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Childhood, Migration and the Pursuit of Happiness in Middle-Class East Asia

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ABSTRACT

This special issue explores the shifting landscape of global middle-class migration within and from East Asia by taking the relationship between mobility, parenting ideals and changing educational desires as its focus. Contributions explore how East Asian middle-class families balance the emergent emphasis on their children's well-being with the demands of global competitiveness as these often-antagonistic desires are projected onto old and new migration destinations against the background of global geopolitical and economic power shifts. Instead of reifying the simplistic binary of hierarchical, achievement-oriented East Asian 'Confucian educational norms' versus democratic, well-being-focussed Western ideals, the contributions offer a nuanced understanding of how these educational ideals coexist within the social, cultural, political and economic contexts of families. By carefully assessing the dialectically entwined intimate experiences of parents and children, the articles collected here set out to broaden our understanding of how middle-class families in Singapore, South Korea, Japan and China attempt to negotiate the tension between prioritizing children's happiness and maintaining global competitiveness result in a variety of strategies from migrating to less obvious international destinations to crafting domestic alternatives. Taken together, the articles reveal consistent patterns of middle-class migration and child-rearing decisions that contest and reshape conventional notions of success, attesting to a shift in global middle-class migration trends and to the importance of child-rearing in migratory decisions.

1 | Introduction

Migration as a vehicle of lifestyle aspirations—rather than only economic accumulation—has long been thought of as Western privilege (Benson and Osbaldiston 2016; Kunz 2016) but is in fact increasingly typical of the burgeoning global middle classes (Xiang and Nyíri 2022). The scope and significance of global middle-class migration remain poorly understood. Research to date has focussed chiefly on the effects of immigrant investment and wealth on real-estate markets (e.g. Rogers, Nelson, and Wong 2018), occasionally in relation to educational migration (Beck and Gaspar 2024; Robertson and Rogers 2017). Yet as more reports emerge on the diversity and multidirectionality of middle-class migration—from Chinese and Indian students and corporate 'expatriates' and Russian tech workers in Western capitals (Metz and Satariano) to Malaysian and Chinese real estate buyers in Japan and the Philippines (Juwai 2023; Chmiel 2019; Donnelly 2016)—the need for a new research agenda becomes increasingly apparent. Future research must account for the growing complexity of both origin and destination countries, in which East-to-West and South-to-North flows can no longer be taken for granted. To do so, it must extend both to the domestic social, economic and political causes of migration and the motivation of destination choices.

This special issue intends to further such a conversation by focussing on the intersection between aspirations, parenting ideologies and migration. Social reproduction and child-rearing practices that mediate it constitute a field in which shifting aspirations for a good life, success and happiness, as well as the anxieties surrounding these, become manifest (Lareau 2003). This is perhaps particularly so for the middle class, which is privileged enough to be susceptible to the shifting norms of postmaterial aspirations (Inglehart 1971) yet vulnerable to losing that privilege (Ehrenreich 1990). Considering that hopes associated with migration are often closely linked to hopes for one's children, it is perhaps surprising that the links between migration and social reproduction, or the role of children in migration, have not been more widely acknowledged despite important recent work in this direction (Parreñas 2001; Orellana et al. 2001; Dobson 2009; White et al. 2011; Waters 2015; Choi, Yeoh, and Lam 2019). For the middle classes that decide to move for reasons other than immediate material need, such links acquire a distinct significance.

Our issue focusses on East Asia, a region that, as a result of dynamic economic growth, has witnessed momentous shifts in demographics, social norms, migration dynamics and the rise of extensive middle classes since the end of the Cold War. In East Asia, longstanding child-rearing and educational norms—habitually labelled 'Confucian'—may still govern social mobility but are increasingly questioned when confronted with successive waves of 'modern' ideals associated with the 'West' that reflect shifting understandings of success, and multiple pathways leading towards it (Woronov 2007; Hoffman and Zhao 2008; Xu 2017) are being negotiated, as the imagined ideal futures of the family and the child are no longer projected exclusively onto Anglo-American universities (Fong 2011; Lan 2018) but to peripheral destinations such as Eastern (Beck and Nyíri 2022) and Southern Europe (Beck and Gaspar 2024) or Southeast Asia (Li, Guo, and Aranya 2023), valued for their supposedly laid back and healthy lifestyles instead of their superior education and global competitiveness. Such aspirations are sometimes born before the child itself and take shape in various forms of international mobility, from 'birth tourism' (Folse 2023) to educational migration and the lifestyle migration of entire families or various configurations of transnational families.

