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RAISING CHILDREN IN THE CITIES:
SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND
MOTHERING PRACTICE OF RURAL-
URBAN MIGRANT MOTHERS IN CHINA

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Raising Children in the Cities: Social
Reproduction and Mothering Practice of Rural-
urban Migrant Mothers in China

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

As China's market-oriented reforms intensify and family migration becomes more prevalent, the organisation of daily care in migrant families has undergone significant changes. Guided by theories of social reproduction and intersectionality, this thesis examines how migrant mothers raise their children in the city, how social policies and institutional inequalities intersect to shape their mothering practices, and what role migrant mothering plays in the broader process of social reproduction. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork across four megacities—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—this thesis combines in-depth individual and focus group interviews, participant observation, and policy and document analysis. The thesis makes four main contributions.

First, this thesis identifies multidimensional mothering: alongside economic and care mothering, mothers perform “Hukou-linked Motherhood,” evident in four domains: securing local education, obtaining *hukou* for children, providing mobile caregiving, and managing the economic strain due to limited public resources. Pressures across these three domains of mothering are intensifying and mutually reinforcing. In particular, Hukou-linked Motherhood has been intensified under post-2014 policy tightening in megacities, which expands mothers’ psychological load, financial strain, and motherhood penalty, making both care and economic mothering heavier.

Second, this study theorizes a conditional social reproduction regime to explain how these pressures are structurally organised. Access to schooling, social insurance, and housing are stratified by the intersection of *hukou* status and employment form. Families with local hukou and formal employment receive greater support, while those without must self-fund the requirements for accessing public services. Within this regime, migrant families also face expanding care deficits and rising costs of social reproduction, revealing the persistent absence of the state in supporting their everyday reproduction.

Third, this study reframes migrant mothering functions as urban infrastructure. As social reproduction provisioning becomes conditional and exclusionary, mothers are compelled to compensate for institutional deficits through unpaid and underpaid labour: economic mothering that absorbs rising financial and social costs; care mothering that fills the urban care deficit; and Hukou-linked Motherhood that converts documents, credentials, and insurance contributions into eligibility for children's education. The thesis further demonstrates that these costs compound across the life course, producing a cumulative mothering penalty.

Theoretically, the thesis demonstrates the analytical productivity of combining social reproduction theory and intersectionality. SRT explained why care costs have been transferred from the state onto families; intersectionality explained how those costs are distributed in a patterned way organised by the intersection of hukou status, employment form, and gender. In extending intersectionality beyond its original race-

centred formulation, the thesis offered a localised analytical framework for understanding gender inequality in China, while also providing empirical support for a core claim of social reproduction theory. Policy interventions should therefore avoid valorizing maternal resilience as a substitute for institutional support. Instead, they should aim to redistribute reproductive responsibilities across the state, communities, and employers. The findings point to structural remedies: decoupling public services from *hukou* status, expanding affordable childcare, recognising caregiving labour in social insurance calculations, and extending gender-sensitive labour protections to workers in precarious and platform-based employment.

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Chapter1: Introduction

In the past four decades of reform and opening-up in China, millions of migrant workers have endured long-term separation from their children. Starting in the 1990s, however, rural-urban migration began to show a tendency of familization (Hou, 2009; Zhou, 2004), making the nuclear family arrangement the most prevalent in host locations (Fan & Li, 2019; Hu & Zhao, 2017). According to the 2017 China Migrants Dynamic Survey, 70.88 percent of migrant families have achieved family union in host cities, and nuclear families account for 74.45 percent among migrant families (Hu & Zhao, 2021). Along with familization of migration, the number of female migrant workers and migrant children has increased. The number of migrant children rose from 35.81 million in 2010 to 71.09 million in 2020, and the percentage of migrant families with left-behind children fell steadily from around 70 percent in 2010 to 50 percent in 2020 (New Citizen Program, 2023).

In the context of the neoliberal turn of social reproduction—which has meant that the state has offloaded parts of the social reproduction burden onto families, particularly women—and under the urban-rural household registration dual system, raising children in host cities is accompanied by a shift in the mothering practices of migrant mothers. Unlike mothering their left-behind children, migrant mothers who bring their children to cities face increased childcare participation and unique challenges. On the one hand, the mothering practices of migrant mothers are deeply influenced by the hegemonic discourse of urban parenting, which is becoming

increasingly child-centered and more intensive (Binah-Pollak, 2014; Chen, 2018; Hanser & Li, 2017; Jin & Yang, 2015). Compared to middle-class counterparts, on the other hand, migrant mothers face discriminatory household registration, which prevents them from accessing social welfare such as public education, public housing and health care. Moreover, migrant mothers are often employed in low-paid, long-hour, and labour-intensive jobs. This makes it difficult to balance work, caregiving responsibilities, and personal aspirations (Xu & Xin, 2021).

Given the growing trend of family migration and neoliberal turn of social reproduction, it is imperative to expand the understanding of the mothering experiences of migrant mothers to serve them better. Some studies have investigated rural-urban migrant families and the negotiation of mothering in relation to gender, urban-rural migration, and class (Dai, 2019; Du, 2019; Peng, 2017, 2018; Xiao & Cai, 2014; Xiao & Tang, 2021; Xu & Xin, 2021; Zhao, 2020). However, most existing literature primarily focuses on migrant mothering in the context of family separation. The voices of migrant mothers who have experienced childrearing in cities are often absent from discourses about mothering. Additionally, limited attention has been given to the relationship between mothering and social reproduction.

Based on fieldwork in the top four cities hosting the most migrant children in China, this study focuses on the hitherto neglected mothering practices among migrant mothers living with their children in cities—their maternal labour, emotional work, and agency. Drawing on theories of social reproduction and intersectionality,

this study explores the characteristics of mothering practices among rural-urban migrant mothers, their social roots and their social impact on the process of social reproduction. In the following section, the background of this study, research questions, and implications will be discussed.

1.1 The Neoliberal Turn of Social Reproduction in China

The global expansion of capitalism, especially the rise of neoliberalism since the 1970s, has profoundly reshaped national economies, welfare regimes, demographics, and family structures. In the realm of family life, neoliberalism requires individuals and families to shoulder family care rather than rely on their communities or the state. Hence, the thirst for hard money circulation has led to a continuous squeeze in social reproduction capacity, ultimately resulting in the spread and expansion of a global reproduction crisis (Briggs, 2017).

As David Harvey (2007) argues in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, China embarked on a path of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics following Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up in the late 1970s. By the mid-1990s, China had embraced market principles, and the social structure gradually began to shift from "the private embedded in public" to a separation of public/private spheres (Song, 2012b). This market transformation was driven by two forms of privatization - the privatization of the means of production and the privatization of the family (Song, 2012a). The privatization of the family refers to the fact that labour related to reproduction-especially childbearing, parenting, and caregiving-is seen as a private

family matter. Correspondingly, the regime of social reproduction has transitioned from a socialist public regime to a public-private hybrid regime (Dong, 2020). While the state maintains workers' pension and healthcare systems within the public sector—subsidized by the state and employers—it shifts responsibilities such as childcare, eldercare, and domestic labour into the private realm, subjecting them to market forces (Dong, 2020).

Under neoliberalism, capital and the state have offloaded parts of the social reproduction burden onto families —particularly women— resulting in gendered labour policies (Tong, 2017) and the emergence of an informal care market (Dong, 2020). In contemporary China, hundreds of millions of women, many of them mothers, have migrated from rural areas to cities to work as domestic workers, taking on a significant share of the country's social reproduction work. Thus, while urban women can alleviate some caregiving pressure through support from older generations and access to market-based services, rural women often face family separation, double burdens, and a heavier motherhood penalty. Research documents that migrant mothers face significant disadvantages in hourly earnings and employment quality, especially those living with their children (Kong & Dong, 2024; Jiang & Tan, 2021). As the care responsibility is shifting primarily onto the families and working-class women, social reproduction in China has undergone a process of privatization, feminization, and stratification (Tong, 2017), creating care deficits for disadvantaged groups (Connelly et al., 2018).

While a growing body of research has examined migrant women's roles in paid domestic labour and care work (Dong, 2020; Fu et al., 2018; Su & Ni, 2022), less attention has been given to their unpaid domestic and childcare work within their own households. This thesis uses mothering as an analytical entry point to explore the forms of labour and roles migrant mothers perform in social reproduction.

1.2 Migration, Split Households, and Family Migration in China

Over the past four decades of reform and opening up, China's market-oriented reforms and rapid industrialization have drawn hundreds of millions of rural migrants to urban and coastal areas in search of livelihoods. The industrialization and urbanization in China remain two highly distinct processes (Lu & Su, 2021). In 2024, the total number of migrant workers in China reached 299.73 million, with women accounting for 37.6% and 78.9% of them being married (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). Although they live in cities, they have not fully benefited from urban welfare due to the binary system of urban-rural division. This has resulted in a system in which the productive labour of migrants is utilized in urban areas, while the costs of care, education, and elder support are borne by their rural hometowns and families (Ren & Pun, 2007), leading to rural-urban segregation of family models and a split labour reproduction system (Shen, 2006).

In the early days of reform and opening up, with the massive influx of migrant workers into industrial towns, most migrant workers lived in factory dormitories or near factories (Ren & Pun, 2006). Migrant workers were incorporated into industrial

production through low-cost dormitory housing, while the renewal and care of labour—the reproduction of life itself—remained the responsibility of their rural households (Pun & Lu, 2010). This arrangement has been described as a specific feature of China's labour regime—the “dormitory labour regime” (Pun & Smith, 2007) and “unfinished proletarianization” (Pun & Lu, 2010; Pun et al., 2009). Cities draw on peasant labour to meet the demands of global capital and national development strategies, while simultaneously refusing to bear the long-term costs of reproducing that labour in urban settings (Ren & Pun, 2006, 2007). As a result, migrants are excluded from dominant ideals of domesticity and family life, weakening social ties such as kinship, community, and emotional support. The result is a stratified system of labour and reproduction that serves the goals of rapid capital accumulation and urban growth while exacerbating social inequalities between urban and rural populations.

In recent years, changes to labour laws, social insurance, and household registration (*hukou*) policies have made it easier for migrant workers to bring their children with them to cities (Lv et al., 2024; Zhou, 2004). Since the 2000s, an increasing number of migrant parents have brought their children to live with them in cities. The proportion of rural left-behind children declined steadily—from 54.1% in 2000 to 43.8% in 2010, and further to 30.3% in 2020. In contrast, the proportion of migrant children increased significantly, rising from 39.5% in 2010 to 51.5% in 2020, thereby becoming the dominant group among children affected by internal migration

(Lv et al., 2024). As a result, migrant families have become more prominent, nuclear, and diverse (Hu & Zhao, 2017). Among the new generation of migrant workers, familization is seen as a process that reshapes their lives, making "wife (or husband) and children" the center of their existence and a key source of meaning in life (Wang, 2022).

Yet despite this trend toward family migration, the urban-rural household registration dual system continues to limit their access to urban welfare and public services. Research has shown that Beijing has the highest overall threshold index for hukou eligibility, followed by Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen across the country (Zhang & Chen, 2024). Migrant families still face the dilemma of state absence. Rural-urban migrant mothers living with their children frequently experience intense family-work conflict and face intersecting forms of marginalization based on hukou status, gender, and class, which impact on how they are able to perform their maternal duties (Peng, 2017; Li, 2022; Xu & Xin, 2022).

Current academic research has largely focused on the well-being of migrant and left-behind children. Much less attention has been paid to the impact of rural-urban segregation on migrant mothers. This thesis seeks to address that gap by exploring how the existing social system shapes migrant mothers' mothering practices, and how they navigate labour production and social reproduction in the context of mobility and marginalization.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

Given that the multiple intersectional oppressions experienced by rural-urban migrant mothers may significantly impact their mothering practices, a better understanding of how they experience mothering and the degree of agency they can exercise would help identify gaps in policy reform and supportive services for rural-urban migrant mothers.

Drawing on interviews, document analysis, and participant observation in four megacities including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, this study aims to address the following questions: a) How do migrant mothers engage in mothering practices within the context of family migration? b) How do unequal social contexts shape and constrain their mothering practices? c) What role does migrant mothering play in the broader processes of social reproduction?

By analyzing the maternal labour and emotional experiences of rural-urban migrant mothers across different stages of life, the first objective of this study is to examine the characteristics of their mothering practices and record migrant mothers' narratives about their experiences and how these relate to what they consider ideal mothering. The second objective is to illuminate how intersectional inequality shapes the mothering practices of migrant mothers. The third objective is to explore the role of migrant mothering in the social reproduction of working-class families and the wider society.

1.4 Implication of the Study

By delving into these underexplored areas, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the complex realities faced by migrant mothers and the active roles they play in social reproduction across various urban contexts. This study aims to contribute insights across three dimensions: theory, policy, and practice.

At the theoretical level, rather than attributing mothering practices to cultural or family issues, this research draws on theories of social reproduction and intersectionality to situate motherhood within the broader framework of socioeconomic and political transformation. In doing so, it aims to enrich theoretical discussions on mothering. Previous studies have primarily focused on identifying the intersectional inequalities that impact mothering practices, but they have overlooked the dynamic interactions and interplay between these different structures. This research seeks to uncover how migrant mothering is both shaped by and contributes to existing patterns of social reproduction and institutionalized inequalities including, gender, labour regimes, and social policy.

By comparing social policies across major host cities in China, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how regional policy variations influence mothering practices among migrant mothers. These findings have the potential to inform more equitable and responsive policy reforms aimed at supporting migrant families.

By documenting and amplifying the lived experiences and voices of migrant mothers, this research aims to provide valuable insights that can inform the design and

implementation of more targeted and supportive services. These services could better assist migrant mothers as they navigate the challenges of care and reproduction in urban China.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To understand how rural-urban migrant mothers in China raise their children and navigate caregiving responsibilities in rapidly transforming urban environments, this study investigates the mothering practices of these women within the context of institutional constraints, gendered expectations, and social reproduction. Specifically, it seeks to examine how caregiving is shaped by intersecting structures such as the *hukou* system, labour market regimes, motherhood ideologies, and how migrant mothers exercise agency within these constraints. This chapter therefore begins by critically reviewing the literature on mothering and motherhood ideologies, including the historical shifts in childrearing norms and their implications for migrant families. It then introduces the framework of intersectionality to explore how rural-urban migrant mothers experience overlapping forms of structural inequality rooted in household registration, gender, and class. Finally, the chapter turns to theories of social reproduction, highlighting how migrant mothering practices are not only shaped by but also contribute to the reproduction of labour, family life, and social order in contemporary China.

2.1 Review of Mothering Research

A large body of research conducted in Western societies has demonstrated that motherhood practices are deeply shaped by structural and cultural factors such as gender norms, class, race, and state policy. While this body of literature offers a valuable starting point for understanding motherhood, it is largely situated in Western

liberal contexts, where welfare regimes, family structures, and gender ideologies differ significantly from those in China. In particular, the legacy of collectivist childrearing, the impacts of market reforms, and the persistence of patrilineal family norms have all contributed to a distinct configuration of motherhood among Chinese women. Given these contextual differences, it is crucial to also examine the specific historical, political, and cultural factors that shape mothering in China. Therefore, to understand how rural-urban migrant mothers construct and practice motherhood, this study draws on both Western feminist theories of mothering and empirical research on changing childrearing ideologies in the Chinese context.

2.1.1 Conceptualization of Mothering

Mothering is a historically and culturally variable relationship "in which one individual nurtures and cares for another" (Jaggar, 1983). It encompasses not only biological motherhood but also social forms of mothering (Glenn, 1994). Like gender, mothering is shaped by individuals' actions within specific historical contexts, highlighting agency as central to understanding it as a social construct. Rich (1995) further distinguishes between two intertwined meanings of motherhood: motherhood as an institutionalized concept and motherhood as a personal lived experience. This distinction emphasizes that women can find agency and self-empowerment through active engagement in mothering practices.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that mothering practices, being shaped by their social and cultural contexts, exhibit diversity both within and between

societies, undergoing continuous transformations over time (Christopher, 2012; Fox, 2006; Glenn, 1994; O'Reilly, 2010, 2014). Within the North American context, Hays (1996) introduced the influential concept of *intensive mothering*, characterized as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially costly. These intensified expectations of mothering have become more prominent and as such have been the focus of numerous studies (Correll et al., 2007; Lareau, 2011; Yavorsky et al., 2015). A related construct, *new momism* (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) asserts that motherhood completes a woman, that mothers are the ideal caregivers, and that mothers must devote themselves fully to their children. However, these demands can lead to low maternal self-efficacy and negative psychological outcomes like guilt, shame, and anxiety (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Guendouzi, 2006; Sutherland, 2010).

While elements of intensive mothering—such as heightened educational expectations and emotional investment—are visible across different cultural settings, a growing body of scholarship has emphasized the importance of remaining attuned to the cultural and institutional specificities that shape maternal norms in each context. Importantly, feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1994) have called attention to how the mainstream articulation of motherhood in feminist theory has tended to center the experiences of white, middle-class women, marginalizing the caregiving strategies of women of color, working-class mothers, and migrants.

The alternative concepts—such as extensive mothering, integrative mothering, transnational motherhood, and other mothering—offer important extensions and critiques of the intensive mothering paradigm. While intensive mothering emerged within white, middle-class, North American contexts, these newer frameworks have been developed in response to racialized, classed, and transnational caregiving arrangements. For instance, extensive mothering (Christopher, 2012) recognises the necessity of balancing paid labour with caregiving responsibilities, particularly among working-class women. Integrative mothering (Collins, 1987; Dow, 2016) highlights caregiving networks that extend beyond the biological mother in African American communities. Transnational mothering (Vives & Vazquez Silva, 2017) and Other mothering (Bloch, 2017) emphasize the lived realities of migrant women who maintain maternal roles across geographical distances and in contexts of legal and social exclusion.

These concepts challenge the presumed universality of intensive mothering and broaden our analytical lens by emphasizing that caregiving can be distributed, collective, negotiated, and deeply embedded in specific structural and cultural contexts. While elements of intensive mothering—particularly those related to educational investment and emotional involvement—have increasingly shaped urban parenting discourse in China, the frameworks of “intensive mothering” and “extensive mothering,” developed primarily in Western societies, are insufficient to capture the

lived realities and normative frameworks of mothering in contemporary urban China (Chen, 2018).

Building on these critiques, this study interrogates how rural-urban migrant mothers in China navigate motherhood under a distinct set of institutional constraints and moral expectations. Rather than uncritically applying Western paradigms, this study investigates how migrant mothers adapt, negotiate, or resist dominant maternal ideologies in their everyday lives. By situating mothering within the local political economy and moral order, this research underscores the need to theorize mothering as both context-dependent and relationally constructed. Through placing the experiences of Chinese migrant mothers in conversation with global scholarship on caregiving, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced, context-sensitive theorization of mothering—one that acknowledges localized specificities while also illuminating broader tensions in maternal expectations under neoliberal, gendered, and migration-related regimes.

2.1.2 Changes in Childrearing in China

Although scholarly attention to mothering in China developed later than in Western contexts, interest in maternal practices and mothering anxiety has grown rapidly in recent years. With a drastic decline in fertility and increases in family income, as well as the state's modernization project of promoting scientific knowledge, urban China is witnessing a new kind of mothering practice named "scientific childbearing and childrearing" (Ke xue yu er) (Zhu, 2010). This ideology

encourages parents—particularly mothers—to devote substantial financial, temporal, and emotional resources to their children's development, especially in education (Evans, 2010; Kuan, 2015; Jankowiak & Moore, 2017), mirroring core elements of the Western concept of intensive mothering (Chen, 2018; Hanser & Li, 2017). This section focuses on the specific characteristics of *intensive mothering* in the Chinese context.

As educational competition intensifies, a growing number of recent studies have documented that China's current "mothering practice" is inclined toward educational responsibilities (Jin & Yang, 2015). For example, Jin and Yang (2015) observe that mothers have become the primary managers of their children's education, dedicating significant time and emotional resources to school-related affairs—from coordinating extracurricular classes to liaising with teachers. This trend reflects a shift from direct caregiving toward a managerial and administrative role in children's development, giving rise to what scholars have termed: "administrative" mothering and "educational" mothering (Xiao & Tang, 2021). Urban mothers not only need to handle child development planning as family parenting "heads" (Xiao, 2014) but also have taken on more responsibilities for educating their children and becoming more like professional agents for their children's education (Yang, 2017).

Apart from intensive parental investment in education, studies have also revealed that the intensive demands of motherhood in China have become emotionally and psychologically involved (Chen, 2018; Evans, 2008; Kuan, 2015;

Peng, 2017), leading to increased stress and anxiety among mothers (Li, 2024; Pan & Sun, 2022; Xu, 2022). Under the ideology of intensive mothering, urban middle-class mothers increasingly encounter "work-family" conflicts, resulting in significant motherhood wage penalty (Kong & Dong, 2024; Lin, 2025; Meng et al., 2022; Mu & Xie, 2016; Xu, 2023).

Some studies reveal that rural-urban migrant mothers are increasingly influenced by child-centered and more intensive parenting. For example, Xiao and Cai's (2014) study of migrant workers' childrearing pointed out that urbanization-oriented migrant families mimicked middle-class desires and practices of scientific parenting. Also, compared to first-generation, new-generation migrant mothers pay more attention to the quality of the mother-child relationship and adopt various strategies to meet their children's emotional and educational needs (Peng, 2017).

These studies capture how changing ideologies about childrearing have indeed affected the mothering practices of different classes of mothers. As this change is not isolated, ideologies of mothering are part of complex ideologies, including patriarchy, capitalism, and technology (Rothman, 1994). In post-reform China, due to multiple factors such as the neo-liberal turn of social reproduction, population control policies, capital intrusion, and education marketization, childrearing is becoming highly "privatized" and "involved" (Shi, 2018), and mothering practices are to a large degree also political actions (Zhu, 2010). Yet most research on mothering neglects to examine the relationship between mothering ideologies and other prevailing

ideologies and explore how the ideology of mothering helps to maintain the existing social reproduction and ideologies that reinforce the hierarchy of different social identities, which will be considered in this study.

2.1.3 Migrant Mothering in China

Although numerous studies show that mothering is differentially constructed for women of different races, classes, and ethnicities, a majority of literature about the mothering of Chinese women focuses more on middle-class mothers (Chen, 2018; Wu, 2021). Yet, recently, a growing number of studies have focused on rural-urban migrant mothers (Dai, 2019; Du, 2019; Dong, 2022; Jin & Dai, 2024; Li, 2022; Peng, 2017, 2018; To et al., 2018; To et al., 2019; Xiao & Cai, 2014; Xiao & Tang, 2021; Xu & Xin, 2021; Zhao, 2020).

Some migrant mothering research in the context of family separation echoes research on transnational mothers. For most first-generation migrant mothers, economic provision tends to take precedence over direct care provision. They need to adopt "long-distance mothering" and "intermittent migration" to reconcile the tensions between economic and care provision (Xiao & Tang, 2021). Some mothers, such as those interviewed by Dong (2022), choose to engage in gig work in factories, aiming to straddle the boundary between work and home on a seasonal basis, thereby fulfilling their dual roles as both breadwinners and caregivers. Li's (2022) study shows that migrant mothers expressed profound guilt for leaving their children behind

and often faced harsh judgment from their family and members of their broader social networks, thus internalizing structural deficiencies as their responsibilities (Li, 2022).

Compared to the first-generation migrant mothers who faced acute economic hardship and greater political and institutional constraints on migrant mothering, the new-generation migrant mothers have benefited from a less oppressive context, economic development, and technological advancement (Peng, 2017). Yet the new generation of migrant mothers who tend to bring their children to live with them face time poverty, a double shift and educational exclusion within the context of the factory regime, the traditional gender ideology, and the rural-urban dual structure (Xu & Xin, 2021). Additionally, they are constantly exposed to cultural messages that celebrate ideal motherhood (Dai, 2019; Jin & Dai, 2024; Li, 2022). However, they face many difficulties in trying to achieve the standards and practices of scientific parenting, which are popular among urban middle-class families, such as low-income, a lack of cultural capital and public education opportunities (Xiao & Cai, 2014), producing significant maternal anxiety among migrant mothers (Li, 2024; Xu & Xin, 2021).

Although the mothering practices of first-generation and second-generation migrant mothers differ, both face intersectional inequality like low-income, labour-intensive jobs, discriminatory household registration, and traditional gender ideology (Peng, 2017; Xu & Xin, 2021; Zhao, 2020). These studies on migrant mothers provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of policy, labour, and culture. Most of

the research has been more concerned with mothering practices towards left behind children rather than migrant children, and few studies have focused on policies such as *Hukou*, education, labour, and insurance to examine the social impact of migrant mothering of different stages in more detail. Furthermore, as most studies were conducted in the same city or area, neglecting the differences impacts of social policies in various cities on migrant mothering. In this thesis, from the perspective of different life cycles of families, I explore the impact of structural context on the mothering practices of migrant mothers as well as how different policy contexts across different hosting cities in China shape their mothering practices.

2.2 The Intersectionality and Rural-urban Migrant Women in China

According to Collins, motherhood cannot be analysed in isolation from its context within the intersecting structures (Collins, 1994). To understand migrant mothers' marginalization and social inequalities they are facing and how they resist overlapping inequalities, the concept of intersectionality provides an important analytical framework. This section explores the application of intersectionality theory in the context of motherhood research and its relevance for understanding the intersecting forms of oppression experienced by migrant mothers.

2.2.1 Mothering and Intersectionality

Originating from black feminist and critical race theory, *intersectionality* functions not only as a theory but as a method, a disposition, a heuristic, and an analytical tool (Carbado et al., 2013). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, black critical

legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) was the first to use "intersectional" to describe how racial and gender discrimination influence each other and work together to shape black women's life experiences. This perspective was deepened in the 1990s by Patricia Hill Collins, who sees intersectionality working within "a matrix of domination". She defines it as "systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organisation, which shape Black women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women" (Collins, 2000: 299). Rather than merely mapping additive disadvantages, intersectionality offers a processual and system-centered mode of analysis (Choo & Ferree, 2010), making it particularly relevant for analyzing structural and institutional inequality.

The intersectional approach in motherhood studies has long emphasized that racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context not only for racial and ethnic women in the United States but for all women (Collins, 2000). Patricia Hill Collins's foundational work demonstrated how Black mothers historically challenged the public/private divide through community-based care and political resistance. These contributions remain pivotal in moving motherhood studies beyond white, middle-class norms and toward an analysis grounded in the lived realities marginalized women (Collins, 2000). Scholarship on transnational families, and on how family formation and structure are shaped by immigration policy, has expanded considerably in the past decade (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020).

While intersectionality emerged in a Western context where race is often foregrounded, scholars have extended the framework to other social settings, recognizing that the axes of oppression vary across geopolitical and historical contexts. A key contribution in this direction comes from Anthias (2012, 2013), who argues that intersectionality must be decoupled from any fixed set of categories and reconceptualised through what she terms "translocational positionality"—an approach that foregrounds how social locations are constituted by context-specific structures of power, including ethnicity, class, migration status, and gender, rather than by race as a universally primary axis. This theoretical move opens space for applying intersectionality in contexts where race is not the organising axis of inequality. Scholars working on migration in South and Southeast Asia have taken up this challenge directly: Lan's (2006) study of migrant domestic workers in Taiwan recentres intersectionality around citizenship, ethnicity, and class; while Kim (2013) demonstrates how citizenship status and ethnicity operate as the primary intersecting axes structuring the lives of marriage migrants in South Korea. In the Indian context, Thenmozhi Soundararajan and others have argued for caste—not race—as the central axis of intersecting oppression alongside gender and class (see also Mohanty, 2003). Taken together, this body of work establishes a well-developed methodological precedent: intersectionality's core logic—that social positions are co-constituted by multiple, simultaneous structures of power—is preserved across these transpositions, while the specific axes are made responsive to local historical and institutional conditions.

In the Chinese context, Su (2016) offered an influential methodological intervention in Chinese gender sociology, arguing that intersectionality provides a productive analytical lens precisely because it can be reconfigured around locally operative structures of power rather than those specific to its Anglo-American origins. In China, racial discrimination may not be a primary axis of inequality; however, other intersecting structures—such as the urban-rural hukou system, labour market stratification, gendered caregiving norms, and migration policy—play analogous roles in shaping marginalization. This study applies an intersectional lens not to reproduce the U.S.-centric model of racial analysis, but to trace how multiple social forces—particularly class, gender, institutional exclusion, and spatial regulation—co-produce disadvantage in the lives of rural-urban migrant mothers. Wang (2015) demonstrated this concretely through a process-centered intersectional analysis of female migrants' employment in Xi'an, showing how the gender–hukou intersection generates qualitatively distinct forms of labour market disadvantage that neither axis alone can explain. Here, intersectionality becomes less about identity markers and more about the relational and structural processes that create vulnerability and constrain agency (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Methodologically, this study draws upon Choo and Ferree's (2010) three strategies for doing intersectional research: (1) *group-centered* analysis, which centers the experiences of multiply marginalized women (in this case, rural-urban migrant mothers); (2) *process-centered* analysis, which examines how different inequalities

(e.g., household registration, labour regime, and caregiving responsibilities) interact in practice; and (3) *system-centered* analysis, which reveals how institutional arrangements reproduce caregiving burdens and social exclusion.

Despite its transformative potential, the mainstreaming of intersectionality has led to theoretical tensions. Dhamoon (2011) cautions that the widespread institutional adoption of intersectionality risks depoliticizing its radical critique. She stresses the need to maintain intersectionality's focus on systems and processes rather than merely identities or categories. Similarly, critiques by scholars such as Bilge (2013) warn against "ornamental intersectionality"—the superficial use of intersectional language in diversity discourse without engaging with its commitment to dismantling oppressive structures.

This study addresses a key limitation in the application of intersectionality theory by introducing social reproduction theory as a complementary framework. While intersectionality highlights the multiple and intersecting forms of inequality experienced by rural-urban migrant women, social reproduction theory helps to identify the structural anchors within these inequalities—particularly those related to care work, labour, and state policy—that play a critical role in shaping their mothering practices. By integrating these two frameworks, I aim to analyse how caregiving practices among rural-urban migrant mothers are not only shaped by intersecting social hierarchies but also by the political economy of urban China—

particularly the commodification of care, the fragmentation of welfare provision, and the persistence of spatial and institutional exclusion.

2.2.2 The Intersectional Oppression of Rural-urban Migrant Mothers in China

Intersectionality offers researchers a valuable framework for examining both the micro-level manifestations of social differentiation among Chinese women and the macro-level processes that generate them, through intersecting categories such as gender, class, and the rural-urban divide (Su, 2016). Rural-urban migrant women in China experience not only multiple simultaneous forms of oppression but also the multiplicative relationships (King, 1988). Rural-urban migrant women have faced the country's household registration (*Hukou*) divide for over half a century, which is closely intertwined with their gender and class identities. Numerous studies have revealed that migrant women suffer from the "double jeopardy" created by the *hukou* system and patriarchy and are frequently channeled into low-income, labour-intensive jobs in factories and service sectors (Jacka, 2014; Wang, 2015).

In exploring migrant motherhood, some existing studies have drawn on intersectionality theory to highlight how maternal experiences are shaped by three major structural forces: the capitalist labour regime, traditional gender norms, and the rural-urban divide (Lui, 2018; Peng, 2017; Wang, Y. 2015; Xu & Xin, 2021). Lui (2018) applied an intersectional framework to inter-*hukou* marriages, revealing how the intertwined institutions of state and patriarchy co-produce stratified marital power dynamics. Peng (2017) compared the narratives of two generations of migrant

mothers and their daily mothering of their left-behind children, revealing how the intersection of gender, class, and the rural-urban divide in China shapes their gendered ideology and performance of childcare over time. Wang, Cheng, and Bian (2018) further extended this analysis at a national scale, finding that the simultaneous effects of gender and hukou produce disadvantages more severe than their additive combination—what they term "more than double jeopardy."

However, these analyses tend to adopt an outcome-centered approach, treating the intersection of structural dimensions as a fixed result rather than a dynamic process, and often overlook the temporal and spatial dimensions through which these structures evolve. As social policies, including household registration, education policies, and childbearing policies, are constantly changing in cities, this has led to changes in the family life and reproduction of migrants. Additionally, China has witnessed a rapid informalization in both the manufacturing and service industries (Dong, 2020). Therefore, how intersectional analysis responds to this dynamic change is challenging in the rapidly changing social context.

To fully grasp how intersectional inequalities shape mothering practices in such a volatile context, it is essential to move beyond static snapshots and adopt a longitudinal, process-centered perspective. This study therefore draws on Choo and Ferree's (2010) dynamic model of intersectionality, which conceptualizes intersecting structures of power not as fixed positions but as relational, evolving processes. By tracing the shifting intersections of gender, class, *hukou* status, and policy regimes

over time and across space, this approach offers a more nuanced understanding of how migrant mothers navigate motherhood amid structural change.

2.3 Social Reproduction and Migrant Mothering

While intersectionality provides a critical lens to examine how multiple structural forces—such as gender, class, and *hukou* status—intersect to shape the lived experiences of rural-urban migrant mothers, it is equally important to identify the underlying systems that sustain these intersecting inequalities. In this regard, intersectionality and social reproduction theory can be viewed as complementary. Whereas intersectionality focuses on the dynamic interactions among axes of inequality, social reproduction theory offers a structural explanation for how policy, labour, and culture are sustained under particular political-economic regimes.

Mothering, long considered a private and familial responsibility, is affected by what goes on in the public sphere of the political economy (Glenn, 1994) and plays a crucial role in social reproduction of labour and society (Li, 2021). For rural-urban migrant mothers in post-reform China, caregiving not only ensures the daily functioning of their families but also contributes to the reproduction of the urban workforce. Their unpaid and often unrecognised care work exemplifies how the costs of social reproduction are externalized from the state and market to families—particularly to women. This section reviews key strands of social reproduction theory and explores how they shed light on the constraints and contradictions embedded in migrant mothering under China's neoliberal restructuring. By linking macro-level

transformations with micro-level caregiving practices, social reproduction theory offers an essential analytical framework for understanding how the labour of care is organized, devalued, and contested in the context of rural-to-urban migration.

2.3.1 Review of Social reproduction theory

Feminists use social reproduction to refer to the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally (Brenner & Laslett, 1991). Mothers' daily work for their children is the foundation of social reproduction (Fox, 2006). Social reproduction theory (SRT), rooted in Marxist theory, addresses the reproduction of labour power—how human life and societal systems are sustained across generations. Feminist scholars later expanded this framework, bringing reproduction to the center of political economic analysis. SRT offers a broad analytical lens that situates mothering not only as a domestic practice but as a politically and socially embedded process.

Karl Marx (1975[1867]: 677) first raised the question of the reproduction of labour, “The reproduction of a mass of labour power, which must incessantly re-incorporate itself with capital for that capital's self-expansion... forms, in fact, the foundation of capitalist production.” However, how the reproduction of labour power across generations is actually achieved remained inadequately theorized in classical Marxism. Burawoy (1985: 150–155) identifies four key factors—labour process, market competition, reproduction of labour power, and state intervention—as

determinants of production regimes. According to Burawoy, the reproduction of labour power is one of the essential dimensions of the factory regime and emphasizes that this dimension is necessarily influenced by various institutional arrangements provided by the state.

While Burawoy emphasized state influence in shaping how workers sustain their labour capacity, Marxist-feminist discussion of social reproduction has a strong gender consciousness and tries to answer the neglected question: "who makes the workers? how is this reproduction achieved?" (Bhattacharya, 2017: 19). Lise Vogel (2013: 157) situates women's oppression and domestic labour in the context of labour reproduction and social reproduction, finding what would later be called the Social Reproduction Theory. She divides the necessary labour into the domestic and social components and argues that "domestic labour is the portion of necessary labour that is performed outside the sphere of capitalist production. For the reproduction of labour-power to take place, both the domestic and the social components of necessary labour are required" (Vogel, 2013: 154).

The mode of social reproduction is not static but has taken different forms at different historical moments, shaped by the interaction of capital, the state, and the labour movement (Fraser, 2017). In various social texts, social reproductive labour has different characteristics and can be provided by the state, market, or borne by the family. SRT brings labour's social reproduction, alongside other "background conditions" of capital accumulation such as state, racial order, and nature, to the

center stage, arguing that instead of being external factors, these conditions are the built-in elements of capital accumulation (Fraser, 2014).

Socialist feminists have made great contributions to expand further and deepen the extension and connotation of "social reproduction" and have emphasized and highlighted the public attributes and social responsibilities of "social reproduction." However, in the capitalist economic system, the public social sector not only does not recognise the responsibility of social reproduction borne by members of society but regards it as a personal family affair, which leads to the individualization and familization of social reproduction (Li, 2021). Neoliberalism is indifferent to the gender division of labour and gender inequality (Braedley & Luxton, 2010).

This theory gained renewed attention in the context of neoliberalism. As state support for welfare declined and markets expanded, care responsibilities were privatized and commodified (Hochschild, 2003; Zelizer, 2000). Social reproduction activities constitute an important prerequisite for capitalist economic production, paid labour, and accumulation of surplus value (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Federici, 2014; Fraser, 2017). These studies acknowledge the sphere of reproduction as a source of value-creation and exploitation (Federici, 2014:7).

On the level of historical materialism (rather than pure discourse, ideology, and identity), social reproduction theory puts the classic issues of feminist research, such as gender division of labour, housework, and social care, under the perspective

of social and historical changes (Li, 2021). It involves the roles of the state, market, and family in allocating caregiving responsibilities and distributing access to resources. Institutions such as schools, hospitals, and welfare systems both sustain and reinforce social hierarchies, while migration and globalization complicate how care work is organized across borders. As the theory has developed, it also engages the concept of global care chains, transnational families, and the emotional tolls borne by migrant caregivers (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002).

