

Acting as Father-State and Mother-Society

Introduction

In late January 2015, shortly before the Chinese New Year, I watched a televised talent show for children. As a young boy finished an impressive gymnastic routine, the camera zoomed in on a couple in the audience. One of the hosts asked the child, ‘Wouldn’t your parents have been very happy to see your excellent performance?’ When he agreed, the host continued, ‘Don’t you wish that the two of them could come to all your performances?’ Again, as expected, he agreed. The host explained that the boy’s parents were peasants working in the city and he had not seen them in over six months. Then, he pointed them out in the audience. The boy started to cry, and as they came up to the stage his father also burst into tears. Meanwhile, the host explained that, although the relationship between children and parents was the most important, due to social conditions the boy’s parents had had no choice but to leave their son with his grandparents in the village to find work. Still, the host encouraged the parents to do better in the future. Then he turned to the boy again and asked whether he would prefer to spend more time with his parents or win the world championship. The boy answered right away and declared confidently that he would rather win the championship. For just a moment, the host’s face betrayed his surprise. He tried to salvage the situation with another question: in the future, would the boy rather live with his parents or his grandparents? Again, the boy’s answer was straightforward: with his grandparents. Another host stepped in,

explaining that this (apparently wrong) answer could be justified by familiarity. The son had become accustomed to spending time with his grandparents and therefore did not realize the importance of his relationship with the parents. Generously, the two hosts turned back to the parents and explained that they still had the opportunity to do better in the future.

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In 2014, the year before, a Beijing-based rural development NGO had sent staff and some student volunteers to Daxi Village to conduct ten days of ‘community education’ for rural children. This summer camp offered morning and afternoon activities for 120 children, aged six to twelve. Most of the children came from the village, but there were also twenty from Chengdu, accompanied by parents – mostly mothers – who were customers of the village’s peasant cooperative. To provide their families with ‘ecological’ produce, these mothers had organized consumer associations, which they also referred to as ‘mommies’ groups’ (*mama tuan* 妈妈团). On the day when ‘social activities’ were on the agenda, all the parents were expected to participate in ‘parent-child activities’ like transplanting rice as well as games in which parent-child pairs needed to cooperate closely while playfully competing with other families.¹

That December, the NGO organized a conference in Beijing that promoted such education to address the problem of so-called ‘left-behind children’ (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童) whose parents had migrated to work in the cities. Dong Jie, the township agronomist, was invited to the forum to represent the Daxi Village cooperative. One slide in his report on the summer camp was labelled ‘Parent-child activities: Strengthening the relations between parents and children’. Beneath this was a photograph of children and adults standing in a flooded paddy field transplanting rice in which one adult was photographing the interaction herself. Dong Jie used this slide to represent parents’ participation in community education as a success to an audience of NGO staff, academics, peasant organization leaders and rural social workers. It depicted globalizing ideas about intensive parenting that are also closely related to the construction of the image of the left-behind child as performed in the TV show.

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As I learned during my fieldwork, the urban middle-class consumers who bought the products from the peasant cooperative that Dong Jie was representing at the conference cherished intensive parenting.

This segment of the urban middle-class was not only critical of the Chinese state's 'birth planning', which had until recently directly affected them: some would have lost their jobs at state enterprises or public universities if they had had a second child, they told me. Moreover, some of them had developed a pronounced interest in education in 'the West' and thought the Chinese state's formal education in public schools put too much pressure on children. Thus, many thought that the state should not interfere in the private life of families. At the same time, some enthusiastically participated in the community education for rural children offered by the NGO and did not consider these activities an intrusive imposition of specific middle-class values and standards on rural families but warm care for the 'left-behind child'.

In this chapter, I argue that this divergent evaluation was made possible by doing and undoing multiple state boundaries in performance. On the one hand, the boundary between state and family was undone in the construction of the 'rural left-behind child' as a social problem. The responsibility for caring for these children was claimed by state and society, justifying interventions in the life of rural families. On the other hand, a gendered boundary was erected between state and civil society in initiatives promising to address this problem. Continuing the exploration of domain multiplicity started in Chapter 2, I examine how markers of state boundaries can 'travel' from one non-state domain to another: in this case, intensive mothering from family to civil society and – in the opposite direction – participation from politics to parenting.²

I try to capture these travelling markers of the state's boundaries with family and civil society using the term 'participatory parenting'. This specifically refers to calls for citizens' participation in care for the left-behind child, rural parents' public participation in community education, and parents' performances of intensive parenting in front of other citizens. Focusing on these dynamics arising from the domain multiplicity of state boundaries, the chapter contributes to a growing literature that not only acknowledges that politics and kinship interrelate but makes this interconnection the centre of attention (McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Thelen and Alber 2018).³

I first introduce the left-behind child as a figure that allowed the continuation of the liberal othering of the Chinese state even after the end of the so-called one-child policy. Then, looking at an NGO's 'rural children's community education' project in Daxi Village that was appreciated and supported by urban middle-class consumers, the rest of the chapter shows how the liberal rejection of intervention

into family life can suddenly disappear if the boundary between state and civil society is performed with markers that travel from kinship to politics and vice versa. I discuss how both the central government and the NGO imagined various forms of care that state and society should provide as a remedy to the ‘problem’ of the rural left-behind child. In the next step, I interpret the educational activities of the NGO’s summer camp as a performed distancing of the state that builds on travelling boundary markers. I argue that performances of parents’ participation in public activities, as well as performances of participation of society and community in parenting, make the NGO’s intervention in rural families appear as a benevolent, non-state activity of civil society that upholds a ‘proper’ split between state and family.

Liberal Family Images and the Chinese State’s Otherness

Since its introduction in 1979, liberals have taken ‘birth planning’ – better known outside of China as the ‘one-child policy’ – as evidence of the Chinese state as the coercive and authoritarian other of the democratic West. This discourse represents the Chinese state as not respecting the boundary between state and family and, therefore, as curtailing the ‘free choice’ of individuals in both realms. While the ‘one-child policy’ was in fact implemented as a flexible ‘two-to-three-children policy’ in many areas, especially in the countryside (Santos 2017: 97), and while there have always been exceptions (for ethnic minorities, for example), the limit of one child was officially abandoned only in 2015.