This special issue focusses on the international mobility of middle-class children and their families in/from East Asia. It explores the links among different forms of mobility, shifting parenting ideals, the changing content of 'educational desire' (Kipnis 2011) and lifestyle aspirations as they are projected onto both old and new migration destinations against the background of global geopolitical and economic power shifts.

2 | A Child-Centred Perspective

Given the adult-centred nature of the social sciences in general, and the dominance of economic-rational approaches to migration mostly interested in the migrant as an adult paid worker (Ackers and Stalford 2004), the role of children in migration has overwhelmingly been conceptualized as a sort of collateral damage: either having to adjust to a new environment as a result of parents' migrations or being 'left behind' (Orellana et al. 2001; Dobson 2009; White et al. 2011). Although the increasing international mobility of tertiary-education students (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2023) has emerged as a major research subject in recent decades, it has been studied by scholars of higher education (e.g. Hoey and Law 2018) or, sometimes, psychologists (e.g. Li, Wang, and Xiao 2014), in isolation from migration studies undertaken by sociologists, demographers and anthropologists (for a recent call to correct this, see Brooks and Waters 2021). It was the emergence of pre-tertiary student migration that first broke through this divide, in part because it was often accompanied by the migration of a parent (e.g. Huang and Yeoh 2005; Brooks and Waters 2011; Robertson 2013).

Although migrant children have long been pre-tertiary students in their host societies, their presence was largely seen as a spin-off of their parents' migration whose primary purpose was labour. The education of migrant children, generally assumed to hail from working-class backgrounds, is unambiguously conceptualized as a policy challenge, with research consistently revealing the conspicuous learning disadvantages they face in most host societies (Schnepf 2007; Behr and Fugger 2020). Preceding the rapid expansion and internationalization of higher education in the 21st century and the parallel emergence of East Asian middle classes on the global stage, Asian students have established a worldwide reputation as an exemption from the universal pattern of the immigrant student disadvantage, generally attributed to an Asian 'folk theory of success' (Ogbu 1982). Although this theory has been problematized arguing that research is misguided by a sampling bias, as Asian students hailing from working-class backgrounds—who are most prone to drop out from the education system—disappear from statistics about educational achievements if they do so (Pieke 1991), the widely held presumption of 'Asian success' has gone mostly unchallenged.

Catered to by an emerging education–migration industry (Baas 2019), the third millennium saw the rapid growth of international student mobility that expanded beyond the elites and tertiary education to secondary, elementary and even preschool children of the middle classes, particularly in East Asia (Huang and Yeoh 2005). As states tend to keep no statistics on pre-tertiary educational migration, evidence of this growth is either indirect, such as data on accompanying parent visas where they exist, or anecdotal. This is part of a broader pattern of internationalization of education that includes the expansion of 'international' schools and offshore campuses as alternatives both to national education systems and, as our authors point out, to educational migration (Nyíri 2018; Brooks and Waters 2011). Literature focussing on the educational practices of more privileged migrants interprets the acquisition of Western educational capital as a strategy of accumulation (Ong 1999, 95). Standing in stark contrast with the general theme of migrant children's education, the acquisition of globally competitive, superior educational credentials is problematized for its success, not for its failure.

Asian students' competitiveness in the global educational arena (Chiang 2022) draws great public and scholarly attention, manifest in the Anglophone world's heightened public discourse about 'Asian success', which posits the educational success of Asian students as an object of both envy and fear (Watkins,

Ho, and Butler 2017). Epitomized by celebrity 'tiger mom' Amy Chua (2011), this discourse points to an imagined East Asian 'Confucian educational culture' responsible for the outstanding performance of Asian students and singles out the role of parental effort behind it. This discourse presumes 'Confucian educational culture' as unchanging and homogenous, strictly hierarchical, controlling and achievement-oriented and contrasts it to its antithesis, the supposedly democratic, liberal and well-being-oriented educational culture of the West.