Thus, SRT's materialist lens reveals that the reproduction of labour is not merely biological or familial—it is socially organized and politically contested. This makes it an essential framework for analyzing mothering, particularly among populations whose labour is undervalued or rendered invisible in conventional economic accounts. Drawing on the theory of social reproduction in the study of migrant mothering allows me to bring to light the changes and tensions in the deep structure behind the childrearing ideology and motherhood practice.

2.3.2 Mothering, labour regime, and social reproduction

According to Fraser, after the 1980s, globalization and neoliberalism reduced state and corporate investment in social welfare. Fraser argued that the "crisis of care" is best interpreted as an expression of the social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism in the present era (Fraser, 2017). Profiting from the unpaid condition of the labour involved, the current social system does not recognise the

production and reproduction of the worker as a social-economic activity and a source of capital accumulation (Federici, 2014: 8).

While returning care work to the family, it recruited women into productive labour in the name of gender equality, forming a new organisational form of social reproduction and reconstructing motherhood. On the one hand, the increase in women's participation in the workforce left working women shouldering the "double shift" and double pressures of paid and unpaid work (Hochschild, 1989). On the other hand, originating from the neoliberal model of economic development, the ideology of "intensive motherhood" requires women to devote more time and energy to their children (Hays, 1996), which is culturally contradictory to the increased market pressures that mothers face (Yavorsky et al., 2015). The emergence of "intensive motherhood" is the result of the middle class's response to the decline of traditional agricultural family patriarchy and a crisis in social reproduction caused by capitalism's development in the 19th century (Fox, 2006; Hays, 1996).

In post-reform China, along with the development of neoliberalism and industrialization, such social changes are also taking place in Chinese families and ideologies; the social reproductive functions are re-regarded as affairs in the private sphere and partly returned to the family or individual (Song, 2012a). This neo-liberal turn of reform resulted in the collapsing of the socialist regime of social reproduction, giving rise to the public-private hybrid regime of social reproduction, which keeps workers' pension and healthcare schemes in the public domain, but privatize and

marketize other social reproduction, including childcare, elderly care, and domestic work (Dong, 2020). The rise and fall of a socialist public regime of social reproduction in urban China deeply influenced the mothering practice of women among different classes. Professional women are under double squeeze and tension from the fields of labour and reproductive labour. Yet most research on Chinese mothering does not appear as a political issue but located in the private sphere of the family (Wu, 2021) and tends to pursue cultural analyses – of the ideologies and representations of motherhood (Fox, 2006).

Additionally, recent research seldom pays attention to integrating social reproduction perspectives in labour regime analyses (Dong, 2020) and welfare regime. Although the dormitory labour regime (Pun & Smith, 2007) is still a common regime of social reproduction in some industries, it is not as popular as before in the context of family migration. Maternal experience of working-class mothers has played a more essential part in the production and reproduction of the workers, which should be mystified as the social-economic activity and a source of capital accumulation. This study seeks to bring the mothering study back to the public sphere and take it as an entry to see the influence of the welfare regime and specific labour polity that mediates their social reproduction experience (Swider, 2015), how commercialization of social reproduction and care crisis intersect to influence mothering practices, as well as how migrant mothering helps the capital accumulation.

This chapter reviewed three strands of literature—mothering theory, intersectionality, and social reproduction theory—construct the conceptual framework for understanding the caregiving practices of rural-urban migrant mothers in contemporary China. Each of these perspectives contributes distinct analytical dimension. Theories of mothering reveal how caregiving practices are shaped by cultural discourses and evolving ideology of “good motherhood”. Intersectionality draws attention to the compounding effects of gender, class, hukou, and labour regime intersect to produce compounding disadvantages that no single axis of inequality can explain alone. Social reproduction theory provides a macro-structural lens to analyse how unpaid care labour sustains both families and the broader economy—and how the costs of that labour are distributed, privatised, and feminised under conditions of neoliberal restructuring.

These perspectives together allow this study to have a more comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of mothering. Rather than viewing migrant mothers as passive recipients of structural forces, this study approaches mothering as a site of negotiation, adaptation, and subtle forms of agency. The analytic framework developed in this study will guide the writing of each chapter by addressing several key questions:

(1) How do regional policy disparities shape migrant mothering across different institutional contexts?

(2) How access to reproductive resources is stratified, and what role does migrant mothering play in sustaining social reproduction?

(3) How do intersecting policies, labour regimes, and gendered expectations contribute to caregiving inequalities and motherhood penalties?

(4) How do migrant mothers negotiate dominant mothering ideologies and exercise agencies across different life stages?

The empirical chapters that follow apply this framework to analyse how migrant mothering is practised, shaped, and contested at the intersection of state policy, labour regimes, social reproduction institutions, and cultural expectations. By centring social reproduction as the primary analytical lens—and bringing it into dialogue with intersectionality and mothering theory—this study contributes to a more structurally grounded and empirically rich understanding of how neoliberal reforms in China have produced, distributed, and sustained gendered inequalities through the labour of migrant mothers.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The present study explores how mothers raise their children in host cities where they are facing intersectional inequality, with the aim of understanding the role of mothering in the social reproduction of the wider society. The strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to investigate complex social problems in depth, providing a nuanced and holistic understanding of the experiences within a specific community (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the mothering practices of rural-urban migrant mothers. This chapter outlines the rationale for research design, the selection of the research site, and the methods and procedures used for data collection and analysis.

3.1 Rationale for Conducting Qualitative Research

Qualitative research offers a rich framework for exploring how rural-urban migrant mothers raise children within intersecting systems of inequality. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000:3-4), qualitative research “involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ life”, aiming to “make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”. In order to explore the lived experiences behind migrant mothers' mothering practice in urban contexts, it is essential to understand not only their maternal labour and emotional experience, but also the structural challenges they face— how they exercise their agency in navigating these constraints. At the same time, this inquiry must take into account their

intersecting social identities—as rural migrants, mothers, and workers—and the broader social context in which their lives unfold. For this reason, this study draws on a qualitative paradigm that gathers rich, holistic data that reveals the complexity of a phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

This research draws on qualitative tools—in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation—which are well suited to understanding the dynamic, processual, and often tacit dimensions of maternal experience. Interviews allow for the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant, making space for participants to reflect upon their actions, aspirations, and struggles in their own terms (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As Kvale points out, interviews are not just about obtaining information, but about engaging in a knowledge-producing dialog that is shaped by the research relationship. At the same time, focus groups provide a unique interactive environment in which collective norms, shared dilemmas and contested understandings can be articulated and negotiated (Morgan, 1997, 2012). Group discussion fosters a social setting in which participants' interpretations may be shaped, challenged, or reinforced by peers—revealing how individual experiences are embedded in relational dynamics and cultural discourse. These interactions are particularly valuable in research on mothering. In this study, observations of home and community spaces provide insight into the physical and emotional labour involved in caregiving. As Mason (2018) suggests, observation is not merely about "seeing" behavior but about engaging in the rhythms, routines, and textures of social

life—producing situated, sensory, and context-rich understandings. In this study, observation in families and community spaces offers insights into the social infrastructures and emotional labour involved in caregiving.

To investigate the social roots and how mothering practices contribute to social reproduction, this study will use the extended case method, which seeks to expand ethnographic analysis beyond the immediate field of everyday life and into broader historical and theoretical contexts (Burawoy, 1998). Burawoy (1998) proposes an alternative model of science—a reflexive science—which has four principles: intervention, process, structure, and reconstruction. For Burawoy, reflective science challenges the notion of interviews as a neutral data collection tool; instead, interviews are understood as an active intervention in which the interplay between researcher and participant reveals the underlying structure of the social world. This approach requires the researcher to attend to the processual nature of fieldwork, taking into account not only verbal narratives but also the contextual and non-verbal dimensions of social life.

This study attempts to draw on the methodology and principles of extended case studies to gain insights into migrant mothering through the investigation of macro and micro factors. On one hand, by maintaining a reflective stance, I aim to examine individual narratives with attention to their broader socioeconomic and political contexts. On the other hand, the research traces how macro-level power dynamics—such as hukou policies, labour regimes, and social reproduction

structures—shape the everyday caregiving experiences of migrant mothers, thereby linking the “micro” to the “macro.”

Through longitudinal and comparative analysis, including repeated interviews and observations over time and across different urban spaces, this study captures mothering as a process rather than a fixed state. Theoretical reflection is embedded throughout the research process, enabling a dialogical movement between empirical findings and conceptual frameworks. Ultimately, this study seeks to use the dialectic between micro-level agency and macro-level constraints as a basis for reconstructing theoretical understandings of mothering and social reproduction in contemporary China.

3.2 Research Site

In order to recruit as research participants rural-urban migrants with co-resident children, several cities were selected based on their significant number of migrants and migrant children. The chosen cities for this research study are Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, which are known as the four cities that host the most migrant children in China (New Citizen Program, 2023). According to data extracted from the seventh census conducted in 2020, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen have migrant populations totaling 8.41 million, 10.479 million, 9.378 million, and 12.439 million, respectively (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). These migrant populations have had an effect on the total population size of these cities. This is most marked in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the populations with hukou of

which have soared by 47% and 69.5% respectively over the span of a decade. In contrast, the permanent resident population growth rates of Beijing (11.36%) and Shanghai (8.04%), while significant, have remained more modest.

While local governments of megacities have implemented strict settlement restrictions in an effort to curb the influx of migrants, large numbers of people still move to cities because they offer better employment opportunities and higher public benefits (Wang & Cai, 2008). As a result, the trend of population concentration in mega cities persists. The total population of the four major cities exceeded 83 million in 2020, accounting for 5.8% of China's total population (National Statistic Bureau, 2021).

Table 3-1. Population Statistics in Four Megacities

	Beijing	Shanghai	Guangzhou	Shenzhen
Resident Population (2020, in million)	21.8931	24.8709	18.6766	17.5601
Migrant Population (2020, in million)	8.41	10.479	9.378	12.439

Proportion of Migrant	38.5	42.1	50	71.1
Population to resident Population				
(2020, %)				

Migrant Children Population	0.697	0.971	0.952	1.487
(2020, in million)				

Sources: The Seventh National Population Census Bulletin of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen (2021)

In 2020, the number of migrant children in China reached 71.09 million, constituting approximately one-quarter (23.9%) of the country’s total child population (Lv et al., 2024). Guangdong Province alone hosted more than seven million migrant children (New citizen program, 2023). Within the province, Shenzhen and Guangzhou host the largest concentrations of migrant populations and migrant children. According to the seventh National Population Census, Shenzhen has the highest migrant population—12.439 million— accounting for 71.1% of the city's residents. In Guangzhou, the migrant population is 9.378 million, comprising 50% of the city's residents. There are 1.487 million and 0.952 million migrant children in these two cities, respectively (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

In 2020, Beijing’s migrant population reached 8.418 million, representing 38.5% of its total permanent residents. Compared to 2010, this figure increased by

1.373 million, reflecting a growth rate of 19.5%. The number of migrant children stood at 0.697 million, comprising 24.23% of the city's child population. This marks an increase of 57,600 (9.01%) from 2010.

Shanghai reported 10.4797 million migrant residents in 2020, accounting for 42.1% of its permanent population. This represents an increase of 1.503 million (16.7%) relative to 2010. The city's migrant child population reached 971,400, constituting 34.94% of the total child demographic. Compared to 2010, this figure shows an increase of 6,300 children, corresponding to a growth rate of 0.65%.

These data indicate that both Beijing and Shanghai witnessed continued expansions in their migrant populations and migrant child populations over the past decade. Notably, Beijing saw a relatively higher proportional increase in migrant children (9.01%), whereas Shanghai's growth rate was comparatively modest (0.65%). Nonetheless, migrant children in Shanghai still represent more than one-third of the overall child population.

Policy differences among cities have a significant impact on the experiences of migrant families. Compared to Beijing and Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen have adopted more migrant-friendly population policies, including lower thresholds for obtaining local hukou and access to social security. For instance, migrant children in Guangzhou and Shenzhen are eligible to take part in high school and college entrance examinations that are generally unavailable in Beijing and

Shanghai. These discrepancies in policy profoundly shape migrant families' living conditions and parenting practices. A comparative analysis of policies across cities can therefore illuminate the role of institutional structures in shaping migrant mothering.

Moreover, these four cities are located in the south, east and north of China, attracting migrant workers from different regions. Their varying industrial structures also shape employment patterns for migrant mothers. For example, Beijing and Shanghai are dominated by the service sector, while Guangzhou and Shenzhen offer a mix of service and manufacturing jobs. These economic differences further influence the gendered division of labour, childcare options, and the daily experiences of migrant mothers.

Taken together, the cities selected for this study provide a robust foundation for comparative research. Their status as key destinations for migrant families, coupled with diverse regional cultures, employment opportunities, and policy landscapes, offers rich ground for exploring the complexities of mothering practices in urban China.

3.3 Data Collection

For data collection, a longitudinal interview methodology was employed, organized into three distinct phases. This approach is valuable for capturing the evolving nature and complexity of mothering practices across various stages of

children's growth. It also allows for a nuanced understanding of external factors—such as family residence, career development, economic conditions, and social policies—shape motherhood and families over time. Moreover, longitudinal methods enable me to tailor my questions and direction based on previous interviews. Through repeated interactions with participants, this approach offers rich insight into the shifting dynamics and influences that shape migrant mothers lived experiences.

The first phase of fieldwork, comprising individual interviews and participant observation, was conducted in Guangzhou and Shenzhen between December 2021 and August 2022. During this phase, it became clear that macro-level policies significantly influence maternal practices, prompting the development of the second phase. This phase (between September 2022 to May 2023) involved gathering policy documents from four mega cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, and conducting individual interviews and focus group interviews in three cities: Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. Being the city with the largest migrant population in Guangdong Province, Shenzhen was chosen as a representative of the Pearl River Delta in the second phase.

To deepen the analysis and strengthen the dataset, follow-up fieldwork was conducted from September 2023 to July 2024. Table 3-2 outlines the timeline for data collection and analysis. The following section will introduce and elaborate on the three primary data collection methods employed in this study: interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

Table 3-2. Time Schedule of Data Collection and Analysis

Phase	Method	Data
Dec 2021-Aug 2022	Interviews in Shenzhen, Guangzhou Observation	26 individual interviews
Sep 2022- May 2023	Policy analysis (Including household registration policies, education policies, social insurance, social welfare and assistance policies, social services and public housing) Interviews in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen	Policies in four cities 26 Individual interviews 19 focus group interviews in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen
Sep 2023- July 2024	Follow-up interviews and observation in Guangzhou and Shenzhen	Open coding Theme coding
Jan 2024- Aug 2025	Data Analysis Thesis Writing	Coding Thesis

3.3.1 Individual Interview

In order to illustrate the complexity of mothering practices of rural-urban migrant mothers, most of the primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, either with individuals or in focus groups of three to eight participants. All the individual interviews were conducted face-to-face in Mandarin Chinese, at locations chosen by the participants—typically in their homes, in quiet public or semi-public spaces such as parks or NGO offices. Each interview lasted over two hours with a semi-structured interview outline, giving informants more space to provide relative experience and subjective feelings.

All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, use of data, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the de-identification of sensitive personal details. To mitigate potential emotional distress—especially given the sensitive nature of motherhood and migration—interviews were conducted with care and attentiveness, and participants could choose to skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

In this study, the term "rural-urban migrant mothers" refers to mothers who originally come from rural areas but are currently working in urban cities and have experience raising children in cities or rural areas. Participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling. Given my years of experience working within the migrant community in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, I have established relationships with many migrant workers. Initially, I approached some of the rural-urban migrant

mothers I knew personally as key informants and then asked them to introduce some other participants to me according to the purpose sampling.

The sampling strategy was designed to reflect the heterogeneity of migrant mothers. Participants were selected taking into account differences in age, origin, hukou status, length of stay in the city, occupation, educational background, family income, number and age of children, type of school the children attended (public, private or migrant children's school), and intra-family care arrangements. This diversity allowed for a comparative understanding of how different structural positions shape maternal strategies, access to resources, and perceptions of “good mothering.” Ultimately, the sampling frame supported the study’s broader aim of theorizing how individual caregiving practices are embedded in and responsive to macro-level social, economic, and policy environments.

Although this study centers on rural-urban migrant mothers, it also includes interviews with 11 fathers, among whom 5 were interviewed as part of couple interviews (2 couples in Shenzhen, 2 in Guangzhou, and 1 in Beijing), and 6 others were interviewed independently. The inclusion of fathers in the study will enrich the analysis of gendered parenting practices and caregiving arrangements in migrant families. Through interviews with both spouses in the selected families, I was able to trace how caregiving responsibilities, decision-making, and emotional labour are distributed and coordinated between couples. In particular, they help to reveal the processes by which women take on a disproportionate share of caregiving

responsibilities and how men's participation (or lack thereof) is influenced by occupational arrangements, migration trajectories, and cultural expectations. Moreover, the occupational diversity of the interviewed fathers—who work across various sectors, including factories, delivery services, driving, and small business operations—offers an additional lens into how labour regimes intersect with domestic gender roles. Analysis of these interviews helps us to understand in greater detail how the political economy of migration affects not only women's mothering roles, but also the broader dynamics of family caregiving and labour.

As shown in Table 3-3, the 52 migrant parents in this study varied widely in terms of city, educational level, occupation, and care arrangements. Of these, 41 were female and 11 were male, and the majority (45) were born in the 1980s and 1990s, representing the new generation of migrant workers. The research participants lived in four major cities in China—Shenzhen (16), Guangzhou (15), Shanghai (11), and Beijing (10)—and engaged in a wide variety of jobs. While 10 informants identified as stay-at-home mothers, the remaining participants worked in factory positions (12), shop operations (7), domestic service (3), food delivery (4), driving (2), and sales (3). A small number of participants held relatively stable white-collar positions, such as company clerks (5) or NGO employees (6), but the vast majority worked in the low-wage and unstable sector.

With regard to living arrangements, participants reported three broad categories: “migrants” (33), with children living with them in the city; “left-behind”

(5), with children remaining in their rural hometowns; and “migrants and left -behinds” (14), reflecting mix group. The mixed group includes both families whose children live in different places and cases where children's living arrangements have changed over time. In particular, urban barriers to schooling around the time of the transition to lower secondary school prompted some children to return to their hometowns. This suggests that even for families that prioritise reunification, urban family life remains precarious and fragmented due to institutional constraints.

Family size also varies: while most parents have two children (27), a significant number have one child (18), and some even have three or four children (7). In terms of educational attainment, 22 parents had completed junior high school and only 8 parents had a university degree or higher. Finally, 22 participants were interviewed more than once, allowing for a deeper understanding of their changing strategies, emotional shifts, and parenting practices over time. Appendix A provides detailed demographic and background information on all interviewees in this study.

Table 3-3. Sample Characteristics Summary Table

Variable	Category	Count	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	41	78.85
	Male	11	21.15
City	Shenzhen	16	30.77
	Guangzhou	15	28.85
	Shanghai	11	21.15
	Beijing	10	19.23
Education Level	Elementary school	1	1.92
	Middle School	22	42.31
	Technical School	11	21.15

	High School	9	17.31
	Self-study College Degree	1	1.92
	College	8	15.38
Number of Children	1	18	34.62
	2	27	51.92
	3	3	5.77
	4	4	7.69
Living Arrangement	Migration	33	63.46
	Migration and Left-behind	14	26.92
	Left-behind	5	9.62
Occupation Category	Service Sector	30	57.69
	Factory Sector	12	23.08
	Stay-at-home	10	19.23

Seven key topics were discussed in individual interviews: 1) migration and working experience; 2) the daily arrangement of childcare; 3) the balance between mothering and work; 4) family members and intra-family collaboration in childrearing; 5) the influence of social policies on mothers, childrearing, and family; 6) the agencies to be good mothers; 7) expectations for children and plans for themselves.

3.3.2 Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups can provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspective between groups of individuals (Rabiee, 2004). To ensure a diverse and insightful dataset, focus-group interviews were utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and efforts of migrant mothers of various ages, as well as the influence of different social contexts on their experiences.

Each focus group consisted of two to six participants and lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. In total, 19 focus group interviews were conducted between October 2022 and May 2023 in three cities: Shenzhen, Beijing, and Shanghai. Table 3-4 provides a full description of the composition of each focus group, including age, gender, and city-specific distribution. Across the three cities, the 50-59 age group had the highest number of participants (22), followed by the 30-39 age group (19).

Table 3-4. Description of Focus Group Interviewees

City	Age	Group	Number	Gender
Shenzhen	20-29	2	5	4 Female, 1 male
	30-39	2	9	4 Female, 5 male
	40-49	1	4	3 Female, 1 male
	50-59	2	9	8 Female, 1 male
Beijing	20-29	1	5	4 Female, 1 male
	30-39	2	6	4 Female, 2 male

	40-49	2	11	7 Female,4 male
	50-59	1	4	4 Female
Shanghai	20-29	1	3	2 Female,1 male
	30-39	2	4	3 Female,1 male
	40-49	1	5	4 Female,1 male
	50-59	2	9	9 Female
Total		19	74	56 Female; 18 male

Participants were recruited through a combination of NGO assistance and snowball sampling. Four local NGOs serving migrant women and children in Shenzhen, Beijing and Shanghai supported the organisation of most of the groups. In addition, five focus groups were arranged through personal networks and referrals from previous interviewees, especially in areas with limited access to NGOs. Some participants overlapped with those involved in the individual interviews, while others were newly recruited specifically for the group format. Participants were selected based on the following purposive criteria: 1) not holding household registration in the city; 2) having lived in the city for at least six months; 3) balanced occupation,

socioeconomic status and place of origin; and 4) falling into the age range of that specific focus group.

To capture a range of perspectives, participants were segmented by age group, with each group addressing issues relevant to their particular life stage (i.e., 20-29 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years, and 50-59 years). This age-based grouping helped to identify concerns at particular stages. For example, women in their 20s discussed how to navigate the difficulties of first-time motherhood while being employed in the city, while women in their 40s and 50s reflected on raising adolescent children, financial planning and retirement planning. These generational diversities enabled the study to capture the impact of changes in social policy on motherhood at different stages. In practice, however, due to informal recruitment methods and constraints, the composition of the groups was not always strictly aligned with age categories; a small number of participants in each group fell outside the designated age range. Some age cohorts were represented through multiple group discussions, depending on recruitment success in each location.

In order to create a comfortable and open environment, each focus group discussion began with self-introductions and informal warm-up questions and then transitioned into a formal discussion. Unlike the individual interviews, the group interviews focused on exploring the collective experiences and perspectives of migrant parents, particularly the common challenges and strategies faced in raising children in an urban environment. Key discussion topics included difficulties in

accessing quality education, how to cope with hukou-related exclusion, how to balance work and care responsibilities, and perceptions of institutional barriers such as school enrollment policies and healthcare services. By creating a dialogic environment in which individual stories resonate with, contrast with, or build on the stories of others, interactive nature of the focus groups produced rich data.

3.3.3 Participant Observation

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of mothering practices in family and community contexts, this study utilized participant observation as a complementary method to interviews. Participant observation enables researchers to explore how everyday practices unfold in real time, particularly the embodied, affective, and relational dimensions of caregiving that are often implicit in interviews (Spradley, 1980; Mason, 2018). As Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) note, participant observation allows researchers to go beyond what people say to understand how they behave and interact in particular social contexts.

A total of eight families participated in the observation component of this study, five from Guangzhou (Yan & Sheng; Huaduo & Luo; Guan & He; Shali; Fenjin) and three from Shenzhen (Pinghe; Mei; Ming). These families were selected through purposive sampling from those who had previously participated in in-depth interviews and had indicated a willingness to be observed in their homes or daily activities. This selection strategy was designed to capture the diversity in age, family structure, number and age of children, care arrangements, occupation and socio-

economic status, thus providing a richer understanding of how the role of motherhood unfolds under different material and relational conditions.

Each family was visited at least once and each visit lasted between five and eight hours. In some cases, repeat visits were conducted to build rapport and deepen understanding of the context. During these visits, I participated in and observed a range of daily activities, including meal preparation, eating together, supervising homework, taking children to community venues, informal conversations, and interactions with extended family members or neighbors. These immersive experiences provided rich insights into the impact of gendered divisions of labour, emotional dynamics, and material constraints on daily care practices.

Field notes were written immediately following each observation, in accordance with ethnographic standards (Emerson et al., 2011). These notes included both descriptive accounts—such as spatial organisation, activities, interactions, and observed routines—and analytical memos reflecting on the meanings, contradictions, or emergent themes arising from the field. I also documented nonverbal communication, tone of voice, gestures, and emotional climate, which are critical to understanding the mother's emotional labour.

I carefully considered ethical considerations throughout the process. All observed participants gave informed written consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. No audio recordings or photographs were

taken during the observations, and all identifying information was anonymized. In order to minimize disruption and ensure participant comfort, I adopted a flexible and respectful attitude — participating in observations when invited and keeping a low profile during more private or sensitive moments.

I observed participants while conducting interviews, allowing for methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978), enhancing the validity of the findings and providing a more nuanced and contextualized account of migrant mothers. Observing caregiving in the field reveals tacit knowledge, unspoken tensions, and practical improvisation in caregiving routines. It also reveals strategies of interdependence and cooperation within the family that are often underrepresented in accounts of individualized motherhood. Through this approach, the study captures caregiving not as a set of isolated decisions, but as a dynamic process shaped by emotional, material, and institutional forces across time and space.

3.3.4 Policy documents

Due to the continuous changes in China's urban and rural policies, the four selected cities have undergone significant reforms in their household registration system over the past decade. By analyzing various types of documents such as policy reports, government publications, legislation, official statistics, and scholarly articles, researchers can gain insights into the historical development, implementation, and impacts of social policies.

To understand how institutional arrangements shape migrant mothers'

parenting practices and access to care, this study incorporates a documentary analysis of welfare-related policy texts from 2000 to 2025, focusing on four major Chinese cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The analysis focuses on five key policy areas: hukou and residency reforms, educational opportunities for migrant children, social insurance schemes, urban welfare and assistance, and public service delivery. Policy documents were purposively selected on the basis of their relevance to the enrollment conditions, eligibility criteria, and institutional barriers of migrant households. In total, 25 documents were analysed, including formal government regulations, policy reform plans, and implementation guides. Appendix B provides a full list of related documents. By examining hundreds of policies, the study aimed to comprehensively analyse the policy changes over time and their implications for migrant mothers in different cities. This longitudinal and comparative perspective of documents enables the identification of policy changes and the evaluation of policy effectiveness and constraints on migrant mothering.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study began early in the fieldwork process, consistent with the understanding that qualitative data collection and analysis are iterative and mutually constitutive (Morse et al., 2002). As I conducted new interviews and observations, I periodically revisited previous transcripts, field notes, and policy documents, continually coding and writing memos to refine emerging ideas and guide subsequent data collection. This synchronized approach allowed for the refinement of

theory and a better response to the lived realities of migrant mothers in the field.

Through the first phase of fieldwork, I found that mothers' work has become increasingly demanding not only due to cultural changes in Chinese childcare practices, but also due to the challenges posed by family migration, institutional policies, and increasing consumption. It became evident that the full-scale commodification of social reproduction and the disparities in social policies intersect to intensify the maternal responsibilities among migrant mothers. This finding guided me to initiate a second phase of fieldwork in Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen and to analyse social policies. Thus, by integrating data analysis early in the research process, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and dynamics of motherhood in the context of social reproduction and intersecting social policies. This process also helped me to find a third objective, which was to examine motherhood practices as a means of engaging in theories of social reproduction.

The dataset for this study consists of three primary sources: (1) individual and focus group interview transcripts, (2) participant observation transcripts, and (3) policy and institutional documents. Each type of data has its own unique focus and together provides a comprehensive picture of migrant mothers' mothering practices at the macro, meso, and micro levels. To support the process of managing and analyzing the large amount of qualitative data, I used MAXQDA 2024 software, a powerful mixed-methods research tool that allowed me to store, code, compare, and retrieve various forms of qualitative data in a unified platform.

Interview and focus group transcripts were imported into MAXQDA and coded using an open coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I conducted line-by-line coding, generating initial codes grounded in the language and meanings of the participants. Through thematic coding, these initial codes were organised into broader thematic categories—such as investment in education, caring networks, gender responsibility, emotional regulation, and household-related exclusion—by identifying patterns of meaning across the dataset. This process was iterative rather than linear: emerging themes were repeatedly tested against the data, and divergent or contradictory cases were used to refine and deepen the analysis rather than being set aside (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). In the focus group transcripts, I also used the memo feature of MAXQDA to capture intergroup dynamics such as consensus building, differences of opinion, and shifts in discourse between different age groups.

I also coded participant observers' field notes in MAXQDA. I first used descriptive coding to categorize observed routines, spatial arrangements, and relational dynamics (e.g., mother-child interactions, gendered divisions of labour). I then applied analytic memos to explain how these practices reflected broader structural constraints and affective responses. The software's document comparison and matrix tools are used to track how patterns of caregiving vary across families and cities.

For policy and institutional documents, I conducted content analysis using MAXQDA's document coding and search functions. I systematically coded key

themes across texts related to hukou, education access, social welfare, and housing policies, tracing how eligibility criteria, point thresholds, and enrollment conditions changed across cities and over time. This allowed me to map the institutional landscape within which migrant mothers navigate their children's schooling and welfare access, and to identify the specific policy mechanisms that produce the conditional social reproduction regime documented in Chapter 5.

To integrate these heterogeneous data sources, I employed Mason's (2011) facet methodology, which encourages researchers to view different types of data as offering complementary analytical "facets" of the same phenomenon. Rather than forcing convergence, this approach allowed me to juxtapose data types to generate deeper interpretive insight. For instance, the theme of maternal exhaustion was approached through: a) interview narratives describing physical and emotional fatigue; b) observational data on care routines and time-use; c) and institutional discourse framing mothers' responsibilities in narrow, instrumental terms.

Through MAXQDA, I created code co-occurrence matrices and visual concept maps to explore how different themes intersected across interviews, observations, and documents. This multi-dimensional synthesis enabled me to theorize migrant mothering not simply as a personal or cultural experience, but as a social practice shaped by gendered labour expectations, spatial inequalities, and policy infrastructures.

Finally, I maintained reflexivity throughout the process by writing reflective memos within MAXQDA to document analytical decisions, emotional reactions, and theoretical shifts. This iterative and layered approach allowed me to identify recurring patterns, divergences, and structural contradictions embedded in the everyday experiences of migrant mothers across different urban contexts.

A note on how the different data sources contribute to each empirical chapter is warranted here, given the ambitious scope of the multi-method design. Policy document analysis is most visible in Chapter 4, which traces how hukou and education policies in the four cities produce the conditions for Hukou-linked Motherhood; the cross-city comparison that drives that chapter's analysis depends directly on the documentary data. Individual interview and Focus group interview data provide the primary evidential basis for Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, with the depth and continuity of the interview material—particularly the 22 participants interviewed more than once—supporting the longitudinal analysis of migrant mothering. Observational data is most visible in Chapter 6's analysis of domestic labour arrangements and Chapter 7's account of emotional caregiving practices, where they provide access to the embodied, relational, and tacit dimensions of caregiving that interview accounts alone cannot fully capture. This distribution reflects a methodological decision made in response to the analytic demands of each chapter.

3.5 The Role of the Investigator

In this study, I conducted qualitative research to gain insight into the complexities of mothering practices among rural-urban migrant mothers and the social context that shapes these practices. The positionality and interaction between the researcher and migrant parents may affect the quality and effectiveness of the data. Over the past decade, I have cultivated deep friendships with some migrant mothers and fathers working in Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. This relationship enabled a degree of trust that facilitated access to participants and their networks. As a migrant from Jiangxi Province with experience of living and working in Wuhan, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, I was able to draw on my own migration experience to understand the challenges participants described. As a mother, I also shared some aspects of the maternal and family experiences that participants discussed. These shared identities—as a migrant, a mother, and a co-ethnic—helped to establish rapport and facilitated more open conversations in both interviews and observations.

However, my close relationship with the interviewees presented both advantages and challenges. On the one hand, our long-standing familiarity allowed me to delve into their narratives and experiences, enabling a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings behind their words. On the other hand, this closeness required ongoing reflexive attention. As Bourdieu (2003) warns, familiarity can produce a form of "blindness" in which the researcher takes for granted precisely those aspects of social life that most need to be made strange and analytically visible. To address this, I maintained a reflexive research journal throughout the fieldwork,

documenting moments of over-identification, assumptions I brought to the field, and instances where my own positioning as a migrant mother may have shaped what participants chose to share or withhold. Rather than seeking a neutral vantage point—which qualitative methodology does not claim to offer (Haraway, 1988)—I aimed for what Haraway calls "situated knowledge": an explicit acknowledgement of how my positionality shaped the research encounter, and a commitment to making that shaping analytically productive rather than simply a source of bias to be minimized.

Chapter 4: Welfare Regime and the Hukou-linked Motherhood

In 1978, China's urban population was 172.45 million, accounting for only 17.92% of the total population. By 2022, the number of permanent urban residents had increased to 920.71 million, with an urbanization rate of 65.22% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). Over the past four decades, China's urbanization rate has risen by more than 47 percentage points, with the urban population increasing by over 700 million. However, a significant proportion of this urban population consists of rural *hukou* holders—such as migrant workers—who live and work in urban areas and are counted as part of the permanent urban resident population yet are still officially classified as rural residents in the household registration system.

The household registration (*hukou*) system, established shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, has evolved over the past six decades into one of the country's most foundational mechanisms of social governance. Over the last decade, the Chinese government has introduced a series of central-level policy documents aiming to loosen the boundaries of rural-urban household registration and promote the equalization of essential public services towards locals and migrants. The policies implemented in different cities have had varying impacts on migrant worker families. Household registration restrictions have been largely lifted in small towns, and reform of the household registration system in medium-sized cities is progressing steadily. In contrast, reforms in large cities with the largest mobile populations have

been slow to materialize (Zhang & Chen, 2024), and the gap between policy intention and everyday experience remains wide for many migrant families.

This gap falls unevenly across families—and within families, unevenly across men and women. From a social reproduction perspective, when the state does not fully cover the costs of raising children—schooling, healthcare, childcare—those costs do not disappear; they are transferred onto families, and within families, onto mothers (Fraser, 2017; Tong, 2017). But not all mothers bear the same share. A mother's *hukou* status, her employment form, and the city she lives in all shape how heavy that burden becomes. This is why this chapter approaches the *hukou* system through an intersectional lens: *hukou* does not operate in isolation, but in combination with gender and class to produce very different mothering experiences across different women. As Su (2016) and Wang (2015) have shown, *hukou* functions in the Chinese context as a primary axis of inequality—one that is administratively assigned, difficult to change through individual effort, and deeply determinative of what resources a family can access. Understanding migrant mothering in China's cities therefore requires understanding how *hukou* intersects with other aspects of women's lives to shape the specific strategies they adopt, the costs they absorb, and the labour they perform.

Existing policy research tends to focus on a single city or region, with limited attention paid to cross-city comparisons and the potential impact these policies may have on different forms of mothering. By systematically analyzing policy documents

across the four cities, this chapter compares the trajectories of social policy change in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen and examines their differential implications for migrant mothers. In navigating systemic exclusions and institutional constraints, migrant mothers perform substantial labour to secure care, education, and residency rights for their children—labour that often occurs outside the formal realm of policy visibility. These practices often occur outside the formal realm of policy visibility, giving rise to a form of Hukou-linked Motherhood that encompasses unpaid labour, emotional support, and logistical negotiation—all carried out in the shadow of unequal welfare access.

4.1 Hukou Reforms in Four Mega-Cities: Differentiated Inclusion, Shared Stratification

After 2000, the Chinese government began to intensify *hukou* reforms, gradually relaxing the *hukou* requirements in small and medium-sized cities, while significantly reducing the restrictions in most large cities. The New-Type Urbanization Plan (China's State Council, 2014) has promoted the transformation of China's urbanization model by emphasizing “urbanization of people”, which refers to the central government's stated desire to increase the proportion of people not only working but also consuming and permanently residing in cities (Friedman, 2022). Meanwhile, this plan explicitly stated the need to "strictly control the population size of mega-cities with urban populations exceeding 5 million." The *Key Tasks for New Urbanization Construction* in 2019 also proposed that cities with an urban permanent population between 1 and 3 million should completely lift household

registration restrictions; cities with 3 to 5 million urban residents should relax and liberalize Hukou settlement conditions; and mega and super cities should refine and improve their points-based Hukou system (National Development and Reform Commission, 2019). These measures collectively set the tone for subsequent reforms in household registration policy.

The 2022 Implementation Plan for New-type Urbanization during the 14th Five-Year Plan explicitly states that by 2025, China aims to steadily increase the urbanization rate of the permanent resident population and significantly improve the quality of the urban integration of rural migrants (National Development and Reform Commission, 2022). It also calls for the removal or relaxation of *hukou* restrictions in all cities except a few mega-cities. The points-based system is primarily implemented in major metropolitan areas and targets the general working population. Using micro-level census data and municipal hukou policy documents, Zhang and Chen's study found that, between 2014 and 2024, the weighted average threshold for obtaining urban hukou significantly declined in most cities across China—excluding the first-tier cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen (Zhang & Chen, 2024).