Meanwhile, a new concept had entered Chinese public discourse in the early 2000s. Social scientists and, later on, the media in China constructed the so-called left-behind children as a ‘vulnerable group’ and decried their fate, especially their supposed ‘emotional deficits’, ‘emotional instability’ and ‘poor academic performance’.⁴ Since the so-called Reform and Opening Up in the 1980s, an increasing number of young men and women have left villages to work in the cities. *Liushou* (留守), the Chinese term used in the phrase ‘left-behind children’, literally means ‘those who stay and hold the fort’. Xiang Biao (2007: 181) has argued that this implies that those who are left behind are waiting for migrants to return, while the English translation focuses more on those who have migrated and suggests that they are waiting for the others to follow (Xiang 2007: 181). Public discourse, which expects their migration to be only temporary, has classified

those migrating ‘peasant workers’ as China’s ‘floating population’ (Zhang L. 2001).

Tatjana Thelen and Haldis Haukanes (2010) remind us that images of a good childhood are always accompanied by images of good parenting. The migrating parents who leave their children behind in the countryside do not demonstrate the globalizing middle-class concept of ‘good’ parenting (understood as ‘intensive’ parenting), on which the notion of the left-behind child is based. Although here we are dealing with internal migration, the discourses are strikingly like those about children ‘left behind’ due to international migration, as Annika Pissin (2013b) has pointed out.

While one narrative blames the migrants for neglecting their offspring due to their own greed, another narrative draws attention to the institutional setup. With access to social welfare and public services, in particular schooling, being linked to China’s rigid household registration system, migrants are represented as forced to leave their children in the countryside. When their situation is framed this way, the liberal mind tends to read left-behind children as yet more proof of the Chinese state’s otherness and as it continuing to wrong families.

Both these liberal discourses concerning ‘birth planning’ and ‘left-behind children’ in China highlight the boundary between state and family. In the case of birth planning, the Chinese state appears as having an undue influence on ‘private’ decisions on reproduction. When it comes to left-behind children, the discourse again emphasizes how family life is interrupted by the Chinese state, this time through the household registration system. In both cases, we see a framing of the ‘big’ state intervening in ‘small’ families.

Kinship Measurements and the Birth of the Left-Behind Child

‘I know what left-behind children are from what I saw on TV.’ This statement came from a senior female volunteer who was conducting a survey of the names, dates of birth and identification numbers of left-behind children in Daxi Village in November 2014. This task had been ordered by the township, and the village leader had just assigned it to the leaders of the nine villagers’ groups and this volunteer, who along with others was already scheduled to conduct a regular household-to-household ‘environmental sanitation inspection’ during the next two days. Village Leader Kang Sunbin and one of the

group leaders had just discussed if a particular child should be counted as left behind. As the parents were ‘working outside’ the village most of the year, but ‘locally’ rather than ‘outside the province’, the two men finally decided that the child was not left behind, thus interpreting the bureaucratic criterion of physical separation between parent and child in terms of administrative divisions rather than geographical distance. The volunteer’s subsequent reference to the TV reports about left-behind children puzzled me, because several children in her own neighbourhood, including the case just discussed, lived physically separated from their parents for most of the year. Obviously, these children did not appear left behind in the same way that the children on TV were because they did not fit the sensational portrayal of their miserable conditions used to evidence a lack of parental care. This not only speaks to the media’s importance in informing people’s ideas about what a left-behind child is but also points to the various measurements of kinship that establish children as left-behind.

Measurements constitute kinship by translating different ideas about kinship as closeness or similarity into indicators, producing evidence and establishing measurement units, measurement periods and thresholds of belonging, which are institutionalized through persuasive visual display (Thelen and Lammer 2021). Whether people are ‘kin enough’ (Moretti 2021) can be measured through a plethora of legal, biometric and bureaucratic indicators, such as names, genealogical distance, blood types or genes, but also through estimates of emotional closeness, by collecting data on time spent together, spatial proximity and frequency of contact. In the situation above, village officials discussed geographical distance as a key indicator. Their decision on the measurement unit (administrative rather than metric) and the threshold (provincial level) established that the child was not left behind. Yet the volunteer’s statement about knowing what constitutes a left-behind child from TV hints at further indicators.

Numbers

The term ‘left-behind child’ surfaced in the mid-1990s, when it first appeared in academic articles, although the social phenomenon to which it is usually taken to refer began more than a decade earlier in the 1980s with the policy of Reform and Opening Up.⁵ Annika Pissin (2013b: 4) points out that ‘the establishment of their numbers’ was crucial in constructing the left-behind child as a problem. Social science publications as well as media reports on the issue of left-behind children often include statistics that show a dramatic increase

in internal migration in China, such as the increase from thirty million migrants to more than 144 million in the twenty years between 1989 and 2009 (e.g. Pissin 2013a: 182). Such articles also introduce other numbers showing that it was mainly men who migrated to work in the city at first, that unmarried women joined them only in the 1990s, and the number of married women only increased later (e.g. *ibid.*: 183).⁶ Finally, and most importantly, these discussions frequently turn to various estimates of the number of left-behind children. For example, most publications estimated that there were about twenty-two million, until the *People's Daily* published a much higher number of fifty-eight million in 2010 (e.g. Pissin 2013a: 184).

Worldwide Expert Language

Furthermore, many studies of left-behind children in China have been informed by methodological nationalism and start from an ahistorical perspective. This is another important factor in the construction of the left-behind child as an apparently 'new' and 'Chinese' problem that has emerged somewhat automatically with the rise of labour migration since the 1980s and intensified in the 1990s and the new millennium. From a historical perspective, Pissin (2013b) argues that before 1949 it was not unusual for children in China to be raised by someone other than their biological parents. In line with that, it is not at all obvious that an increase in migration sufficiently explains the emergence of the left-behind child as a problem. The ideal of a physically close relationship with the 'proper' mother (which refers not necessarily to the biological one but to the father's wife rather than his concubine) is said to be present in texts from throughout the history of imperial China. Yet, it was only during the very brief period of the Mao era – somewhat paradoxically, given the contemporary ideological attack on the family – that most parents and children actually first started to live in spatial proximity with each other (Pissin 2013b: 4), in large part because of limits on mobility imposed by the household registration system (Davis and Harrell 1993: 2).