Contributions to this special issue problematize such naturalizing understanding of East Asian educational culture by drawing our attention to confluences and disjunctures between often ambiguous desires and aspirations, as they attempt to reconcile the increasingly prevalent holistic approach to children's well-being with educational achievements. Focussing on the intimate experiences of both parents and the subject of their hopes, students, contributions broaden, extend and deepen our understanding of how different educational ideals intersect in a variety of ways with the social, cultural and economic positions of parents and families in Singapore, South Korea, Japan and China.

Several of our contributions approach migration, and the parental decisions that form its basis, from the perspective of children. Following Waters' call in this issue, all studies adopt an anthropological perspective to bring the dialectical nature of the parent–child relationship to the fore. As studies assessing the parental point of view (Kang, Göransson and Igarashi) make clear, even parental accounts are increasingly often narrated from the child's point of view. Choi et al. adopt a methodologically groundbreaking strategy and approach parental strategies from the perspective of children's narrative accounts of their upbringing to show how parental aspirations shaped their education and migration trajectories. Although children rarely are actual agents of migration, contributors to this issue show that they are increasingly often cast in the role of protagonists by their parents, a role, as Tu shows, they can play with enthusiasm, acquiescence or resistance, with parents assuming the secondary role of spinoff migrants. Kardaszewicz points out how migrant children often become—or indeed *are*—international students, highlighting the diffuse boundary between these two categories conventionally seen as radically different (cf. Waters 2015). Regardless of the question of agency, the narrative centrality children have come to occupy is a strikingly pronounced trend in Korea, Japan, Singapore and China, indicating the global diffusion of child-centredness and intensive parenting.

3 | Torn Between Shifting Notions of Success and Happiness

The similarities in parental anxieties, ambitions and strategies in China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore are striking. Beginning in the 1960s (in Japan's case) or the 1970s, these societies experienced rapid economic growth accompanied by dramatic social change and declining fertility. One result was the exponential growth in access to higher education, making the pursuit of desirable jobs affording social prestige possible. 'Educational desire' (Kipnis 2011) emerged as a social fever—involving both institutions and families—taking a firm hold over popular imagination, identifying education with a successful life: white-collar urban living and material affluence. However, as university degrees became mainstream in subsequent generations, their value progressively declined as graduate unemployment rose, especially in South Korea and China (Yang and Chan 2017). Competition for prestigious jobs became increasingly severe and appeared earlier and earlier in the life of a child, as the ranking of secondary, primary and even preschool education weighed in on future chances, a phenomenon dubbed 'educational involution' in China (Yang, Ge, and Ownby n.d.).

This social environment produced a generation of ultra-intensive 'tiger moms' or, as it is referred to in China, 'chicken-blood' (鸡娃) parenting.[1] As room at home for upward mobility shrinks, their ambitions are increasingly set on a global stage, where the best Chinese and Singaporean students carrying impressive extracurricular portfolios compete with peers from elsewhere for admission to Harvard's most prestigious programmes, leading to what Kardaszewicz in this special issue describes as the 'fetishization of education'. Yet at the same time, as returns of hard work at school are increasingly uncertain (Wang and Li 2023), pathways to success are unclear, leading to the questioning of accepted narratives of success, defined as a well-paid white-collar job at a prestigious international company, home ownership and a family.

What can replace this costumary image of success is rarely clear-cut, but, as all studies in this issue unanimously indicate, children's social and emotional well-being tends to emerge as a locus of parental aspirations. Middle-class parents still lay great store by education, but they search for new meanings in it. As a result, as Johanna Waters shows in her contribution, the end goal of educational migration, too, becomes less well-defined. A top degree instantly convertible into an international career is no longer the self-evident dream pursued by middle-class East Asians sending their children abroad and no longer justifies all possible means.