Since 2014, megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai have adopted increasingly restrictive strategies to limit the growth of their migrant populations (Friedman, 2022). However, despite the implementation of strict settlement controls and selective hukou policies—often favoring "talents" while excluding ordinary migrant workers

(Chan, 2019)—megacities continue to attract large numbers of migrants. Each of these four cities has a population exceeding 10 million. The concentration of resources, employment opportunities, and superior public services in these cities has undermined efforts to redirect migration flows (Wang & Cai, 2008; Xing & Zhang, 2017), sustaining a persistent trend of population agglomeration in megacities. Migrant workers and their children make up a substantial share of the population. According to data extracted from the seventh census conducted in 2020, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen have collectively absorbed a migrant population totaling 8.41 million, 10.479 million, 9.378 million, and 12.439 million, respectively. These figures account for 38.5%, 42.1%, 50%, and 71.1% of each city's total resident population.

Despite being classified as mega-cities under central government policy and thus subject to population control targets, these four cities have adopted markedly different hukou policies over the past decade. The following section provides a comparative overview of hukou policies in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, highlighting their distinct approaches to residency and local integration.

4.1.1 Hukou policies in Beijing and Shanghai

Local hukou policies in China can be broadly categorized into two types: qualification-based admission and points-based admission systems. The qualification-based system (*Zhun ru zhi*) includes a variety of pathways, such as regular employment, the introduction of talents (including highly skilled professionals, recent

university graduates and overseas returnees), investment and taxation, home purchase and family reunification. The points-based settlement system (Ji fen zhi), on the other hand, requires applicants to meet a series of basic conditions, usually including a valid residence permit, social insurance contributions and stable employment. Core points indicators usually include age, education, occupational skills, job stability, housing status and number of years of social insurance contributions. Additional points may be awarded for awards or honors, paying taxes, innovation or entrepreneurship. Conversely, points are deducted for violations of the law, breach of integrity or participation in illegal organisations. The weights and thresholds of these indicators vary considerably from city to city.

Currently, Beijing offers these two official pathways to obtain local household registration (hukou): the qualification-based admission and points-based admission systems (Song & Zhang, 2022). Beijing's qualification -based admission policy for graduates imposes high standards. According to the Provisional Measures for the Employment of Non-Beijing Fresh Graduates issued in 2017 (Beijing Municipal People's Government, 2017), in principle, candidates must hold a postgraduate degree and meet strict age requirements. The majority of new residents who obtained Beijing hukou from outside the municipality have done so through the qualification-based admission system, rather than via the points-based hukou program. Between 2011 and 2022, the number of new residents migrating to Beijing from outside the municipality exceeded 120,000 each year. In 2011, the figure even surpassed 210,000, and in 2022,

it remained as high as 139,000—far exceeding the annual quota of 6,000 granted through the points-based hukou system (Zhang & Chen, 2024).

Beijing was also the last major city to introduce a points-based hukou programme, doing so in 2016. The system comprises three categories of indicators: basic indicators (including age, education, skills, employment stability, residence, and years of social security contributions), bonus indicators (including awards and honours, tax contributions, and innovation or entrepreneurship), and deduction indicators (including legal violations and participation in prohibited organisations).

Table 4-1. Beijing Points-Based Household Registration Policy

Category	Conditions	Point Details
Basic Eligibility	- Holding a Beijing residence permit - Below statutory retirement age - Continuously contributing to Beijing social insurance for 7+ years - No criminal record	None
Legal and Stable Employment	1. Signed formal labour contract and continuously employed for over 1 year; 2. Invested in a business and operated continuously for over 1 year; 3. Registered as self-employed and operated for over 1 year	Each full year of social insurance payment earns 3 points
Legal and Stable Residence	1. Ownership of property and continuous residence for 1 year earns 1 point/year; 2. Legal rental or dormitory residence for 1 year earns 0.5 point/year	Only counts if matched with equivalent years of social insurance payment
Educational Background	- Associate degree: 10.5 pts - Bachelor's degree: 15 pts - Master's degree: 26 pts - Doctorate: 37 pts	Only the highest degree is counted, not cumulative
Work-Residence Alignment	Having residence in sub-center or other Beijing districts and working in the same district	2 pts per year if same district; 3 pts/year if working

		in a different district, up to 12 pts
Innovation & Entrepreneurship	Receiving national or Beijing-level awards for innovation or entrepreneurship	Up to 12 pts (national), 6 pts (Beijing)
Tax Contribution	Paid personal income tax for 3 consecutive years, with annual average $\geq$ 100,000 CNY	2 pts per year, up to 6 pts
Age	Under 45 years old, 20 pts Older than 45, 4 points are deducted for each additional year of age	
Commendations	Received national moral model awards or similar honors	Up to 20 pts
Legal Record	No administrative or criminal penalties in the past 5 years	Each administrative detention deducts 30 pts

Source: Administrative measures for the Beijing points-based household registration system (Beijing Municipal People's Government, 2020)

In Beijing, where hukou acquisition remains highly restrictive, even well-educated and steadily employed migrants are often excluded. According to my interviews, even individuals with a university degree and stable employment find it extremely difficult to obtain local hukou status or secure their children's eligibility for the national college entrance examination (gaokao) in the city. For example, Hamin (30s, a mother of one) shared:

“I’ve basically given up on getting enough points for a Beijing *hukou*. Both my husband and I hold bachelor’s degrees, and although our social insurance payments increase our score slightly each year, the main points come from education and purchasing property. I currently have no plans to buy an apartment in Beijing, so the points we earn through social insurance alone are not sufficient.

That’s why I bought a place in the Dasan County, Hebei, near Beijing, so my child can attend middle school there.”

Similarly, Zhou (30s, a mother of two), who also holds a bachelor’s degree along with her husband, reported that while their children were able to attend public school in Beijing, the hukou barrier still blocked local gaokao eligibility. As a result, when their child turned fourth grade, the family relocated back to their hometown in Hebei province, and they now commute frequently to Beijing for work.

If Beijing represents a high-bar, exclusionary model, Shanghai offers a more codified—though still selective—pathway: a points-based regime that spells out criteria for staged access to services. The *Administrative Measures for the Shanghai Residence Permit* (May 2013) and the *Shanghai Residence Permit Points Management Measures* (July 2015) jointly established a comprehensive evaluation system composed of basic indicators (age, educational background, professional titles/skill levels, years of employment, and social insurance contributions), together with bonus items, deductions, and disqualifying conditions (Shanghai Municipal People’s Government, 2022).

Table 4-2. Shanghai Residence Permit Points System

Indicator Category & Name	Max Points	Description / Criteria	Points	Notes
Age	30	Age 56–60: 5 points; Each year younger than 60 adds 2 points	2 pts/year	

			younger	
Educational Background	110	Associate degree (Higher vocational)	50	1. Choose either this or the “Professional Titles & Skills” category for scoring. 2. Level 2 and above require 6 months of social insurance in the last year at or above the city average salary.
		Bachelor's degree	60	
		Bachelor's + bachelor's diploma	90	
		Master's degree	100	
		Doctoral degree	110	
Professional Titles and Skill Levels	140	Skill Level 5	15	
		Skill Level 4	30	
		Skill Level 3	60	
		Skill Level 2 or Intermediate Professional Title	100	
		Skill Level 1 or Senior Professional Title	140	
Social Insurance Contribution Years	/	Each full year of employee social insurance contribution	3 pts /year	
Extra Credit Indicator				
Ratio of Social Insurance contribution to the average salary of employed persons in urban units in the city in the previous year	120	$80\% \leq \text{ratio} < 100\%$	25	The first three are based on the licensee's employee social insurance premiums paid in the city for an aggregate of 36 months within the last four years, and the last one is for an aggregate of 24 months within three years.
		$100\% \leq \text{ratio} < 200\%$	50	
		$200\% \leq \text{ratio} < 300\%$	100	
		ratio=300%	120	
Entrepreneurship Talent	120	Qualified entrepreneurship talent based on published standards		
Innovation & Service Agencies	120	Qualified intermediary talents supporting innovation		

Scarce Majors	30	Working in a role aligned with a city-designated scarce major		
Investment / Local Job Creation	120	Tax $\geq$ 100,000 CNY/year or hiring $\geq$ 10 local employees for 3 consecutive years 10 pts per threshold met, up to 120		
Public Service Employment		Working in designated public service fields	4 pts/year (after 5 years)	
Suburban Development Zones		Work and live in outer suburban priority zones	2 pts/year (max 20)	
Fresh Graduates	10	Full-time university graduates		
Awards and Honors	110	City-level special award	30	
		City-level general award	60	
		Provincial or national	110	
Spouse with Shanghai Hukou	40	4 pts for each full year of marriage		
Demerit Point Indicator				
False Information		Fake documents (ID, education, job, etc.) within past 3 years	-150 per incident	
Administrative Detention		Record within last 5 years	-50 per record	
General Criminal Record		Record within last 5 years	-150 per record	
Disqualifying Offense		Serious criminal record or Violation of national and municipal family planning policies	Disqualifies application	

Source: Shanghai Residence Permit Points Management Measures (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2022)

The regulations define the calculation methods and point values for each indicator and clearly state that the standard total score for the residence permit is 120 points. Applicants who reach the threshold are eligible to access corresponding public services (Qian et al., 2017), including children's education, access to local high school and college entrance exams, social insurance, administrative services, housing, basic public health, and family planning. In practice, however, the high threshold makes it extremely difficult for most rural migrant workers to attain the required 120 points (Yuan et al., 2017). Research indicates that “the current point levels of rural migrant workers are only one-quarter of the standard full score, and they lack the capacity to sustainably accumulate points” (Qian et al., 2017).

Unlike Beijing, which counts only contribution years, Shanghai ties points to the ratio of social insurance contributions relative to the city average salary. This design allows higher-income households to accumulate points more rapidly by contributing at higher rates, tilting the system toward families with stronger finances. For example, Lijie (36, a mother of two) lacked enough points to place her daughter in a public junior high, so she enrolled her in a private school in Zhejiang while pursuing a plan to qualify both children for Shanghai's zhongkao/gaokao. On an agency's advice, she began a four-year college program to add education points and simultaneously raised her social-insurance contribution base to over 4,000 RMB per

month (about double the standard rate) to push her score to 120 and secure local exam eligibility.

As a result, the points-based residence permit system in Shanghai also tends to favor individuals with higher educational qualifications, higher incomes, and greater social insurance contributions. A large portion of the migrant labour population remains excluded from essential public services, especially children's access to local high school and college entrance exams. In my interviews in Shanghai, only one mother mentioned that her husband's educational background and years of employment had enabled them to accumulate the policy-designated 120 points in Shanghai, qualifying their child to take the local *zhongkao* and *gaokao*. Many other families, however, were compelled to pursue additional certifications or vocational skill qualifications, or to contribute to social insurance at higher multiples, simply to meet the eligibility criteria and allow their children to remain in the city for schooling.

Beijing and Shanghai exemplify two selective models of urban incorporation. Beijing operates primarily on a *qualification-based* regime with only a tiny points channel—built around high-bar criteria (elite degrees, talent schemes, employer sponsorship); the points route functions more like a gate valve than a pipeline. Shanghai, by contrast, runs a *points-based, tiered inclusion* pathway anchored in the residence-permit system: indicators and thresholds are explicit, and once the 120-point bar is met, access to public services—including local *zhongkao/gaokao* eligibility—is unlocked in stages. In both cities, benefits are accrued to the highly

educated and steadily employed, while ordinary workers accumulate points too slowly to cross thresholds.

Beijing's tighter limits have spurred strategies such as buying homes outside the municipality to secure schooling, keeping children in Beijing only through preschool/ primary. Shanghai's "calculable" constraints come with high costs: many families stack certifications or raise their social-insurance contribution base to 120 points. Migrant families in Beijing and Shanghai therefore adopt costly workarounds—two-place living, long commutes, "points boosting" via certifications or higher contributions, or sending children to a nearby province or back to the home province. The net effect is a set of costly workarounds that convert public responsibilities into private labour.

4.1.2 Hukou policies in Guangzhou and Shenzhen

Compared to Beijing and Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen have set lower thresholds for both points-based and qualification-based admission within their systems, helping to facilitate the settlement of ordinary migrant workers. In 2008, Shenzhen, which has been a pioneer of *hukou* reforms, discontinued the temporary residence permit (*Zan zhu zheng*) that had been in effect for 23 years and implemented a system of residence permits (*Ju Zhu Zheng*). The system has eliminated the long-standing distinction between rural and urban household registration — in place since 1958 — and now classifies all Chinese citizens uniformly as "residents" (*jumin*) (Dong & Goodburn, 2020). This new system enables

rural residents to enjoy various social benefits as urban residents, including access to education for their children, subsidies for child development, vocational skills training (Shenzhen Municipal People's Government, 2008).

Furthermore, the implementation of the points-based household registration system in 2010 and the provisional measures for migrant workers in 2012 allow migrant workers to obtain Shenzhen *Hukou* if they reach the required points (Chen & Zhang, 2017). These policy reforms reflect the gradual relaxation of the household registration system in Shenzhen. Guangzhou also introduced a points-based household registration policy in 2010, which was officially implemented in 2011.

Compared to Beijing and Shanghai, the points-based hukou systems in Guangzhou and Shenzhen are more inclusive and accessible, particularly for migrant families. While Beijing and Shanghai maintain strict entry thresholds—favoring high-level talent, long-term social insurance contributions, and innovation—Guangzhou and Shenzhen adopt more flexible criteria. For instance, Guangzhou requires four years of social insurance and no housing ownership, and Shenzhen accepts both renters and homeowners with five years of contributions. These southern cities focus more on labour market participation and social integration, offering clearer and more attainable pathways to urban citizenship for ordinary workers and younger migrants.

Table 4-3. Points-Based Hukou Entry Requirements in Guangzhou and Shenzhen

Criteria	Guangzhou	Shenzhen
Legal Employment or Entrepreneurship	Must be legally employed or engaged in	No explicit mention, but social insurance are

	entrepreneurship in Guangzhou	required
Age Requirement	Under 45 years old	Men under 55; Women under 50
Residence Permit	Valid Guangdong Province Residence Permit issued in Guangzhou	Valid Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Residence Permit
Housing Requirement	Not specified	Must own legal property or rent a home in Shenzhen at least 5 years
Social Insurance	At least 4 years of social insurance contributions in Guangzhou	At least 5 years of contributions to Shenzhen's pension system or medical insurance
Points Requirement	Must reach 150 points based on the official index system	No fixed score required; eligibility based on meeting all conditions
Criminal Record	No criminal penalties in the past 5 years	Must not have participated in any banned organisations or activities

Source: Measures for the Shenzhen Points-Based Household Registration System (Shenzhen Municipal Public Security Bureau, 2023); Administrative measures for the points-based household registration system in Guangzhou (Guangzhou Municipal Government, 2025)

In addition to the points-based system, the qualification-based hukou admission standards in both Guangzhou and Shenzhen are also comparatively more favorable to migrant families. According to the Notice on *Several Provisions for Shenzhen Hukou Admission* (Shenzhen Municipal Public Security Bureau, 2016) applicants who meet any of the listed criteria—such as holding a full-time associate or bachelor's degree within a certain age range, possessing intermediate or senior professional titles, or working in high-demand technical fields—can bypass the points

calculation and directly obtain a hukou quota. Eligible groups also include international students with a bachelor's degree or above, individuals officially recognised as high-level talents by the city, and taxpayers (legal representatives, shareholders, sole proprietors, or high-income individuals) who have made substantial contributions over the past three years.

This reflects Shenzhen's inclusive and flexible approach to talent and population policy compared with stricter systems in other mega cities. For example, in my fieldwork, several migrants with university degrees qualified directly for local hukou via the qualification-based route. Shenzhen also recognises non-full-time degrees (e.g., adult education, self-study) and lists a wider range of eligible skilled occupations, benefiting migrants without conventional full-time credentials. Zhuo and Xiaoqi, for instance, each with secondary vocational diplomas, enrolled in self-study associate-degree (*zikao*) programs to meet Shenzhen's hukou threshold so their children could attend public schools and gain eligibility for local entrance examinations.

Similarly, Guangzhou's qualification-based Policy offers a streamlined pathway to household registration (*hukou*) for individuals with recognised educational qualifications, professional titles, or technical skills. The policy is designed to attract high-level professionals, skilled workers, and innovative entrepreneurs who contribute to the city's development. Applicants who meet specified age, education, or skill

criteria can bypass the points-based system and directly apply for hukou (Guangzhou Municipal Public Security Bureau, 2016).

Thus, in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, more inclusive policies have enabled some families to keep their children in the city during critical educational transitions. Eight families in my fieldwork had managed to obtain local household registration (*hukou*) in cities in Guangzhou and Shenzhen. These families were among the few who successfully navigated the structural barriers and remained intact as a family unit in the city. For example, after significant effort, Yan (30s, a mother of two) successfully earned a mid-level professional qualification, which enabled the family to secure *hukou* in Nansha at a critical moment. This breakthrough not only solved the issue of school access but also relieved financial pressure and allowed the family to remain together. Spurred by her example, Fenjin (30s, a father of two) and Jieli (30s, a mother of two) invested the time to obtain intermediate professional titles, then secured Guangzhou hukou, enabling their children to enter public schools.

Thus, Guangzhou and Shenzhen offer two more accessible—but still selective—variants of urban incorporation. In practice, advantages accrue to households able to sustain stable contributions and “upgrade” credentials, while lower-wage, less stable workers still struggle to clear the thresholds. Accordingly, if at least one member of a migrant family holds an associate degree or higher—or alternatively has obtained such a degree or a mid-level professional title through self-study and examination, it significantly improves the family's ability to reunite and

settle in the city. As a result, these more flexible qualification-based and point-based hukou systems in southern cities have made family migration more attainable for many working-class and lower-middle-class migrant families.

Even so, the scale remains limited: by 2022, approximately 140,000 individuals (including accompanying family members) had obtained local Hukou through the points system (Guangzhou Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, 2021). However, in comparison to the city's 9.38 million non-Hukou permanent residents, the annual quota of only several thousand to just over ten thousand new admissions via this system remains strikingly limited.

Analytically, this “more accessible” southern model still institutionalizes stratified inclusion: citizenship rights are effectively earned through calculable signals—continuous formal employment, higher social-insurance bases, and stackable credentials—which better-off or more stably employed households can purchase or plan for, while low-wage and care-interrupted workers cannot. This setup converts access to urban rights into an eligibility threshold process, drives demand for extra certificates and *zikao* degrees, and pushes the risk and paperwork onto families—who must gather documents, pay more into social insurance, and juggle school arrangements across places.

The household registration reforms in Guangzhou and Shenzhen stand in contrast to the rigid and selective systems in Beijing and Shanghai, reflecting

divergent strategies of population governance among China's mega-cities. While Beijing and Shanghai adopt a high-threshold, elite-filtering model that privileges advanced degrees, innovation capacity, and long-term contributions to high-value industries, Guangzhou and Shenzhen exhibit more pragmatic and inclusive approaches, particularly in the context of labour absorption and family settlement.

Both Guangzhou and Shenzhen have lowered the entry barriers for points-based and qualification-based hukou acquisition, offering more feasible channels for ordinary migrant workers and their families to access public services. Shenzhen's reforms are especially notable for pioneering the elimination of the rural-urban hukou divide, replacing it with a more unified "resident" identity, and for accepting non-full-time degrees and mid-level occupational certifications in its qualification criteria. Guangzhou, although less radical, still maintains relatively attainable thresholds for points-based settlement. In both cities, these pathways have facilitated educational inclusion and family reunification for a subset of migrant households.

However, this relative inclusiveness does not imply egalitarianism. Both cities maintain quota systems that sharply limit the number of new hukou holders each year, and even the more accessible pathways still rely on metrics of productivity, stability, and investment. As a result, the hukou policies in all four cities—though differentiated in structure and tone—ultimately reinforce a stratified system of urban citizenship. Access to full social entitlements remains contingent on one's ability to conform to the economic and administrative logic of each city. This reflects a broader

trend in China's urban governance: despite policy language about integration, reforms continue to prioritise developmental rationales over distributive justice, producing an urban hierarchy where rural-urban migrant families remain structurally disadvantaged, albeit to varying degrees across regions.

Despite the evident strides being made in current policy, it remains apparent that China's policy is more concerned with economic efficiency than social equity (Dong & Goodburn, 2020; Wu & Zhang, 2010). Based on the development orientation and the corresponding political incentive system linked to GDP growth, the competition between cities in China is more intense (Qi, 2021). Consequently, the goal of most mega cities' settlement policies is to attract the production factors needed to achieve economic growth in their jurisdictions, namely wealth and talents (Wu & Zhang, 2010). Only a limited proportion of rural-urban migrant workers are eligible under the stringent requirements of the points-based and qualification-based settlement policies. Thus, no matter how different the indicators are, the household registration system in these four cities constructs an inverted pyramid-shaped public resource distribution system. Within the same region, local urban residents are at the top, followed by local rural residents with their own advantages and the urban-urban migrant population, while rural-urban migrant population is at the bottom (Yang, 2017).

4.2 Conditional Inclusion in Migrant Children's School Admission in Four Mega Cities

Before 2001, local governments were not clearly responsible for providing compulsory education to migrant children. As education budgets were allocated based on local hukou populations and could not be transferred across cities, migrant children without local hukou were largely excluded from free public education (Chen & Fu, 2023). In response, profit-driven migrant schools emerged to meet demand, despite poor conditions and lack of legal status, making them vulnerable to closures and relocations. By 2001, 87% of migrant children in Beijing and 55% in Shanghai were enrolled in private migrant children's schools (Han, 2017).

Starting in 2001, the central government introduced a series of policies aimed at facilitating the inclusion of migrant children in the public education system. The 2001 "Two Primaries" policy (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2001) marked a turning point, mandating that host cities take responsibility for the compulsory education of migrant children and designating public schools as the primary avenue for their enrollment. This was followed by the 2012 "Two Inclusions" directive (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2012), which further required local governments not only to admit migrant children into public schools but also to include them in local education plans and budget allocations—thereby offering a more institutionalized guarantee of their right to compulsory education.

Most recently, the 2021 policy guidelines stipulated that over 85% of migrant children should be enrolled in public schools, while private school enrollment for compulsory education should be limited to no more than 5% (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). These measures reflect the central government's growing commitment to integrating migrant children into the public education system, aiming to reduce reliance on private schooling and promote educational equity. At the central level, China's education policy for migrant children can be broadly summarized as affirming their right to education and clarifying the responsibility of local governments for policy implementation. Guided by national directives, local governments have developed region-specific policies based on their respective socioeconomic and demographic conditions. As a result, the education policies for migrant children in China exhibit strong regional variations (Han, 2017). The next section will provide an overview of how school enrollment policies have evolved in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, highlighting key differences across these cities.

4.2.1 Education Policy Evolving in Beijing and Shanghai

In 2008, a key policy milestone in Shanghai's education reform was the release of the *Several Opinions of the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission on Further Improving the Compulsory Education of Migrant Workers' Children in the City* (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2008). This document laid the foundation for a three-year action plan (2008–2011), marking a significant turning

point in the city's comprehensive efforts to improve educational access for migrant children. Following this policy shift, since 2008, all migrant children's schools have been converted to privately-run education, with all costs fully paid by the government, and migrant children studying in privately-run migrant children's schools are also entitled to free compulsory education (Chen & Feng, 2017).

Meanwhile, the requirements for migrant children to enroll in public schools in Shanghai have been significantly relaxed. The original “five certificates” requirement was reduced to just “two certificates”: proof of the parents’ rural migrant status and either a Shanghai residence permit or employment certificate. The “Shanghai model” of migrant education has frequently been referenced as a leading example of educational inclusion and held up as a compelling and commendable model for other cities to emulate (Liu & Laura, 2018).

Despite sharing a common central directive, Shanghai and Beijing have developed divergent approaches to managing the education of migrant children. Beijing has adopted a fragmented "policy-control model" characterized by the decentralization of responsibility to district and sub-district levels. This has led to highly discretionary enrollment thresholds—famously known as the “five certificates,” which in practice often expand to seven or more—and opaque school capacity disclosures, exacerbating inequality and creating space for rent-seeking (Han, 2017).

By contrast, Shanghai has constructed a more coherent, service-oriented governance model. Since 2008, the municipal government has taken the lead in establishing a three-tier responsibility framework across city, district, and street levels. A joint fiscal mechanism has been implemented to share educational costs between city and district authorities. Planning based on the permanent resident population has allowed for more consistent school resource allocation, including the construction of new public schools.

However, 2014 is a turning point in megacities. The release of the National New-type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020) clearly stipulated the need to "strictly control the population size of mega-cities with urban populations exceeding 5 million." In response, local governments in these mega-cities began implementing a range of population diversion measures, including relocating wholesale markets, demolishing illegal constructions, and closing private kindergartens, schools, and street-side shops (Chen & Fu, 2023; Friedman, 2018). Consequently, the barriers for migrant children to access education in these cities were also raised.

Shanghai also raised the requirement for the "Flexible Employment Certificate" from two to three years. The 2014 changes in the thresholds for enrolment in public schools also apply to private schools for children of migrant workers. This means that children who do not meet the new enrolment thresholds will not be able to enrol in either a public school or a migrant children's school in compulsory education (Chen & Feng, 2017). Also, starting in 2016, The conditions for obtaining a residence

permit were also tightened, requiring not only six months of social insurance contributions but also proof of legal residence. Meanwhile, in Beijing, various districts implemented stricter procedures for verifying the “five certificates” required for school enrollment since 2014 (Zhao & Wei, 2016).

By collecting and analyzing official policy documents from the municipal government websites of Beijing and Shanghai, the admission criteria for compulsory education in these two cities can be summarized as follows (Since Beijing does not enforce a city-wide standardized enrollment policy for migrant children, this analysis will focus on Haidian District as a representative case):

Table 4-4. Enrollment Thresholds in Beijing and Shanghai

City	Admission requirements
Beijing (Haidian District)	1.The family’s <i>hukou</i>; 2. Valid Beijing residence permits with a registered address in Haidian; 3.Proof of actual residence in Haidian, such as property ownership certificates or valid rental contracts with supporting tax and agreement documentation. 4. Employment and social insurance documents demonstrating stable employment and continuous social insurance contributions in Haidian from September 2023 to May 2024.
Shanghai	1. Shanghai Residence Permit within the one-year period. 2. Social insurance for six months; or flexible employment registration for three consecutive years.

Source: Verification requirements for non-local school-age children receiving compulsory education in Haidian District in 2024 (Haidian District People’s

Government of Beijing, 2024); Implementation opinions on the enrollment and admission work of compulsory education schools in Shanghai in 2025 (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2025)

Compared to Shanghai, the material review process for migrant children's school admission in Beijing's Haidian District is significantly more complex and cumbersome. Shanghai's policy primarily focuses on two quantifiable conditions: one parent must hold a valid Shanghai Residence Permit and either have paid six months of employee social insurance within the past year (excluding back payments) or have registered for flexible employment at a community service center for three consecutive years. This standardized and streamlined approach offers a degree of predictability in practice.

In contrast, Haidian District imposes numerous additional requirements beyond residence and employment status. These include verification of household registration, residence permits, property ownership or rental contracts, tax receipts, the landlord's signed consent, the employer's legitimacy, employment documentation, uninterrupted local social insurance contributions, and a valid business license. Furthermore, families must go through a dual-stage review involving both online preliminary screening and in-person verification by multiple government departments at the subdistrict level.

More critically, Beijing reinforces residential space-based educational access through strict spatial allocation policies. The district continues to enforce the “one enrollment quota per address every six years” policy, under which a housing unit used for school registration cannot be reused for another child within six years. For nine-year integrated schools, this restriction extends to nine years per household address. While intended to curb speculation in school districts, such policies impose institutional barriers on non-local families, severely limiting their access to educational resources.

Hongge recalled that when her daughter was about to start first grade in 2016, “it was exactly when the new policy came out—one property tied to a school spot for six years. I spent over 10,000 yuan just to get a placement.” Jiaxin said they spent 30,000 yuan:

“Four years ago, when my second son began elementary school, the Haidian District implemented a policy requiring that a school placement (xuewei) be tied to a specific residential property for a minimum of six years. This meant that in order for a child to enroll in a public school within the district, the family had to rent a property that had not been used to register another child within the previous six years. At that time, I paid 30,000 yuan to my landlord. This was not required when my eldest son entered school.”

Hamin considered herself “lucky” because she was able to use a colleague’s property to obtain a spot without extra payment, noting how hard it is to enroll without personal connections. Local police then conducted an in-home verification. she said, “The police and even some TV channel’s program crew came to check. I told my kid, ‘You can’t go to school today, you have to stay at this home we borrowed.’ We brought her clothes, toys—everything—over there. Then they directly asked my child questions. She had to pretend like she lived there.”

Overall, household entry in Beijing is not only the most demanding but also requires more burdensome supporting documents, systematically excluding migrant families who lack university qualifications and have precarious housing or employment conditions. However, research shows that while these institutional barriers have not significantly reduced the migrant population, they have led to an increase in the number of children left behind. Studies have utilized census data to show that the number of left-behind children in Beijing and Shanghai has risen significantly since 2014 (Chan & Ren, 2018; Chen & Fu, 2023). The main reason for this increase is the higher compulsory education enrollment threshold in megacities, which has a greater impact on low-skilled, low-income families with school-age children.

Moreover, Beijing has not yet opened the high school and university entrance examinations (zhongkao and gaokao) to migrant children. In Beijing, migrant children are only allowed to take entrance examinations for secondary and higher vocational

schools unless they obtain a local hukou. The other three cities have relaxed the eligibility criteria for public high school and university entrance examinations to varying degrees. In Shanghai, for instance, migrant parents must achieve a specific household registration score—currently 120 points—before their children are eligible to take the high school and college entrance examinations.

In Beijing, non-local students are barred from taking high school and university entrance exams. Parents worry that their children won't adapt to the exam-focused education system in their hometowns, so they typically return home around the end of elementary school. For instance, Fu (in his 40s, father of one) sends his child to a boarding school in his hometown while he and his spouse continue working in Beijing; he visits his child every two weeks. Similar arrangements exist in Shanghai. Jiang (in her 40s, mother of two) and her husband keep their younger son in Shanghai while their eldest daughter attends junior high back home.

A growing body of research indicates that exclusionary policies based on household registration systematically restrict migrant children's access to affordable and continuous education in urban areas, leading to spatial and social fragmentation within migrant families (Qiu & Liang, 2024). As Sun and Tian (2020) noted, nuclear families are most likely to migrate together during the newlywed and preschool stages. However, when children reach school age, the risk of spatial separation significantly increases due to difficulties in accessing educational resources in cities. The likelihood of family reunification often rises again after children graduate or enter

the workforce. This U-shaped curve reflects the rigid constraints imposed by the education system on family migration strategies.

According to data compiled by the New Citizen Program from municipal bulletins and statistical yearbooks, over 100,000 migrant children returned to their hometowns during the transition from primary to secondary school in 42 core cities nationwide in 2020. Among these, six cities—Dongguan, Beijing, Shenzhen, Suzhou, and Shanghai, accounted for a combined total of 79,000 children (New Citizen Program, 2022). This widespread “return migration wave” during the transition from primary to secondary school highlights the systemic barriers migrant families face in maintaining their children's public education in different regions.

4.2.2 Education Policy Evolving in Guangzhou and Shenzhen

Building on the previous section, South China’s megacities followed a more inclusion-oriented track—but via different institutional logics. Since 2010, Shenzhen has abolished compulsory education fees for migrant children and has been the first city in the country to provide subsidies for migrant children attending private compulsory education schools since 2012. Additionally, all migrant students in Shenzhen are covered by children's medical insurance. Beginning in 2013, the Shenzhen Municipal Education Bureau issued the *Guiding Opinions on the Trial Implementation of a Points-Based Admission System for Public Compulsory Education Schools* (Shenzhen Luohu Education Bureau, 2015) thereby introducing a

uniform points-based school admission policy in public primary and secondary schools across all 10 administrative districts for both local and non-local children.

Guangzhou's points-based enrollment system was first implemented at the district level: In 2010, Panyu District pioneered the points-based admission policy for migrant children entering public elementary school first grade. Subsequently, other districts in Guangzhou gradually adopted this model, achieving citywide coverage by 2017. Guangzhou did not adopt a unified citywide points-based enrollment policy, instead allowing each district to formulate its own detailed rules. This study analyses the case of Nansha District based on the my field research.

Table 4-5. Enrollment Thresholds of Compulsory Education in Guangzhou and Shenzhen

City	Admission requirements
Guangzhou (Nansha District)	1. Quota-Based Admission (First-Round Placement): Children of parents who have resided continuously in Nansha for five years (Guangdong Residence Permit serves as proof of residency), social insurance in Guangzhou for five consecutive years (at least one type), and hold stable employment are eligible for first-round admission. 2. Points-Based Admission (Second Round and Supplemental Placement): Children who do not qualify for the first round, but whose parents have held a Guangdong Residence Permit in Guangzhou for at least one continuous year, may apply through the points-based system in the second round. If seats remain unfilled after the second round, they may be considered for supplemental placement.

Shenzhen	1. Basic requirements: at least one parent holding a valid Shenzhen residence permit and having lived in the district for one year, as well as one year of continuous pension and medical insurance contributions. 2. Other required documents include: the child's birth certificate, <i>hukou</i>, ID cards of the child and both parents; valid property ownership certificate or purchase contract for property owned by the parents in the city, or a rental certificate issued and filed by the housing rental management department showing a continuous registration period of at least one year, or a rental contract for government-subsidized housing with a duration of at least one continuous year.
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Source: Implementation guidelines on compulsory education for children of migrant workers in Nansha District (Guangzhou Nansha District People's Government, 2025). Notice of the Shenzhen Municipal People's Government on Issuing the Measures for the Administration of Compulsory Education for Children of Non-Hukou Residents (Shenzhen Municipal People's Government General Office, 2018)

The points-based enrollment systems in Shenzhen and Guangzhou differ in their scope of application and implementation sequence. First, Guangzhou applies the points system only to non-local household registration applicants, while Shenzhen implements a citywide unified points system for all applicants regardless of household registration status. Second, both cities closely link children's ranking to parents' social security contribution duration, but with different operational approaches: Guangzhou grants families with over five years of social security contributions priority access to the first round of quota-based allocation, effectively safeguarding enrollment opportunities for children from families with greater stability and longer residency.

Shenzhen, by contrast, calculates a multi-factor score—hukou status, housing (ownership/tenure), and social insurance—so non-hukou families compete directly alongside local hukou holders for a limited pool of public-school seats.

Although specific implementation rules may vary across Shenzhen's districts, the general priority order for admissions follows this sequence: students with household registration within the school district have the highest priority, followed by students with household registration in the same administrative district, then students with household registration in other Shenzhen districts, and finally non-registered students. Among applicants within the same hukou category, those with Shenzhen hukou are ranked by the length of time their household registration has been held in the city. For non-hukou applicants, priority is determined by the parent who has made the longest continuous contributions to both pension and medical insurance in Shenzhen—the longer the contribution period, the higher the admission priority.

For example, in Longhua District, the enrollment follows a "school seat type + points" system, categorizing applicants into six groups based on household registration (hukou) and housing conditions—from Shenzhen hukou families with self-owned housing to non-hukou families with rental housing (Shenzhen Longhua District Education Bureau, 2025).

In practice, Guangdong's dual track—points-based school admission (*jifen ruxue*) and points-based hukou (*jifen ruhu*)—has opened public-school access for

some migrant children, but many remain ineligible. In my Shenzhen sample (n=42), six families successfully secured public school enrollment: five through parents or grandparents obtaining Shenzhen residency, and one via points-based queueing. The remaining 36 families enrolled their children in private elementary schools or sent them back to their hometowns for schooling. This demonstrates that the seemingly merit-based admission system actually stratifies families by resources: households without household registration or property ownership are placed at the bottom of the priority list, effectively excluded.

Policy tightening further reinforces this stratification effect. In 2018, Shenzhen added a one-year social-insurance payment requirement (on top of one year of continuous residence) for school admission; the same year, private-school enrollment was also folded into the points regime—making a parent’s social-insurance record essential. Because purchasing social insurance can cost tens of thousands of yuan annually, schooling in the city becomes more expensive; families unable to shoulder this cost often return children home. For instance, when Huajie’s son was due to enter junior high, neither parent had social insurance (factory and construction work, respectively), forcing a return to their hometown for schooling.

Guangzhou’s hurdles take a different form. In Nansha District, children qualify for first-round admission only if parents hold a residence permit continuously for five years. Any lapse can push families into later rounds and to distant school assignments. As Meijie described, a missed renewal reset their “continuity,” dropping

them to a second round and creating daily transport burdens that were hard to manage.

She explained,

“I had a gap in my residence permit renewal for three years. Oh my God, it lapsed! I didn’t even know it had lapsed. It was only a month later that I realised it—and by then the permit dates didn’t match up anymore. Without continuous records, I had to restart accumulating points. How was I supposed to manage that? If it weren’t for the residence permit issue, we might have been in the first round. In the end, we were placed in the second round and could only be assigned to a far school. It’s really inconvenient if we come back in the evening—transportation is a problem. After 8 p.m., there are no more buses, so we have to pick up and drop off the child ourselves. That’s a hassle. If we had to do the pickup and drop-off every day, how would we even have the time? We definitely don’t have time in the morning, right? And if it’s at night, the lighting isn’t great either—it’d be such a hassle if there’s not enough light.”