Pissin (2013b) shows that the emergence of the Chinese discourse on left-behind children since the mid-1990s and its intensification in the 2000s coincided with the development of similar discourses elsewhere. She notices a baffling similarity in claims about the experiences and troubles of the 'global left-behind child', particularly the negative academic and emotional implications, and she argues that we are dealing with a 'worldwide category'. She also provides explanations for the similar descriptions of the children's experiences in

places as various as China, Ecuador, Mexico, Moldavia, the Philippines, Poland, Romania and a host of other Eastern European, Latin American and African countries. In particular, she points to a global ‘expert language’ of psychology, medicine and law. This seems to be a very sensible explanation of why surveys that are based on this specific expert language produce similar results, contributing to the discursive construction of the category of the left-behind child.⁷

Surveys by Chinese academics, as well as local branches of such mass organizations as the All-China Women’s Federation, labelled children as ‘left-behind’ by asking them if they had ‘difficulties adapting to the left-behind life’, if they ‘felt abandoned’, if they had problems ‘expressing difficulties’ or ‘obtaining help’, or if they ‘performed poorly in school’. Qualitative studies suggested that left-behind children showed ‘extreme’ social and psychological behaviour and were either ‘withdrawn’ or ‘excessively aggressive’. Many studies blamed their grandparents, who ‘spoil the children’ or ‘fail to give them enough emotional care’ (Xiang 2007: 185–86). Xiang Biao critically deconstructs the notion of the left-behind child. He notes that most ‘research tended to focus only on the left-behind children, without comparing them with those who live with their parents. Comparative studies have found that the differences between the two groups are marginal’ (ibid.: 186).⁸

Gendered Parental Care as a Travelling Boundary Marker

In 2004, the term ‘left-behind children’ appeared in major nationwide newspapers such as the *People’s Daily*, arousing public concern (Li Y. 2015).⁹ In comparison with other ‘left-behind’ categories – left-behind women and left-behind elders – left-behind children attracted more public attention. Many of these news reports focused on extreme cases such as left-behind girls being raped, and unattended left-behind boys dying in accidents (Xiang 2007: 185), thereby inspiring arguments that intervention was needed. In October 2006, the State Council established a working group on rural left-behind children. Ten years later, the State Council (2016) published a first ‘Opinion concerning strengthening care and protection work for rural left-behind children’, further solidifying the left-behind child as a problem.

This section examines what forms of care the central government and the Beijing-based rural development NGO regarded as necessary for left-behind children in the countryside and which actors

they considered most suitable for providing these different forms of care. Contributing to research on childhood and education in China (Kipnis 2001; Naftali 2009; Binah-Pollak 2014), I draw attention to how ideas of the urban and the rural relate to ideas about good childhood and good parenthood. Furthermore, I emphasize that these images also intersect with images of state, family and community.

Material Care as a Marker of the Father-State

The State Council document (2016) introduces the left-behind child in the context of the country's socioeconomic development, industrialization and urbanization, with some of the rural labour force having left their hometown to work or start a business elsewhere. It continues by explaining that because employment is not permanent and objective conditions such as housing, education and guardianship are limiting some people have decided to leave their children in their hometown under the guardianship of others. The State Council then acknowledges the contribution of the labour migrants to the country's economic development and that the economic situation of these households – and, therefore, the material basis and conditions for the children's education and upbringing – has objectively improved. However, it points out that the children lack the concern and affectionate love of a guardian, leading to mental health problems and even extreme behaviour. It claims that this has not only prevented individual children from growing up healthy but also has a negative impact on social harmony and stability.

The State Council emphasizes that left-behind children are, like other children, the future and hope of the 'ancestral land'.¹⁰ Therefore, they need the common concern of the whole society and the care of all citizens. In this passage, the State Council emphasizes that children do not belong to their parents alone but the whole nation.

The measures proposed by the State Council can be divided into three kinds. Under the heading 'Gradually reducing the phenomenon of left-behind children at the root', the State Council presents the task of turning peasant workers into city residents as the key to improving their ability to serve as guardians for and provide care to their children. It thus implicitly acknowledges social scientists' critique of the institutional setup of the household registration system.¹¹ Another bundle of measures proposed by the State Council aims at guaranteeing the rights of children and youth with a help and protection mechanism for rural left-behind children focused on the question of guardian responsibility and ability.

Yet another set of measures relates to the provision of ‘care service’ (*guan'ai fuwu* 关爱服务), and the chosen term *guan'ai* stresses the required affectionate love that should be shown to the left-behind children. Here, the State Council particularly emphasizes the role of mass organizations such as unions and women’s federations, as well as on the active participation of social forces, and calls for the civil administration and other relevant government units to provide tax relief for such organizations and pay for the services needed.

The State Council thus envisions a division of labour between state and society in caring for the country’s children. In other contexts, such arrangements have been discussed in the academic literature as an aspect of the concept of ‘educational partnership’ (Franklin, Bloch and Popkewitz 2003). For the State Council, the state is well suited to removing institutional barriers to ensure the necessary rights and provide the necessary material support to serve the left-behind children, but it cannot provide the necessary emotional support and thus it calls for the participation of citizens and their organizations. One of the examples the State Council mentions is the provision of day-care during holidays – like the summer camps the rural development NGO offered as ‘rural children’s community education’.

Emotional Care as a Marker of Mother-Society

The rural development NGO was established in Beijing in the 2000s by an intellectual associated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Its funding mainly comes from a Hong Kong-based philanthropic foundation established by a real estate entrepreneur, but it has also received financial support from various state agencies. The NGO is closely linked with the New Rural Reconstruction Movement, and its mission is to promote comprehensive development that is ecologically sustainable. It aims to do so by supporting peasant associations that provide comprehensive services to the community: economic and social, as well as cultural. It claims this will eventually reverse the current rural to urban flow of people and resources. It imagines the return of migrant labourers to their villages as the fundamental solution to the problem of the left-behind child. To address the issue in the short run, however, the NGO proposes a programme of community education for rural children under the category of social services:

Previously, rural children’s education focused on the school’s formal education. But this forum emphasized that the biggest difference between

rural children's community education and regular school education is that [community] education returns to life, returns to nature, returns to human nature.

This was how the founder of the NGO characterized the kind of educational activities her NGO promotes in the published version of her concluding statement at the 2014 Beijing conference. In this section, I discuss how the NGO discursively distanced its education from the kind supposedly offered by the state and then turn to the question of how Dong Jie translated this idea of difference into the syllabus for the summer camp in Daxi Village. I show how ideas of the rural and the urban, as well as of the community and the state, intersect with ideas about a good childhood and good parenting in this conception of education. The rural is presented as different from the urban both in the resources available and in the needs and challenges it faces.

During the Beijing conference, the founder of the NGO framed and legitimated its intervention in rural society by referring to the 'three-dimensional rural issue', the core topic of the central government's Document No. 1, which had been in effect since 2004:

Among the social problems of the three-dimensional rural issue . . . the problem of rural left-behind children stands out as it covers many different issues such as a shortage of educational resources, deficient household education, a lack of community activities and the separation of school, household and community education.

In her concluding talk, the founder used the concept of the left-behind child to present a claim for resources for the NGO's project:

As the resources of state and society are directed towards urban education and formal education, we propose paying attention to informal rural children's community education activities as a different kind of social voice. This is a call for justice, for making the state and society show concern and love for the rural children who make up the huge majority. For their healthy upbringing, public resources of state and society must be directed towards rural children's education. Furthermore, the focus should not only be on the rural children's formal education but also on the rural children's community education, which is closely linked with household education.