For some, the anticipated emotional costs—which Waters evokes in her essay—outweigh expected returns. This is the case for Yoonhee Kang's Korean informants who continue to aspire to enhance their children's 'global competencies' but, in a reverse move, choose to do so locally by finding their children alternative pathways of 'global engagement' within the domestic education market. These parents attribute so much significance to both the child's and the family's psychic needs that they decide not to move. However, while prioritizing happiness, they still try to preserve global competitiveness and forge local strategies for the pursuit of cosmopolitan capital. Although parents in Kang's study attempt to strike a delicate balance between happiness and competitiveness by minimizing the costs of studying abroad (by not moving abroad) but nonetheless cultivating cosmopolitan capital, Göransson's participants vote with their feet for the emotional well-being of their children and against academic capital accumulation by removing them from highly stressful academic competition. They see educational competition in Singapore as a serious emotional–mental threat to their children and either retreat to the confines of their home (like Chinese parents described by Friedman 2023) or choose to relocate to Chiang Mai in pursuit of a happy and meaningful childhood (like Chinese parents in Aranya and Li 2024).

Although Kang's and Göransson's studies foreground parental perspectives in which their children's happiness appears as a pivotal aspiration, Tu's work offers an insight into how happiness emerges as a central notion to frame students' own accounts of their educational journeys, but in most cases in terms of its opposite, *unhappiness*. As Tu argues, unhappiness leads to the discovery of alternative success frames and highlights the tension between emerging multiple success frames and the ambivalent pathways towards happiness. Choi et al.'s research draws attention to the contradictions of parental aspirations and the instabilities of the cultivation process. They identify three ideal types of parental aspirations (traditional, neoliberal and non-materialistic) in the narrative biographical accounts of educational migrant students and shed light on their inherently ambiguous nature, as experienced by students themselves.

The case of Japanese families who choose to educate their children in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, offers an example of how similar aspirations—the need to remove children from a highly competitive educational environment, described as 'evacuation'—can nonetheless intersect with parents' economic incentives and the accumulation of newly forged, distinctly Asian cosmopolitan capital, which Igarashi calls 'regional cultural capital'. As Igarashi demonstrates, Johor Bahru not only offers a site for receiving a relatively relaxed international education for children, but also an opportunity for investment for fathers, and potentially for mothers, who refashion themselves as educational migration agents, highlighting the intersection of parental aspirations and the education industry.

Most of our contributors point out the gendered nature of parental pursuits, as mothers still predominantly assume the responsibility of managing the educational journey. However, in all studies, we get to hear the voice of fathers, indicating their increasing presence in child-centred, parenting-intensive child-rearing pursuits (see also Aranya and Li 2024). Perhaps remarkably, none of the contributors thematize gender in relation to children. With the emergence of the child-centred parenting mandate, children's gender seems to decline in importance, and daughters enjoy as much parental resources as sons do. The strictly patriarchal view of child-rearing seems to have imperceptibly become a thing of the past, confirming Fong's hypotheses (Fong 2002). Although her hypothesis was based on low fertility as a direct consequence of the one-child policy, below-replacement fertility is a common characteristic of all societies concerned (Anderson and Kohler 2013) and arguably contributes to—and is constituted by—changing parental aspirations.

4 | East Asian Middle Classes

What explains such a similar evolution of parental aspirations in these four societies despite their differing political systems and historical trajectories? It is customary to attribute their similarities to a supposedly shared 'Confucian culture', a term that often serves to naturalize both their content-oriented, examination-centred educational systems and traditional, family-oriented social structures. Although 'Confucian values' is rarely unpacked, it is generally a gloss for collectivism, hierarchy and obedience coupled with merit-based mobility and self-cultivation. The shift in the position of the child from a subaltern devoid of individual agency whose significance both as a moral individual and supporter of the family lies in the future to a sentimentally valued, autonomous person endowed with needs and desires requiring immediate gratification can be easily recognized from Western societies (Zelizer 1985). Arguably, however, it took place more abruptly and, at least in some of the societies considered here, *within* rather than across generations, resulting in the ambiguous coexistence of contradictory values. Thus, protagonists of the studies in this issue can often be said both to follow and to reject 'Confucian values'.