Rapid urban growth in and massive population inflows to Guangzhou and Shenzhen and other Pearl River Delta cities led to severe shortages in educational resources. Despite decades of educational reforms, migrant schools—established in the 1990s—continue to serve as the main schooling option for many migrant children in Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

To meet the mandated target that over 85% of migrant workers' children enroll in public schools, Guangdong has implemented a strategy of “government-purchased private school seats” and then counted these subsidized private positions as part of the public-school quota. For example, in Guangzhou, the government provides up to 5,000 yuan per year for primary school seats and up to 6,000 yuan per year for junior high school seats. In Shenzhen, the subsidy can be as high as 7,000 yuan per year for primary schools and 9,000 yuan per year for junior high schools. By including these subsidized private school seats in the public-school count, Guangzhou was able to reach 85.6% enrollment of migrant children in what is officially recognised as public compulsory education by 2021 (Guangzhou Municipal Government, 2021).

In terms of high school admissions, Shenzhen and Guangzhou implemented comprehensive policies for non-local high school entrance exams in 2016 and 2017 respectively, ensuring more equitable access to public high schools for children without local hukou. However, in Guangdong, the high school admission ratio of non-local students is much lower than that of locals, 24% to 25% in Shenzhen and 14% in Guangzhou (Wang et al, 2020). Therefore, in terms of secondary and higher education enrollment, non-local household registration status further restricts the academic development pathways of migrant children in these two cities.

In summary, Guangdong's policy mix exhibits significant implementation gaps: statutory eligibility appears to have expanded, yet actual enrollment

opportunities remain constrained by limited capacity. Purchasing private school spots enables local governments to meet enrollment targets, but this practice commodifies benefits that should be public entitlements, shifting part of the financial and administrative burden onto migrant families.

A comparative analysis of the admission requirements across Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai reveals both shared structural logics and locally specific implementations shaped by governance models and demographic pressures. At the core, all four cities have tied school admission for migrant children to parents' residency status, and social insurance participation, reflecting a national trend toward conditional inclusion based on contributions to the urban welfare system. This reveals a prevailing policy orientation: integrating migrant children into the public education system is not viewed as an unconditional right, but rather contingent upon stable housing, continuous employment participation, and social security contributions. Only children of migrants who meet all criteria gain access to public education opportunities. These fiscal revenues are intrinsically linked to capital accumulation. Those unable to contribute are systematically excluded and blamed for lacking *suzhi* (human quality), revealing a broader neglect of collective investment in social reproduction (Trémon, 2023).

However, significant variations exist among cities in administrative complexity and stratification mechanisms. Shenzhen and Guangzhou both employ point-based admission systems, stratifying applicants based on quantifiable indicators

such as duration of residence, social security contributions, and housing type. While predictable, such systems reproduce inequality by favoring long-term, stable residents. In contrast, Shanghai employs a more streamlined eligibility model requiring only six months of social security contributions or three years of flexible employment registration, with lower documentation thresholds, reflecting a more efficient and inclusive policy orientation. Beijing, however, presents the most cumbersome and opaque model, demanding multi-tiered proof materials including housing contracts, tax payment certificates, and notarized employer information. Furthermore, Beijing enforces strict spatial quotas, such as “one enrollment per address every six years,” which institutionalizes housing-based exclusion and incentivizes informal transactions in school placements.

Despite following common national directives, the four megacities—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—exhibit distinctly divergent institutional logics in their approach to migrant children’s education. According to Han Jialing (2017), Beijing employs a fragmented governance model characterized by dispersed responsibilities, where districts enjoy significant discretionary power in enrollment approvals, yet the required documentation remains highly cumbersome. In contrast, Shanghai implements a service-oriented governance model that clarifies municipal-level administrative accountability, adopts simplified admission criteria, and streamlines the enrollment process. Guangzhou and Shenzhen, while both implementing *points-based admission systems* and “government-purchased private

school seats” strategy reflects a pragmatic workaround to meet enrollment quotas amid public school shortages.

Across all four cities, however, rising thresholds for school admission—such as social insurance requirements, residence stability, and points-based metrics—have increasingly restricted access for low-income and precariously employed migrant families. Recent studies have shown that since 2014, the likelihood of rural migrant children being left behind has significantly increased in China’s megacities compared to other cities. The primary mechanism behind this trend is the rising threshold for accessing compulsory education in megacities, which disproportionately affects low-skilled and low-income families (Chen & Fu, 2024).

4.3 Hukou-linked Motherhood

Although social exclusion of migrant workers has been partially alleviated in China, educational inequality faced by migrant children in megacities has intensified, particularly since the tightening of urban education policies after 2014. Institutional arrangements such as point-based school admission systems and secondary school entrance examinations have failed to substantially reduce migrant children’s educational disadvantages. As a result, migrant families continue to enjoy only partial citizenship rights and limited access to hukou-based public services (Wang, 2020).

Under these conditions, the responsibility for securing children’s education and everyday welfare is increasingly shifted from the state to individual families. This

institutional transfer of responsibility generates a distinct form of gendered reproductive burden, disproportionately borne by migrant mothers. To compensate for restricted access to public provision, migrant mothers are required to undertake extensive forms of supplementary reproductive labour that are structurally induced rather than individually chosen.

In this thesis, I conceptualize this phenomenon as Hukou-linked Motherhood—a form of gendered social reproduction in which migrant mothers absorb and compensate for institutional exclusions through intensified educational coordination, caregiving mobility, and economic provision. Rather than representing an extension of conventional maternal care, this labour is produced by policy regimes that condition access to education and welfare on hukou status, employment form, and local eligibility criteria.

This form of Hukou-linked Motherhood manifests in four interrelated dimensions: first, intensive mothering practices oriented toward securing access to local educational opportunities; second, sustained efforts to accumulate institutional credentials or points required for children's educational mobility; third, mobile mothering across cities or regions to manage fragmented caregiving arrangements; and fourth, heightened economic labour to offset the absence of public educational and welfare support. The following sections examine these four dimensions in detail and analyse how variations in local policy regimes across cities shape migrant mothers' everyday mothering practices.

4.3.1 Mothering for Children's Enrollment in Host Cities

At the compulsory education level, public school places in these four cities prioritise resources to meet the needs of children with local household registration, so migrant children need to compete for the remaining places. Both policies deliver on the promise of equalization of public services to a limited extent, with migrant children being screened into the appropriate tier of public education through a legal process based on their family class background. Migrant children cannot receive public education unless they can prove their parents have residence permits, stable residence, employment, and social insurance. Thus, many migrant mothers devote considerable time, energy, and financial resources to securing their children's access to public schools—navigating educational qualification requirements, point-based settlement systems to ensure better educational opportunities for their children.

Since 2014, with the tightening of *hukou* and education policies, the documentation requirements for primary school admission in Beijing and Shanghai have become more stringent and complex than before. Liuhong recalled the intense emotional and physical toll she experienced while applying for a spot in a public school for her child. The application process involved three separate rounds and extended over two months. She described how each stage left her feeling anxious and on edge, saying, “Every time I made it through one round, I felt like I couldn’t relax. I was constantly worried and even had trouble sleeping at night.” Liuhong emphasized

the significant time, energy, and financial resources she invested in meeting the increasingly stringent admission requirements:

“The whole process involved three rounds of review. For the second round, we had to bring the landlord to the neighborhood committee, where they recorded a video asking the landlord whether they were willing to let our child use that school spot. Was the landlord really willing or just pressured into it? After the video was done and all documents were ready, they stamped it, which meant we passed the second review. The third round required us to provide proof of social insurance and various documents related to the child, including our marriage certificate, social insurance records, the child's birth certificate, and ID cards. All of this had to be compiled into one file and sent to their email. If approved, they would send you a text message confirming the result. A month later, we finally received the notification that our child was admitted. This whole process—from early May to early July—lasted two months. I often couldn’t sleep, just waiting anxiously, afraid we’d miss something.”

Beyond the onerous application paperwork and multi-stage vetting that drain mothers’ time and energy, Beijing’s rule that a single dwelling is “locked” to one school place for six to nine years makes securing a suitable placement even harder. The required inputs—continuous residence permits, compliant leases, employer-issued contracts, uninterrupted social-insurance records, and landlord cooperation—are class-coded resources unevenly available to migrant households. Yege (40s, a

father of two), a food delivery worker in Beijing, had no choice but to send his wife and children back to their hometown because his landlord refused to provide the necessary documentation to obtain a school placement (xuewei) tied to the rental property. Without the landlord's cooperation, Yege was unable to meet the residence verification requirements needed to apply for his child's admission to a local public school.

Consequently, the process privatizes public access: families must assemble dossiers, manage multi-stage reviews, and negotiate with landlords (sometimes incurring side payments). This reveals how institutional exclusion is experienced and absorbed at the family level, particularly by mothers, reinforcing their role as primary agents of invisible caregiving labour in urban China.

Moreover, such dynamics are also evident in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, where mothers must navigate increasingly competitive school admissions systems. As demand has outpaced capacity, more eligible migrant children now enter the points queues while the supply of public places remains tight; hence, only a minority—typically those with stable jobs and stronger finances—clear the thresholds. For example, Peihong (30s, a mother of two)'s husband has worked at Foxconn for 11 years, yet they still lacked enough points for the only nearby public school, where many Foxconn families had higher scores. To improve their chances, she rented a place in Guangming district and registered the child's address there as required, but the plan failed. She described the effort as both costly and exhausting:

"I was thinking to see if I could get into a public school there after renting an apartment for a year; I would stay there. But if I couldn't, I would return to my hometown. According to the points requirement in previous years, our points could be lined up for a public school in Guangming District. Unfortunately, there are too many children applying for admission to the first grade in this year of 2023, and my husband's points were 33.5, which was 1.1 points short of the minimum admission points. A few days ago, the Education Bureau called and said we couldn't get in. I was going through a very hard time. Not only did we spend thousands of yuan on renting that apartment, but our kids can't go to the private school in Longhua District because we registered our kids' accommodation information with Guangming District."

Tanli is also a migrant mother in this neighborhood, and her daughter was lucky because she was enrolled in the public school for Shenzhen Hukou. Tanli said, "There are eight grade one classes in this school, with 400 students last year. It seems that those who don't have Shenzhen households took only a few, but the rest were all Shenzhen households."

In Shenzhen and Guangzhou, points-based admissions operate under persistent capacity shortages, so only a minority of better-resourced families (stable jobs, longer contributions, home ownership) clear the cutoffs. Cases like Peihong's show how address moves, and extra rent often fail, while local hukou still dominates seat allocation. Thus, although both cities offer points channels and subsidized private

places, these measures have not eased parents' anxiety: free, higher-quality public schools remain the goal, yet hukou and housing weight the rankings against migrants, pushing many children into private schools or back to hometowns.

Across Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, compulsory-education access is formally open but substantively stratified. To help their children be enrolled in schools in host cities, mothers in the four cities must make great efforts and emotional labour to cross the institutional education boundaries. Therefore, the increasing institutional welfare exclusion of education in mega-cities converts public entitlements into class-filtered access and shifts administrative and affective labour onto families—especially mothers—thereby increasing economic outlays, time costs, and anxiety even as formal pathways ostensibly widen.

4.3.2 Mothering for Obtaining Hukou and Required Points

The cumbersome enrollment information and procedures are the first step in crossing institutional boundaries. This is followed by an even more difficult institutional dilemma of whether the child can attend senior secondary school and university locally. There are also significant differences in the policies of secondary and higher education in these four cities, which also profoundly affect the motherhood experiences of migrant mothers.

In Guangzhou and Shenzhen, securing eligibility for the high-school entrance exam (zhongkao)—and, by extension, a plausible route to university—often drives

migrant parents to pursue local *hukou*, unless a child is exceptionally high-achieving and can withstand fierce competition without it. Because both the *hukou* channels in two cities place heavy weight on parental educational credentials, many mothers in my fieldwork enrolled in adult-education or self-study (*zikao*) programs to upgrade their degrees and meet *hukou* thresholds. Yet these exams are not easy. For women whose schooling ended at junior secondary, vocational, or high school, self-studying toward a college diploma while working and caregiving is an arduous, time-intensive undertaking.

Xiaoqi (30s, a mother of two)'s case illustrates the squeeze. Both of her children attend private schools in Shenzhen. Anticipating a forced return to the hometown, she enrolled in a self-study associate degree and professional-title exams in 2020 to qualify for local *hukou*. By the interview, her son was about to enter Grade 7 and her daughter Grade 6, leaving little time to clear both hurdles while juggling paid work and care:

"I also want to finish the junior college exam and get intermediate professional titles as soon as possible because my son will take the senior high school entrance examination in two years. This time is a problem for me because the times of the two exams are closely linked. I feel a bit nervous because I can't move out the time to prepare for the exam. I am usually busy with work, and the time is insufficient."

Inequities in education policy have made settling down in host cities a large part of the responsibilities of motherhood, especially for young mothers whose children are still in elementary school or kindergarten. Among younger parents (20s–30s), strategic planning began early because they still had a buffer before secondary-school exams. Some of them had chosen to spend a few years preparing for their academic or skills exams. For example, In Shenzhen, Yuan and Qiong started tertiary-qualification and undergraduate tracks while their children were in kindergarten.

In parallel, in Shanghai, many mothers worked toward the 120-point threshold. Among our interviewees, three of the mothers we interviewed in their 30s are actively trying to reach 120 points by obtaining a college degree. For example, with her child now in Grade 5, Yongqiao (30s, a mother of one) and her husband began college self-study three years ago to improve their chances of settling in Shanghai. She said:

"When our child was in second grade, we began to get the points. Because we are from the countryside and only finished high school, we must take the college-degree exams. We also spent a lot of money to attend the exam training courses, but we caught up with the epidemic just that time, and the training institutions closed down. We need to prepare for the test by ourselves. It isn't easy; for example, we took six exams at a time but could only get through two or three. According to the requirement, we must pass all the exams by Grade 5. It's very late already. To pass these exams, my hair turned white, and my husband also

became bald. Then I spent money to get a lot of skill certificates, but the points were still less than 120."

Yongqiao's account—multiple sittings, pandemic closures, and still falling short of Shanghai's 120-point bar—shows how this treadmill produces time poverty, chronic stress, and embodied wear. Jiang's path to upgrading her credentials was equally arduous. She first took a self-study exam (zikao) in her hometown, only to discover after receiving the certificate that Shanghai's points system imposes a strict "three-place consistency" requirement on non-full-time qualifications at the associate-degree level and below: during the period of study, the place of study, place of employment, and place of social-insurance payment must be the same. By contrast, full-time regular degrees count for points with the diploma/degree certificate alone. To keep her high-performing daughter in school, she ultimately sent the girl back home while she stayed in Shanghai with her younger son and re-enrolled in a Shanghai program that complies with the three-place rule.

Cases like Xiaoqi\ Yuan \Qiong \lijie \Jiang, juggling self-study college and an intermediate title while parenting and working illustrate the Hukou-linked Motherhood. The work is cognitively and temporally dense: sourcing materials, mastering unfamiliar curricula after long gaps in schooling, and synchronizing exam calendars with children's school milestones. This is intensified by the moral expectation that a "good mother" should anticipate policy risks, pre-empt bottlenecks (e.g., xiao sheng chu), and protect a child's exam trajectory. The hukou and

educational policy design indirectly moralizes outcomes as maternal competence or lack thereof—deepening self-surveillance and stress.

Thus, urban governance regimes structure the modalities of maternal labour required to convert household resources into children’s educational eligibility. In Guangzhou and Shenzhen—relatively permissive yet still selective—mothers are drawn into a sustained credential-accumulation treadmill (college degrees, professional titles, contributory records) to satisfy thresholds for hukou. In Shanghai’s codified points regime with explicit thresholds, maternal effort centers on points collecting, i.e., strategically stacking recognised credentials and social-insurance contributions while navigating technical rules such as the “three-place consistency requirement”. By contrast, Beijing’s comparatively closed system offers no realistic ladder for most migrants, pushing families toward split-household schooling (children returning to their hometown for junior secondary while parents remain in the city); here, maternal labour takes a mobility/logistics form—regular long-distance accompaniment and coordination.

4.3.3 Mobile Mothering for Caring

Beijing is the only city in this study without a realistic direct-settlement pathway for most bachelor’s-degree holders; even university-educated mothers with stable, well-paid jobs cannot readily obtain local hukou. Confronted with these high thresholds, none of the Beijing migrant parents we interviewed described “upgrading” credentials or buying property to settle. Unlike respondents in the other three cities,

most Beijing interviewees had little engagement with settlement policy—echoing Yanli (29, mother of one): “This has nothing to do with us... it’s a pie-in-the-sky dream.”

Against this backdrop, mothers often turn to mobile mothering—coordinating schooling across places and providing care through travel. To secure stronger pathways to senior secondary and university, many send children back to the hometown for junior secondary and then shuttle to accompany them. Fanjie (40s, mother of two) had just returned from a weekend visit home to support her child. Fuli (40s, mother of one) enrolled her son in a boarding middle school in their hometown and now travels every two weeks to be with him:

" Because we don't stay with our children, we owe them a debt, right? We'll do our best to spend more time with him. He went home for middle school so he can aim for a key high school. Otherwise, he could only do vocational high school in Beijing. Now I return home once every two weeks when he gets home. On Thursday night, I started to go home; on Friday, I took a day off. To save money, I take the slowest train, which takes more than five hours. I return Sunday at 10 p.m., reaching Beijing at 5 a.m. I rushed to the company at 7:40 am on Monday. So, that day off is exhausting. " (Fuli, 40, Beijing)

During the pandemic, when online classes depressed his performance, Fuli stayed in the hometown for five months. Such mobility directly affects women’s

employment continuity and, in turn, social-insurance accrual. After six years of contributions in Beijing, she acknowledged she would still forgo work and benefits if necessary:

"I think it's good to earn money outside, but children are generally the most important. No matter how good the job is, life is still about children. Maybe, anyway, my work is not so high profile. I am working in a private company. If my child's grades drop again, I'll quit and go back—even if it means giving up social security. "

Limited caregiving support in sending areas further tightens options. Without available grandparents, mothers often suspend urban employment to return home so children can access schooling. Jiabin illustrates the bind: her older child stayed in Beijing and entered vocational high school; her younger child (Grade 4) performs well, but no relatives can care for him back home, and she does not want to give up her current job and pension track:

" My oldest son was not brought back to junior high school but chose to stay in Beijing to attend vocational high school, so I felt sorry for him. My parents-in-law work as sanitation workers in Beijing and the whole family is in Beijing. At that time, he also knew that he couldn't go back home, and get into high school in Beijing, so he didn't want to study either, and there were a lot of kids who thought like that. That's why I want our second son to go home for junior high school;

he's doing well academically. But the grandparents can't take care of him, and the kids don't listen to them, and he doesn't want to go back with his grandparents. So, I've been struggling with whether to go back or not. I've been working outside for years and don't want to return. I was thirty-five years old when I entered this company, and finally have social security, so when I have paid for fifteen years, I will be exactly fifty and have a pension when I am old. It would be nice if the child's education problem could be solved. "

This narrative illustrates the difficult trade-offs migrant mothers face between securing their children's education and ensuring her long-term financial security. This dilemma reflects the structural constraints of China's rural-urban divide: while migrant children face exclusion from urban education systems, access to pension entitlements requires stable, long-term urban employment. Within this context, mothers must constantly negotiate between investing in their children's future and safeguarding their own later-life wellbeing. Their maternal practices reveal both a deep sense of responsibility and the burden of care placed on families under neoliberal policy regimes, where the costs of social reproduction are increasingly shifted onto individuals.

Participants in the other cities faced similar dilemmas. Linfen (40s, a mother of two) was a migrant mother in Shanghai, and her son is attending the first year of high school in her hometown. Because of her son's rebellious behaviour, she was torn over whether to go back to accompany him, but she does not want to give up social

security in Shanghai, which she has contributed towards for 11 years. Yingying (40s, a mother of three) had sent her twins back to her hometown while she chose to stay at Guangzhou, but she frequently traveled between Guangzhou and hometown.

Following feminist political economy (Fraser, 2016; Folbre, 2001), this regime externalizes the cost of education access onto households; those costs are then gendered. Mothers absorb the time costs (long-distance travel, queuing, multi-stage verification), income costs (lost wages, social insurance), and bodily costs (sleep deprivation, physical strain). Mobile mothering thereby becomes an implicit subsidy that keeps the urban economy running while keeping welfare expenditure low—an archetypal case of the state’s withdrawal from social reproduction being offset by women’s unpaid labour.

4.3.4 Mothering for heavy economic responsibilities

In China's four megacities, securing a child's entry into compulsory education hinges on proving stable employment, valid leases, and continuous social security contributions. What was once universal public protection has become a conditional reward. In practice, mothers shoulder most of the burden: they must care for their children while simultaneously gathering documentation, paying fees, and coordinating with landlords, employers, and schools. With limited enrollment spots and policies favoring families with stable employment and formal housing, low-income migrant populations bear the heaviest pressure. These pressures cluster in three areas: (1) paying social-insurance premiums to satisfy entry rules; (2) securing “verifiable”

housing for address-based enrollment; and (3) turning to private schools or cross-city arrangements when public places are unavailable.

In these cities, school enrollment policies stipulate that at least one parent must have an active social security record. Wuli's account vividly illustrates how tightening education and settlement policies in Shanghai over time have placed increasing burdens on migrant families:

"When my child entered elementary school in 2014, the control policy became stricter. They needed a flexible employment permit. At that time, I took the exam for a domestic worker certificate, so I didn't need to buy social security. However, when he entered middle school in 2019, I had to pay for social security for half a year, and a residence permit was also a must. I spend about 30,000 yuan a year to pay for social security."

For secondary-exam eligibility, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen generally require three consecutive years of parental contributions; Beijing's higher-education pathway is stricter still, demanding six years of compliant documentation. Unlike Beijing, which counts only contribution years, Shanghai ties points to the contribution base; better-off families can accelerate scores by paying at higher bases. As noted earlier, Lijie doubled her monthly premium to over 4,000 yuan to reach 120 points and secure her child's local middle- and high-school exam eligibility.

Yet employers' contributions for migrants remain limited, forcing many migrant families to pay the full premium out of pocket. Meijie (a mother of two), for instance, purchased social insurance to secure eligibility for her children under the local points-based school admission system. She explained, "It used to be just over 800 yuan a month, but now it's more than 1,640. I just paid for it all by myself. Even if we pay, it doesn't count as much. We don't have enough points like people in factories, so our children can't go to public school." Her efforts to accumulate points through individual contributions thus yielded limited returns.

Enrollment also hinges on verified, "stable" residence, which has significantly increased the cost of living for migrant families. In recent years, 12 districts in Beijing have implemented policies such as "one school place per property every six years" (for primary school) and "one school place per property every nine years" (for combined primary and secondary education). As a result, landlords in high-demand school districts have gained substantial leverage. To secure a rental property that is recognised by the local education bureau for school enrollment, migrant families often have to pay landlords tens of thousands of yuan in key money or side payments (on top of regular rent). As Liuhong explained:

"Now one property is tied to a school spot for nine years. It was extremely difficult for us to find a slot—we ended up paying tens of thousands of yuan to secure one, through a personal connection who introduced us to a unit in a residential compound."

Others reported similar costs: Jiabin paid 30,000 yuan, and Hongge paid 10,000 yuan to lock in an eligible address. In Guangzhou and Shenzhen, renters also need to file a rental contract to prove that they have a legal and stable residence. However, for the majority of migrant families living in urban villages, there are a large number of houses without construction permits or legal proof of ownership. To register their leases, some families have to move to eligible housing, which increases housing costs and affects the quality of their housing. For example, Qiong and Yuan in Shenzhen had to move because their landlord was unwilling to lease them. Yuan said, "We lived in a house for seven years, and the landlord was unwilling to give us a license. So, we need to change to a new place. But the new landlord has been raising our new tenants."

When public seats are unavailable, families turn to private schools in the host city or nearby provinces. In Guangzhou and Shenzhen—where migrant children's access to public schools remains comparatively low—private tuition becomes a major expense. Although both cities offer subsidies for eligible students, these cover only part of the bill, leaving many families priced out.

For example, Peihong's son failed to enroll in public school this year, and she planned to take her children home. Although the private school tuition is only 6,000 yuan per semester, additional costs—including books, uniforms, meals, transportation, and extracurricular fees—can bring the total annual expense to around

15,000 yuan. If her daughter also fails to attend public schools next year, the two children's expenses will make the family unable to afford.

Parents often pay more for schools with stronger promotion rates. Xiaoqi chose a higher-fee private school because its high-school admission rate was better than the alternative: As she explained:

“I chose this more expensive private school because its admission rate is higher. There are four classes, about 150 students, and over 30 of them can get into high school. That’s much better than the previous school my son attended, where maybe only one or two out of a hundred students managed to make it. I just hope this increases his chances of getting into high school. Now my child's tuition is 9,000 RMB per semester, but with meals and accommodation, I pay 17,000 RMB per semester. Even with government subsidies, I still have to pay 12,000 RMB per term. That’s a massive cost.”

In Shanghai and Beijing, some families enroll children in private schools in neighboring provinces. Lijie (36, mother of two) sent her daughter to Shaoxing, Zhejiang, while keeping family life anchored in Shanghai:

“Because I didn’t have the required 120 points, I had to send my daughter to school in Shaoxing, Zhejiang. Honestly, it’s a big expense for us. Each semester costs tens of thousands of yuan, and with living and accommodation fees, it comes to around 70,000 to 80,000 yuan a year for my daughter.”

This arrangement enabled children to return home every ten days, allowing for continued family co-residence despite the lack of local public schooling options. Some migrant families in Beijing follow similar “nearby but not local” arrangements. For example, Zhuang (38, a father of one), who works as a chauffeur, picks up his child in Baoding every two weeks: “Tuition is over 30,000 yuan a year; with boarding and meals it’s roughly 50,000. On one income, that’s hard—especially with emergency savings, mortgages, and car loans.”

Viewed through the lens of social reproduction theory, the financial burdens documented above are not simply personal hardships—they reflect a broader shift in how the costs of reproducing the urban labour force are distributed. As Fraser (2017) argues, neoliberal restructuring does not eliminate the need for social reproduction; it relocates its costs, transferring them from public budgets onto families. In the case of migrant families in China's megacities, this transfer is particularly stark: social insurance contributions, housing fees, and private school tuition are not optional expenditures, but mandatory entry costs imposed by a policy system that conditions children's access to education on parents' ability to pay. What was once framed as public provision has been effectively privatized—converted into a series of financial thresholds that families must clear on their own. The hukou system does not merely exclude migrant children from public education—it actively generates a set of financial demands that restructure migrant mothers' labour, time, and economic

strategies around the task of purchasing, through private means, what should be available as a social right.

This chapter traced how China's four megacities—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—have constructed household registration and educational access mechanisms, and how these systems influence the daily childcare practices of migrant mothers. Despite unified national policy guidance, significant differences emerge in institutional design across cities: Beijing is the most restrictive and opaque, linking admission to public schools to extensive documentation and excluding most non-household students from the local secondary/higher education exams; Shanghai has streamlined the compulsory education enrollment process, but its points system established in 2013 limits eligibility for the secondary/higher education exams to a minority group of parents who have attained a score of 120 points; and Guangzhou's and Shenzhen's policies are relatively migrant-family friendly, with a points-based enrollment and more liberal settlement policies, which are ostensibly easier to reach but still discriminatory in practice.

Thus, despite national directives requiring local governments in receiving areas to include migrant children in the public compulsory education system, four megacities endeavor to safeguard and enhance their own local interests, resorting to a variety of nuanced strategies to maximize regional benefits (Wang & Lu, 2019). These institutional logics have fostered a stratified urban citizenship. Rigid institutional standards benefit families with assets and formal employment, while low-

income and precariously employed migrant groups face slow point accumulation, tighter quotas, and frequent exclusion into private schools. This leads to a negative association between need and ability to access public goods (Friedman, 2022). In different megacities, integration is framed as conditional: public education is less a right than a reward for stable residence, employment, and social insurance contributions.

This chapter demonstrated that the migrant mothering in Chinese cities extends far beyond traditional caregiving. Migrant mothers not only meet the economic and physical demands of childrearing but also actively navigate policy systems to secure educational and welfare resources for their children. I termed this maternal practice Hukou-linked Motherhood, which encompasses: (1) Mothering for Children's Enrollment in Host Cities (organizing documentation, coordinating multi-level approvals, negotiating with landlords and employers); (2) Mothering for Obtaining Hukou and Required Points (self-study for academic degrees, professional titles, skill certifications; supplementing social insurance contribution bases); (3) Mobile Mothering for Caring (long-distance accompaniment when children return to hometown schools); (4) Mothering for heavy economic responsibilities (paying social insurance, purchasing school enrollment slots, and bearing tuition expenses).

The cross-city comparison in this chapter served a purpose beyond documenting policy differences: it helps to isolate hukou status as the key structural axis shaping migrant mothers' experiences in the Chinese context. Importantly,

however, what varies across cities is not simply how hard mothering is, but what form Hukou-linked Motherhood takes. In Beijing, where public school admission is tied to extensive documentation and non-local children are largely excluded from secondary-level public exams, migrant mothers are pushed toward mobile mothering—accompanying children back to hometown schools, managing care arrangements across cities, and absorbing the financial and emotional costs of family separation. In Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, where points-based systems offer a pathway to local status, the same pressures of rural hukou and informal employment redirect mothers' efforts toward credential accumulation—pursuing self-funded degrees, professional certifications, and social insurance contributions in order to meet enrollment thresholds. The form differs across cities; the underlying dynamic does not. In each case, it is the specific rules through which hukou status is operationalized that determine which compensatory strategies mothers must pursue—and it is mothers, positioned at the intersection of rural *hukou*, precarious employment, and primary caregiving responsibility, who carry out that work.

This variation points to a broader theoretical argument developed throughout this thesis: that in the Chinese context, *hukou* operates in ways that are structurally similar to how race functions in the original intersectional framework—not because *hukou* maps onto racial categories, but because it is administratively assigned, institutionally determinative, and difficult for individuals to change through their own efforts. Social reproduction theory helps explain why the costs of institutional

exclusion fall on families rather than the state; intersectionality helps explain why, within migrant families, those costs fall disproportionately on mothers; and the cross-city comparison of *hukou* policy helps explain why the specific burden mothers carry looks different depending on where they live. Together, these three lenses reveal that Hukou-linked Motherhood is not a single, uniform response to welfare exclusion, but a set of differentiated practices shaped above all by the *hukou* rules that each city puts in place.

This labour is not a matter of personal sacrifice—it is the structural consequence of the state's gradual withdrawal from social reproduction responsibilities. Within exclusionary systems, these maternal practices—often taken for granted or overlooked—actually serve as compensatory measures for a policy framework that fails to recognise the rights of migrant families to social reproduction. Addressing these systemic inequalities requires policy reform that moves beyond a developmentalist and market logic toward a framework centered on redistribution and care. This entails decoupling household registration from educational and welfare eligibility, expanding public education and childcare provision, and formally recognizing the value of caregiving labour in social protection frameworks.

Chapter 5: Stratified by Design: Rising Costs, Care Deficit and Conditional Social Reproduction Regime

As discussed in chapter 4, despite state initiatives to “integrate” migrants, China's dual welfare system continues to obstruct migrant workers' access to comprehensive social reproduction resources in major cities. Migrant families remain systematically disadvantaged compared to local residents in education, housing, healthcare, and elderly care. Even as migrant families transition from separation to cohabitation, neither the state nor corporations bear the costs of reproduction. In essence, the costs of sustaining and renewing the labour force have shifted from public budgets and enterprises onto families—particularly mothers.

These responsibilities remain framed as private obligations, giving rise to conditional social reproduction: duties are shifted onto families and recalibrated according to local rules and financial capacity, leaving migrant households in the most precarious position. In this arrangement, cities can maximize accumulation and accelerate urbanization while externalizing social costs—actively producing and managing a non-racialized “surplus population” by withholding full access to social rights (Friedman, 2018). Social reproduction theory illuminates the critical issue here: activities that maintain daily survival and intergenerational continuity are not byproducts of capitalism but preconditions for production and surplus accumulation (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Fraser, 2017).

Simultaneously, migrant families confront broader marketization waves in education, housing, marriage, and care—sectors that directly shape family life conditions. On one hand, urban renewal and exclusionary policies in major cities inflate housing and education costs. On the other hand, county-level urbanization tightly links children's education, marital prospects, and housing, driving the urbanization of migrant families' reproduction. Within this political-economic context, the “means” required for labour force reproduction—whether financial or temporal—become increasingly costly, driving up the social reproduction costs of child-rearing. The need for stable cash income compels many mothers to become (co-)economic pillars while shouldering daily caregiving responsibilities.

Moreover, neoliberal reforms have created significant care gaps. When public care infrastructure is lacking or restricted by the household registration system, and commodified alternatives are prohibitively expensive, migrant families cannot simply “purchase” substitute care. Maternal labour thus becomes the primary compensatory mechanism: mothers shoulder economic responsibilities, caregiving duties, and the task of filling institutional gaps. Viewed through the materialist lens of social reproduction theory, this is not a private shortage but a contradiction in social reproduction under a financialized, market-driven development model—what Fraser (2017) terms a contemporary “crisis of care.” By linking macro-level transformations with micro-level caregiving practices through social reproduction theory, this chapter demonstrates that migrant mothers' parenting practices are not marginal activities but

a core component in the reproduction of labour power for the working class and for urban society more broadly.

The sections that follow are organized as follows. Section 5.1 analyses how the policy architecture functions as a conditional social reproduction regime. Section 5.2 traces the rising costs of social reproduction. Section 5.3 examines the care deficit facing migrant families and the survival strategies they adopt under structural constraint.

5.1 Conditional Social Reproduction Regime

Chapter 4 showed how *hukou* policy shapes the specific forms of Hukou-linked Motherhood that migrant mothers perform. This section asks a different but related question: not what mothers must do, but what they can access. The answer, this section argues, depends on the intersection of two axes: *hukou* status and employment form. Together, these two axes determine a family's position within what I call a conditional social reproduction regime—a system in which the level of state support available for raising children is not fixed but calibrated according to where a family sits at the intersection of *hukou* status and labour market position.

Since implementing market-oriented reforms, China has shifted from a planned economy to a market economy, and from state socialism to a form of state capitalism (Song, 2012b). As Polanyi (2007 [1944]: 57) argues, modern capitalism reversed the relation between economy and society: rather than the economy being

embedded in social relations, social relations became embedded in the economic system. China's post-reform trajectory followed a similar logic of disembedding: through the *xiangang* (layoff) policy, workers from state-owned enterprises were cast into the labour market; as collective ownership of rural land loosened, peasants were increasingly forced into systems of wage labour; and state-owned enterprises ceased to bear the costs of reproducing the workforce (Song, 2012a). This process dismantled the traditional networks of social protection (Wang, 2004: 520). Meanwhile, the discourse of welfare socialization imposed a moral injunction that individuals should secure their own well-being and shoulder duties for national development (Nguyen, 2018)—a shift through which social protection was reconstructed from a right into an individual responsibility, reformulating the contract between the state and the worker (Lin & Nguyen, 2021).

Neoliberalism names this overarching shift, but it does not capture the patterned, place-specific ways in which access to care, schooling, housing, and income security is allocated across different households in China. To make this variation visible, this section theorizes a conditional social reproduction regime: supports and responsibilities are offloaded onto households and then scaled by the intersection of *hukou* status and employment form. Rather than a simple binary of inclusion and exclusion, migrant families occupy different "thicknesses" of protection along a public–private spectrum. Two axes organize this spectrum: *hukou* status regulates eligibility for education and housing resources, while employment form

determines access to social security. Where these axes intersect, families receive more or less support for social reproduction—and it is intersectionality that makes this variation analytically visible. It is at the most disadvantaged intersection—rural hukou, informal employment, and primary caregiving responsibility—that migrant mothers are disproportionately located, which is why the costs of China's care crisis fall on them most heavily.

Table 5-1. Reproduction Support Mix Spectrum

Hukou→ / Employment form ↓	Local hukou	Non-local (migrant) hukou
Formal employment	Public Education Subsidized housing Employer-contributed social insurance Maternity Leave	Employer-contributed social insurance
Informal employment & non-employed caregiver	Public Education Subsidized housing Resident social security	New rural cooperative medical care Rural old-age insurance

As shown in table 5.1, the differences between these four cells are not abstract—they are visible in the everyday lives of the mothers in this study.

At one end of the spectrum sit families with local hukou and formal employment contracts, who can access public education, subsidized housing, employer-contributed social insurance, and maternity leave. In this study, families occupying this position were primarily local urban residents rather than rural-urban migrants—a contrast that itself underlines the structural significance of *hukou* status.

Among all the families in the fieldwork, only one—Yan and her husband Sheng—

gained access to the full package of local welfare entitlements, and only after years of sustained effort to obtain Guangzhou *hukou*. Among migrant mothers, Hamin came closest to this position: university-educated and formally employed in Beijing, with all five social insurance schemes and a housing fund paid by her employer at a high contribution base. When she gave birth outside Beijing, her workplace processed the full reimbursement. Yet her formal employment status could not compensate for the absence of local *hukou*. As discussed in Chapter 4, Beijing's exceptionally high *hukou* threshold meant that despite her stable contributions and professional qualifications, she had effectively given up on obtaining local registration—and with it, any prospect of her child sitting the gaokao in Beijing.

At the other end sit families without local *hukou* and in informal employment—the most common position among the women in this study. These households receive the thinnest coverage: at most, the new rural cooperative medical scheme and basic rural old-age insurance, both administered in the hometown rather than the city where the family actually lives and works. Xiaosu, a food delivery worker in Beijing, had only accidental injury insurance and no social security coverage at all. Peihong, who worked in the service sector before becoming a full-time mother, had never enrolled in any insurance scheme. Xi and Su, both of whom worked for years in small-scale factories, had likewise never been covered.