In this statement, we can see that the founder calls for material support as well as concern and love from both state and society. This differs from the State Council's emphasis on the state's responsibility for providing material funding as a form of care and must be understood in

the context that the NGO then depended entirely on funding from philanthropists, as the state document promising material support for the kind of education offered by the NGO had not yet been published.

In this call for material support, the founder stressed even more explicitly than the State Council (2016) would later that the state, with its urban bias, has been unable to understand what the rural children ‘really’ need. The formal education offered by the state in public schools is deemed insufficient. Rather, the aim is to guide children to ‘become a proper person first, and then a talented person’ (*xian cheng ren hou cheng cai* 先成人后成才). The rural requires a community that bridges the gap between the incomplete education offered by the state, on one side, and the education offered by the incomplete rural household, on the other. In a document introducing the NGO’s approach to community education, this perceived lack of the rural is further elaborated:

Many fathers and mothers work elsewhere and give their children to grandfathers and grandmothers to look after. Skipped-generation education is a serious problem, and children become left-behind children. The majority of household heads only send their children to school to supervise them on their premises. Furthermore, because there is a shortage of teachers, the school cannot provide supervision very well and the syllabus offered is also not complete.

In contrast to these perceived challenges, the rural was also described positively in terms of its potential resources, not yet exploited by the formal state education – resources that were just waiting to be tapped by the NGO’s special form of community education.

Activating Rural Resources through Community Education

The countryside is the starting point of human civilization, and it is also the ever-growing and never-exhausted origin of human civilization. In China this is even more the case, as agriculture is the root and as China is a nation with a culture of both farming and reading that has been transmitted over generations. To pay attention to the fate of children is therefore to pay attention to the prosperity and decline of the nation.

This paragraph comes from the NGO’s brochure for potential volunteers, which calls on ‘everyone to come together to participate’ in rural children’s community education. In this introductory note, the NGO frames its community education as being in the interest of the Chinese nation, being linked to its countryside as well as to its past.

Rural children are here presented as the nation's children as in the state document's formulation. And, like the State Council (2016), the NGO asks for the participation of society in educating rural children.

At the Beijing conference, speakers also emphasized the rural as a potential resource for education without exclusively linking it to China. Scholars, among them historians and educational researchers, introduced concepts not only from China but also from Taiwan and the United States, aligning them with the NGO's project though the summary statement of the NGO's leader that this kind of community education would 'return to life, return to nature, return to human nature'.

Referring back to the educational mindset of the Rural Reconstruction Movement of China in the 1920s and 1930s, an educational expert introduced the idea of 'life education' that was particularly suited to the specific psychology of children's development. The main idea was that 'nature' and 'society' should be used as teaching resources. A historian of Taiwan introduced the pedagogy of the 4-H Club, a rural youth organization, which claimed that it was necessary to bring head, heart, hands and health together for the proper development of the child. This organization had come to Taiwan from the United States, where it had been founded in Ohio in 1902 and was administered by the Cooperative Extension Service of the US Department of Agriculture. Another educational scholar presented rural education as special because it transmits knowledge informally in a 'society of people who know each other' (*shuren shehui* 熟人社会) and through 'getting close to nature'. This close attention to 'intimate feelings', 'nature' and the 'native soil' imperceptibly helps the child to become a well-rounded individual.

Here, we have an interesting mixture of images and evaluations of the rural and the urban and the traditional and the modern, as well as of the community and the state. On the one hand, the NGO seems to cling to the ideal image of a 'modern' conjugal family for rural areas, decrying the lack of intensive parenting in the upbringing of children in the countryside. On the other hand, it appears to cherish the idea of the wider 'community' as something valuable and suitable for the countryside, something that was once there but is not there anymore. One might expect this positive evaluation of the countryside and its 'traditional culture' to include support for the idea of an extended family or community being able to provide good care for a child;¹² however, in this case the NGO values the care of 'traditional' community and extended families ambivalently and only as complementary to intensive parental care.

Community education for rural children is only one part of the comprehensive services the NGO imagines peasant associations providing. Distancing its vision from the state's market-oriented support of 'specialized peasant cooperatives', it expects comprehensive services to further the goal of reducing or even reversing rural to urban migration. From the NGO perspective, rural families would then no longer need to blur the domains of urban and rural with parents migrating to the city and children staying in the village. If parents could stay in the countryside, they could also 'properly' participate in their children's upbringing through physical closeness, but so long as this is not the case, the NGO's interventions aim at rebuilding the supposedly lost rural community. In all this, the 'modern state' appears to be valued so long as it stays where it belongs: in the city, with its formal school-based education. In this view, the state should provide material support and technical knowledge for the rural community but refrain from further interference.

Before turning to performances of participatory parenting in the NGO's summer camp and in other activities in the food network, the gendered character of this imagined complementary care of state and society for the children of the nation deserves closer scrutiny.

Father-State and Mother-Society Caring for the Left-Behind Child

In studies of Turkey and of Singapore, Carol Delaney (1995) and Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan (1992) have pointed to images of the 'father state'. In Chinese, the term *zuguó* (祖国) literally means 'ancestral land', which is gender balanced, but in the phrase *zuguó muqin* (祖国母亲), which describes the 'ancestral land', *zuguó* is understood as being the 'mother' (母亲). Some argue that this gendered phrase was only introduced through contact with 'the West' at the beginning of the twentieth century. The *Analects* of Confucius uses the term *fumu zhibang* (父母之邦), which can be translated as 'the country of the father and the mother', while Mencius' term *fumuguo* (父母国) equally includes both father and mother. Still others argue that as China was a patriarchal society the ancestral land was that of the male ancestor and therefore the 'fatherland'.

In the discourse of the left-behind child, the central government referred to both these children and all the others as the 'future and hope of the country'. Although the government framed the whole nation as a family, it nevertheless emphasized a division between the state and this family similar to that imagined by organized urban

middle-class consumers. Both the State Council and the rural development NGO promoted a partnership between ‘state’ and ‘society’, with the former providing the institutional, legal and material support and the latter the emotional care for tackling the constructed problem of the left-behind child. Therefore, both also asked for the ‘participation’ of citizens in caring for all left-behind children in the country.

This imagined split between the care of the state and the care of society and community mirrors a specifically gendered notion of parenting. Many of the women active in the consumer associations had well-paid husbands who supported the family financially. As discussed in the preceding chapters, the NGOs and the communities they were trying to build distanced themselves from the state and its market-oriented approach both discursively and through performance. I have also described how Dong Jie distanced himself from the image of the wining and dining, smoking and gambling male rural official through his everyday habits and when hosting banquets. This suggests that certain gendered family images have been turned into markers of the boundary between state and society.