The nation-states described by our authors endorse differing political ideologies and indeed follow diverse political models, from the Chinese Party-state through Singapore's authoritarian nanny state to the plural electoral democracies of Japan and South Korea. Nonetheless, the parallels that emerge from the contributions to this issue raise the question to what extent political systems matter. On the one hand, many middle-class migrants who are leaving China explicitly point to a lack of freedom as a reason to 'run' (Zhang 2022; Beck and Nyíri 2022). On the other hand, perhaps what parents perceive as unfreedom and impediments to happiness have more to do with concerns about maintaining a middle-class lifestyle—which includes a certain amount of private space free from the state's intrusion and control of one's own time. To what extent, then, are these concerns and the solutions to them 'East Asian' or more universally middle class? Emerging parallel to the 'Asian economic miracle' and particularly crystallizing around the Four Little Dragons (Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore), the new Asian middle classes—the protagonists of all contributions of this special issue—appeared on the global stage of educational migration as their countries were increasingly integrated with the capitalist world system. These stunning economic transformations created conditions for a distinct form of social life and culture, epitomized by the rise of the new middle classes. A complex and unstable social formation produced by different historical conditions, the common denominator of Asia's new middle classes is a strikingly similar orientation in lifestyle, initially characterized by the rise of the consuming individual in pursuit of leisure and material comfort (Yan 2010; Zhang 2012; Ivy 2010), and then by questioning these material pursuits in the name of a more authentic and moral personhood (Osburg 2020).

As our contributors show, hopes related to children and subsequent parenting ideologies play a central role in outlining distinctly middle-class lifestyle orientations. Ironically, what Inglehart (1977) describes as a shift to postmaterial values requires increased material outlay. With states' gradual withdrawal from the spheres of reproduction such as housing, health care and education, a booming private sector catering to intensive parenting desires emerged, leading to the monetization and commercialization of children's lives, which simultaneously acquired growing sentimental value (Zelizer 1985).

The relevance of child-rearing to the middle class in the Western (especially American and British) context is a well-understood phenomenon. Given the significance of good parenting for the middle class where—unlike in the upper or lower social classes, where membership is inherited—reproduction is secured only through parental efforts (Ehrenreich 1990, 83), intensive parenting emerged as a dominant ideology. Coined by sociologist

Hays (1998), the term 'intensive parenting' spread to popular discourse and became a household term globally. It denotes the large amounts of time, energy and material resources good parents invest in their child, the mandate of child-centredness (i.e. putting the children's needs first) and a scientific/expert approach towards child-rearing. Although the term originated in the West and has mostly been researched in that context, emerging research in South America, post-Soviet Eastern Europe and Asia suggests that with the rise of a global middle class, we witness a class-specific dispersion of parenting as a set of ideals and practices that are 'child-centred', resource-intensive and focussed on the maximization of individual achievement potential (Faircloth, Hoffman, and Layne 2013; Szőke and Kovai 2022; Lan 2018). The articles in this special issue delve into the complex narratives of families who navigate this terrain, offering profound anthropological insights into how child-centred, resource-intensive approaches to parenting are reshaping notions of success and happiness, influencing the global landscape of education and mobility.

5 | Migration as One Way Out

The contributions to this issue remind us that migration is only one of several options for parents who wish to opt out of educational or social settings they deem detrimental to their child's happiness or insufficiently conducive to their success, or both. Alternatives include schools outside the state system, as in the case of Korean families studied by Yoonhee Kang; home schooling, as with the Singaporean parents in Kristina Göransson's article; or internal migration to an environment perceived as more relaxed (Friedman 2023). This optic helps understand the expanding range of migration destinations to places such as Chiang Mai in Göransson's article (see also Aranya and Li 2024), Johor Bahru, Malaysia, in Igarashi's study, Poland in Kardaszewicz's work or Budapest (Beck and Nyíri 2023) and Lisbon (Beck and Gaspar 2024), as a form of arbitrage (cf. Hayes 2018) of a complex basket of resources that defines a sustainable middle-class lifestyle. It is not just the perceived global competitiveness of education that counts, but also its 'happiness', the accessibility of extracurricular activities, the quality of life and the cost of all of these. An international school in Malaysia or Hungary may not produce more competitive graduates than one in China and conveys far less prestige than an elite school in the United States or Britain, but it is likely to have a lower admission threshold, less pressure and lower fees for a comparable curriculum. As such, geoarbitrage in these cases frees up resources not only of money, but also and most importantly of time and energy, which can contribute to the moulding of a happy, relaxed childhood, conducive of cultivating autonomous personhood.