Between these two poles lie intermediate positions that reveal the intersectional logic of the regime most clearly. Formally employed migrants—like

Zhuo, who had maintained Foxconn contributions for over fifteen years—can access pension, healthcare, and maternity insurance through their employer, but remain excluded from public education for their children due to the absence of local hukou. The practical consequence of this gap is visible in Zhuo's own family: despite her stable employment and long contribution record, she sent her child back to her hometown when the child was just over one year old. Her child now boards at a school far from where Zhuo lives and works—an arrangement that reflects not a personal preference but the structural ceiling that *hukou* imposes even on formally employed migrant mothers. Informally employed migrants with local hukou occupy yet another intermediate position: they can access public education and resident social security, but without the employer contributions that formal employment provides.

These exclusions are not independent; they are structurally interconnected. For migrant families, *hukou* status and social insurance are not two separate barriers but two interlocking ones: local *hukou* grants direct access to public education, but for those without it, social insurance contributions have become the alternative route in—a conditional, costly, and far less secure pathway to the same entitlement. Yet this alternative route is itself far from universally accessible. In practice, access to social insurance is largely contingent upon formal employment status—and China has witnessed rapid informalization across both manufacturing and service industries (Dong, 2020). Official statistics from 2014 recorded migrant workers' social insurance participation rates as follows: 26.2% for work injury, 17.6% medical, 16.7% pension,

10.5% unemployment, 7.8% maternity, and 5.5% housing fund—figures that have not been publicly updated since (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). From a social reproduction perspective, this is not merely a data gap; it represents a governance model that normalizes partial and temporary coverage for a workforce that is essential to urban economies.

The consequence is that social insurance operates simultaneously as social protection and as an eligibility ticket—and for many migrant mothers, it is the latter function that drives their participation. Most major Chinese cities require at least one parent to hold a valid social insurance record for their child to be eligible to attend public school. Enrollment in insurance is therefore, for many families, not a response to the need for pension security but a strategic adaptation to school admission requirements. Meijie paid her own contributions entirely out of pocket; in Xiaosu's family, her husband arranged for contributions to be paid through a company specifically to meet enrollment thresholds. In both cases, the decision to enroll was shaped not by the logic of social protection but by the logic of educational access.

What the conditional social reproduction regime ultimately reveals is not simply that migrant families receive less support than local residents—it is that they are structurally excluded from the baseline of ordinary state provision that even a slimmed-down welfare system extends to its registered urban citizens. Local residents with formal employment may experience the pressures of neoliberal retrenchment: reduced subsidies, marketized housing, and stretched public services. But they remain

within the scope of state provision. Migrant families, by contrast, are positioned outside that scope from the outset.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that social reproduction theory and intersectionality are not parallel frameworks that can be applied independently—they are complementary and mutually necessary. Social reproduction theory explains the structural logic: why the costs of sustaining the labour force have been transferred from the state and employers onto families, and why this transfer is a feature of China's neoliberal restructuring rather than an incidental policy gap. But SRT alone produces an undifferentiated account of privatized care—it can show that families bear costs that the state no longer covers, but it cannot explain why some families bear far more than others. This is where intersectionality becomes essential: it shows that the conditional social reproduction regime does not distribute its costs randomly but in a patterned, predictable way organized by the intersection of *hukou* and employment form. Together, the two frameworks reveal what neither could show alone: that migrant mothers—particularly those without local registration, in informal work, and carrying primary caregiving responsibility—are not simply disadvantaged by China's welfare system but are structurally positioned to absorb its costs so that the urban economy can continue to function.

5.2 Rising Cost of Social Reproduction and Intensification of Economic Mothering

Drawing on Marx (1972), the production of labour power entails the reproduction and sustenance of the individual worker. The value of labour power is equivalent to the value of the necessary means of subsistence to support the labour power owner, which is significantly influenced by historical and ethical factors. This section argues that contemporary urban China has made those means of sustenance markedly more expensive.

As social reproduction has become increasingly commodified and the state has progressively withdrawn from universal provision, the costs of sustaining family life have risen sharply—and have fallen disproportionately on migrant families who cannot access the public services that would otherwise absorb them (Fraser, 2017; Xiang, 2021).

Concurrently, with the shift in the focal point of Chinese families towards a downward trajectory (Yan, 2016), the burden on Chinese families has grown heavier in the process of nurturing the next generation. Particularly with the skyrocketing housing prices, the value of the means of living has likewise escalated. Consequently, the labour required to raise the next generation has increased, placing an ever-greater burden on mothers—a pivotal role in social reproduction. This entails not only higher cash expenditures but also more unpaid labour and coordination work.

The previous section established that migrant families are structurally excluded from the baseline of state welfare provision that local residents—however partially—can access. This exclusion does not simply mean receiving less support; it means absorbing costs that the state would otherwise cover. This section traces what those costs look like in practice, arguing that the rising financial burden of raising children in Chinese cities is not simply a product of general economic inflation but is actively shaped by the intersection of state retrenchment and hukou-based exclusion. It unfolds in two steps: first examining how exclusion from urban public services drives up the direct costs of social reproduction in the city; then turning to the additional burden of hometown housing investment, which compounds these urban pressures.

5.2.1 Urban Costs under Exclusion: Housing, Education, and the Absent Welfare State

For migrant families in China's megacities, the rising cost of social reproduction begins with their exclusion from public provision that registered local residents can access. Where local families' reproductive costs are partially absorbed by the state—through public schooling, subsidized housing, and employer-supported social insurance, migrant families must purchase equivalent provision on the market or go without. These urban expenses—encompassing rent, utilities, schooling, transportation, and caregiving—are not only persistent and rising but also shaped by policies of spatial exclusion and urban redevelopment that continue to marginalize migrant households.

First, the cost of housing illustrates this dual burden. Many families, like Fenjin's, bear the dual burden of mortgage and rent. While paying a 2,000-yuan monthly mortgage for an unused apartment in his hometown, Fenjin's family also rents in Guangzhou for 1,500 yuan per month, amounting to 60% of his total monthly income spent on housing alone. This is not an isolated case, but rather an inevitable consequence of the stratified citizenship system (hukou) that restricts migrants' access to affordable and stable housing in cities (Chan & Buckingham, 2008). This creates a "dual housing burden": mortgages tie educational or marital dignity to homes in the hometown, while rent secures current urban employment and educational opportunities.

Second, urban renewal exacerbates cost pressures by displacing residents. Migrant families in Shanghai and Beijing commonly face escalating relocation and rental costs due to urban demolition (Friedman, 2022). As aging rental communities and informal settlements are demolished to make way for redevelopment, these families are forced into repeated relocations, continually seeking cheaper housing further from the city center. In Shanghai, Wuli describes a decade-long migration trajectory—moving from the inner ring road to the outer ring road, yet facing persistently rising rents:

"We moved from the inner ring to the middle ring to the outer ring and then beyond the outer ring. The price has risen from 2500, 3500, to 4500, and then reached 5500. I finally do not want to live in that apartment. I had to pay 15,500

Yuan for three months, a thick pile of money. Then, we moved to private housing (i.e., farmers' housing). At the beginning, we were very unaccustomed, so we spent some time accepting the reality."

In Beijing, Fanjie described a similar experience: "I've been in Beijing for so many years—at first it was on the edge of the third ring, then the fifth ring, and now almost the sixth ring. I have moved thirty times. And if this village is demolished, we'll be outside the Sixth Ring Road." These accounts demonstrate how city-level urban renewal intersects with hukou-based exclusion to intensify spatial marginalization. For migrant families, city life is not simply expensive—it is precarious, temporary, and constantly under threat.

Third, even apart from housing, the everyday costs of childrearing in cities escalate under marketized provision. Families that bring children with them face rising outlays for transportation, utilities, food, school fees, shadow education, and care—often without full access to public services. Interview data reveal that most families are unable to accumulate savings, living instead in a cycle of subsistence-level spending.

For instance, Yan, whose family was among the few that successfully obtained urban hukou and received a housing subsidy of over 2,000 yuan per month, nevertheless reported that they had no meaningful savings. Although they avoided the high costs of homeownership, monthly expenses—such as rent, tutoring fees for their

child, and basic living costs—still consumed nearly all of their income: “We spend everything we earn. Others come to the city to work and can save some money, but for us, we have to spend what needs to be spent.”

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the education and hukou system have made it necessary for low-income migrant families to pay additional costs, including out-of-pocket payments for social security, available school places, and tuition fees for private schools. Thus, financial pressure is even more pronounced among families whose children are in private schools. Ying, who worked in a factory alongside her husband, explained that an entire salary was dedicated solely to her son’s schooling: “One semester of tuition was as much as a month’s salary. When he was in primary school, it was around 1,000 yuan. But later, it rose to over 3,000. Now he’s in vocational college, and we still send him 1,500 yuan each month just for living expenses.” In addition, Ying’s family had borrowed money to build a home in their rural hometown, a move she described as emotionally necessary: “I just wanted my son to feel that he has a warm home. Without it, we had nothing.”

This intergenerational logic of investment—centered on children’s education and future marriage prospects—forces migrant mothers into intensified economic roles. Ying regularly worked two jobs. “I feel exhausted,” she said. “But if I don’t work, we can’t eat, and the child can’t go to school. So, I have to go to work every day.” This reflects broader gendered patterns in migrant households, where women

increasingly stretch their maternal roles into the economic domain to compensate for the withdrawal of public support (Jacka, 2014).

These cases illustrate how the commodification of housing, exclusion from social welfare, and marketization of basic services impose immense pressures on migrant families. For migrant mothers, they must coordinate their children's education and care while absorbing the intensified demands of economic mothering, extending their wage labour to compensate for rising reproductive costs produced by compounding exclusion and marketisation.

As Xiang (2021) insightfully argues, the core problem lies in the monetization of social reproduction, particularly in the areas of housing, education, and healthcare, which has transformed basic life-sustaining activities into expensive, competitive commodities. This monetization is not merely an expression of rising consumer prices but reflects a deeper structural transformation: access to basic social goods (such as homeownership, school admissions and health care) has become market-based, transactional and exclusive. Within this system, migrant families -- and mothers in particular -- act as the primary bearers of the financial, educational, emotional, and subsistence burdens of securing their children's future in an increasingly stratified society.

5.2.2 “Housing Loan is like a Speeding Train”: The Intergenerational Burden of Hometown Investment

The urban costs documented above do not exist in isolation. They are compounded by a separate but equally significant set of financial pressures rooted in the intergenerational logic of rural social reproduction: the expectation that migrant parents will invest in hometown housing to secure their children's educational access and marriage prospects. As commercialization continues to penetrate the realm of social reproduction in China, housing has become more than a place of residence—it is now deeply embedded in families' long-term reproductive strategies, influencing access to school districts, determining marital prospects, and serving as a crucial marker of family status and intergenerational responsibility.

In the process of county-level urbanization, local governments often tie educational resources to home ownership and the household registration system. This practice concentrates essential elements of social reproduction—such as education and housing—in urban areas, effectively urbanizing the family lives of migrant workers (Wang, 2025). Consequently, many migrant workers are compelled to purchase urban housing to secure their children's education. Simultaneously, owning urban housing has become a substantive prerequisite for marriage among ordinary rural youth. These dynamics collectively inflate the costs of family reproduction, imposing heavy economic burdens on migrant worker households—particularly on women (Wang, 2025).

This hometown investment logic operates through two overlapping channels. The first is education. For migrant families whose children cannot attend urban public schools, a county-seat apartment represents not a lifestyle aspiration but a calculated reproductive strategy. Min (30s, a mother of one) described how her entire family pooled resources to buy a county apartment so her daughter could access a better school district:

“The motivation behind buying an apartment stems from the awareness of the stark differences between rural and urban education. I aspire to provide my daughter with a better education. I don't want her to be as useless as us and follow our old path. However, the current burden of my housing loan feels like a speeding train with no brakes. Once I start it, I can't stop. Additionally, I don't have much money in my hand. Although I have paid the maintenance fund (280,000 yuan) for the house, I have yet to settle the deed tax. Moreover, the house requires decoration, which would cost at least around 100,000 yuan. I don't intend to decorate it too badly but rather aim for an average standard. Overall, I estimate the total expenses of decoration to be approximately 150,000 yuan.”

The second channel is matrimonial. Owning a county-seat apartment has become a near-baseline expectation in rural marriage markets, bundled with a car and a substantial bride price. Jing explained: "It's impossible not to prepare. Even if you don't have much in savings, you should at least help him get a car and a house—that's

the bare minimum. What if the bride's family asks for a bride price of 88,000 yuan?

You have to be ready for that."

Although the family already owned a house in their hometown, owning an apartment in the county seat has long become a crucial asset in the local marriage market. The financial pressures stemming from housing purchases for children's marriage vividly reflect the rising cost of wedding dowries. For instance, Jing described the arduous process of purchasing a home in their hometown:

"Honestly, when you're buying a house that costs six or seven hundred thousand yuan and still owe more than half of it, the stress is overwhelming. Considering that bank loan interest rates are high, it's often better to grit your teeth and borrow enough from family to pay it off in full. You're constantly worrying about which relatives might be willing and able to lend you money—you really need to think through every possibility. You have to swallow your pride and ask. Of course, repayment depends on the terms you've promised. As long as you have a job earning at least tens of thousands of yuan per year, people are generally willing to lend you money. My husband earns about five or six thousand yuan per month, and my income is less stable but usually around three to four thousand. This year, we finally paid off all our debts and completed the house renovations. It truly feels as though a heavy burden has been lifted from our hearts."

Children's marriage is indeed a major financial burden. Yulan spent over 300,000 yuan on her child's wedding. The engagement alone cost over 100,000 yuan, and the wedding itself required a similar amount—totaling around 300,000 yuan. In addition, she contributed more than 200,000 yuan as the down payment for the couple's apartment. The monthly mortgage payments are now covered by the newlyweds, but Yulan and her husband are still very willing to provide financial support if the couple faces any difficulties in daily life.

As illustrated by the cases above, although their monthly incomes typically range from 3,000 to 6,000 yuan, the down payment for purchasing a home—often several hundred thousand yuan—far exceeds what individual savings can afford. Consequently, many must rely on loans from extended family networks or banks to cover the initial costs. The subsequent burden of long-term bank mortgages then forces them into a cycle of relentless labour, binding them to high-intensity, long-hour work schedules in order to keep up with repayments. This situation not only exacerbates their sense of economic insecurity but also reflects the structural predicament faced by working-class families under the commodification of housing in urban China.

Moreover, the limited salaries of individuals often lead to mortgage payments squeezing out other essential living expenses. This sometimes creates a conflict between housing-related expenses and investments in children's education and

development. For example, Fenjin's apartment purchase tightened their living expenses, leaving limited funds for investing in their children's education.

" My wife insisted on buying an apartment in our hometown—she felt that since others were buying, we had too as well. The down payment was over 200,000 yuan—my dad covered half of it. Because we have to make mortgage payments every month—over 2,000 yuan—a large portion of my 5,000-something monthly salary goes toward that, so the pressure is quite high. If we hadn't bought the apartment, with my current formal job, we could barely manage. Without the apartment, we wouldn't have the mortgage burden, and life would be a bit easier. That would also allow us to invest more in our child's education—university itself is already a big expense. Also, if my wife didn't want to work, we could consider that—but not now. We simply can't survive on my income alone."

These narratives collectively reveal how housing—once considered merely a place of residence—has become deeply entangled in the intergenerational logic of social reproduction in post-reform China. Housing is now a key axis along which families invest for their children's future access to education, marriage prospects, and symbolic status. These investments do not exist in isolation but are embedded within a broader system—the privatization of welfare, the commodification of housing, and the stratification of education have shifted the burden of reproduction from the state to individual households.

Comparing housing loans to an “housing lone is like a speeding train” accurately captures the irreversible and exhausting nature of this path. Once a family steps onto the track of homeownership, it becomes nearly impossible to disengage. More significantly, mothers not only bear a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities but are also entrusted with the critical task of sustaining the family's economic foundation. They willingly engage in physically demanding work beyond retirement age, shoulder high-interest loans, and delay retirement—actions not driven by personal ambition but shaped into moral obligations. In this context, housing loans transcend mere financial instruments, becoming structural mechanisms of neoliberal governance.

5.2.3 Mothers as Shock Absorbers: The Intensification of Economic Mothering

The cases documented in the preceding two sections—mothers working double jobs to cover urban living costs, servicing mortgages to secure children's education and marriage prospects, and paying out-of-pocket insurance contributions to meet school enrollment thresholds—point to a broader pattern that this section draws together: the progressive intensification of what this thesis terms economic mothering. As the costs of social reproduction rise on both the urban and rural fronts, and as the state withdraws from providing the public infrastructure that would absorb those costs, migrant mothers increasingly function as the primary financial shock absorbers of their households—stretching their labour across hukou-linked labour,

caregiving, and economic provision in ways that extend well beyond conventional understandings of maternal responsibility.

This pattern is consistent with what feminist scholars of social reproduction have identified as the feminization of the costs of neoliberal restructuring (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Bhattacharya, 2017). As Fraser (2017) argues, the current organisation of capitalism depends on an ongoing appropriation of care and domestic labour that it simultaneously devalues and renders invisible. In the Chinese context, this dynamic is compounded by the hukou system's exclusion of migrant families from public welfare, which transfers not only care costs but also substantial financial costs onto households—and within households, onto women.

Research has documented that migrant mothers face a distinctive "double disadvantage" in the labour market: they bear both the motherhood penalty common to working women generally and the additional wage and employment penalties associated with rural hukou status and urban migration (Kong & Dong, 2024). Yet despite these labour market disadvantages, they are simultaneously expected to function as economic co-pillars of the household, generating income to cover the rising costs that public provision no longer absorbs.

Meijie's situation illustrates this intensification with particular clarity. Running a family breakfast shop that also served as their residence, her household had to earn over 8,000 yuan monthly just to cover fixed costs like rent and insurance

contributions—while simultaneously spending tens of thousands of yuan on tutoring for one daughter, paying 8,000 yuan per semester for the younger one's private school, and giving gifts worth several thousand yuan through personal connections to secure a public school place.

The shop, she explained, could not stop for a single day: "If we don't open for even a day, we don't earn anything. At least by not hiring staff, we save that cost and earn a wage for ourselves. If I worked outside, I couldn't take care of the kids." Yet even running the shop full-time was insufficient—Meijie also took on a part-time job to supplement the household income. Her day thus encompassed running a business, caring for two children, and performing additional wage labour simultaneously—a configuration that is legible not as individual overextension but as a structural response to the compounding of hukou-based exclusion, rising urban costs, and the gendered expectation that mothers bear primary responsibility for household welfare.

The intensification of economic mothering is also visible at the intersection of caregiving obligations and retirement. In China, women's official retirement age is 50 for manual workers and 55 for white-collar employees—yet the social reproduction obligations that fall on migrant mothers do not follow this timetable. Supporting children's marriages, servicing mortgages, and subsidizing grandchildren's care extend mothers' economically active roles well into what should be their retirement years. Yulan, who had already begun receiving a pension, continued working as a cleaner

and taking on part-time jobs to supplement the financial support she provided to her newly married child.

Ming's situation was considerably more precarious. Having not contributed enough to qualify for a pension—gaps in her contribution record produced by earlier periods of full-time caregiving—she received no retirement benefits and could not stop working past the age of 50. Despite having little in savings, she borrowed the entire down payment of over 200,000 yuan for a hometown apartment and took out a 400,000-yuan mortgage with a 30-year repayment period, requiring monthly payments of 3,100 yuan—all to improve her son's marriage prospects.

Now working in small garment factories in Dongguan at 20 yuan an hour, she could envision retirement only when her son "became capable"—married, with a child of his own—at which point she would transition from wage labour to grandchild care. Her trajectory captures what social reproduction theory makes visible across generations: the labour of reproducing the next generation does not end when children reach adulthood but extends across the life course, binding mothers into an unbroken chain of productive and reproductive work (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2017).

In all these cases, the expansion of economic mothering was not a choice but a structural necessity. These mothers' labour is simultaneously productive and reproductive: it sustains the immediate household while underwriting the conditions for the next generation's social inclusion. Yet it remains largely invisible within

conventional economic accounting, uncouned in measures of labour productivity and unrecognised in social protection calculations. As Federici (2014) argues, the invisibility of reproductive labour is not incidental but structural—it is precisely because this work is unrecognised and uncompensated that it can be appropriated. For migrant mothers in China, this appropriation operates through the intersection of neoliberal governance, hukou-based exclusion, and gender ideology: the state withdraws from social provision, the hukou system ensures that migrant families cannot access what remains, and gender norms ensure that the resulting burden falls on women. Economic mothering is the name for what is left when all three forces converge.

5.3 Care Crisis and Everyday Survival

Since China's shift toward a market economy, public care has contracted, and more services have been pushed into the market. In practice, this means that the state covers less, and families must do more; within families, mothers usually carry the heaviest load (Connelly, 2016; Tong, 2017). At the same time, the hukou system continues to shape who can access public services in cities and on what terms. Even when policies have relaxed in some places, migrant families still face thresholds—such as proof of social insurance, stable employment, or points-based admission—before they can obtain schooling or childcare at public rates (Trémon, 2023). As a result, migrant households constantly move between two places (the city where they work and the hometown where kin live) and two systems (hukou-based entitlements

and market-based provision). This “double navigation” raises the cost of daily life and increases the risk that care needs will outstrip what families can provide.

Against this backdrop, the “care deficit” is best understood as a growing mismatch: care needs are rising—because of long work hours, children’s schooling demands, and elder care—while the reliable supply of care from kin and public services is unstable or limited. Grandparents’ help is often divided across many grandchildren or interrupted by illness; affordable formal childcare is scarce or hard to access for migrants; and long commutes further compress parents’ time. In short, what used to be solved by extended family arrangements is now frequently overstretched, and the shortfall is absorbed by mothers through longer hours, fragmented schedules, and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1989; Jacka, 2014).

This section proceeds in two steps. Section one shows how kin-based care arrangements are strained or break down under multi-sibling demands, elder illness, and hukou restrictions, leaving mothers to take on childcare alongside low-paid, insecure work. Section two examines how mothers respond to these conditions—not through agentic resistance or creative circumvention of structural constraints, but through survival strategies shaped by neoliberal demands for self-reliance and efficiency. As feminist scholars have argued, what appears on the surface as women’s resourcefulness or entrepreneurialism is better understood as an adaptive response to an impossible situation: one in which the withdrawal of public support and the persistence of patriarchal norms leave mothers with no alternative but to absorb

whatever the system does not provide (Fraser, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017; Orgad, 2019).

5.3.1 The Care Deficit: Kinship, Life Course, and Educational Exclusion

Under China's neoliberal transition, one of the most pronounced outcomes of this transformation is the intensification of the "care deficit" within working-class migrant families (Connelly et al., 2018). As responsibility for care has been increasingly offloaded into families, rural-urban migrant mothers are compelled to mobilize kinship networks for childcare. However, in many cases, these intergenerational arrangements have been severely overstretched or broken down altogether. What the cases in this section reveal is that the care deficit is not a static condition but a dynamic one: it intensifies and shifts form in response to changes in grandparents' health, children's developmental stages, and the educational pressures imposed by hukou-based exclusion.

Mothers from large, multi-sibling families often faced significant obstacles in securing stable caregiving support from grandparents due to competing demands among siblings, aging relatives, or sudden illnesses and deaths. These individual stories reflect a broader structural issue: the growing mismatch between care needs and the capacity of familial networks to meet them under conditions of labour precarity and minimal state support.

In the case of Huaduo, the competition for care resources becomes particularly obvious. She has an older brother and a younger brother, while her husband has a younger brother and a younger sister. Her older brother has four children, and their mother is constantly busy—both helping to care for the grandchildren and assisting at his shop, leaving her physically exhausted every day. Meanwhile, Huaduo's father helps take care of her younger brother's child. As a result, when Huaduo gave birth, it was difficult for her to receive support from her own family.

Moreover, her husband's siblings had children around the same time, which made it difficult for his parents to help care for her child as well. After giving birth to her first child, her husband's younger sister also required their mother's care for childbirth. Huaduo expects her mother-in-law to assist with the childrearing caregiving so that she can go out to work. However, her mother-in-law was already occupied with caring for her own mother in hometown. When the second child was coming, Huaduo's mother could only stay for two weeks before being called away by her sister-in-law's abortion. By the time her third child arrived, her parents-in-law were likely to prioritise her husband's younger brother's newborn. At each turn, competing care demands within the extended family foreclosed the support that Huaduo had anticipated.

Similar to Huaduo, many women from large, multi-child families are unable to rely on grandparents for childcare support. Although Ying and her husband both

works long hours in a factory, they still had to bring their child to live with them. As Ying explained:

“My husband’s family has four siblings, and each of their families has three or four children. When our child was little, the others hadn’t had their kids yet, so my parents-in-law helped care for him until he was three. When he turned four, I sent him to my mother. But my older brother also has three kids, so there were four little ones together, always fighting. He stayed with his grandmother for about a year, but she couldn’t handle so many children, so we brought him back to my parents-in-law. Later on, he came with us to Shenzhen and started first grade here.”

These cases reflect how, in families with multiple children across generations, the availability of grandparental care is often stretched thin, forcing mothers like Ying to constantly shift caregiving arrangements or eventually take full responsibility for raising the child themselves, even under demanding labour conditions. Jianfeng, like Ying, was also concerned that constant fighting among the children was detrimental to her daughter’s development. She decided to separate them and take on the caregiving responsibility herself:

“I didn’t have a father-in-law, and with just mother-in-law, it was not possible to divide the care. Later, there were three children all together and I thought the quality of childcare was too poor. My daughter was constantly being bullied and

hit. Every time I came home from work, I'd see blood on her face, and sometimes there'd be bite marks on her body. Eventually, I decided to separate them and arranged for my mother-in-law to take turns staying at each of our homes to help."

Thus, Jianfeng's mother-in-law was not always available. After Jianfeng had her second child, the burden grew heavier—she had to help with the family store and handle many domestic responsibilities, which made things increasingly difficult. Jianfeng recalled:

"This year has been the hardest for me. Last year, my mother-in-law was here, and no matter how tired I was, at least she could help a bit with housework. But this year has been the toughest. People think taking care of kids and the household isn't a big deal but making three meals a day and other childcaring labour is really no easy task. And my husband—he's a bit of a traditionalist. He believes that men should work outside, and women should raise the children and manage the household. To be blunt, he doesn't want to deal with anything related to the kids—it's all left to me."

This account illustrates the gendered dynamics of caregiving in migrant families, where the absence or limited availability of grandparents intersects with entrenched patriarchal norms, leaving women to shoulder the dual burden of childcare and household labour with little spousal support. In addition to the caregiving crisis

caused by multi-child households, the illness of family members can further exacerbate the household's care deficit. As a result, migrant parents are left with no alternative but to either bring their children along or enroll them in boarding schools in their hometown. For instance, Jing said: "Her son's grandfather suffered from a cerebral thrombosis, and his grandmother need to serve his grandfather, so there was no other way. We had to bring our son here (Guangzhou). Four years later, his grandfather passed away."

Meijie had initially left her older child in the care of her own mother while working in the city, believing this arrangement could be sustained through primary school. After two or three years, however, her mother developed persistent back problems: "At first, I thought it would be fine for the older child to stay home and attend primary school there. After two or three years, my mother started having persistent back problems. Her health was not good—she was in constant pain. So, I had to bring the child to the city."

Tian faced a compounded crisis: after her father's death, her mother was involved in a car accident and has since been unable to help with childcare. Her father-in-law has also passed away, and her mother-in-law cannot provide care support due to her ongoing responsibilities towards her younger daughter's education. Thus, besides taking care of her son and daughter, Tian is also faced with the challenge of helping her mother who needs assistance with grocery shopping and caregiving in her hometown. These cases highlight how the death or illness of an

elderly family member can abruptly disrupt the fragile caregiving equilibrium that migrant families depend upon, forcing mothers to absorb the shortfall without any institutional alternative. Migrant mothers like Jianfeng, Jing, Ying, Huaduo, and Yingying have all navigated this crisis. They juggle work, domestic responsibilities, and childcare duties, often without institutional safety nets or reliable familial support. The dissolution of intergenerational care arrangements—once the cornerstone of rural family life—leaves these women to bear alone the burdens of their elders' illnesses, widowhood, and the strain of overburdened grandparent caregiving.

It is significant that the destabilization of care arrangements does not occur randomly across the life course but clusters around specific structural pressure points. Migrant families' demand for caregiving resources shifts over the course of the family life cycle: during the early stages, particularly from childbirth to the start of primary school, the need for intensive childcare is highest, and it is during this period that grandparents are most commonly brought into the city to assist. Both Yan and Fenjin exemplify this pattern. Fenjin's mother lived in Guangzhou for three years to help; she returned home once his daughter turned three and could start kindergarten. Yan's mother-in-law lived with the family in the city while the child was in preschool but moved back to their hometown once the child entered primary school. As children grow older, grandparental support typically withdraws—but this withdrawal does not coincide with a reduction in caregiving demands. Instead, it coincides with the intensification of educational pressures that hukou-based exclusion generates.

The most common juncture for a second wave of care disruption is the transition from primary to middle school, when educational exclusion becomes acute and families must either secure urban enrollment, send children back to the hometown, or relocate entirely. As Sun and Tian (2020) have documented, nuclear families are most likely to migrate together during the newlywed and preschool stages, but when children reach school age, the difficulty of accessing educational resources in cities significantly increases the risk of spatial separation. The likelihood of family reunification often rises again only after children graduate or enter the workforce—a U-shaped curve that reflects the rigid constraints imposed by the education system on family migration strategies.

Yingying, who had raised her twin daughters alone in Guangzhou until sixth grade, sent them back to the countryside to prepare for middle school enrollment. Ming was forced to send her son back to their hometown after he failed to secure public school admission in Shenzhen. Both were comparatively "lucky" in having grandparents available in the hometown to provide daily care. Where no kin support was available, children entered boarding schools, and mothers adopted what might be called "mobile mothering"—shuttling between city and hometown at regular intervals, as Fuli did every two weeks—or, in cases like Yege's family, the mother moved back with the child full-time. In each scenario, the burden of managing the separation—logistically, emotionally, and financially—fell primarily on mothers.

What these patterns collectively reveal is that the care deficit in migrant families is not a fixed condition but a recurring structural vulnerability, produced at the intersection of over-extended kin networks, the life-cycle dynamics of grandparental availability, and the temporal pressures of hukou-based educational exclusion. Each of these forces operates independently; together, they ensure that migrant mothers face repeated episodes of care disruption across the entire period of their children's dependency—and that, at each episode, the absence of public provision leaves them with no institutional alternative to absorbing the shortfall themselves.

As feminist political economists have argued, the crisis of social reproduction under neoliberalism concerns not only inadequate service provision but also society's systematic reliance on women's unpaid and underpaid labour to sustain both household routines and the broader economy (Fraser, 2016). The care deficit documented here is not a private predicament, but a structural crisis produced by the retreat of state welfare, the commodification of daily life, and the persistence of gendered labour expectations—one whose costs are borne disproportionately by women who are already marginalized by class, migrant status, and rural origins.

5.3.2 Survival Strategies under Structural Constraint

Under the structural pressures of unstable labour markets, inadequate welfare provision, and entrenched gender norms, migrant mothers develop a range of strategies for keeping work and care going simultaneously. These strategies—

managing time across fragmented schedules, shifting to flexible or self-employed work, and mobilizing kin and neighborhood networks—are easily interpreted as expressions of resourcefulness or agency. This section argues, however, that such an interpretation obscures more than it reveals. These are not acts of resistance or creative circumvention of structural conditions; they are survival responses to an impossible situation, shaped at every turn by the neoliberal demands for self-reliance and efficiency that produced the impossibility in the first place. The specific forms that these networks take—how mothers draw on grandparents, neighbors, and informal carers to construct their care arrangements—are examined in detail in Section 6.2.3. What this section focuses on is the structural logic that underlies all of these strategies: not what they look like, but why they exist and what they cost.

Feminist scholars have drawn attention to the figure of the "entrepreneurial self" that neoliberal governance cultivates: the self-managing, flexible, optimizing subject who internalizes responsibility for problems that are structurally produced (Bröckling, 2016; Scharff, 2016; Gill & Orgad, 2018). In the context of mothering, this logic is particularly consequential. When public childcare is unavailable, mothers who reorganize their working lives to accommodate care are not exercising freedom—they are absorbing a cost that the state has offloaded onto them, and doing so in ways that are legible as individual choice and personal efficiency (Collins, 2019). The "flexibility" that is offered to mothers as a solution to their double burden rarely delivers what it promises: it typically means lower pay, reduced job security,

and greater vulnerability, while leaving the structural conditions that produced the double burden entirely intact (Orgad, 2019).

The most immediate manifestation of this dynamic is in how mothers manage time. Migrant mothers typically bear the dual burden of paid labour and caregiving responsibilities. Arlie Hochschild's (1989) concept of the “second shift” provides a useful framework for understanding this dual burden: after completing a full day of paid work, women return home to continue unpaid care labour. Through meticulous daily scheduling, these mothers strive to balance dual responsibilities, ensuring their children receive proper care and educational support.

For example, Yingying and Ying, who work in a factory during the day, have only a 45-minute lunch break. They still insist on rushing home during lunch to cook for their children before returning to work. During summer vacation, Ying even took unpaid leave to accompany her child through this critical stage of early childhood development. These practices are often framed—both by the women themselves and in popular discourse—as demonstrations of dedication and self-discipline. Yet as Hochschild (1989) documents, women's entry into paid labour has not been matched by a parallel shift in men's domestic contribution—producing a “second shift” that falls overwhelmingly on mothers. This dual burden is not simply a product of unequal household norms; it reflects a structural transfer of care costs from public institutions onto individual households and, within households, onto women's time and bodies (Fraser, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017). The mothers in this study are not optimizing

freely; they are rationing a resource—time—that has been made scarce by the combination of full-time employment demands, the absence of public childcare, and the gendered expectation that mothers bear primary responsibility for domestic labour. Their efficiency is a response to a neoliberal problem, not an escape from it.

For those who are unable to engage in full-time employment, many mothers actively seek part-time work opportunities as a means to attain a degree of economic independence and to alleviate the financial burden on the family.

After her son was born, Yongqiao left her corporate job to start her own business in order to have more flexibility to care for her child. She explained:

“When my son was about four or five months old, I started my own small business—things like milk tea or other little ventures. It was impossible to keep working in a company, because I’ve been taking care of my child myself from the beginning. My parents-in-law have many sons—four in total—so they couldn’t focus on helping our family. We only have one child, but my husband’s younger brother has two, and his older brother has three, so every family has several children to take care of.”

After the milk tea store closed down, Yongqiao went on to learn beauty make-up and rented a venue inside the neighborhood, and her business has become more stable. In contrast, Lu has not been as fortunate. With two younger children who still require frequent pick-ups and drop-offs, she needs highly flexible working hours. In

her search for a suitable job, she has shown remarkable determination, having tried more than 20 different types of work—including roles such as courier, waitress, and packager.

These trajectories resemble what Collins (2019) describes in her comparative study of working mothers across welfare regimes: in contexts where affordable childcare is unavailable, mothers do not freely choose flexible or entrepreneurial work but are pushed toward it by the absence of viable alternatives. The shift from stable employment to precarious self-employment or part-time job is consistently associated with lower income, reduced social insurance coverage, and greater economic vulnerability—outcomes that, in the Chinese context, are compounded by social insurance contributions. Yongqiao's move from formal employment to self-employment did not resolve the structural tension between work and care; it traded one form of constraint for another. As Orgad (2019) argues, the promise of flexibility as a solution to mothers' childcare problems is rarely viable in practice—it relocates the problem rather than addressing it and does so in ways that further individualize what is a collective and structural failure.

Taken together, these cases illustrate that flexible work is a double-edged sword: while it enables migrant mothers to exercise agency within constrained environments, it also reveals the enduring failure of state and market institutions to account for the gendered burden of social reproduction. Beyond time management and employment adjustment, a third survival strategy involves the mobilization of kin

and community networks to fill care gaps that neither the state nor the market covers—are examined in detail in Section 6.2.3.

This chapter traced three interlocking dimensions of the conditional social reproduction regime under which migrant mothers in urban China operate. Section 5.1 established the foundational logic of this regime: rather than a simple binary of inclusion and exclusion, migrant families occupy differentiated positions along a public-private spectrum of welfare provision, organised above all by the intersection of hukou status and employment form. The most disadvantaged position—rural hukou combined with informal employment and primary caregiving responsibility—is also the position in which migrant mothers are disproportionately concentrated.

Section 5.2 showed how this structural exclusion translates into rising costs on two fronts simultaneously: urban costs generated by the absence of public provision that registered residents can access, and rural costs generated by the intergenerational obligations of hometown housing investment. Together, these produce a dual reproduction burden whose financial weight falls, within households, disproportionately on mothers—extending their economically active roles well beyond conventional working age and binding their labour, across generations, to the task of reproducing the conditions for urban life.

Section 5.3 then examined how mothers respond to the care deficit that results from overstretched kin networks and the contraction of public care—not through

agentic resistance or creative circumvention, but through survival strategies shaped by neoliberal demands for self-reliance and efficiency: time management that rations scarce hours, flexible or entrepreneurial work that trades job security for caregiving proximity, and mutual-aid networks that construct a private welfare infrastructure in the absence of a public one.

The conditional social reproduction regime documented across this chapter places the burden of social reproduction on migrant mothers: coordinating care among relatives, absorbing rising urban and rural costs, shifting into flexible or precarious work, and performing the daily labour of feeding, tutoring, and emotional regulation—all while navigating the institutional demands of Hukou-linked Motherhood.