In the discourse on the left-behind child, I did not come across explicitly gendered descriptions of the roles of the state and society. However, the division between the distant material and legal support provided by the state and the close emotional support provided by participating citizens and society reproduces the gendered parenting practices of urban middle-class families. It appears that the father-state and the mother-society are considered most capable of caring for the left-behind child together.

Performances and Artefacts of Participatory Parenting

Thus far, my discussion has focused on state and NGO calls for citizens to participate in caring for the rural left-behind child. Here I use the analytical lens of boundary work to study how this participation of ‘society’ in parenting and the participation of parents and children in activities of the ‘community’ were both publicly performed in a food network.

Avoiding Formal School Education as a Marker of the State

The Beijing-based rural development NGO understood the contemporary Chinese countryside as both lacking and potentially provid-

ing valuable resources for a special form of community education that differed from the formal education the state offered in public schools. These guiding principles were translated into a syllabus with activities through which the NGO performed its difference from the state.

In Daxi Village, community education for rural children was first offered in the summer of 2014. Dong Jie had encouraged the village's peasant cooperative to host a summer camp for about one hundred children of primary school age. In the NGO's discourse, the rural left-behind child was used to justify and legitimize the need for rural children's community education, but in Daxi Village no kinship measurements were used to identify left-behind children. Rather, all children were welcome to participate in the summer camp.

In October 2014, the township agronomist asked the village party secretary, the village leader, another member of the villagers' committee (the only woman on the committee, Zhou Yueying, who had been responsible for birth planning) and me to meet to prepare for continuing the project in summer 2015. Following Dong's insistence, all these people had already participated in the NGO's training week for rural social workers in another village, where the peasant cooperative had been selected by the NGO as a model association. There, rural children's community education had been introduced as an aspect of the comprehensive services it provided.

For the preparatory meeting in October 2014, Dong Jie had already prepared a letter of intent to cooperate with the NGO again in co-organizing a second summer camp in Daxi in 2015. When drafting the letter, he built on the exemplary syllabus of activities from the model association. In the preface to this syllabus, the NGO emphasizes that the fundamental principle was multidimensional education to guide natural development and that natural practice inspired active exploration. The syllabus is divided into health activities, social activities, scientific activities, literature and arts. It includes many activities that speak directly to the discourse of left-behind children but also omits certain aspects of it. As described above, surveys and media reports have mainly constructed left-behind children as displaying emotional problems, extreme behaviour and poor performance in school. The exemplary syllabus for rural children's community education focuses particularly on psychological and social aspects. For example, how to deal with setbacks and problems, changing a mindset and knowing themselves. Furthermore, health classes are included to cultivate healthy and hygienic habits, as well as to spur transformation within the family.

The social activities mentioned in the syllabus include many individual activities aimed at promoting individual self-confidence, such as introducing oneself to an audience and performing in a talent show, as well as group games aimed at promoting cooperation, group cohesion and solidarity. Finally, along with etiquette and traditional customs, there is a special focus on parent-child activities aimed at strengthening the relationship and building harmonious families. In 2015, Dong Jie planned for the children to write a letter to their parents to make them conscious of the ‘kindness of the nurturing’ (*yangyu zhi’en* 养育之恩) of their father and mother. In order to develop ‘filial piety’ (*xiao* 孝), the children were also to read from *Standards for Being a Good Pupil and Child*.¹³ I read these activities as an attempt (aside from their appeal to Chinese culture and tradition) to establish certain expectations in children regarding who should be the most important participants in their upbringing and to prepare them to accept future care responsibilities for their aged parents.¹⁴

The literature and arts activities seem to be aimed at nurturing children’s awareness and sense of belonging towards their hometown and community. An emphasis is put on learning about ‘the local’. Children are to be introduced to local instruments, local traditional folksongs, local handicrafts, local history, local conditions and customs, and local legends and tales. In the preparatory meeting, Dong Jie and the village cadres did not specify what ‘local’ referred to. Instead, they requested that the NGO invite knowledgeable teachers from Beijing and send them to their village in Sichuan Province. Apparently, they assumed that ‘local traditions’ were no longer known inside of the village, the county, or the province, and only experts from China’s capital were expected to have preserved that knowledge. Besides inviting these experts, one concrete idea was to have children make themselves ‘traditional’ toys out of Chinese silvergrass. At the same time, the literature and art activities also included examples through which children would learn nonlocal cultural activities. For example, both ‘Western dance’ and ‘dances of diverse nationalities’ were to be introduced and appreciated by the children.

In the science activities section, the NGO proposed that rural children learn about environmental protection by practising waste separation and the safe and energy-saving use of electronic devices. Rural children were to learn about animals and plants, ‘traditional’ handicrafts and food manufacturing, and ‘local’ landscapes and geography, with the aim of understanding their hometown and strengthening their approving and loving feelings for their own homes. Hence, I understand the NGO to be distancing itself from state schools by

imbuing the term ‘scientific’ with a sense quite different from the modernist one that is attributed to the state’s formal education.

Setting Standards for Rural Parents

Along with the model syllabus, the NGO also proposed certain standards for households who wanted their children to participate in the community education activities. These standards show us how the NGO imagined an ideal household:

1. The family is harmonious. Husband and wife, as well as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, do not speak rudely and quarrel with each other in front of the child.
2. Old people are shown filial respect. Every day, old people are politely asked how they are, and every year they are bought new clothes. The child is neither beaten nor scolded and the child is respected.
3. The home is kept very clean, and waste is separated. The family practises home composting.
4. Participation in voluntary work once a month.
5. The father and mother of the child must participate in the opening ceremony, as well as check-ins in small groups during the activities and at the end of the activities.
6. Participation in monthly discussion meetings by young mothers and grandmothers.

Here, one can see that public participation by parents is demanded not only in the parent-child activities of the community education but also in more regular meetings. Moreover, this public participation tends to be gendered and expected primarily of mothers. By getting parents – particularly mothers – to participate in public activities related to child rearing, the NGO opened a space for intervening based on the ideals they described for rural families.

