’s private tutoring as for her SIBS tuition. Three parents shared that they had initiated dialogue with the schools when problems arose, sometimes with the help of Google Translator or education consultants. For example, in response to her daughter’s maladjustment, Sherry wrote emails to the school principal, sharing her daughter’s demotivation in learning and asking her teachers to assign extra work. Sherry perceived this com-

munication as positive, as she immediately saw the school acting, and believed that she needed to keep up this close communication.

In a more extreme case, when Ting's son demonstrated maladjusted behaviors during his first year at a SIBS, Ting started immigration procedures for him so that he could transfer to a Swiss international day school and she could stay in Switzerland long-term to take care of him. When she later realized her son's decreasing Chinese proficiency, she brought him back to China and enrolled him in an international school there while hiring private tutors to help with his Chinese for two years. At the time of the interview, Ting decided that he was ready for a SIBS again and was managing to transfer him back to his old school. This tortuous schooling journey would not be possible without the time, economic resources, and cultural knowledge that Ting had invested in her intensive, attentive parenting.

## 6 Conclusion and Implications

Through seven in-depth interviews with wealthy Chinese mothers, this study explores how those families cultivated their children through schooling at SIBSs. The participants were confident that their children would inherit their social class advantages and continue their lifestyles. Therefore, while they valued their children's education, they did not demonstrate class anxiety and disagreed with the competitive parenting practices that are prevalent among the middle class in China. Their decision to send their children to SIBSs demonstrated what Irwin and Elley (2011) call concerted cultivation in the present, placing value on diverse cultural pursuits and socio-emotional development at school.

At the same time, participants in this study strived to make up for a lack of direct parental support entailed by the ESA practice. At the very beginning of their children's ESA journey, they made on-site visits with their children to make informed school choices. After their children enrolled at a SIBS, they traveled to Switzerland frequently, closely monitored their children's well-being, kept regular contact with the school, and intervened in institutional settings when necessary. Therefore, while it seemed like the participants had outsourced concerted cultivation (Ma and Wright 2021) to the SIBSs, they still practiced it from afar, made possible by their economic resources, time, and cultural dispositions in some cases.

This study has the following implications. First, it adds to the literature on parenting practices of the wealthy, an area to which existing research pays little attention. The extant literature primarily focuses on the parenting practices of the middle and working class, defining class in broad strokes (Sherman 2017). Furthermore, this research adds to the literature on study abroad practices among the wealthy. In the case of China, previous literature has labeled study abroad as a middle-class practice, collapsing more economically privileged families into the

“middle” category (Zhou et al. 2019; Wang 2020). In sum, this study expands the literature on parenting and studying abroad by exploring the practices of an economically privileged population.

Relatedly, the study confirms the finding of Irwin and Elley (2011) and Maxwell and Aggleton (2013) that for middle-class English families, class anxiety is not necessarily the main drive for concerted cultivation. Such class anxiety is also absent in Sherman’s (2017) study on wealthy families in New York. The wealthy Chinese parents in this study were confident that their children would inherit their class advantages. As a result, concerted cultivation was for them less about class reproduction than about their children’s development, as in Irwin and Elley (2011) and Maxwell and Aggleton (2013).

By using outsourced concerted cultivation as its theoretical framework, this study contributes to both Lareau’s (2003) original discussions on concerted cultivation and this newly proposed framework by Ma and Wright (2021). While Ma and Wright (2021) focus on “new rich” Chinese families outsourcing concerted cultivation to international high schools and educational consultants in China, this study applies the theoretical framework to a different parent population, destination of study, and type of school, discussing how wealthy Chinese families outsource concerted cultivation to SIBSs. The findings of Ma and Wright (2021) and of the current study exhibit significant differences in how Chinese families outsource concerted cultivation.

In addition, the study foregrounds economic resources in the practice of concerted cultivation, as suggested by Ma and Wright (2021). The participants disagreed with the education-above-all mindset prevalent among the Chinese middle class and outsourced concerted cultivation to expensive SIBSs so that their children could be exposed to diverse cultural pursuits. Because of their time and economic resources, they were able to continue practicing concerted cultivation even though their children studied thousands of miles away. The study also highlights the importance of cultural knowledge, which enabled the participants to be more engaged in their children’s schooling than the parents in Ma and Wright (2021).

This study investigates a little-known education and parenting practice of a hard-to-reach population. However, there are limitations to spotlighting only the mothers. Further research on ESA and transnational parenting could also collect data from the children, or the fathers. Park (2018) shows that among Korean students at elite US universities, mothers’ practical decisions decrease as their children grow older, and fathers become more and more engaged in guiding their children’s education. It would thus be interesting to explore fathers’ involvement and the gender division of family roles during a child’s ESA.

## 7 References

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