Neither framework alone is sufficient: social reproduction theory explains why care costs have been transferred onto families, but cannot explain why they fall unevenly; intersectionality explains the uneven distribution, but without social reproduction theory cannot account for what is being distributed or why. Together, they reveal that migrant mothers are not simply disadvantaged by China's welfare system but are structurally positioned—at the intersection of hukou exclusion, labour market informality, and gendered caregiving expectations—to absorb its costs so that the urban economy can continue to function.

In this sense, mothers' tangible and intangible labour functions as an implicit subsidy to urban accumulation. As Pun and Chan (2012) have argued, under split-household arrangements, the unpaid care labour performed by rurally based kin—often older women—constitutes a covert form of surplus value extracted by global capital. Under family reunification, migrant mothering underwrites accumulation in an analogous but distinct way: through economic mothering that absorbs financial costs the state no longer covers; through care mothering that fills the urban care deficit left by the contraction of public provision; and through Hukou-linked Motherhood that converts documents, credentials, and insurance contributions into children's educational eligibility. These forms of labour are unpaid, largely invisible, and structurally necessary—not incidental to China's urban economy but integral to its reproduction.

Chapter 6: Dynamic Intersections: Labour Regimes, Domestic Division, and the Cumulative Motherhood penalty

This chapter examines how migrant mothering practices are not fixed roles but are continuously reshaped by changing institutional systems and life-course trajectories. Building on Choo and Ferree's (2010) dynamic intersectionality model, I treat gender, class, and policy systems as fluid relational processes that shift over time and space. Methodologically and theoretically, this chapter shifts focus from outcome-oriented depictions of mothers facing “multiple disadvantages” to a process-oriented narrative: how welfare policies, labour markets, and patriarchal norms continuously reshape mothers' caregiving practices.

By tracing how family migration, gender norms, and labour and welfare regimes intersect, this chapter examines how institutional logic translates into daily divisions of domestic labour and, over time, into the cumulative Motherhood penalty. First, 6.1 analyses how employment conditions and welfare eligibility intersect with household registration status to produce gendered divisions of caregiving labour. Second, 6.2 analyses how couples negotiate the division of household labour, examining when mother-led caregiving patterns, negotiating parenting, or extended mothering arrangements emerge. Third, 6.3 traces the characteristics of the “Motherhood penalty” resulting from unequal household labour distribution and its impact on migrant mothers.

Through cross-generational and cross-city comparisons, I reveal that the same mother may occupy multiple intersections at different life stages, demonstrating that intersectionality is both situational and temporally bounded. This dynamic perspective links production to social reproduction, elucidating how macro-level governance translates into micro-level care arrangements and how mothers actively negotiate, adapt to, or even resist these arrangements in daily life.

6.1 Hukou, Labour Regimes, and the Making of Gendered Caregiving

This section examines how labour regimes, patriarchal norms, and institutional barriers intersect to sustain unequal caregiving responsibilities within migrant families. The first subsection examines migrant parents across a range of occupations and employment arrangements, revealing how the nature of the labour regime shapes household divisions of labour and, in turn, maternal practices. The second subsection reveals that the pressures exerted by education costs, inadequate childcare support, and exploitative labour conditions create a vicious cycle that disproportionately disadvantages women, while simultaneously limiting men's ability to participate in family life.

What distinguishes this chapter's analysis from existing accounts of gendered caregiving in migrant families is its insistence that the division of domestic labour is not primarily a cultural phenomenon but an institutionally produced one. The cases examined here demonstrate that hukou status functions as the foundational axis from

which the other dimensions flow: it determines access to public education, which shapes families' financial pressures, which in turn structures parents' employment choices, which ultimately reproduces the gendered division of caregiving labour within the household.

6.1.1 Labour Regime and Gendered Time Constraints

The division of labour within families is often linked to traditional gender norms, which dictate that women should bear caregiving responsibilities while men serve as the primary economic providers. However, while cultural expectations certainly shape family dynamics, it is the institutional and structural inequalities embedded in labour policies, social welfare systems, and educational accessibility that play a far more decisive role in perpetuating unequal gender roles—particularly among low-income families (Cook & Dong, 2017; Peng, 2018). Drawing on cases from two representative sectors—factory work and service-sector employment—this section examines how the nature of parents' jobs shapes the division of domestic labour and mothering.

When examining the group of formal workers in factories, the labour regime is characterized by intense discipline, mandatory overtime, shift rotations, and rigid schedules—conditions that are structurally incompatible with parenting responsibilities. In Shenzhen, one of my interview sites was a community located near Foxconn, the world's largest electronics manufacturer. Foxconn is widely known for its military-style management, the intensity of assembly line work, and strict

production quotas (Pun & Chan, 2012), factors that leave little room for flexible care arrangements.

Among the mothers interviewed in this community, four (Peihong, Cuihong, Wenling, and Erjie) are full-time caregivers, two (Wangjie and Tanli) work at kindergartens, and one (Yuan) is employed by a non-governmental organisation. In all of these cases, their husbands worked at Foxconn. Peihong, Tanli, Cuihong, Wenling, and Erjie all transitioned to full-time caregiving before their children started school. Peihong's situation illustrates the structural constraints of this employment arrangement. Her husband, a skilled technician at Foxconn, works under a "996" schedule and is frequently required to do overtime. While his salary can sustain the household, it relies heavily on these overtime hours. On rare occasions when he has an early shift (ending at 4 PM), he can pick up their child, but such opportunities are extremely infrequent. Due to tight work schedules, the family can typically only reunite on Sundays.

Tanli only returned to work after her child entered kindergarten, while Erjie waited until her child started junior high. These patterns exemplify how, in families where men hold stable yet inflexible jobs, women are expected to fill the care gap—often by reducing or withdrawing from paid employment (Dong, 2022).

Such long working hours also have an impact on working mothers in factories directly. Zhuo (30s, a mother of one), a former Foxconn worker, for instance, initially

brought her infant to the city, relying on her mother-in-law for childcare during the breastfeeding period. At that time, she was exempt from night shifts, had reduced overtime, and benefited from a one-hour daily breastfeeding break. However, due to her mother's discomfort with urban living and Zhuo's increasing work demands, the child was eventually sent back to their hometown for care.

Similarly, Yulan (50s, a mother of one) had no one to help with childcare in the city, and the demanding nature of factory work made it impossible for her to care for her child, so she had no choice but to leave the child in her hometown. Yulan has been working in this job for thirteen years, and although there have been many times when her child wished she could be at home, she still chose to continue working here. It ensures that she can contribute enough years to the social security system, allowing her to receive a pension after completing 15 years of contributions.

Yulan's experience highlights how the factory labour regime severely constrains her maternal choices. She carries a deep sense of self-blame for sacrificing the chance to be physically present in her child's life. This guilt intensified when her child chose not to pursue high school and failed to gain college admission—an outcome that left Yulan with profound regret. Yet the demands of the labour system and the rigid structure of the social security system compel her to remain in the factory. Fearful of losing a stable job and being unable to accumulate sufficient contributions for her pension, Yulan feels trapped. Her case illustrates a dynamic that runs through many of the factory-based cases: the labour regime and the social

security system operate in combination to constrain maternal choices, trapping women in arrangements they did not choose and producing guilt for outcomes that are structurally produced. Under the combined pressures of the factory regime and pension policies, many mothers like Yulan are forced to relinquish the opportunity to raise their children in person.

In cases where caregiving support was unavailable, migrant mothers often devised adaptive solutions to balance work and childrearing. Huaduo (30s, a mother of four) and Yingying, both factory workers, applied for reduced overtime to return home earlier—by 8:30 p.m. instead of the usual 10 p.m.—so they could attend to their children. Ying even took unpaid leave during the summer to care for her child, while Jieli transferred from the night-shift-heavy production line to an administrative role to better accommodate childcare. She said:

"When my child first came to Guangzhou, I was still working shifts in the workshop—rotating between day and night. It was exhausting. Sometimes I'd come back from the night shift and the kids were already off to school. My sleep suffered, my health suffered, and I barely had weekends to spend with them. I did that for years before finally switching roles. Now I get Sundays off, and I can take them out."

Even though some mothers worked long hours in a factory, the father's more flexible schedule compensated for the mother's intensive work demands. For

example, Fenjin worked as a security guard, and despite rotating shifts, his role remained eight hours long, making him one of the few fathers with substantial caregiving involvement.

The significance of these factory-based cases lies not in their confirmation of existing findings about women's withdrawal from employment—that pattern is well documented—but in their illustration of the specific mechanism through which labour regime rigidity interacts with the absence of public childcare to produce gendered outcomes. It is not that these women prefer caregiving to paid work, nor that their husbands are unwilling to participate. It is that the institutional arrangement leaves no alternative: someone must absorb the care deficit, and the combination of factory overtime demands and the absence of affordable childcare ensures that it is always the mother.

Platform-mediated gig work introduces a different but equally constraining set of dynamics. In my interviews, seven food-delivery couriers, two Didi ride-hailing drivers, and four domestic workers employed through app-based housekeeping firms reported relying on digital platforms for job allocation, payment, and performance monitoring. This platform-mediated work model contrasts sharply with traditional factory employment in its algorithmic scheduling, piece-rate pay, and volatile hours—features that reshape how families coordinate care and income. As Sun, Chen, and Rani (2023) show, gig work in China often becomes “sticky labour”: workers can’t leave because they depend on algorithmic platforms for income, while control

mechanisms and social norms deepen their dependence. Many migrant fathers in the gig economy (such as food delivery workers), report that they can only contribute financially but have no time to be present in their children's lives.

For instance, Peng explained, “Taking care of the family? We have no time for that. If I want to make more money, I work until midnight. I leave early in the morning and only come home for a quick meal before going out again.” Peng’s wife Xiaoqi described how her husband is completely consumed by the algorithmically governed platform economy. “He leaves after 10 a.m. and usually doesn’t return until midnight. He only rests one day a month. The 8,000 yuan he earns comes from doing over 12 hours work every single day.”

This extreme labour schedule, while appearing flexible in theory, is in fact tightly controlled by the digital infrastructures of platforms like Meituan (a delivery company). She complained that her relationship with her husband felt more like being dorm roommates. “He treats our home like a dormitory now,” she said “I keep telling him, ‘This isn’t a hotel.’ He just comes home to sleep and then leaves again. There’s no emotional connection anymore—we barely talk.”

This structure is codified through company’s system hierarchy: from crowdsourced (zhongbao), to scheduled freelance (Lepao), and finally to dedicated delivery (Zhuansong). Unlike crowdsourced riders who can log on and off freely,

Lepao riders must commit to specific shifts, typically covering peak hours. Missing shifts or underperforming leads to penalties and ranking drops. As Peng explained:

“We are Lepao. LePao gets slightly higher priority for order dispatch compared to the Zhongbao model. In our LePao system, we’re organized by team leaders who assign us fixed time slots. During those time slots, we have to go out and work—if we don’t, then we lose our eligibility for the next week. If we get even one bad review, we’ll be forced to switch to the crowdsourced system the following week. That means a loss of at least 1,000 yuan.”

Therefore, food delivery work is not only characterized by long and continuous working hours but also requires riders to provide consistently good service in order to avoid various penalties imposed by the platform’s algorithmic system. As Peng said:

“Honestly, you could say it’s a service job, we have some degree of autonomy. But the customer asks for something, we’re expected to do it. If we refuse, the customer might get upset and leave a bad review.”

As the group discussed, customers often ask riders to purchase additional items like cigarettes, water, or alcohol, even taking out their trash during deliveries. One participant Li (40s, a father of two) added: “And we’re already short on time.”

This dialogue reveals that platform-based emotional labour extends beyond mere politeness and affective performance, being deeply embedded within the

structures of algorithmic evaluation and customer surveillance. As Sun (2019) argues, emotional labour in the platform economy is “rationalized and standardized” through metrics such as star ratings and customer reviews. Riders are subject to algorithmic “disciplinary mechanisms,” where even minor refusals or perceived rudeness can lead to financial penalties.

In addition to undertaking sticky labour and emotional labour under algorithmic control, workers in the gig economy are classified as "independent contractors", meaning they lack labour protections such as paid leave, health insurance, or pension contributions. As Peng noted, “Meituan doesn’t provide retirement benefits or social security. If I stop working, I don’t earn money.” Since these jobs offer no long-term financial security, many men feel trapped in an endless cycle of work. The weight of family responsibilities and the uncertainty of wages prevent them from reducing their hours. This creates a vicious cycle: the harder they work to cover education expenses, the less they participate in their children's lives. As Peng’s wife Xiaoqi said:

"Sometimes I feel like he doesn’t even count as a good roommate. He just comes home, lies down to sleep, and then leaves. There's no communication the whole time. He just stays on his phone, watches anime, or listens to audiobooks. Our communication has gotten even less overtime. Sometimes we only talk when we argue—usually about things related to our child. So, I end up talking less and less with him—sometimes without saying a single word the whole day. And

communication between him and our child is also very limited. Ever since he started working as a food delivery rider, he's become like a completely different person—filled with negative energy and much more pessimistic. He drinks alone at home every night, and I'm really worried about his health."

Yet it is precisely within these institutional cracks that delivery riders express a deep, albeit silent, form of fatherly love through their actions. These fathers, while acting as the economic backbone of their families, are paradoxically excluded from their children's growth and life planning—ironically, in the name of “doing it for the child's sake.” They build their children's future by removing themselves from the present. These migrant fathers are caught in a paradox—they must keep moving to survive, but in doing so, they lose the ability to remain present in their own homes. This in turn exacerbates the gendered burdens borne by women, who must shoulder greater responsibility for the long-term stability of the family.

In summary, the labour patterns of both parents profoundly shape parenting practices. In households where fathers have demanding or inflexible work schedules, mothers typically shoulder the bulk of caregiving responsibilities. Only in rare exceptional cases do mothers work longer hours than fathers while fathers engage in less demanding occupations. When both parents face long working hours and lack extended family support, caring for children in urban settings becomes nearly impossible. In most cases, families prioritise the stability of the father's income while

expecting the mother to shoulder caregiving responsibilities—an arrangement shaped both by institutional labour structures and cultural norms.

6.1.2 A Vicious Cycle: Education Costs, Labour Exploitation, and Feminized Unpaid Work

The previous section's case study demonstrates how limited educational resources profoundly shaped the division of household labour between Xiaoqi and Peng: the family's financial strain trapped Peng in sticky platform work, depriving him of time and energy to share domestic responsibilities. This, in turn, bound Xiaoqi deeply within the confines of the household division of labour. This section uses the case of Yan and Sheng family to demonstrate how access to public educational resources and local Hukou not only increases the likelihood of family reunification but also alleviates household economic burdens, broadening parents' employment options but creating a more favorable environment for negotiating gender divisions of labour within the family.

Driven by a strong sense of family responsibility and a firm belief that families should remain united, Yan and Sheng have made extraordinary efforts over the past decade to preserve their family's integrity. They initially operated a private kindergarten in Beijing, but the facility was forced to close due to the city's population control policies. They understood that if they remained in Beijing, their children would be unable to enroll in public high schools. Seeking better educational opportunities, the entire family relocated to Shenzhen. To qualify their children for

admission to Shenzhen's private schools, they rented housing in accordance with the policies at the time. However, an unexpected policy change suddenly required one year of social insurance contributions—a requirement that exceeded their expectations and ultimately prevented their children from enrolling in Shenzhen schools.

They eventually settled in Nansha District, Guangzhou, where their eldest daughter was able to attend a private elementary school. Yet the high tuition fees for both children quickly became a heavy burden. To keep their family together, they began seeking ways to obtain local hukou. Yan explained how the hukou reform altered her family's prospects: she noted that without Guangzhou's hukou, the family could not afford the cost of educating both children in the city. Sending a single child to a private school would cost approximately 15,000 yuan annually. With two children, covering this cost would exceed her family's financial capacity. However, after obtaining Guangzhou hukou, they saved 30,000 yuan per year by accessing public school options. In addition, they applied for Guangzhou's housing subsidy, receiving a monthly allowance of 2,000 yuan. This subsidy eased financial pressures, enabling them to allocate more resources towards childcare and family support.

The decision to relocate and secure public school enrollment through household registration proved crucial for family reunification and employment. He described their situation as fortunate, noting that a gap in the enforcement of otherwise rigid rules had prevented family separation and eased financial pressures. After obtaining household registration, Sheng gained greater autonomy in

employment choices, balancing personal interests with childcare needs. He initially tried factory work but found frequent overtime and made fulfilling family responsibilities difficult. Ultimately, he opted for flexible employment such as platform driving and designated driving.

Many ride-hailing drivers, as Sheng observed, are “barely home all day rounds. When they do come home, it’s just to sleep. They work 12 to 14 hours a day, what could they possibly do at home? As a result, almost all the housework, everything at home, ends up being dumped on the wife.” However, Sheng has chosen a different path:

“I start driving at 7 a.m. and go until around 9:30 or 10 a.m., when there are no more orders. Then I rest, sleep, do some housework, and go back out around 4 p.m., driving until 11 or 12 at night. On average, I earn about 150 yuan a day. On weekends, I can drive a whole day and make around 300. My monthly net income is just over 3,000 yuan. This way, I can take care of the home a bit. It’s just a choice. You can also be like others, not care about anything at home. That’s also a choice.”

Sheng’s approach to fatherhood and family responsibility diverges significantly from dominant norms centered on economic provision. Unlike fathers in families burdened by private education costs and extreme financial pressures, Sheng was able to balance paid labour with caregiving responsibilities. This case also

illustrates that not all platform workers are equally embedded in the "sticky labour" dynamics of the gig economy. He positioned himself and his wife Yan as intentionally not joining the "double hustle" lifestyle:

"We're not the kind of people who just fight to make more money. We prefer having some comfort at home, being able to take care of the kids. For us, some things in family life are just slightly more important than money. Not like those couples who both go all out, both working themselves to the bone."

The experience of this former Didi driver reflects the relative autonomy he gained by obtaining local hukou status. Unlike many food delivery riders, Sheng was not constrained by algorithmic control. His hukou status enabled his children to attend local public schools, easing the family's financial burden while allowing him greater flexibility to balance work with family responsibilities. He shared that although he uses platforms apps, he maintains control over when and how long he works. Sheng shoulders a significant share of caregiving tasks, including cooking, cleaning, as well as tutoring children's homework. On each occasion that I visited for interview purposes, he was engaged in household tasks and child-rearing activities. This gendered but negotiated household division grants Sheng a different relationship to platform labour—one in which mobility is selectively activated rather than coercively imposed.

The experience of Sheng and Yan's family in Guangzhou exemplifies how structural interventions in education policy can lead to more equitable gender dynamics. Having secured residency status, Yan's children were able to attend public school, thereby reducing financial pressures and enabling greater flexibility in employment arrangements. This allowed her husband, Sheng, to pursue fewer rigid forms of work that permitted greater participation in caregiving. This case demonstrates that public education access can mitigate gendered disparities in caregiving by alleviating financial strain and allowing fathers to engage more actively in household responsibilities. By reducing education costs, families gain more flexible labour allocation options, enabling both parents to participate in paid work and childcare.

In contrast to the more "work-flexible" household of Yan and Sheng, Xiaoqi and Peng were far less fortunate. As noted in Chapter 4, Xiaoqi began preparing for a Shenzhen hukou two years earlier by enrolling in a self-study (zikao) associate degree and studying for an intermediate professional title. However, when we met for the second time, she told me her entire family was preparing to leave Shenzhen: during the critical window when her son was taking the high school entrance exam and her daughter was entering middle school, she had failed to complete any of her professional certifications. Though reluctant to leave her job, she had no choice but to resign and relocate, all for the sake of her children's academic futures. It is evidence that hukou status—by removing the educational cost pressure that traps families like

Peng's in maximum-hour extraction—creates the conditions under which a different relationship to platform labour becomes possible. The contrast between the two families functions as a natural experiment: holding platform work constant, it is institutional access that determines whether the cycle can be broken.

Moreover, the contrast turns on time, visibility, and the division of labour.

Xiaoqi shouldered all three shifts at once—childcare, paid work, and Hukou-linked Motherhood under acute time poverty and mounting anxiety about her son's high-school access. Meanwhile Peng worked twelve-hour days as a Lepao delivery rider to cover their son's boarding-school fees and other household expenditure, locked into platform “sticky labour” that is algorithmically scheduled, ratings-dependent, and formally outside standard labour protections. This institutional arrangement prevents him from participating in daily caregiving and leaves him unable to share the burden of child-rearing responsibilities. In short, while Sheng's partial flexible work arrangement redistributes some practical tasks, Peng's algorithmic overtime work erases his presence within the family. Consequently, the intertwining of educational costs, caregiving burdens, and exploitative labour conditions forms an inescapable self-perpetuating cycle, trapping working-class families within its grip. This cycle operates as follows:

The cycle is self-reinforcing and hukou-driven. Exclusion from public education forces families to pay private school fees; covering those fees requires parents—particularly fathers—to maximize working hours; fathers' absence transfers

full caregiving responsibility onto mothers; mothers' withdrawal from or restriction within the labour market reduces household income; and reduced income intensifies financial pressure, requiring fathers to work even longer.

The contrast between Yan and Sheng's family and Xiaoqi and Peng's family is not simply an illustration of different outcomes; it is a natural experiment in which institutional access—specifically, access to public education through local hukou—is the variable that determines whether the cycle can be broken. In low-income migrant households, constrained access to public educational resources, inadequate care support, and economic pressures collectively lead to severe imbalances in the distribution of domestic responsibilities. These institutional constraints often result in women shouldering the bulk of unpaid care labour. Breaking this cycle requires not only transforming societal cultural expectations around gender but also implementing structural policy interventions to alleviate economic hardship, expand public education coverage, and create more inclusive labour market opportunities for both men and women.

The significance of this cycle is analytical as well as descriptive. Existing research has documented each of its components separately: the educational cost burden, the feminization of caregiving, the wage gap between male and female migrants. What this section contributed is a demonstration of how these components interlock—how each feed the next in a self-reinforcing loop whose pivot is hukou status. This finding has direct implications for policy: it suggests that expanding

public educational access for migrant children would not only reduce direct costs but would restructure the entire household labour arrangement, potentially redistributing caregiving more equitably between parents.

6.2 Mothering Under Constraint: Three Forms of Care in Structural Context

If the rise of "divided motherhood" (Liu & Erwin, 2015) in recent decades has provided women with economic independence, enabling them to break away from domestic roles and challenge gendered parenting, then bringing their children into the city signifies a re-emergence of these domestic duties and gendered parenting responsibilities. Among the 85 interviewees who have had their children living with them, most report that mothers lead in child-rearing. This includes 18 full-time mothers and one single mother. In dual-income households, mothers predominantly take on caregiving responsibilities more than fathers, though some families adopt co-parenting or father-led models when fathers have flexible work schedules.

The previous section established why migrant mothers bear a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibility: the intersection of labour regime rigidity, platform algorithmic control, and hukou-based exclusion produces gendered outcomes that cultural norms alone cannot explain. This section moves inside the household to ask a different but related question: given these structural conditions, what does mothering actually look like in practice? How do different domestic arrangements shape the content, intensity, and emotional texture of migrant mothering? The contribution here is not a typology for its own sake but a fine-grained account of three recurring forms

of mothering under constraint—each representing a different way in which the same structural pressures are lived and absorbed. Across all three forms, one pattern holds constant: regardless of how domestic tasks are distributed, mothers remain the ultimate responsible party for caregiving and the primary bearers of its cognitive and emotional labour.

6.2.1 The Overwhelmed Mothering: Mother-led Caregiving

The most common form of mothering in this study is one in which a mother's time, emotional resources, and cognitive attention are comprehensively absorbed by caregiving responsibilities. This is not simply a matter of doing more tasks than one's partner. The cases in this section each illuminate a different pathway into this condition: structural imposition through labour regime rigidity, spousal non-adaptation, and the acute vulnerability of the postpartum period.

The most structurally determined pathway into overwhelmed mothering is through labour regime rigidity combined with the sudden arrival of children in the city. Xiaoqi's case illustrates this dynamic: when her husband brought their child to Shenzhen without adequate preparation, she found herself assuming full-time caregiving responsibilities for which no prior arrangement had been made. She eventually left her factory job to care for their child until third grade. Even after resuming her career, her role as primary caregiver persisted, especially after her husband switched jobs to become a food delivery rider.

"The responsibility for my child's care and academic progress has always fallen on me. My husband now works twelve-hour days as a delivery driver and hardly interacts with our children. However, when my children's grades drop, he blames me for not supporting them enough."

What Xiaoqi's account makes visible is not only the unequal distribution of tasks but the asymmetry of accountability: she is responsible for outcomes she cannot fully control, held to standards her husband is exempted from by the same institutional conditions that prevent his participation. Her husband Peng concurred, attributing his limited involvement in childcare to financial pressures and demanding work hours:

"To earn enough, I work late into the night. I simply don't have time to help with homework. My primary role is providing financial support. Most of my monthly income goes toward living expenses, leaving little room for savings. Life in Shenzhen is extremely costly—if you break down daily expenditures, it amounts to spending."

A second pathway into mother-led caregiving operates through the absence of spousal adaptation to the demands of parenthood. Hochschild's (1989) concept of the "stalled revolution"—in which women's entry into paid labour has not been matched by a corresponding shift in men's domestic contribution—resonates strongly in the

migrant families documented here, where gender attitudes among many male partners lagged behind those of their wives.

For example, Shali (33, a mother of two), a former auto parts worker, prepared for motherhood by learning to bake as a means of supplementing her income. However, her husband's lack of contribution to housework and childcare, along with his frequent outings with friends, has exacerbated the tension between them.

"When I was pregnant with my first child, my husband loved going out to play games and eat late-night snacks. He often left me alone at home in the evenings, going out four or five times a week. I was so overwhelmed and frustrated, and we often argued, but he wouldn't change. The worst part was in the last month of my pregnancy—he still went out to play. Thankfully, after the baby was born, he started to improve. However, when I was pregnant with our second child, the pressure got on him, and while he went out less, our conflicts actually increased. He was frustrated because he couldn't go out, and after the second child was born, his temper changed. Before, he had never lost his temper with our child, but after the second baby, he started getting angry with the kids, especially our eldest daughter, who often got scolded by him. I'm always exhausted, doing everything from baking to childcare, while he scrolls on his phone or meets friends. He thinks my work at home is easy."

Now a mother of two young children, Shali finds herself juggling baking, household chores, and her husband's constant belittling and criticism of her income. With no support, she has even contemplated divorce. Shali's case illustrates how mother-led caregiving is compounded when a partner not only fails to adapt to the demands of parenthood but actively undermines the value of the mother's domestic labour. The disparity in adjustment to parenthood frequently generates sustained marital tension.

Similar patterns exist in other households—the inequality in parental role adaptation intensifies the emotional strain on mothers. After undergoing a cesarean section, Yuanjuan (20s, a mother of two) suffered from severe postpartum depression. Her husband's refusal to share nighttime childcare duties compounded her distress, leaving her isolated and helpless in her role as a mother:

“During the confinement period, when my daughter cried, I was very irritable, I felt very wronged sometimes. After I was discharged from the hospital, I might have some postpartum depression. Sometimes my daughter might have bloated at night, and her belly was bloated, and she was very fussy. I was still holding and comforting her, my waist hurt when I sat there. But my husband lay there, anyway, he didn't care about anything. I felt very wronged, and I felt I was alone in the confinement period. Also, when we'd go out as a family, he wouldn't hold the baby, saying what it was like to hold a baby outside as a man. He was a bit chauvinistic.”

Yuanjuan's experience reveals that for some men, the preservation of traditional masculinity takes precedence over equitable parental responsibility even at the moment when the need for support is greatest. The postpartum period functions here as an acute test of domestic arrangements, revealing not the willingness of individual partners but the depth to which gendered expectations are institutionally and culturally embedded. The failure of that test leaves traces that shape the distribution of caregiving long afterward.

Mother-led caregiving extends well beyond early childhood and persists even when mothers return to paid employment. Even when children reach school age, many mothers continue to carry a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities—despite working the same long hours as their partners. For instance, Ying (40s, a mother of one), a factory worker in Shenzhen, described how she had been the primary caregiver since her child moved to the city in first grade. During her 45-minute lunch break, she would rush home to cook for her child:

“My husband didn’t like cooking. And my child was very attached to me, so I was the one who always made meals. At that time, we worked overtime every day—until 10 p.m. He would do his homework and wait for me to come home and help him if he had questions. Eventually, from second grade, he learned how to use the gas stove to cook for himself. Sometimes my husband and I had different shifts—he worked nights while I worked days—but if we both had the

night shift, it just wouldn't work. In those cases, I had to talk to the factory and ask for adjustments.

She added that her husband, in his younger years, often spent his wages on gambling and card games, which left the family with limited income. "To support the household, I had to take on extra informal work during factory holidays. I've always felt exhausted."

In my fieldwork, mother-dominated caregiving emerged as a pervasive pattern. This dynamic stemmed not only from differing work schedules but was deeply rooted in entrenched gender norms and men's absence from family responsibilities. While economic constraints and demanding labour regimes—such as long factory shifts or delivery work—shape the division of labour, they intersect with traditional gender norms that naturalize women's responsibility for childcare and domestic work. Even when mothers re-enter the workforce or engage in income-generating activities, their role as primary caregivers persists, often leading to amplified physical and mental strain.

Xiaoqi quit her factory job to care for her child full-time; Shali struggles to balance home-based work and household chores without a supportive partner; Yuan's postpartum depression worsened due to her husband's neglect; and Ying rushes home daily from the factory to cook for her child yet still faces overtime work—these cases reveal how unequal patterns are perpetuated. Male partners often shirk caregiving

responsibilities by citing financial pressures, while simultaneously resisting participation due to cultural expectations of masculinity. This further exacerbates the inequality in the division of labour.

These dynamics reflect what Hochschild (1989) describes as the “stalled revolution,” where women’s participation in paid labour has expanded without a parallel shift in men’s contribution to domestic responsibilities. For migrant mothers in China’s urban peripheries, this means carrying the “second shift” under precarious working conditions, managing the dual burden of earning an income and sustaining the daily reproduction of family life, often with little institutional or spousal support.

6.2.2 Negotiated Mothering: Conditional Paternal Involvement and Cognitive Labour

Where the overwhelmed mother represents the most common and most constrained form of migrant mothering, a second form emerges in households where fathers' employment permits greater temporal availability. In such households, caregiving arrangements emerge from ongoing negotiation between partners, shaped by each individual's availability and the demands of urban employment. This negotiated mothering is a genuine departure from the mother-led pattern: fathers participate in pick-ups, cooking, and homework; mothers retain paid employment; the household functions through coordination rather than sole maternal absorption. But negotiated mothering has limits that are determined not by the willingness of individuals but by the structural conditions that make negotiation possible in the first

place—and those conditions are, above all, a function of employment flexibility, which is itself a function of hukou status and labour market position.

The first dimension of negotiated mothering is the redistribution of physical caregiving tasks, made possible by fathers' temporal availability. For example, Mei (38, a mother of two) notes that her husband, a factory manager, returns home by 5 p.m. to cook and help their children with homework. Jieli (30s, a mother of two) and her husband split tasks according to availability: she works in a factory; he runs a small shop. Yan's husband, Sheng (37, a father of two) transitioned from factory work to a more flexible Didi (the largest ride-hailing platform in China) driving job, allowing him to take on domestic duties when his shifts permitted.

When both spouses are employed in factories, migrant couples often adopt a range of strategies to coordinate caregiving responsibilities. Jing (40s, a mother of one) and her husband decided to bring their child to Guangzhou when her son was in second grade, after her father-in-law suffered a stroke and her mother-in-law could no longer manage caregiving duties. She recalled:

“That was probably the most difficult period. We both had to work 12-hour shifts and couldn't cook lunch for him. So, we enrolled him in a private school that provided lunch and had a school bus. My husband and I took opposite shifts—he worked the day shift, and I worked nights. Whoever was on the night shift would get up around 5 p.m. to cook dinner. That's how we managed.”

This arrangement continued until the child entered middle school, at which point her husband transferred to a factory with more flexible working hours. Since then, he has taken on greater responsibility for childcare and their child's education. Jing added, "At our old factory, we were busy all year long. We never had weekends off, and the wages were low—you only earned a little extra through overtime."

The second dimension—and the form of negotiated mothering closest to genuine redistribution—emerges when fathers not only have flexible schedules but also develop active investment in their children's education and development. For instance, Fenjin (36, a father of two), working shorter hours as a factory security guard, not only handles school drop-offs and pick-ups and meal preparation, but also assumes primary responsibility for his children's educational lives:

"My wife works in a printing factory, from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., and recently she's been working until 10:30 p.m. She doesn't want to do overtime, but the factory enforces it. I have more flexible time, so I spend more time taking care of the child. In the mornings, it's my wife who takes our child to school. For pickup, I usually handle it. The teacher often contacts me—I'm the one who deals with the school. My wife doesn't get involved at all. She's too busy at work, and because she's on the assembly line, she doesn't really have time to check messages. My wife doesn't really engage in education. I'm the one more concerned about the kids' learning. I buy extracurricular books and toys. "

What distinguishes Fenjin from the fathers in the overwhelmed mother cases is not only his temporal availability but his orientation toward fatherhood: he does not position himself as a secondary support to his wife's caregiving but as an active co-parent with his own domain of responsibility. When I first met him for the interview, he happened to be on the morning shift: he picked up his preschool-age daughter, stopped to buy groceries, and, once home, immediately started cooking for both children.

Similarly, Qing (30s, father of one) works afternoons/evenings at an NGO and brings his daughter along, while his wife's 8 a.m.–8 p.m. auto-parts job leaves little flexibility. On workdays, he often brings her along with him to the NGO office or community activities, effectively integrating caregiving into his daily routine. Like Fenjin, Qing's involvement is not merely reactive—he has structured his working life around his caregiving role, rather than fitting caregiving around work.

The third dimension of negotiated mothering concerns what negotiation does not reach: the cognitive and emotional labour of caregiving management. Even where task sharing looks balanced, the cognitive and emotional load often remains mother-led. For example, while the division of labour between Yan and Sheng appears relatively balanced on the surface—“If he can't make it, I'll cover for him. If I don't have time, he'll step in. We coordinate with each other”—a closer look reveals that caregiving responsibilities remain largely mother-led. As Yan reflected:

“He chooses jobs based on what he enjoys, while my work has always revolved around the needs of the child. He does take into account whether a job is flexible enough for him to help with the household and the child. But I would still say that I’m the one mainly in charge—it’s not so much that he shares the burden. After dinner, he goes out to drive for Didi. I stay home and help our two children with their homework. When he comes back, he needs to sleep, since he usually works night shifts. He sleeps until 3 or 4 p.m., then gets up, makes dinner, and heads back out. Cooking is something I assign him to do. If it’s raining or cold and I don’t feel like picking up the kids, I’ll tell mothers like the child’s ‘agent’—we manage the whole household and the child’s schedule. The small details of the kids’ daily lives are mostly handled by me. He’s happy to follow along with what I arrange. If I ask him to do something, he’ll do it. If I don’t ask, he won’t. Honestly, I think it must be so nice to be a man. You only need to focus on one thing—your job.”

Yan's account is precise about the asymmetry: her husband executes tasks that are assigned to him; he does not independently identify, anticipate, or plan for the family's needs. As Daminger (2019) notes, cognitive labour—the mental effort required to organize, anticipate, and oversee household tasks and family members' well-being—often exhibits gendered disparities. Despite sharing some household duties with her husband, Yan still bears the overwhelming majority of this cognitive burden. She coordinates her children's schedules, assigns household tasks, and plans

activities. This often-overlooked work of anticipating and overseeing constitutes the core of caregiving, firmly anchored within the mother's domain—even when fathers participate physically or temporally in caregiving responsibilities. This finding extends Daminger's framework into the context of Chinese migrant families, demonstrating that the mental load of caregiving is not a feature of middle-class Western households alone but a structural characteristic of gendered caregiving across very different institutional contexts.

In summary, the negotiated mothering in migrant families reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the time demands of urban labour markets rather than a fundamental shift in gender norms. While work flexibility (often linked to the father's occupation) can redistribute certain physical caregiving tasks, mothers typically remain the primary coordinators of family life, bearing the cognitive and emotional burden of household management. The cases of Fenjin and Qing demonstrate that when fathers' work schedules permit, they may assume substantial caregiving responsibilities, particularly when mothers' factory jobs lack time flexibility. However, such arrangements remain constrained by structural factors such as job type, working hours, and access to educational resources tied to household registration status. The mother remains, in Yan's precise formulation, the child's "agent"—the one who manages the whole family, even when she does not do everything herself. Negotiated mothering is therefore not a solution to the gendered structure of caregiving but a partial, conditional, and cognitively incomplete departure from it.

6.2.3 Extended Mothering: Kinship, Community, and Informal Care

A third form of migrant mothering emerges when neither the mother-led pattern nor spousal negotiation is sufficient to cover the household's care needs—when the combination of long working hours, young children's intensive care demands, and the absence of public provision creates a gap that one or two adults cannot fill alone. In these circumstances, mothers actively extend their caregiving networks outward: drawing in grandparents, neighbors, teachers, and informal paid carers to assemble a patchwork of provision. Extended mothering is creative and resourceful, but it is also precarious, emotionally demanding, and always mother-led. It is the mother who identifies the gap, recruits the resources, coordinates the arrangements, and holds the network together. The extension is hers—and so is the labour of maintaining it.

Crucially, the care network that extended mothering constructs is not static: it expands and contracts in response to grandparents' health, children's developmental stages, and the shifting demands of urban employment—and at each point of contraction, it is the mother who absorbs the shortfall. The structural implications of these arrangements—as survival strategies produced by neoliberal governance rather than expressions of agency—are analysed in Section 5.3.2. What this section adds is an account of what extended mothering looks like from the inside.