Yet this did not appear as an imposition for urban middle-class consumers who visited Daxi Village. The NGO mobilized the ‘problem’ of the left-behind child to justify its educational intervention. In the construction of the left-behind child, kinship was measured as physical and emotional closeness and thus came to indicate the family side of the state boundary. When assessments diagnosed the absence of such closeness, a child was categorized as left-behind and the boundary between family and state dissolved. But like the State Council, the NGO did not give up on this closeness as a marker of the non-state other. Rather, the provision of psychological and social care was turned into a gendered marker of the civil society side of the state

boundary. The activities planned in the syllabus of the summer camp scripted a difference between the state's education and the care of society. In the NGO's community education, society was performed as responsible for emotions, social behaviour and the informal, and the state only responsible for monetary support and the formal.

These performances were not exclusively or primarily directed at rural citizens in Daxi Village. Rather, these markers of the state boundary suited the images of the urban middle-class consumers. As in 2014, Dong Jie hoped to include the urban customers of the cooperative in the 2015 summer camp. As already mentioned, these urban middle-class consumers also referred to their consumer associations as 'mommies' groups'. In these groups, they organized not only the provision of food from villages but also excursions to the countryside. As these outside supporters of the ecological village were expected to participate in rural children's community education, the performed character of these educational activities gained an additional audience.

Mommies' Groups as Participating Audience

One Sunday in November 2013, I was waiting with Dong Jie and Wang Zhaochen for a group of visiting consumers from the provincial capital of Chengdu. Dong Jie's phone rang yet again, and yet again he patiently explained how to get to the village. At that time, the road from the town had not yet been improved, so the ride from Chengdu took about two hours, depending on the traffic. Turning to Wang Zhaochen and me, Dong Jie joked: 'In fact, it's good if they arrive late. When they're hungry, the rice will taste even better.' Under his arm, he was carrying a poster illustrating the cultivation of rice. 'The aim of the consumers from Chengdu', he explained to me, 'is to show their children how their food is grown and produced because urban children do not know about such things'. Like the NGO, both Dong Jie and the urban middle-class consumers viewed the rural as a potential educational resource for children. Moving between urban and rural was welcomed so long as parents and children moved together.

Finally, ten adults and six children arrived in two new German luxury cars and two ordinary older cars. As it was late, we did not visit the cooperative's ecological vegetable site but walked past small hills and ponds directly to the home of Zhou Yueying, who had prepared a meal for the visitors. Dong Jie explained the differences between the three rice varieties served. He especially praised the cooperative's brown rice for its nutritional value, lamenting that most

people today did not like brown rice but that this was only a matter of what they were used to. Chen Zhifang, a mother who was visiting the village with her son, interjected that she felt that in fact brown rice tasted much better. Dong Jie, describing himself as a vegetarian, continued, pointing out wryly that much of the valuable rice bran was fed to pigs instead. While these consumers were obviously interested in what they were eating, I was nevertheless surprised about the topic of the following conversations.

After lunch, we walked to the host's mandarin orange grove on the hill behind her house, and the visiting consumers turned to Dong Jie with questions concerning agriculture and the village. When addressing him, they did not refer to his position as a state official of the township but called him 'teacher' or 'rural expert'. It surprised me that education appeared to be an even more important topic to them than food, agriculture or the consumer association they had just set up. Their conversations with me, a European PhD candidate, always turned into comparative discussions about education in China and the West, whether kindergarten or tertiary. Chen Zhifang, the brown rice fan, told me that her son attended a Montessori kindergarten and that she was interested in Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf pedagogy. She and her friend wanted to hear about the Austrian school system because they thought that the education system in China exerted too much pressure on children.

When we arrived at the mandarin orange grove, the children were sent to pick mandarin oranges themselves, the smaller ones with help from their parents. Everything was documented by camera and smartphone, and some of the photos were posted on the consumer association's social media group. A child and his or her parents being 'active' in 'nature' together – for example a 3-year-old girl who was squatting next to a chicken to pet it, or a mother and son planting rice seedlings – was a popular image to share in this online group.

Although their newly established consumer association had a different name, and although the group was not exclusively organized by young mothers of kindergarten or primary school children, many nevertheless referred to it as a 'mommies' group'. In their group conversation on a Chinese social media platform, several of the more active members included the term 'mom' (*ma* 妈) in their nickname.

Homemade Dolls: Artefacts of Intensive Mothering

Another event a year later left an even deeper impression on me. Chen Zhifang invited me to see her workshop at the Montessori kin-

dergarten. This kindergarten was located in an area in the suburbs of Chengdu that was no longer being used for agriculture but where construction of new high-rise buildings had not yet started. There, she rented a one-storey studio and offered craft workshops. When I arrived there on an October afternoon in 2014, six women were sitting on little children's chairs around two large low children's tables sewing the different body parts of cloth dolls. Chen was assisting those who needed help, so I chatted with one mother whom I knew from her visit to the village a year earlier.

This mother mentioned that the work they put into making these dolls by hand would give them a special warmth. Commercial toys that were produced by machines did not possess this kind of warmth. My quip that machines also emitted heat in the production process might have fallen flat: she explained that this was a different kind of warmth, representing her love for her child. They only made these dolls for their own children, not for other children, and not for sale. The dolls became artefacts of intensive parenting that these middle-class women used to perform in front of each other as 'good mothers'.

This idea of personally making something for one's own child is also important when it comes to food. For example, Chen Zhifang announced in the consumer association's chat group that they would soon brew 'old-fashioned' homemade soy sauce. Her announcement included an anecdote about how much her son must adore this kind of soy sauce: he ate rice with nothing but soy sauce in the evening, and green beans with nothing but soy sauce in the morning. He no longer wanted sesame oil; nothing but soy sauce, she said, proud of her success in providing for her son.

Spotlighting performances and artefacts of intensive parenting not only sheds light on notions of good motherhood among organized urban middle-class consumers but on the boundaries between state, market and society and between the rural and the urban, as well as those between China and the West. As shown above, both the State Council and the NGO explicitly called for the 'participation' of citizens in the education of left-behind children; and in Daxi's summer camp, this call for participatory parenting found expression in two practices. On the one hand, other citizens – urban families – were invited to participate in the community education offered for rural children. On the other, rural children's parents were expected to conform to middle-class ideals of good parenting and required to demonstrate this publicly through participation in community education.

In the three cases presented here, the concept of participation was not used. However, the three performances of urban consumers who

understood themselves as members of a mummies group followed the same call for participation. The parents and children visiting the village and picking mandarin oranges together, the group of mummies making dolls together, and the mother sharing her news about making soy sauce for her own son with the social media group are three cases of publicly staged intensive parenting. These parents participated in groups beyond the family, with or on behalf of their children, and this made other actors spectators and participants in these parenting practices. For them, performances of participatory parenting like those at Daxi Village's summer camp marked the state's boundary with their families and their mummies' groups that bought the cooperative's products. Artefacts of participatory parenting were thus used to represent the 'success' of rural community education in Daxi Village to this audience.