These more complex logics of migration not only complicate global spatial hierarchies but also reflect a shifting temporal orientation. Unlike the presumption of future orientation underlying mainstream migration theories, the contributions in this special issue point to the increasing significance of the *present* as the decisive temporal dimension of migration decision-making. The distinctive presentist orientations in these emerging migration patterns acquire significance against the overwhelming domination of risks in the discussion of child-rearing across the globe (Beck 1992). As middle-class parents are increasingly compelled to profess expertise in the identification and prioritization of future risks (Lee, Macvarish, and Bristow 2010; Lan 2018; Furedi 2002), the present turns into the time of prevention rather than something to be lived in its own right. Amidst a social environment that is dominated by a fear of losing out and a desperate quest to minimize ever-increasing risks, the reorientation of parental strategies towards prioritizing present happiness even at the cost of risking future success signals a qualitative shift in global middle-class migration patterns.

The risk participants in all studies identify is the threat a rigid and stressful education poses to the mental well-being of children, leading Beck and Gaspar (2024) to call Chinese middle-class families in Portugal and Hungary 'educational exiles'. Igarashi, who is more concerned with the utilitarian values present in migration from Japan to Malaysia, reveals other risk factors, such as environmental (earthquakes, radiation) and economic (pension system), but also, interestingly, the ethnic/racial dignity of children. The parents in his study deliberately opt for a putatively Japan-friendly East Asian destination to eliminate children's exposure to racial discrimination. These risks point to a different direction, one that responds to Waters' call to move beyond the tendency to prioritize theories of capital accumulation in understanding what drives educational migration and grasp the existential meaning-making depth in it. 'Education', she writes, 'is rarely the goal in and of itself, but a much longer term investment in the future and the means to a good life' (Waters, this issue). Moreover, she suggests reframing educational migrations 'as a life's work' (ibid). Studies in this special issue endeavour to shed light on the—at times hesitant—attempts parents and students, in an inevitably dialectical manner, make to search for new meanings to their lives through the pursuit of educational mobilities.

The studies included in this special issue attest to the changing nature of 'educational desire' among East Asian middle classes in ways that are, in part, remarkably consistent across the region and affect migratory pathways. How this increasing ambivalence about pursuing competitive credentials relates to global shifts requires further understanding. For one thing, although questioning the utility of educational competition may be particularly consequential in East Asia, the arrival of the artificial intelligence age is raising similar and more fundamental questions about the function of education around the globe. For another, in China at least, appetite for higher education abroad is declining: In 2022, for the first time in years, both British and US universities admitted more Indian than Chinese students. This may have to do with economic difficulties, geopolitical tensions or the expectation that Western degrees may count for less in the future (The Economist 2024b). If this trend is sustained, educational migration may shift further away from its earlier focus on competitive degrees and towards serving 'happy childhoods'. Whether the rapid growth of the Indian middle class will result in similar shifts remains to be seen. Finally, even as 'international schools' around the globe spread and diversify further, China is embarking on an attempt to create its own global network of international schools serving not only mobile Chinese populations but also others wishing to benefit from a vision of cosmopolitanism inflected by China's global political agenda (The Economist 2024a). As national educational agendas compete with middle-class discourses of self-fulfilment on an

increasingly global stage, those who can afford to move will face more dilemmas.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1]The term *ji wa* 鸡娃 literally translates to 'chicken babies' and derives from the phrase 'to inject with chicken blood (*da jixue* 打鸡血)'. Chicken blood therapy has a long and peculiar history (Martinsen 2011), and gain momentum as a 'health fad' during the Cultural Revolution, spreading the belief that injecting chicken (rooster) blood into the human body will make the person stronger and more aggressive, and therefore more competitive. Its current popular usage denotes an ultra-intensive parenting style, by which parents heavily invest in improving their child's competitiveness.

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