The most common form of extension is the incorporation of grandparents into the urban household, itself a generational shift that reflects changing expectations of

family life. Increasingly, a growing share of younger migrants prefers to raise their children in the city rather than leaving them behind as left-behind children. At least ten first-generation migrant women interviewed indicated that they were involved in caring for their grandchildren, demonstrating that migrant grandparents serve as vital resources for expanding family caregiving capacity. Yan described her decision with characteristic firmness:

"During my postpartum confinement, my mother-in-law brought it up several times, saying 'When both of you go back to work, just leave the child at home.' That's how the older generation thinks—they assume the child should be left in the countryside. But I just felt very firm about it. I thought, there's no way I'm leaving my child behind to become a left-behind child. I said to her, 'We couldn't bear to be apart from our first child. Of course, we want to keep the baby with us.' Eventually, my mother-in-law stopped bringing it up—she realized she would have to come with us to the city."

Yan's account reveals that the incorporation of grandparents into the urban household is itself a maternal achievement: it requires overriding the older generation's assumptions, negotiating the terms of co-residence, and managing the ongoing tensions that result. For instance, Liu Mei (50s, mother of two), who came to the city in 2003, now divides her time between working in a cafeteria and caring for her granddaughter. Similarly, Yuanjuan's mother-in-law left factory work when she became pregnant and began combining part-time handicraft work with daily

childcare. The family shares a small two-bedroom in an urban village—a spatial arrangement that facilitates constant help but also reflects the economic constraints common to migrant families:

“The smaller room has a bunk bed. Grandpa sleeps on the top bunk, and Grandma used to sleep on the bottom bunk with my son. My mother-in-law is 52 years old now. She stopped working a few years ago when I became pregnant and started taking care of the children while doing some small handicrafts at home. My father-in-law still works.”

Although Yuanjuan receives substantial support from her in-laws, she still experiences frustration and emotional strain due to her husband’s lack of involvement in childcare, especially after the birth of their daughter. She recalled moments of postnatal distress:

“When my husband comes home from work, he basically doesn’t do anything. Only when I’m completely exhausted from holding the baby will he take her for a few minutes—and then he quickly hands her back. If she cries while he’s holding her, he doesn’t even try to soothe her. He just sits there and lets her cry. I can’t stand it, so I end up taking her back and comforting her. I don’t have a choice. If my husband doesn’t hold the baby, then Grandma or Grandpa will. Especially when I am not around, the husband is totally spoiled by his parents.”

As Peng (2018) emphasizes, grandparents typically shoulder the bulk of caregiving and domestic labour, enabling both parents to work. However, they may also reinforce patriarchal norms by exempting fathers from household responsibilities and challenging mothers' authority (Peng, 2018). The care network that extended mothering constructs is therefore not simply a resource—it is also a site of negotiation, tension, and competing authority, and it is the mother who must navigate all of it. This dynamic varies with intimacy: Yuanjuan described a largely smooth collaboration with only occasional manageable disagreements, while Yan revealed persistent tensions rooted in generational hierarchies and personality clashes:

“My mother-in-law likes to interfere—she’s very enthusiastic, very direct, and quick with her words. I’m more reserved and not good at expressing myself. Most of the time I just keep quiet, but when I can’t hold it in anymore, we end up arguing. I think she still sees me as a child—whenever I do something wrong, or not quite right, she’ll speak up. But I really don’t like being constantly criticized. Over the years, I’ve tried to avoid living with her. I think that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law shouldn’t live together.”

While some mothers-in-law serve as supportive co-caregivers, others exert moral or behavioral authority that reinforces generational hierarchies and can strain domestic cooperation. Research on mother–grandmother relationships, particularly during early motherhood, has emphasized that while such support is often crucial, it can also provoke conflict as new mothers strive to assert their parenting authority

(Dow, 2016). What this reveals is that extended mothering carries an emotional cost that is rarely counted: the labour of managing intergenerational relationships, absorbing criticism, and maintaining cooperation with people whose authority over one's household one did not choose. This emotional labour is, like cognitive labour, invisible in surface accounts of task distribution—but it is real, it is gendered, and it falls on mothers.

Grandparental support is also temporally bounded: it tends to be most intensive during the preschool years and withdraws as children enter primary school—but this withdrawal does not coincide with a reduction in caregiving demands. Both Yan and Fenjin exemplify this pattern. Fenjin's mother lived in Guangzhou for three years to help; she returned home once his daughter turned three and could start kindergarten. Yan's mother-in-law lived with the family in the city while the child was in preschool but moved back to their hometown once the child entered primary school. Extended mothering must therefore continuously rebuild its care arrangements as their components shift—and each rebuilding requires the same investment of coordination, negotiation, and emotional labour as the original construction.

The network is further destabilized when grandparents' health deteriorates without warning. When grandparents fall ill, the care arrangements that depend on them collapse abruptly, leaving the mother to absorb the shortfall with no institutional alternative. Yingying, Meijie and Jing had to relocate their children to the city due to

the illness of their elderly parents, who could no longer provide childcare. These cases illustrate how extended mothering is structurally precarious: its networks depend on the health and availability of elderly kin who are themselves ageing, and whose withdrawal from caregiving cannot be anticipated or planned for.

Beyond grandparents, extended mothering reaches outward into lateral networks of peers, neighbors, and community members. Guan arranged for her sister to live with her and help care for the children, enabling shared coverage across factory shifts. Fenjin and Yan, who live next door to each other, routinely look after one another's children: on the day of our interview, Fenjin had to accompany his wife to the hospital, so they left their daughter in Yan's care. These lateral arrangements are less emotionally fraught than intergenerational ones—they are built on reciprocity rather than hierarchy—but they are equally fragile, dependent on the continued availability and goodwill of people whose own lives are subject to the same pressures.

In some cases, mothers transform the absence of care provision into an entrepreneurial response that serves both their own needs and those of others facing similar circumstances. Jiaxin, facing the absence of affordable after-school care, opened a small care center near a local school—providing a service that addressed her own predicament while generating income and serving other families in similar situations. During summer vacation, she also offered full-day care services. Jiaxin's case might be read as an expression of maternal creativity and community resilience.

More precisely, however, it is evidence of the extent to which families are compelled to construct their own welfare infrastructure in the absence of public provision.

Before eventually sending her children back to the countryside, Yingying spent a period in Guangzhou single-handedly raising her twin daughters. In order to balance caregiving and full-time factory work, she developed multiple strategies of “extended mothering” (Christopher, 2012)—adaptations within her financial limits that enabled her to fulfill both reproductive and productive responsibilities.

“At that time, I usually finished work around 8:20 p.m. My daughters got out of school at 6 p.m., so I asked their teacher to take care of them after school. She would take them to her home, where they had dinner together. It costs 30-yuan in total for two and a half hours. I did the math—it was actually more cost-effective than picking them up myself. The kindergarten teacher was happy to help; she had a daughter of her own at home, so it was convenient for her. On weekends, it was 50 yuan per child. If I had to work on Saturday or Sunday, I’d leave them with her. I had no choice. I couldn’t leave work early, and we had mandatory overtime. Others worked until 10:20 p.m., and I was already lucky to finish at 8:20. So when I found this teacher who could help, it felt like I had been saved.”

Yingying’s use of “saved” is telling: extended mothering at its limit is not constructing a solution but performing triage—the rapid assembly of whatever is available to prevent an immediate collapse of care. None of the families in this study

hired formal domestic workers or professional childcare providers. All turned instead to part-time, informal arrangements—teachers, neighbors, acquaintances—whose services were flexible and financially manageable but also fragile, dependent on personal relationships, and irreplaceable if they broke down.

The informality of these arrangements is not incidental: it is the direct consequence of the lack of public childcare and the unaffordability of formal private care. Extended mothering is, in this sense, the privatization of care at the individual level—each mother constructing her own micro-welfare system from the materials available to her, in the absence of institutional alternative. As Fraser (2016) observes, the social bonds of kinship and neighborhood that are mobilized in these situations are not independent of the systems that produce scarcity—they are responses to those systems, stretched thin by the same forces that have contracted public care.

This section traced three forms of migrant mothering under structural constraint. The overwhelmed mother—the most common and most constrained form—is defined not by the quantity of tasks she performs but by the absence of any structural exit: no institutional alternative, no reliable spousal substitute, and no moment at which responsibility can be set down. The negotiating mother represents a partial departure from this condition, made possible by paternal involvement, but limited by the structural fragility of that involvement and the persistence of cognitive labour asymmetry: even in the most balanced households, mothers remain the architects of family life. The extended mothering represents the creative but

precarious construction of informal care networks in the absence of public provision — a form of individual privatisation in which each mother assembles her own micro-welfare system from whatever is available.

These three forms—the overwhelmed mother, the negotiating mother, and the extended mothering—are not fixed types. The same family may move between them as circumstances change. Care arrangements are most intensive and most dependent on grandparents’ support during the preschool years; they are most disrupted at the primary-to-middle-school transition, when hukou-based educational exclusion forces families to choose between keeping children in the city at high cost, sending them back to the hometown, or relocating entirely.

What drives these transitions between forms is not the preferences or values of individual families, but the structural forces documented in Section 6.1: hukou status, labour regime rigidity, and the absence of public childcare. The care arrangements documented in this section are, in this sense, less a reflection of how families choose to organize themselves and more a register of what the institutional environment permits and forecloses.

One feature is constant across all three forms: regardless of arrangement, mothers remain the ultimate responsible party for caregiving. In the overwhelmed mother pattern, this responsibility is total and undiluted. In the negotiating mother pattern, it is partially distributed at the task level but retained at the cognitive level. In

the networked mother pattern, it is spread across a network that the mother herself has built and must continuously maintain. The content of mothering changes; its ownership does not.

The fluidity of care arrangements—and the role of educational transitions and hukou-based exclusion in driving it—has been documented in detail in the Section 5.3.1. What can be added here is that this fluidity is experienced by mothers not as flexibility but as instability: each disruption requires a new round of network construction, emotional labour, and cognitive reorganisation, with no institutional support and no guarantee that the new arrangement will hold. It is this cumulative experience of assembling, maintaining, and repeatedly rebuilding care under constraint that sets the stage for the cumulative motherhood penalty documented in Section 6.3.

6.3 The Cumulative Motherhood penalty: From Domestic Arrangements to Lifelong Costs

The three forms of mothering documented in Section 6.2—the overwhelmed mother, the negotiating mother, and extended mothering—share a common structural feature: in each, the mother remains the ultimate responsible party for caregiving, regardless of how tasks are distributed. This section traces the consequences of that responsibility for women's labour market participation, economic independence, and long-term welfare. The question it asks is not simply whether mothering produces a penalty—existing quantitative research has established that it does—but how that

penalty operates, through what mechanisms it is produced and sustained, and why it compounds across the life course in ways that leave migrant mothers economically vulnerable in later life.

Recent research has documented that family migration is associated with a Motherhood penalty among migrant mothers (Jiang & Tan, 2021; Kong & Dong, 2024; Qin et al., 2016; Xie & Cen, 2019), including decline in the labour supply, employment quality, and the disadvantages in hourly earnings. Using data from the 2010 National Migrant Dynamics Monitoring Survey conducted in 106 cities representing all 31 provinces and geographic regions, Qin and her colleagues found that female migrants have much lower job-participation and wage-earning potential than male migrants. Male migrants earn 26% higher hourly wages than their female counterparts (Qin et al., 2016). The number of children accompanying is a key factor affecting women's employment. Jiang and Tan's study showed that 29.3% of the negative impact of family-based migration on the employment quality of migrant women is attributable to their caregiving responsibilities for accompanying children (Jiang & Tan, 2021). In addition to employment rates, Kong and Dong analysed a sample of 41,996 internal married migrant women and revealed that internal migrant mothers face significant disadvantages in hourly earnings, especially those living with their children.

This section does not replicate these quantitative findings but examines the mechanisms through which the penalty operates and, more importantly, traces its

cumulative trajectory over time. The key analytical move is from cross-sectional to longitudinal: rather than documenting the penalty at a given moment, this section traces how it compounds across the life course. Section one reveals the mechanisms through which the penalty operates—employer discrimination, spousal gatekeeping, and the interaction between institutional conditions and intimate dynamics, all of which flow directly from the care arrangements documented in Section 6.2. Section two then presents what this thesis identifies as its original empirical contribution: evidence that the Motherhood penalty is not a temporary, recoverable disruption but a cumulative process whose costs compound across decades, ultimately producing economic vulnerability and pension insecurity in later life.

6.3.1 Mechanisms: Discrimination, Gatekeeping, and Re-entry Barriers

The transition from rural livelihoods to urban labour regimes has required migrant mothers to navigate dual roles as caregivers and workers while contending with persistent gender inequalities and institutional constraints (Li, 2024; Liu & Xu, 2024). In my interviews, 18 mothers were stay-at-home caregivers, with at least four fathers reporting that their wives performed this role, whereas none of the fathers were full-time caregivers. Employed mothers including Xiaoqi, Yulan, Tanli, Jiaxin, Jing, and Xiaoxi each transitioned to full-time caregiving when their children were young. This pattern aligns with existing research indicating that migrant mothers are typically the group that leaves full-time employment to care for children (Choi, 2019; Choi & Peng, 2016; Peng, 2018).

The birth of a child—or the sudden arrival of children in the city—functions as the critical juncture at which the care arrangements documented in Section 6.2 crystallize into labour market outcomes: the overwhelmed mother exits paid employment entirely; the negotiating mother reduces her hours or shifts to more flexible work; and the extended mother attempts to maintain employment while continuously managing the care network she has assembled. In each case, the labour market consequences flow directly from the domestic arrangements that preceded them. For instance, Jing, who previously worked in a factory, resigned during her pregnancy due to severe morning sickness that made continuing work impossible. Tanli, formerly a kindergarten teacher, left her job after giving birth to her second child. She took several years of unpaid leave to care for her children at home, only returning to the workforce when her youngest entered kindergarten.

Despite living in the same city as her in-laws, Shali recalls her husband hinting during her pregnancy that they couldn't assist with childcare. She prepared to resign, planning to sustain her livelihood by learning to bake and working part-time from home. She recalled:

“After getting married, I stopped working in the factory and started baking at home. It was like a job—I was running a home-based business and taking orders. But when I got pregnant, I stopped because of the oven’s radiation. The weather also started getting hotter, and around four months into my pregnancy, I decided to stop and focus on prenatal care.”

After her eldest daughter started kindergarten, Shali began baking at home while caring for her younger daughter. Yet reality proved far less smooth than she had anticipated. The weight of family responsibilities grew heavier, while baking income remained meager. After seven years of full-time childcare, Shali decided to return to the workforce. Yet her job search proved fraught with obstacles:

“No one wants to hire me. Sales positions don’t want me; e-commerce jobs don’t want me. They say, ‘What happens when you need time off?’ ‘Who’s going to cover it for you?’ Plus, kids get sick all the time. Even McDonald’s said I was too old; they want younger workers. So, the only options left are restaurant jobs, as a waitress or cleaner, but those require long hours—10-hour shifts. There’s no shortage of young people looking for jobs here, and most positions want candidates under 35. I’m already 36—or, well, almost. I’d like to work in a childcare center, but the pay is very low here. Plus, the ones that are hiring are far from where I live. I’ve thought about working in a factory, but the industry isn’t doing well now. Factories are rarely hired; most of them are downsizing. My kid’s father was almost laid off.”

Full-time mothers face significant social discrimination when returning to the workforce. This discrimination often manifests as employers questioning their career gaps, doubting their ability to balance work and family, and harboring concerns about their future childbearing plans. Shali reflected:

“They all think age is a big issue, especially for women. They assume mother comes with all sorts of problems, because taking care of the kids almost always falls on the mother. For people like us with low education levels, it’s just so hard.”

Shali's trajectory illustrates a direct link between Section 6.2's analysis and the Motherhood penalty: it was the overwhelmed mother arrangement—sole caregiving responsibility, no spousal support, no institutional alternative—that produced the seven-year career gap that now forecloses her re-entry options. The penalty is not a separate phenomenon; it is the labour market expression of the domestic arrangement.

After one year at the company, Fang was laid off due to multiple factors—including summer childcare gaps and corporate restructuring. Though confident in her new role, she felt unusually insecure during the job search. She said:

“When you look at the job requirements, you realize that no matter what, you don’t meet the criteria. The company only hires recent graduates, and there’s an age cap of 30. I really feel that my age is a bit of a drawback. The people around me applying are all 19 or 20 years old, and it feels like there’s a significant gap. Besides, recent graduates don’t have high salary expectations and are willing to follow management’s instructions. If they’re asked to work overtime, they’ll do it, right? But if you have a child to care for, can you work overtime if they ask?

The company has already assumed that you can't, so they won't even consider you."

Shali and Fang's accounts identify three overlapping barriers to re-entry: age, career gap, and assumed caregiving unreliability. The accounts of Shali and Fang reveal a consistent pattern of employer assumptions: that mothers will prioritise family over work, making them less reliable employees than younger, childless applicants. Therefore, employers tend to offer job opportunities to young people without family responsibilities, leaving mothers with only low-paying positions. The significance of these cases is not that they confirm the existence of employer discrimination—that is already established in the literature—but that they reveal how institutional conditions and domestic arrangements interact to produce and sustain it.

Although some migrant mothers, like Jing and Tanli, managed to return to their original jobs after successfully coordinating childcare resources, their path back to employment was far from smooth. These mothers constantly had to weigh the trade-offs: Would returning to work affect their children's education or emotional needs? Can the additional income offset childcare costs? Does the new work environment offer flexibility to accommodate family needs? Unlike men, who often face fewer expectations regarding household responsibilities, the process of migrant mothers re-entering the labour market is deeply embedded within the broader framework of gendered caregiving responsibilities and the institutional gaps in urban welfare provision systems.

Beyond mothers actively seeking employment, I also encountered mothers who chose to abandon high-paying yet more demanding and time-consuming positions. Instead, they opted for lower-paying but more flexible jobs to balance work and family responsibilities, ensuring they could still care for their children and meet household needs. Such decisions were closely tied to their spouses' opinions. As Tanli explained:

"The salary in private kindergartens is much lower compared to public kindergartens. Nowadays, those who have the chance are switching to public schools. I could absolutely do that, but I just don't have the energy to make the change. My husband doesn't want me to switch either. He says if I go to a public school, I'll be too busy and won't be able to take care of our child. My current job allows me to manage both work and childcare. So, I thought about it a lot and decided not to go for interviews. I didn't even dare to submit a resume, because if I got the job, I wouldn't have time to spend with my child."

Tanli's decision captures what the negotiating mother arrangement produces at the labour market level: a trade-off in which employment flexibility is purchased at the cost of career advancement, income, and social insurance accumulation. Beyond institutional constraints and caregiving demands, migrant mothers' employment decisions are often significantly influenced by their male partners' attitudes and behaviors. For some women, their husbands' explicit opposition becomes a decisive barrier to seeking or maintaining paid work. Jingjing (20s, a mother of one), who

graduated from a vocational program in early childhood education, explained why she declined an opportunity to work at a kindergarten:

“My child’s kindergarten teacher asked if I wanted to work there. I told her it’s not that I don’t want to work, but my husband said I should just stay home and take care of our child. Seeing how hard the kindergarten teachers work and how low the pay is, I didn’t push it.”

Her narrative reflects both her own conflicting emotions and the strong influence of her husband's expectation that she continues serving as a full-time caregiver. This gender-based pressure hinders women from pursuing career advancement, even when they possess the qualifications and opportunities to do so. A similar yet more complex situation emerged in the case of Huaduo. Her husband worked irregular shifts and rarely contributed to caregiving or household expenses. Unwilling to keep asking him for money, Huaduo decided to return to factory work:

“The factory required overtime until 9:30 p.m., but I requested to leave at 8 pm because I worked faster and needed to care for my child. But my husband didn’t want me to take that job, he didn’t want to take on more caregiving. Sometimes he even refused to cook for me. After a year, I quit.”

Huaduo’s story reveals how structural inequalities intersect with intimate dynamics. Her husband’s economic control and emotional withdrawal exemplify what feminist scholars describe as “everyday patriarchy” (Kandiyoti, 1988) within

domestic arrangements. Spousal gatekeeping—the exercise of male authority through withdrawal, obstruction, and economic control—functions here as a second mechanism of the Motherhood penalty, operating within the household to compound the external barriers of employer discrimination. Together, these two mechanisms—one institutional, one intimate—ensure that the care arrangements documented in Section 6.2 translate into sustained labour market disadvantage.

These cases illuminate two key mechanisms through which the Motherhood penalty operates: constraints on labour supply and downward pressure on wage rates. On one hand, employer discrimination against mothers (Guryan & Charles, 2013) restricts women's labour supply, reducing their opportunities in the labour market. On the other hand, career interruptions due to childbirth lead to a depreciation of women's human capital (Angelov et al., 2016), lowering their wage rates. Additionally, due to the lack of care support, mothers often prefer more flexible jobs that are closer to home (Le Barbanchon et al., 2021), further shaping labour supply structures and wage outcomes.

Previous research using quantitative data has confirmed that the "motherhood penalty" varies significantly among different groups of women, with those who have higher levels of education experiencing a smaller penalty in terms of labour supply (Yang & He, 2022). In other words, women with higher levels of education tend to choose jobs with higher entry barriers and better social protections, such as maternity insurance. As a result, they are less likely to be dismissed due to childbirth or

voluntarily withdraw from the labour market. In contrast, Women with lower levels of education experience a greater childbirth penalty in labour supply (Yang & He, 2022), which is partly attributed to the lack of comprehensive maternity insurance.

Not only does higher education provide a "protective" effect against the motherhood penalty in labour supply, but women working in state-owned enterprises or the public sector also experience less of this penalty. Existing research has found that the motherhood wage penalty is more pronounced in the private sector (Meng, Zhang & Zou, 2022). Migrant mothers are largely unable to access jobs in state-owned enterprises or the public sector. Among the respondents, only two migrant mothers worked in state-owned enterprises, and they were contract workers. The majority were employed by private enterprises or engaged in self-employment. Furthermore, women with higher education were generally better able to afford childcare services, thereby mitigating the loss of working hours.

Due to maternity leave benefits, migrant mothers with formal employment and social insurance experience a less severe “motherhood penalty” compared to those lacking such protections. For instance, Zhuo, Guan, Yue, and Yuanjuan did not interrupt their careers due to childbirth; all received maternity insurance reimbursements and returned to their original positions after maternity leave. In contrast, childbirth often leads to resignation among most informally employed mothers. Despite China's improving urban maternity benefits, where unemployed

women can access partial benefits through their spouses, very few interviewed mothers received maternity insurance reimbursement.

The Motherhood penalty is therefore intersectionally structured: it falls most heavily on women who are already most disadvantaged in the labour market—those with lower education, informal employment, and rural hukou. For these women, the domestic arrangements documented in Section 6.2 do not simply coexist with labour market disadvantage; they produce it. The overwhelmed mother's career gap becomes the employer's justification for discrimination, a permanent reduction in income and social insurance accumulation. The extended mother's network construction costs—time, emotional labour, financial outlay—are absorbed on top of paid employment, with no compensation and no recognition. The mechanisms documented in this section establish the immediate terrain of the Motherhood penalty. What they do not yet show is how these immediate effects accumulate across time. That is the task of the following section.

6.3.2 The Lifelong Trajectory: From Career Interruption to Pension Insecurity

Existing quantitative research has documented the cross-sectional dimensions of the penalty—its effects on employment rates, wages, and working hours at a given point in time. What has not previously been demonstrated through qualitative longitudinal data is the cumulative nature of these effects: the way in which each stage of the penalty builds on and compounds the previous one, producing a trajectory from which recovery is structurally constrained and whose endpoint is frequently

economic vulnerability in old age. The interview data here make this cumulative trajectory visible in ways that aggregate statistics cannot—by tracing individual women's pathways across decades, from caregiving withdrawal through social capital erosion, economic dependence, weakened household bargaining power, contribution record gaps, and ultimately pension insecurity. This section traces four interlocking dimensions of accumulation, showing how each reinforces the next.

The first dimension of accumulation is social capital erosion. The motherhood penalty is evident not only in employment but also in women's social networks, which in turn negatively impacts their future employment opportunities and salaries. During the first interview, Fang was in a state of actively seeking employment but struggling to find opportunities. She said:

“I don't want to be a full-time caregiver. Even after taking on childcare responsibilities, I still yearn to work, but right now it seems impossible. I can't find suitable jobs where I live, and being stuck at home all day makes me feel like time is slipping away while I grow older without any sense of accomplishment. My social circle has shrunk to just a few friends. When I worked at the factory, I had colleagues in the office and occasionally went out with regular friends—life felt more fulfilling and enjoyable. Now, I'm confined to the kitchen and my child, growing increasingly depressed—this is not the life I envisioned.”

Raising children not only diminishes the quality of mothers' daily social network resources but also causes them to withdraw from career-related networks, concentrating their social interactions on "child-centered" networks. The limitations of social circles and the lack of access to information are seen by stay-at-home mothers as mutually reinforcing. As Tanli recalled,

“When I had my second child, I took unpaid leave and stopped working entirely. Considering the children's needs and my husband's lack of time to care for them, I've stayed home these past few years. During that period, I mainly connected with others in similar situations—other stay-at-home mothers. Consequently, our social circles and conversations revolved almost entirely around children. But after returning to the workforce, my social circle truly expanded, and my thinking and perspectives gained substantial depth. This is indeed the case.”

The contraction of social capital during caregiving years is not merely an emotional cost; it directly constrains the quality and range of employment available upon re-entry, compounding the wage and career penalties documented in Section 6.3.1.

The second dimension is economic dependence and the erosion of household bargaining power. Huaduo is deeply entrenched in this dependency trap. She confesses:

“A few years ago, I washed dishes in a school cafeteria for 900 yuan a month.

But whenever I earned a little income, my husband would stop giving me living expenses—which frustrated me, because 900 yuan was nowhere near enough for household needs.”

After giving birth to her second child, she could no longer work outside the home, making her financial situation even more precarious. She revealed: “After repeated reminders, he finally gave me 1,000 yuan this month. He claims his monthly income is only around 4,000 yuan and that he already gave money last month.” But with the baby still on formula, Huaduo found her monthly expenses consistently outpacing her income, forcing her to turn to friends or online lending platforms for help.

The lack of personal income severely undermines a woman's standing within the family, often leading to a loss of voice and emotional vulnerability. Take Liuhong, for example. She spent two years caring for her child in her rural hometown after giving birth, during which time she did not engage in any paid work. She reflected:

“I truly felt I had no say in the family. Everyone else in the family earns money—except me. No income means no voice in the household. When I speak, no one truly listens; it’s as if my words carry no weight. Whenever my husband faces difficulties or feels frustrated, he vents his emotions on me. Sometimes I can’t help but think: If I were a professional domestic worker—those people can earn

eight or nine thousand yuan a month, even over ten thousand. But here I am, trapped at home, pouring my entire heart into this family: cooking three meals a day, doing laundry, caring for the children. Despite giving so much, in the eyes of my husband's family—let alone outsiders—my contributions hold no value. They treat it as cheap labour, as if my efforts are utterly insignificant.”

Liuhong's experience starkly reveals how economic dependence profoundly shapes family dynamics. Unequal distribution of financial resources often translates into power imbalances, relegating women to subordinate positions even within intimate relationships. For Liuhong, being an unpaid full-time caregiver not only left her financially vulnerable but also symbolically diminished the value of her labour in her family's eyes.

The third dimension is the accumulation of contribution gaps in the social insurance system. Migrant mothers may lose eligibility for retirement pensions due to employment interruptions. In China, formal employees enjoy the most comprehensive social security system, but receiving a basic pension requires at least 15 years of social insurance contributions. For many migrant mothers in urban and rural areas, employment interruptions caused by caregiving responsibilities become a major obstacle to meeting this requirement. Descriptive statistics reveal that Chinese women over 60 receive only half the social pension of men, with nearly one-third of this gender benefit gap attributable to shorter employment durations and lower pre-retirement incomes among women (Connelly, 2018).

In interviews, many migrant mothers strongly expressed their desire to access formal urban pensions, particularly through inclusion in the employee social security system. Full-time mother Peihong articulated this pursuit of long-term economic independence:

“I’ve never paid into social security. After having children, I stayed home to care for them. But if I return to work in the future, I hope to find a job that provides social security. That way, I’ll have an income source later on to ease the burden on my children.”

For full-time caregivers without formal employment, enrolling in the urban employee social security system requires covering both the employee and employer contributions—a cost that is often prohibitively high. Several mothers admitted that while they understand the importance of long-term security, the cost of self-enrollment is simply unaffordable. This contradiction exposes a structural gender gap in China’s social security system: designed around the assumption of sustained formal employment, it systematically excludes women who interrupt their working lives for caregiving. Consequently, the burden of future security falls squarely on the most economically vulnerable.

The fourth and most consequential dimension is pension insecurity in later life. Among the women I interviewed who are over 50, only three receive employee social pension insurance. Of these, two women were laid off from state-owned

factories in their hometowns and continued paying social insurance by themselves.

The third woman Yulan left her child in her hometown and worked in a factory in Shenzhen for 13 years. After making two years of additional contributions, she was able to receive her pension. For stay-at-home mothers, only one had purchased social insurance on her own, while the others participated in the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme in their hometowns, leaving them in a social security gap in the city.

Those who had reached the official retirement age for women workers—typically 50 in China's labour system—were nonetheless unable to claim pension benefits due to insufficient contribution years. One such case is Ming (50s, a mother of two). She has always kept her children with her since they were young, and in order to care for them, she could not work in a factory. It was not until her children started elementary school that she worked in a factory for a while, but due to not meeting the required years of social security contributions, she was unable to receive a pension when she retired at 50. She recalled:

"In 1996, when my son was just one year old, I stopped working in factories. At first, I only took home rubber flowers to make, but after Christmas, there was no more work, or I would take beads home to make jewelry. Later, I partnered with locals to raise chickens, which was great because I could earn money and take care of my child. It was not until 2003, when my son started elementary school,

that I entered a factory near the school, and became an office clerk and worked in this factory for 12 years."

Unfortunately, the factory failed to contribute to her social insurance. She and other workers sued the factory, but ultimately the factory only paid several thousand yuan in compensation without making up for her missing social insurance contributions, which she deeply regretted. Ming's case highlights how motherhood impacts women's economic security, particularly in terms of social insurance. Her career was interrupted by caregiving responsibilities, resulting in gaps in social insurance contributions that prevented her from meeting pension eligibility requirements. The situation worsened due to her employer's failure to fulfill social insurance payment obligations.

Ming's story is not unique; it reflects systemic failure to recognise the unpaid care work women undertake throughout their lives. Despite fulfilling vital reproductive functions for families and society, many women like Ming face the hardship of having no pension in their later years. This reveals how the existing social insurance system—which presupposes continuous formal employment—systematically disadvantages caregivers and reinforces gendered precariousness.

The Motherhood penalty experienced by rural-urban migrant mothers is neither accidental nor purely individual—it is institutionally rooted and perpetuated through social reproduction. This chapter has shown that transitioning to full-time

caregiving not only interrupts women's careers but also disconnects them from social networks, confines relationships to childcare spheres, and erodes emotional well-being and self-worth. Crucially, this penalty accumulates overtime. Women's inability to secure stable employment and formal social protection during their working years often results in losing pension eligibility in old age, leaving them vulnerable in their later years.

Viewing the motherhood penalty as a lifelong structural cost (rather than a temporary phase) demands a reexamination of current welfare policies and employment structures. Without recognizing and compensating unpaid care labour, women's reproductive contributions will remain invisible, perpetuating gender inequality at both the household and national levels.

This chapter traced how the gendered division of household labour in migrant families is produced at the intersection of labour regime rigidity, hukou-based welfare exclusion, and differential access to public education. Three recurring forms of mothering under constraint have been identified: the overwhelmed mother, defined by the total absorption of her time and emotional resources into caregiving with no institutional alternative; the negotiating mother, whose household achieves partial task redistribution through paternal involvement but retains cognitive and emotional labour asymmetry; and extended mothering, in which mothers construct informal care networks from whatever is available in the absence of public provision. These three forms are not fixed types but recurring positions between which families move as

employment conditions, grandparents' health, and children's educational needs shift.

What drives these transitions is not individual preference, but the structural forces documented in Section 6.1.

Crucially, the Motherhood penalty documented here is cumulative and life-course shaping. Childbirth, or the sudden arrival of children in the city, marks a critical juncture at which labour market withdrawal begins. Re-entering the workforce is constrained by age ceilings, career gaps, and caregiving responsibilities, exacerbated by spousal gatekeeping mechanisms and everyday patriarchy. Even upon re-employment, women often trade wage levels for work flexibility, resulting in setbacks in both income and social security accumulation. These costs compound across the life course, exposing women to livelihood instability and pension insecurity in later life.

Theoretically, this chapter empirically applies dynamic intersectionality theory (Choo & Ferree, 2010) by tracing how time-shifted work patterns across factories and platforms, coupled with welfare eligibility disparities and educational thresholds, reconfigure domestic gender divisions across temporal and spatial dimensions. When public school spots are limited and private tuition is exorbitant, families must extend working hours to cover fees; fathers' overtime deepens mothers' entrapment in full-time caregiving; reduced maternal income shrinks total household earnings—creating a self-reinforcing cycle of dependency and exhaustion. Moreover, the same mother may occupy different intersectional positions at different life stages: shifting from

extended mothering to the overwhelmed mother pattern when grandparents fall ill; transitioning from the extended mothering to negotiating mother pattern when children's age change. These temporal shifts are not random but patterned, organized by the structural forces documented across both this chapter and Chapter 5.

Neoliberalism remains indifferent to gender division of labour and gender inequality (Braedley & Luxton, 2010). This chapter revealed that China's neoliberal reforms—through the intersecting shortages of care resources, economic resources, and policy support, compounded by the pressure of overwork in migrant families—have further entrenched traditional gender roles within these households. Research also indicated that while migrant mothers actively negotiate family care, work, and household responsibilities, they perpetually navigate structurally skewed dynamics. Thus, addressing the inequalities documented here requires far more than calls for shared household labour.

We need policies that: expand access to public schools without household registration or contribution period restrictions; increase affordable childcare services; strengthen family-friendly work arrangements and leave systems in low-wage industries; and recognise the value of unpaid care work in social protection designs. Without such structural reforms, care burdens will continue to be individualized as “mothers' responsibility,” perpetuating the vicious cycle linking education costs, labour exploitation, and feminized unpaid labour. The three forms of mothering

documented in Section 6.2 will continue to produce the cumulative penalty
documented in Section 6.3.

Chapter 7: Negotiating Good Motherhood: Ideology, Structural Exclusion, and Maternal Agency

With the advancement of economic reforms and the rise of the digital economy, China's concept of motherhood has undergone significant transformations since the late 20th century. Despite limited resources, migrant mothers are often compelled to align their parenting practices with the intensive, child-centered standards of urbanized motherhood (Jin & Dai, 2024; Xiao & Cai, 2014). This chapter argues that the circulating urban, intensive, and child-centered standards define what counts as being a “good” mother, while the structural conditions of migrant life—precarious work schedules, welfare exclusions tied to hukou, high housing and education costs, and thin formal care infrastructures—constrain the capacity to realize those standards. The friction between strong ideological prescriptions and limited material means produces a durable affective burden of guilt and anxiety, but it also generates a repertoire of negotiations in which women selectively adopt, adapt, and contest what “good” mothering should look like in their circumstances.

Providing a multi-dimensional analysis of the motherhood experiences of rural-to-urban migrant women in China, this chapter challenges binary portrayals of migrant mothers as either victims or heroines. Instead, it conceptualizes migrant mothering as a site of ideological tension, structural oppression, and everyday negotiation, offering new insights into how reproductive labour is governed, contested, and reimagined in a rapidly urbanizing China.

This chapter argues that rural–urban migrant mothers are not simply adopting a ready-made “good mother” model; they are actively remaking it under the pressures and possibilities of city life. In practice, this reinvention combines modern ideals—educational investment, emotional closeness, and “scientific” caregiving—with selective revisions of inherited norms such as corporal punishment and hierarchical authority. The outcome is neither a linear transformation nor a complete rupture, but rather a localized reconfiguration of motherhood in response to real-world circumstances such as household registration exclusion, unstable employment, and commercialized education.

This chapter shows this reinvention along three intertwined dimensions. Section 7.1 examines how mothers reinvent the “good mother” ideology across two dimensions: educational investment and emotional caregiving. This section examines how migrant mothers selectively revise dominant good motherhood ideology—drawing on multiple normative frameworks to construct parenting practices that are neither faithful reproductions of middle-class intensive mothering nor simple continuations of inherited tradition. Section 7.2 traces the affective consequences of this negotiation: the anxiety, self-blaming, and guilt that emerge when the ideological prescriptions mothers have internalized, however selectively—cannot be fulfilled under structural conditions that systematically foreclose their realization. Section 7.3 then turns to the forms of maternal agency through which mothers actively respond to these conditions, documenting two distinct but related forms of subjectivity under

constraint: the critical revaluation of caregiving's social worth, and the pragmatic recalibration of educational aspirations in the face of structural impossibility.

7.1 Revising Good Motherhood: Educational Investment and Emotional Attunement

The concept of good mothering ideology encompasses cultural and normative expectations that mothers must be wholly dedicated (Chodorow, 1998). Such expectations, known as intensive mothering ideology, defined as a “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive” approach (Hays, 1996), has also been widely observed in Chinese middle-class families (Chen, 2018). For such families, “good motherhood” is characterized not only by intensive care but also by the adoption of a scientific approach and emotional restraint (Hays, 1996). Empirical studies in China reveal that rural migrant mothers are increasingly affected by the globalized intensive parenting ideology, despite lacking access to broad social or familial support (Jin & Dai, 2024; Peng, 2018).