Rural Children's Drawings: Staging the Success of Community Education

In November 2014, Daxi Village again prepared to present itself as an 'ecological village' with a 'comprehensive cooperative'. This time, Dong Jie and the village leaders made the following arrangements. Vegetables produced by the cooperative were displayed on tables set up on the village square. Behind these, children's drawings and compositions were hung on the wall of the building of the village committee, along with notes and mind maps from the last strategic development plan for the cooperative. These were from a 'beautiful home' drawing and writing competition that had been part of the rural children's community education programme during the summer. The drawings and compositions testified to the success of the community education project. Dong Jie introduced community education to the visitors as an example of the social services that the cooperative offered to the community. He stressed how they were different from the specialized peasant cooperatives that the state acknowledged and supported: each of those cooperatives focused exclusively on the production and sale of a single commodity. The children's drawings and compositions were displayed alongside the vegetables to mark the cooperative as different to the market-oriented state.

At the conference on the NGO's rural children's community education in Beijing, Dong Jie had been invited to speak about his practical experiences. As the community education project in Daxi Village had been well documented, Dong Jie used many photos to show the significance of the summer camp activities. Among these

was one in which a child was holding up to the camera her drawing for the 'beautiful home' competition. Another photo with the title 'Parent-child self-experience: constructing connections between city and countryside', showed, as mentioned above, urban middle-class mothers taking pictures of their children who were helping to plant rice seedlings. I take this choice of photos to represent a performance of how 'community education' provided by 'society' – in contrast to 'formal education' offered by 'the state' – is imagined as not separating parents from their children or children from nature.

Conclusion: Gendered Markers Travelling Between Non-state Others

During the summer holidays of 2015, a woman in Daxi Village took her granddaughter to work with her at the cooperative's vegetable facility. She had to look after her because the rest of the family worked in Shanghai. When two groups of student volunteers offered two consecutive weeks of community education in the village, she happily sent her granddaughter to the summer camp without worrying about the ideal of intensive parenting. While she would have preferred to work in Shanghai, where wages were higher and life more exciting, the summer camp at least helped her to continue to care for her family by both earning an additional income and caring for her 'left-behind' granddaughter. For her, the performed difference between the care of father-state and mother-society did not matter.

It has been pointed out that 'educational partnerships' that attempt 'to expand civil society [may] ultimately serve to enhance the regulative power of the state' (Franklin, Bloch and Popkewitz 2003: 3). While the summer camp did not necessarily infuse rural families with ideals about intensive mothering, such interventions of civil society did indeed have political implications far beyond the changes 'within' the targeted families. Such renegotiations of care responsibilities affect how public resources are distributed. Therefore, they should be of interest to not only kinship anthropologists and family sociologists but also political anthropologists and political scientists and economic anthropologists and economists.

The notion of the left-behind child rose to global prominence around the 1990s. As images of good childhood and good parenthood are always related to each other (Thelen and Haukanes 2010), it should come as no surprise that ideas about 'intensive parenting' (and 'intensive mothering' in particular) gained global currency around

the same time, at least among the urban middle classes (Hays 1996).¹⁵ The simultaneity of the global participation buzz in rural development may appear as pure coincidence, but in this chapter, I used the term participatory parenting to highlight how intensive mothering moved as a marker of state boundaries from family to civil society as another non-state other. At the same time, the term also points to participation travelling in the reverse direction.

It has been argued that the idea of participation, contrary to mainstream depictions, initially travelled from religion to development politics, and that while it is often thought of as a ‘right’, it also has a history as a ‘duty’ (Henkel and Stirrat 2001). The question that needs to be posed, then, is not only who has the right to participate (and who is excluded) but also who is expected to participate and what form this ‘participation’ should take when it is performed. Similarly, the notion of intensive parenting suggests that parents have a right to participate in their children’s upbringing and may thus justify the exclusion of ‘the state’ from ‘inside’ the family. However, intensive parenting is also a duty, and failure to enact it properly can be used to justify intervention from ‘outside’ the family.

While central government documents as well as NGO publications claimed all children as children of the nation, some had their familial belonging questioned: those children who were left behind in the countryside. In the construction of the left-behind child, ‘kinship measurements’ (Thelen and Lammer 2021) were used to justify the transfer of care responsibilities. Informed by globally travelling ideas about intensive parenting, geographical distance was taken to indicate a lack of kinship in terms of a lack of emotional closeness. Physical proximity thus became a marker of the family side of the state boundary. If this marker was absent – for example, when volunteers in Daxi Village collected information about the parents’ places of work and the village’s geographical distance to these places – specific children turned into left-behind children. Without this marker, children’s familial belonging lost relevance compared to their belonging to the nation. What would have otherwise appeared as intrusion into family life turned into benevolent participation of other actors in the care for the left-behind child.

In caring for the left-behind child, both central government and NGO documents proposed a clear but complementary division of labour between state and society.¹⁶ Besides formal schooling for all children in the nation, the state should take care of institutional and legal improvements and provide material support. With this material support, society should provide psychological and social care

for left-behind children. Even if this discourse did not use the terms ‘father state’ and ‘mother society’, this complementary division of labour was also present in certain gendered images of parental care, with the father providing monetarily for the family and the wife taking care of children’s emotional and social needs. With care for the left-behind child, these images travelled, and specific images of good fatherhood (in particular, monetary support) and good motherhood (in particular, emotional support) became markers of the boundary between state and society.

While the NGO justified its approach to rural community education with reference to the left-behind child, kinship measurements were not applied to establish specific children’s belonging for the projects in Daxi Village in 2014 and 2015. All children in the village could participate in the summer camps; the boundary between state and family as marked through physical proximity did not matter at this stage in the project cycle. Instead, the syllabus for the summer camp was designed as a contrasting civil society complement to the state’s formal school education. This was all the more important because urban middle-class consumers who valued intensive parenting but were sceptical of state intervention were included as an additional audience of the summer camp. As an element of the comprehensive services provided, the NGO’s community education project served as another marker that distanced Daxi Village’s cooperative from the ‘specialized cooperatives’ supported by the state.

Taken together, the case of community education for the left-behind child adds to reconnecting politics and kinship through a focus on care (Thelen and Alber 2018; Read 2018; Rasell 2021). First, it demonstrates how the results of kinship measurements can be turned into markers of the boundary between state and family (see also Chapter 6). In particular, the absence of good care as a marker of the family is often used to justify the rearrangement of care responsibilities (Papadaki 2018). Second, the domain multiplicity of state boundaries sometimes makes markers of one non-state other ‘travel’ to another non-state other. In the case of rural community education, gendered images of good care travelled from kinship to politics, while participation travelled from politics to kinship. Finally, the state boundaries that were performed with travelling markers made certain activities appear acceptable or even desirable (‘care’ and ‘participation’) that might otherwise be regarded as intolerable intrusions.

The second part of this book continues to explore the differences that performed state boundaries make, even as it shifts attention from

participatory rural development to the democratic administration of social benefits. Deepening the exploration of the multiplicity of performed state boundaries through a focus on temporality, these chapters show how markers of the state and non-state make a difference between democracy and paternalism (Chapter 4), discretion and deviation (Chapter 5), and corruption, filial piety and individualism (Chapter 6).

Notes

1. Dong Jie organized similar activities on other occasions. A five-legged race with four participants tied together was held at the schoolyard on a national holiday in a competition between several villages from Qiuling Township. Dong Jie had introduced the game by explaining that the aim was to let the villagers learn to walk together as a community.
2. I borrow the notion of ‘travelling’ from those who have worked on travelling ideas and models (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996; Behrends, Park and Rottenburg 2014). More specifically, I follow the call by Tatjana Thelen and Erdmute Alber (2018: 3) to reconnect politics and kinship by studying both boundary work, through which the two are constructed as distinct domains, as well as concepts that travel across this divide. Some notions usually considered firmly rooted in politics may suddenly pop up in the domain of kinship as well. Jeannette Edwards (2018), for example, has pointed to the travel of the idea of ‘transparency’ from the field of politics to that of artificial reproduction technologies. She shows how being ‘transparent’ about genetic kinship in the United Kingdom has become important to being both a ‘good parent’ and a ‘good citizen’. Similarly, while the notion of participation is usually associated with politics, it may also show up elsewhere; for example, in parenting, as this chapter shows.
3. Until now, it has been kinship studies rather than political anthropology that have focused on the coproduction of state and family. Even these contributions have only partially acknowledged the broader influence of kinship on state formation and often remain focused on certain policies directly related to parenthood and childhood. In the anthropology of China, the title of the introduction to *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* – ‘The impact of Post-Mao Reforms on Family Life’ (Davis and Harrell 1993) – offers a telling example of this tendency to focus on the influence of politics on kinship rather than vice versa. Gonçalo Santos (2017) offers a rich and nuanced study about changes in rural family life, which he interprets as a reconfiguration of ‘patriarchal multiple mothering’. While he focuses on changes within the family, he also argues that these transformations in kinship have, conversely, influenced state policy and market developments as well and points to a boom in

- full-day kindergartens and residential primary schools for the children of migrant parents (Santos 2017: 105).
4. The English translation ‘left-behind children’ might lead to misunderstandings, given its similarity to UNICEF’s discourse about ‘the children left behind’. While the UNICEF formulation is meant as a metaphor and refers to inequality in child well-being, the Chinese notion refers to children physically distant from their parents.
 5. Xiang Biao (2007: 182) summarizes how the economic reforms of the 1980s enabled labour migration even as the household registration system prevented other kinds of migration: ‘While citizens can move elsewhere to search for jobs as labourers and they can purchase basic subsistence products as consumers, they cannot settle down as they wish as social and political subjects. Thus, only those who expect to find jobs and earn money immediately can afford to migrate; family members who need care must stay behind.’
 6. Mandatory pregnancy tests, as part of the birth planning policy, were among the things said to have discouraged married women from migrating (Xiang 2007: 182). Another reason often mentioned by both migrants and those left behind is the old saying that ‘men are in charge of external affairs; women are in charge of internal affairs’. However, in contrast to the earlier distinction between agriculture and household, the ‘outside’ now refers to migration to work outside of the village and ‘inside’ means within the village and includes agriculture (Jacka 1997: 140–41 quoted in Xiang 2007: 183).
 7. Pissin (2013b: 11, 13) also argues that capitalism caused a shift ‘from kin-based to capital-, commodity- and labour-based relations’, thereby homogenizing social relations on a global scale. This second explanation appears less convincing as it adopts – in contrast to anthropological approaches emphasizing heterogeneity in globalization – a problematic narrative of modernization.
 8. Xiang Biao himself reconstructs the notion of ‘the left-behind child’ in a way that resembles the UNICEF notion of children left behind in terms of welfare. He argues that ‘rural children as a whole are left behind’. For this argument, he points out that while those left behind do encounter various problems, these are ‘not much worse than that of those living with other family members in the same community’ (Xiang 2007: 180). Moreover, he draws on quantitative studies that assert, for example, that rural children are ‘twice as likely to have psychological and behavioural problems as their urban counterparts’ (Xiang 2007: 186).
 9. The ‘fake milk formula’ scandal that hit the headlines in 2004 was interpreted as ‘bringing to light’ the problems of the left-behind children. This incident happened in Fuyang, a municipality in Anhui Province known for its high number of migrant workers. The story goes that left-behind babies had to rely on milk formula because their mothers were away and could not breastfeed them. Furthermore, the grandparents who should have been caring for the babies were themselves portrayed as ‘left be-

- hind' and poorly educated, and therefore unable to assess the quality of the milk formula and slow to bring sick babies to hospitals (Xiang 2007: 180).
10. Here I translated the Chinese term *zuguo* (祖国) as 'the country of the ancestors', a gender-neutral term. I return to the question of gendered statehood below.
 11. For example, the anthropologist Xiang Biao (2007) made a similar argument against the registration system that separates urban and rural households. Working within a political economy framework, he is mainly interested in this institutional setup and less in the middle-class discourses of familism, although he also mentions these briefly (Xiang 2007: 185).
 12. Thelen and Alber (2018: 6) noted that in debates about so-called 'care crises' in the face of 'ageing societies' in the West, the extended kinship of the 'traditional other' has experienced a positive reassessment.
 13. Li Yuxiu wrote this book (*Di Zi Gui* 弟子规) in three-character verses during the early Qing Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722), basing it on the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lun Yu* 论语).
 14. In the context of social assistance, Dong Jie emphasized that parents whose adult children do not care for them should not blame the children but look for the mistakes they made bringing them up. I discuss the selective and strategic use of the discourse of Chinese familism in relation to the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee in Chapter 6.
 15. Sharon Hays (1996) has traced the evolving notion of intensive mothering over a much longer period but also stressed that it has only become stronger over time.
 16. Rosie Read (2018) has studied boundary work in a similar partnership between the medicalized care provided by the state and the non-medicalized care of civil society provided by volunteers in Czech health care. She showed that while the boundaries of the confrontational civil society discourses of the 1990s were reproduced, state and civil society were no longer constituted as antagonistic or competitive entities in the 2000s but rather as complementary.