This study echoes these studies: For many, a “good mother” today not only ensures academic achievement but also supports her child’s emotional well-being through gentle discipline and emotional regulation. They embrace modern parenting ideals—emphasizing educational investment, emotional closeness, and scientific caregiving—while simultaneously navigating the enduring legacies of traditional practices such as corporal punishment and hierarchical authority. This chapter

examines how rural-urban migrant mothers in China actively revise dominant conceptions of "good motherhood" under shifting cultural and structural conditions.

Yet this reinvention is not linear. Migrant mothers' caregiving practices reflect a dynamic blend of continuity and rupture—adopting new norms while revising inherited ones. Their hopes that education can lift their children out of marginality are intensified by structural exclusions, such as the hukou system, and limited economic and cultural capital. As a result, even when striving for a more intensive, middle-class style of mothering, many find themselves constrained by anxiety. The reinvention of good mothering is therefore always partial, conditional, and negotiated — shaped by the intersection of multiple normative systems and the structural conditions that determine which elements of each system are accessible.

7.1.1 Educational Investment as Maternal Aspiration

Chinese parents today are increasingly focused on their children's academic achievements and socioemotional well-being, reflecting a broader cultural adaptation to the urbanized, market-oriented environment. Research documents phenomena such as "education agents" and "education-competitive mothers" indicate the intensification of women's roles in children's education among middle-class Chinese families (Chen, 2018; Jin & Yang, 2015; Yang, 2018). This model of intensive mothering, practiced by urban middle-class families, also influences and reshapes migrant mothering.

The aspiration that education can serve as a vehicle for intergenerational upward mobility is not specific to middle-class families. As Lareau (2003) documents in the American context, working-class and poor parents hold strong educational aspirations for their children, even when the cultural practices through which they pursue those aspirations differ from middle-class "concerted cultivation." In the Chinese context, Lan (2014) demonstrates that working-class parents place significant importance on academic performance precisely because they understand education as the primary—often the only—available route to social mobility.

In addition to the pressures of educational involution, migrant families face challenges such as segregated education policies and limited financial resources for education as discussed in chapter four. Nevertheless, their expectations for their children's educational success are also intense, driven by the hope that education can serve as a pathway for their children to improve their socioeconomic status. This aspiration is also intensified by their own experience of structural exclusion: having been denied the educational opportunities that might have changed their own trajectories, they invest in their children's education as a form of hope that transcends their own circumstances.

Meijie and her husband manage a breakfast shop, working tirelessly from early mornings every day to support their family and ensure their two children can study in Guangzhou. Her daily routine is relentless: after finishing work at the shop,

she heads to a school at midday to work as an after-school care teacher. Meijie explained:

" I just graduated from elementary school and didn't even go to middle school. I have to invest in my children's education, because there seems to be no other way. I don't want my children to end up like me—miserable and tired for a lifetime. If my children study diligently for a few more years, they will have better opportunities for employment when they enter the workforce. This means they can have weekends off, with time to rest and recharge. Unlike our own small business, which demands constant attention and leaves no room for respite. Also, it would be really miserable to work in a factory, having to work ten hours. That would be too hard. So that's why I want my children to study for a few more years. I told them to find a job with a Saturday or Sunday day off, and don't work every day "

This suggests that migrant mothers' emphasis on education is not solely an expression of intensive mothering ideology but is also rooted in their own experiences of structural exclusion and frustrated aspiration. The realities of urban life have, to some extent, left them feeling exhausted and disheartened, and gradually placing their hopes on their children has become the only way for many to rebuild a sense of meaning and achievement in life (Lu et al., 2015).

Projecting hope onto children does not simply harden into exam-centered parenting. In step with the diffusion of “quality education” (*suzhi jiaoyu*), migrant parents also seek to cultivate interests and non-cognitive skills alongside grades. Early-childhood programmes, extracurricular trainings, and weekend outings—once markers of middle-class parenting—have become increasingly common among migrant families as accessible routes to holistic development.

For example, Liuhong’s son is attending a public school in Beijing, where many of his classmates are local children with Beijing hukou. In her view, most of the children in the class are enrolled in various extracurricular training programs. Liuhong has already enrolled her first-grade child in AI-based English, online cognitive skills classes, and painting. Recently, she discussed with her husband whether they should also sign their child up for a New Concept English course to improve his spoken English. Liuhong said:

“In our class, nine of ten students attend extracurricular interest classes. It feels like the atmosphere has pushed me to this point, where I have no choice but to enroll my child. When your child has no special skills and doesn’t excel academically, they lack common ground with others; you can’t connect with other children, and you feel unable to integrate into the community. So, if I don’t enroll my child in these programs, I feel like I’m failing him, I feel anxiety.”

In today's highly commercialized education landscape, many migrant families are subject to the anxieties and aspirations generated by educational products and social media (Zhang, 2025). Peer pressure further reinforces the pressure to enroll children in extracurricular activities. As a result, migrant mothers like Liuhong spend money on various learning products and courses in the hope of benefiting their children's inclusive and development, when economic conditions permit.

Even in families with limited financial resources, parents are often highly supportive of their children developing at least one special skill or talent. For example, Huaduo's daughter takes a two-hour drawing class every week, which costs 90 yuan per session. Although her husband is the family's sole breadwinner and the household finances are tight, Huaduo still insists on supporting her daughter's interest:

“Every day she just wants to sit there drawing comics, then cutting them up and playing with them. The teacher said she's actually quite good at it. She's very slow in everything she does. At school, drawing is the only thing she excels at. I want her to develop in that direction. That's why I'm planning to rent out our house back in my hometown. I really want to support her training, but my husband and his family don't really agree.”

Similarly, Xiaoqi's family also struggles financially, but she has continued to support her daughter's interest in dancing for four years. She shared:

“She seems to really enjoy it and insists on going, so I’ve kept signing her up. It costs about 5,000 yuan a year. Honestly, my daughter doesn’t seem interested in much else, but she truly loves dancing. Since she finally found something she’s passionate about, I want to support her.”

This adoption of quality education discourse represents a form of normative negotiation: migrant mothers selectively incorporate elements of middle-class parenting ideology that resonate with their aspirations for their children's development, adapting them to their own financial and institutional circumstances. However, when children face increasing academic pressure, limited family resources are often reallocated from interest-based classes to academic tutoring. For instance, when Huaduo’s daughter entered the fourth grade, she planned to stop her art class and replace it with a homework tutoring session. Similarly, Meijie had long been aware—since her child was in the fourth grade—that strong academic performance was essential to gaining admission to senior secondary school in Guangzhou, which in turn was seen as the only pathway to university. Meijie spent an additional 10,000 yuan per semester on tuition fees for cram school. Last year, when her daughter was in the second year of junior high school, they began tutoring sessions again to increase her chances of getting into high school. She said:

"The teacher said that only half of the people in the class can go to high school, so I asked my daughter how much she ranks in class? Around 20, it's really in the middle. It's really too troublesome. This semester, she went to study one day a

week to see if she could make up for it. It doesn't matter how much, 10 or 20 points are all good for us, but her current grades are really not good, especially math. My husband did not agree, he said, 'it costs 10,000 yuan per semester—how long do we have to work to make that much?' Who wouldn't feel heartache over it, right? I just don't want my child to struggle as hard as we have."

Despite spending tens of thousands of yuan on private math tutoring for her daughter, Meijie's efforts did not yield the desired result. Despite scoring 600—about 50 points above the local cutoff—lack of Guangzhou hukou raised the bar; her daughter fell 20 points short of the migrant threshold and entered vocational school. Meijie blamed herself, saying, "I didn't create good conditions for my children."

Despite substantial financial investment in private tutoring, the educational returns are often uncertain. Some parents reflected that their expenditure had produced little measurable improvement—what they described colloquially as paying "IQ tax." Lu, a migrant mother of two in Shanghai, believed that the most important issue was her own limited ability to support her child academically. Merely spending money on educational tools, she felt, could not fundamentally improve her child's performance. She said:

"Many parents buy educational tools like Zuoyebang, Yuanfudao (online tutoring platforms in China), or learning devices when their children are in third or fourth grade, but just because you buy them doesn't mean they work. We don't really

know how well our kids are learning. When my child was still in kindergarten, I paid quite a bit of "IQ tax," possibly spending several thousand yuan. This is the price of not having a higher level of education myself. For instance, if there's a simple English word I can't pronounce correctly, I might end up teaching it wrong. In my case, I feel these tools haven't had much effect".

In conclusion, the educational aspirations of working-class migrant mothers reveal both resilience and the intense pressures of China's evolving school system. Despite barriers such as restrictive residency policies and limited finances, many continue to invest in their children's education as a pathway to upward mobility. For many, being a "good mother" centers on sustained educational investment—now often coupled with nurturing children's interests. The rapid commercialization of tutoring and enrichment, together with peer competition, has pushed extracurricular training into migrant families' routines even under tight budgets.

However, this journey often entails considerable sacrifice, financial, emotional, and physical. Moreover, this path of being a good mother who hopes to achieve intergenerational class mobility through education is fraught with hardships. For migrant children, idealized education often serves more as a channel for class reproduction rather than a ladder for upward mobility (Xiong, 2015). Their experiences highlight the unique interplay of agency and constraints faced by migrant mothers as they pursue a better future for their children. The hukou system compounds this dynamic: even a child who performs well may be denied access to

high school or university examination in the city where they have lived and studied, as Meijie's case illustrates. This structural ceiling does not extinguish educational aspiration—but it does shape the terms on which that aspiration is pursued and the guilt that mothers carry when it is not fulfilled.

7.1.2 Emotional and Psychological Caregiving

In their understanding of what it means to be a “good mother,” the interviewed migrant mothers generally believed that, beyond fulfilling the responsibility of fully supporting their children's education and development, a good mother should also possess strong emotional regulation skills. Mothers should be gentle, reason with the child, and avoid frequent scolding or physical punishment. Increasingly, these mothers are not only concerned with their children’s academic achievement but also with their emotional and psychological well-being.

When Lanlan was pregnant, she often searched parenting forums online and enjoyed reading posts where other mothers shared their child-rearing experiences. On one of these forums, she came across a mother who had taken a course on "Positive Discipline" and spoke very highly of it. Inspired by this, Lanlan later attended the course herself with her two-year-old child. She even worked for a period at a family education organisation that promoted the principles of Positive Discipline. Influenced by these modern parenting philosophies, Lanlan developed a parenting approach that differs significantly from that of her own parents and peers. She expressed concerns

about avoiding the parenting style of her own parents, who prioritised basic needs over emotional support. She said:

“My mom only cared about feeding us and keeping us warm—as long as we survived, that was enough, and she didn’t consider our psychological or emotional needs. We were all raised with beatings, treated like animals. I just didn’t want our children to grow up like we did. If my children’s grandmother took care of them, when the child cried, their grandmother would give him something to eat, and after he finished eating, she would turn on the TV for him to watch. Many children in my hometown were brought up by TV, so I just didn’t want to. Before I got pregnant, I read a lot of books and visited a lot of forums online. I felt that I still wanted to change this generation with all my heart. I want to give our children quality education, freedom, love, and an emphasis on mental health. I am so worried about any trauma they might suffer.”

Determined to raise her children differently, Lanlan has immersed herself in scientific parenting resources. She contrasted her upbringing, dominated by survival-focused parenting and harsh discipline, with her current aspirations for emotionally rich and psychologically safe child-rearing. Her focus on fostering quality education, freedom, love, and mental health illustrates a conscious effort to break intergenerational cycles of neglect and trauma.

Shali's parenting also highlights a deliberate rejection of traditional caregiving norms in favor of scientifically informed practices. Influenced by her own upbringing, she emphasizes the importance of using praise and positive reinforcement over criticism. She deliberately focuses on affirming her child's efforts and achievements rather than pointing out the shortcomings of a parenting strategy rarely adopted by her own parents and parents-in-law.

"In my husband's village, there's this superstitious belief that you shouldn't praise children because it will make them arrogant. Oh, my goodness, what a bizarre idea! Growing up, both my husband and I came from families where criticism was common. My father constantly criticized me, and I deeply craved approval from others. So, with my daughters, I make an effort to praise them as much as I can. Even when I need to criticize them, I try to do it gently."

Throughout the interview, even when Shali's children occasionally quarreled—such as when the older sister took something from the younger one, or when the younger child insisted on going out to buy snacks—she responded with calm and gentleness. She tries to reason with them and encourages them to see things from the other person's perspective. As she explained:

"My younger daughter has a very cheerful personality, but I noticed that after I yelled at her during that period, there was a change in her expression—her eyes became a bit dull and sluggish. I started to think that maybe I had scared her, and

I felt deeply guilty. I think being a mother means you need to have a good temper. In general, mothers should be more gentle and not so harsh. I really dislike mothers who like to scold or hit their children. You should treat them with kindness and wholeheartedly want the best for them.”

Many of the migrant mothers in this study have internalized the expectation that a good mother should maintain emotional composure and avoid physical discipline. Research indicates that new-generation migrant mothers offer more intensive material support and invest time to maintain emotional closeness (Peng, 2018; Bao et al., 2025). Even physical distance does not diminish a mother’s sensitivity to her child’s emotional state (Peng, 2018). For example, Yingying, who has spent significant time closely accompanying her child, has developed a deep sense of emotional attune. She has become highly perceptive of even subtle changes in her child’s mood. She said,

"I can tell right away when my child has something in their mind, my two little ones can never hide anything from me. Just by looking at their facial expressions and demeanor, I can sense what they’re thinking, and I always make sure to talk to them about it. I often chat with them while walking together, and now we also talk over the phone. Sometimes, just from the tone of their voice during a call, I can tell that something is off. If I’m in a situation where I can’t talk freely—like when there are others around—I send them a message instead. They tell me if

something is bothering them, and in this way, we maintain good communication even from a distance."

As Hochschild (1983) observes, emotional labour is central to women's domestic roles, particularly in their dual responsibility of managing not only their children's emotions but also their own. This insight resonates strongly with the experiences of rural-urban migrant mothers in contemporary China. They learned and internalized the intensive mothering ideology through their interactions with urban medical and educational experts and through parenting media they read or watch (Jin & Dai, 2024). With the proliferation of social media platforms such as WeChat and Douyin, these mothers are increasingly exposed to dominant discourses of "scientific parenting," which emphasize emotional attunement, early cognitive stimulation, and intensive maternal involvement (Zhang, 2025). This knowledge of scientific parenting has helped them establish standards for being a "good mother" and continually prompts them to do more emotional and psychological caregiving.

However, under stress, some mothers unconsciously revert to old patterns like yelling or corporal punishment, though they are often quick to self-reflect afterward. This mix of continuity and rupture illustrates that although modern parenting culture has gained traction in China, traditional beliefs—such as corporal punishment and gender biases—still linger, even as they face increasing challenge and decline. Thus, although they may explicitly reject the parenting practices of the previous generation, many mothers still carry forward certain inherited habits—consciously or not.

For example, Lanlan attended several positive discipline courses and holds the belief that a good mother should be “emotionally stable, avoid losing her temper easily, refrain from physical punishment, and offer her child both democracy and respect.” However, she gradually realized that meeting this ideal was challenging. At times, she found herself unable to control her emotions, often experiencing emotional outbursts. She sometimes scolded her child, feeling deeply remorseful and distressed afterward, wondering, “How could I treat my child this way? He’s so adorable.” (She laughs.) She expressed profound regret over these moments.

As the mother of a teenager, Xiaoqi tried hard to practice gentle communication, but her child’s reactions still pushed her to the point of emotional outburst. Xiaoqi said, “I watched a lot of parenting videos from experts and read some books, but it is hard to practice in reality. Sometimes, no matter what I say to my son, he simply ignores you, causing my emotions to erupt uncontrollably.”

As a first-time mother, Guan also articulated the challenges she faces in parenting:

“A good mother should not yell or hit her children. I find it difficult to be a good mother because sometimes I don't know other ways to discipline my child without yelling or hitting. My son is naughty and noisy. If I don't yell, I cannot discipline him. Yet, when I yell, I feel better about myself. So, it's hard for me, and it's difficult. I feel so exhausted.”

The internal struggles of these mothers reveal a profound tension between their evolving parenting ideology and the realities they confront in parenting. While they recognise that traditional methods—such as scolding or hitting—are outdated and counterproductive, implementing scientific parenting approaches often proves difficult. When their children fail to meet expectations regarding obedience or academic diligence, the mothers’ lingering adherence to conventional beliefs (that children should be submissive and hardworking) collides with newer child-rearing philosophies. This clash makes it challenging for them to consistently maintain patient and rational guidance, driving them toward frustration, self-blame, and distress.

The actual parenting practices that the parents in this study employed were often a mixture of both modern and traditional approaches. For example, Yuanjuan and her husband, as young parents, embody this hybridity in different ways. While they have adopted certain modern parenting concepts, they also continue to reproduce some traditional methods to varying degrees. She said,

“Back then, I had a clear idea of how I wanted to raise my child, but the reality turned out to be very different from what I had imagined. I hope my child will be obedient and well-mannered. He can be polite sometimes, but he also tends to argue. When I raise my voice, he reacts even more strongly. I talk to him calmly and try to explain things. Sometimes I lose my temper and yell, but I rarely hit him. It is usually the father who disciplines the child more harshly and physically. When he picks up a clothes hanger, my son immediately backs down.”

Therefore, older generations often resort to corporal punishment or harsh reprimands—rooted in cultural notions of filial piety and obedience. Younger mothers, however, increasingly advocate for rational guidance, emotional empathy, and respectful communication. Even as parenting styles evolve, certain cultural principles persist across generations, such as teaching children the importance of politeness, compliance, and honesty.

In these narratives, modern parenting often entails emotional labour: maintaining composure, communicating rationally, interpreting signals, and establishing daily bonding rituals. Mothers learn these methods through online resources, parenting courses, and social platforms, striving to replace scolding or physical punishment with praise and gentle discipline. Yet under time pressures, lack of support, and children's unpredictable reactions, this ideal proves difficult to sustain. Old habits often resurface—bringing guilt and renewed attempts at better parenting. What ultimately emerges is a hybrid, negotiated parenting model: modern child-centered techniques on the surface, but underneath lies an enduring expectation of obedience and effort. The result is not a failed approximation of middle-class intensive mothering but a genuinely distinct parenting practice, shaped by the specific intersection of structural position, biographical history, and normative multiplicity that each mother inhabits. This shift expands the moral demands of motherhood while simultaneously intensifying its hidden workload, concentrating greater emotional labour on women who have the fewest resources to meet it.

7.2 The Affective Costs of Ideological Negotiation: Anxiety, Guilt, and the Limits of Investment

Under neoliberal governance, individuals are expected to assume full responsibility for their own wellbeing and to continually optimize their choices within an increasingly competitive environment (Meng, 2020). In parenting, this surfaces as an intensive, child-centered, self-optimizing ideal of “good” motherhood, increasingly delivered through platform media and “scientific parenting” advice. As this ideal circulates—often amplified by digital media—it exerts strong ideological pressure on rural-urban migrant mothers. However, structural exclusions (hukou-linked welfare barriers, precarious work, high housing and education costs, and thin public care infrastructures) make it difficult to meet such standards. When a child’s development fails to satisfy multiple benchmarks at once, mothers frequently internalize blame and experience persistent anxiety and guilt (Hall & O’Shea, 2013).

The anxiety documented in this section is not simply a psychological response to competitive parenting culture; it is the affective expression of a structural contradiction. Migrant mothers are interpellated by dominant good motherhood ideology—through digital platforms, medical discourse, school systems, and peer comparison—as the responsible agents of their children's development and future. At the same time, the structural conditions of their lives—hukou exclusion, precarious employment, educational cost burdens—systematically undermine their capacity to fulfil that responsibility. The result is what Hall and O’Shea (2013) describe as the “anxious subject” of neoliberal governance: an individual who internalizes

responsibility for structurally produced outcomes and experiences failure as personal rather than systemic. Understanding migrant mothers' anxiety in this way—as the affective consequence of a structural gap between ideological prescription and material possibility—is essential to avoiding the pathologization of individual mothers and recognizing the systemic conditions that produce their distress.

This section examines how migrant mothers' parenting aspirations—shaped by digital media exposure and constrained by structural barriers—generate emotional strain and, over time, shifting expectations. As mothers strive to be "good mothers"—a standard shaped by state discourse, middle-class norms, and algorithmic parenting advice—they frequently face emotional burdens and contradictions. Caught between rising ideals and limited structural support, their parenting anxieties often reflect broader class-based inequalities. Over time, some mothers learn to resist or reframe these unattainable ideals by adjusting their expectations and pursuing new definitions of success. This transformation marks both a deeply emotional negotiation and a subtle assertion of maternal agencies.

7.2.1 Anxiety from Parenting Scripts and Digital Platforms

Research shows that with the growing popularity of social media, Chinese mothers' child-rearing practices are continually influenced by mainstream digital platforms, where parenting anxiety is also reinforced through social interactions and online engagement (Meng, 2020; Zhang, 2025). During the interviews, it became evident that many migrant mothers actively engage with parenting videos, books, and

social media platforms to acquire parenting knowledge—platforms that function, as Althusser (2011) would suggest, as powerful ideological tools of interpellation.

Guan (35, a mother of one), a skilled factory worker, had given birth to her first child less than a year prior to the interview. As a new mom, she is an enthusiastic learner, particularly adept at acquiring parenting information through various channels.

“When I became pregnant, I followed the *Dingxiang Mama* and *Dingxiang Doctor* WeChat public accounts and downloaded related apps. Usually, after entering the baby's birth date, the app provides monthly guidance on what movements or activities the child should be doing, with step-by-step instructions. It also reminds you of any check-ups that need to be done that month, so I just follow what it tells me to do. Later, I subscribed to several maternal and infant bloggers on Douyin, such as *Yunma Xuetang* (Pregnant Moms’ Classroom) and *Doctor Lao Wu* (a male obstetrician), who post a wide range of informative videos. There’s a lot you can learn on Douyin—for example, I learned how to give my baby massages and tummy rubs from there. If I can’t find what I need, I’ll search for it on Douyin, and once you search a bit, it keeps recommending similar content to you, so I often watch those videos. In addition, I joined a WeChat group for mothers that was created by a friend, where she often shares her parenting experiences. Whenever I run into problems, I ask for help in the group. I also pay close attention to the questions raised by other moms, using

their experiences and the resulting discussions as a form of early prevention and preparation for issues I may encounter myself.”

Guan’s approach to parenting reflects a dynamic and self-directed process of maternal learning that draws heavily on digital platforms. She mentioned three major digital tools that are among the most commonly used by China’s new generation of mothers: a specialized parenting app, WeChat, and the video platform Douyin (Zhang, 2025). Each serves a distinct function in her parenting practice. The parenting app offers structured guidance tailored to the child’s age, including developmental milestones and health check-up reminders. WeChat, the most intensively used app due to its multifunctional platform, plays a central role through its group chats, Moments (friend-circle posts), public accounts, and video channels, providing both informational and social support. Douyin, a short-form video app, on the other hand, serves as a visual learning tool, where she accesses a wide range of short videos on childcare practices. Together, these platforms represent an integrated digital ecosystem that supports contemporary Chinese mothers in navigating parenting tasks through a mix of expert knowledge, peer interaction, and algorithm-driven content discovery.

While these tools offer an abundance of information and access to supportive peer networks, they can also contribute to increased parenting anxiety. For example, Guan often compares her own parenting practices and her child's behavior with those presented by others on social media. This perceived gap between her lived experience

and the idealized images online tends to intensify her feelings of anxiety and inadequacy.

“I often look at the Moments posts shared by the leader of our WeChat group. Her son seems very well-behaved, and she appears to be doing a great job with his education. She involves him in everything—housework, washing vegetables—he participates in it all. Her child is so obedient, and I feel like she’s raising him really well. But when I look at my own child, who is so mischievous, I can’t help but feel anxious.”

WeChat has extended the geographic reach of parenting comparison, exposing mothers to idealized parenting models from beyond their immediate social and regional circles. Unlike traditional parenting comparisons, which were limited to familiar social circles and local norms, the platform enables constant visibility of high-achieving figures often from outside one’s own social or geographic group (Zhang, 2025).

For migrant mothers, the parenting content they encounter on social media is predominantly shared by individuals from middle-class backgrounds. For example, the WeChat group that Guan participates in was established by a middle-class mother she had met earlier. Moreover, influential parenting bloggers on social media are often from well-off families, and they tend to selectively present the positive aspects of their children’s behavior and development. However, this carefully selected and

idealized portrayal leads many mother-viewers to experience feelings of self-blame and heightened anxiety.

For example, Fang enthusiastically introduced me to a blogger she follows on Douyin who has over a million followers. She admires the blogger's parenting style and presentation but also admitted that watching the content often makes her feel anxiety in comparison.

“I watch the videos she and her husband post in Douyin, and there's a big difference from the parents I usually see—they're both so emotionally stable. When they interact with their child, they speak calmly, which I really admire. But I easily get irritable. Sometimes, when I see my daughter talking wildly, I think, ‘like mother, like child.’ That phrase just instantly pops into my head. It's all my fault—because I yell at her like this, so he yells back at me in the same way. I can really feel the impact of my own actions. Having an emotionally stable person in the family is so important.”

From Guan and Fang's experiences, apps, WeChat groups, and short-video platforms not only just share tips or connect moms but also push an “ideal” way to be a mother that looks inspiring but often makes women anxious. These dynamics underscore the ambivalence embedded in digital mothering: while empowering on the surface, it often reproduces social hierarchies and emotional burdens.

In sum, digital platforms have become indispensable tools in the parenting repertoires of China's migrant mothers, offering them access to expert guidance, peer support, and performative benchmarks of "good motherhood." However, this digitally mediated form of maternal learning also generates new layers of emotional labour. Constant exposure to idealized representations of parenting—shaped by algorithmic curation and middle-class norms—can heighten mothers' self-surveillance, trigger feelings of inadequacy, and reinforce the internalization of intensive mothering ideologies (Zhang, 2025).

What is particularly significant for migrant mothers is the class dimension of this digital exposure: as Guan's case illustrates, the parenting content they encounter is predominantly produced and shared by middle-class mothers whose material circumstances are radically different from their own. The comparison is therefore not between equals but between women operating under different structural conditions—and the anxiety it produces is not a sign of individual inadequacy but of a structurally produced gap between the ideals that circulate on these platforms and the conditions under which migrant mothers must realize them.

In addition to the influence of social media, the state-constructed framework of "scientific parenting"—promoted through the public health system, parenting books, television programs, social media, and school-based education—has also shaped the caregiving practices of migrant mothers. The reinvention of the "good

mother" ideology has given rise to multiple parental expectations, which in turn intensify guilt and anxiety among mothers (Sutherland, 2010).

7.2.2 Anxiety around Schooling and Work Futures

As discussed earlier, migrant mothers often construct the image of a “good mother” around a set of overlapping expectations: supporting their children’s academic achievement as a pathway to upward mobility, nurturing their emotional well-being and personal interests. These diverse goals place a significant burden on mothers.

Lu, a full-time mother living in Shanghai, has two children, one in primary school and the other in kindergarten. Her husband, who holds a diploma-level education, passed a skills-based examination and earned 120 points on Shanghai’s residence permit point system. This score qualifies their children to take the high school and university entrance exams in Shanghai; a significant advantage compared to many other migrant families. Despite these achievements, Lu admitted that she still feels deeply anxious about her children’s academic future. She has invested heavily in educational products and tried numerous methods to support their learning yet remains uncertain about whether they will truly succeed. She said:

“We feel anxious all the time. I mean, what if they don’t perform well academically and can’t get into high school with the entrance exam, wouldn’t all

our efforts be wasted? So, we worry a lot about how to educate our children and how to teach them well.”

Chinese parents, regardless of their socioeconomic status, tend to hold high expectations for their children (Liu & Xie, 2015). Lan’s research highlights that working-class parents hope their children will achieve upward mobility through academic success and therefore place significant importance on academic performance (Lan, 2014). For parents living in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the lack of local household registration means that their children must score significantly higher—often by several dozen points—on the high school entrance exam (zhongkao) to be admitted to a local public high school. This policy imposes an enormous burden on non-hukou parents of junior secondary students, intensifying their stress and anxiety during this critical stage of their children’s education.

Migrant mothers frequently experience anxiety when their children appear insufficiently motivated or academically underperforming. Xiaoqi, whose son was in the second year of junior secondary school at the time of interview, transferred him to a boarding school with a higher rate of secondary school admission in order to improve his prospects. When her son appeared unmotivated and lacked a clear sense of direction during the summer break, Xiaoqi became visibly anxious. She said:

“My anxiety stems from my son’s lack of planning. I believe he should be able to organize his time effectively. For example, he can have time to study, and time to

have fun and play games, which I understand. But he can't spend the entire summer vacation on games. While other children are learning, he is playing. Within this educational framework, he will fail the high school entrance exam if he does not work hard.”

For children in China, the high school entrance exam is a significant threshold. Whether or not they can pass it often determines if they can go to university. In interviews with several mothers, they expressed feelings of self-blame because their children did not pass the high school entrance exam. For example, Although Meijie had worked tirelessly to support their families, the academic gap her children faced left her feeling deeply guilty.

“I felt very sorry when my eldest daughter could not attend high school, but I tried my best to help her. Three years of high school are very important for every child’s development. But there was no way, we really couldn't do it. I still didn't do a good job. Firstly, I don't have much education. Secondly, I still do not have the right methods towards my children’s education.”

Similarly, Jingjie’s child scored 480 points in the high school entrance exam, which is enough for local students to be admitted to high school. However, students without household registration could only attend a vocational school. Although Jingjie felt she had been a good mother, especially compared to her husband, who often yelled at or even hit the child, she preferred to reason with the child and explain

things. However, in the face of her child's educational "failure," Jingjie attributed it to her own shortcomings as a mother. She regrets not setting clear academic goals and imposing stricter expectations, as she had been too indulgent with her child.

Thus, when children fail to get into high school and end up attending vocational school or dropping out, it often leaves parents with deep feelings of self-blame and anxiety. The anxiety that mothers experience around their children's educational outcomes is not simply a cultural phenomenon produced by competitive parenting norms; it is rooted in the structural conditions documented in Chapter 5. The conditional social reproduction regime—in which access to public education is determined by hukou status and employment form—transforms educational aspiration from a straightforward investment into an uncertain and costly gamble. Mothers who invest tens of thousands of yuan in private tutoring, only to find their children still denied access to high school because of registration status, are not experiencing a failure of individual strategy; they are experiencing the affective consequences of a system that was never designed to deliver for them.

This anxiety extends across different life stages—whether children struggle with entrance examinations, leave school early, or face employment difficulties after graduating. Rising marriage costs add a further dimension to maternal anxiety, as mothers worry about their children's ability to secure financially stable futures. Mothers want their children to be advanced in the workplace and save money for their future. However, anxiety arises when children do not meet their expectations. Two

years ago, Pinghe's son made the decision to drop out of school at the age of 16 and ventured into the workforce. Both in terms of work and personal life, Pinghe is deeply concerned about him.

“I'm so angry when I talk about my son. Sometimes I tell him to be nice, but he doesn't listen, you know? He finds it very annoying. He's not three years old anymore. He doesn't know how to save some money. He has a long way to go before he gets married. Right now, he only knows how to play games, and communication ability is very lacking. He does not listen and has no motivation to be positive. If he can't change that mindset, he's ruined.”

The mother's concerns and anxieties persist even as the child matures. Despite Hua's son exhibiting excellent academic performance and obedience since childhood and successfully graduating from college, he has become a source of constant worry for his mother in his adult life.

“I can't sleep well knowing that my son owes tens of thousands of yuan on a bank credit card. He hadn't found a good job, and the salary was not high. Also, he doesn't like to move and eats so fat, I hope he can pay them off quickly and save up for his future marriage.”

Hua finds herself unable to comprehend her son's current lifestyle and situation, and worried about how he would attract a suitable partner. The constant

thoughts and concerns weigh heavily on Hua's mind, preventing her from finding restful sleep.

These accounts illustrate how mothers' aspirations for their children's academic success, future economic security, marriage and upward mobility often translate into deep-seated anxiety, self-blame, and emotional strain. Despite their immense efforts and sacrifices, many mothers find themselves questioning their own parenting strategies when their children fail to meet expected educational benchmarks. What is specific to the Chinese migrant context is the way in which the hukou system sharpens this contradiction: a child who works hard and performs well may still be denied access to high school or university examination in the city where they live, simply because of their registration status. When this happens—as in the cases of Meijie and Jingjie—mothers internalize the failure as their own, blaming themselves for not having provided better conditions, not having chosen better methods, not having worked hard enough.

Ultimately, this persistent worry reflects the structural pressures of marginalization and socio-economic uncertainty. Rooted in their desire to shield the next generation from their own hardships, these mothers' anxieties underscore the profound emotional toll that the pursuit of better educational and life opportunities can exact on families at the societal margins. This is the affective work that neoliberal governance performs through the good mother ideology: it converts structural exclusion into personal failure, and institutional inadequacy into maternal guilt.

7.3 Maternal Agency: Critique, Adjustment, and the Remaking of Motherhood

The preceding two sections have traced the content and the emotional costs of migrant mothers' engagement with dominant “good motherhood” ideology. This section turns into a different but related question: how do mothers actively respond to the conditions they inhabit? The two sub-sections that follow document two distinct forms of maternal agency, neither of which should be romanticized, nor reduced to passive accommodation. Section 7.3.1 examines how Shali challenges the dominant discourse that positions paid employment as the only legitimate source of social value, constructing an alternative evaluative framework in which caregiving is recognised as skilled, meaningful, and socially valuable work. Section 7.3.2 examines how other mothers, confronted with the gap between educational aspiration and structural possibility, practice what might be called aspirational realism—a pragmatic recalibration of expectations that is neither resignation nor resistance but a structurally informed accommodation to conditions that individual effort cannot overcome. Together, these two forms of agency illuminate what it means to exercise subjectivity under constraint: not the freedom to choose, but the capacity to critically evaluate, selectively revise, and find dignity within the conditions that structural positions impose.

7.3.1 Caregiving as Meaningful Work: Constraint, Choice, and Moral Reasoning

The educational investment and emotional attunement documented in the preceding two sections represent forms of normative negotiation that operate within

the terms of the dominant “good motherhood” ideology—selectively adopting and revising its prescriptions. This section examines a different and more radical form of negotiation: one in which a mother does not revise the content of good mothering but questions the terms on which domestic labour itself is valued. This section examines how one mother's decision to prioritise full-time caregiving over waged work became a site of reflective agency and moral reasoning—a space in which the dominant discourse that equates social value with paid employment was actively questioned and revised.

Shali, a former auto parts worker, has two preschool-aged daughters. She has been a stay-at-home mother for seven years, and her daily life revolves almost entirely around her children. As documented in Chapter 6, Shali exemplifies the “overwhelmed mother”: her time and emotional resources are comprehensively absorbed by caregiving, with limited spousal support and no institutional alternatives. What Chapter 6 could not fully capture, however, is the meaning Shali herself constructs around this arrangement—and it is here that the analysis of this chapter begins. Shali's caregiving practice is rooted in a deep reflection on her own childhood experiences. She explained:

“The main reason I decided to raise my child myself is actually related to my own upbringing. When I was young, although my parents didn’t go out to work in other cities, they rarely spent time with us at home. They were always busy and

hardly ever spoke to us with real care. So, I feel that for my own child, I want to make sure they are emotionally and spiritually fulfilled.”

She also recalled the instability of her childhood living situation: “When I was little, I moved around staying with different relatives. That feeling of living under someone else’s roof was really unpleasant. If I were to leave my daughter with her grandmother, honestly, given the traditional gender bias in that family—favoring boys over girls—I don’t think it would turn out well.” Beyond biographical reflection, Shali's decision to prioritise full-time caregiving over wage work reflects a considered evaluation of what each offers—and what each costs:

“For a child’s development, I feel that if I went to work in a factory and gave up raising them myself, it would be really irresponsible. Maybe I’d gain a bit of freedom now, but in the future, I’d probably regret it. If I work in a factory for ten years, I’m still just a worker on the assembly line. But my children would have already grown up. If I don’t work in the factory, what I lose might actually be less than what I gain. What I gain is so much more—because that’s my child, my lifelong treasure. In the factory, I’m just a low-status labourer, and people don’t even respect you. I might as well stay home and raise my child.”

Shali also offers a critical perspective on how women’s caregiving labour should be socially recognised. She believes it should be seen as legitimate work and

expresses skepticism toward the dominant discourse that encourages all women to pursue formal employment. She shared:

“I feel that being a good mother and managing a household well is also a great achievement—it’s not inferior to being a career woman. If we agree that being a full-time mother or housewife is a form of work, then it should be treated just like a job title. If we look at it that way, then there’s no reason to talk about discrimination—because this, too, is labour. There was a time when I strongly rejected the idea that women must have a job, a decent, respectable job—as if being a housewife somehow diminishes a woman’s social value. But I don’t think it should be viewed that way.”

Despite enduring emotional neglect, denial, and gender discrimination throughout her childhood—particularly the traditional preference for sons over daughters—these early experiences compelled Shali to embrace modern scientific parenting principles and actively apply them in raising her own children. Her commitment to nurturing her children with tenderness, focus, and respect stems not only from healing past wounds but also from a deep desire to break the cycle of harm, offering her children the emotional security she herself never received.

However, her decision to serve as a full-time caregiver for seven years—from pregnancy through her children’s early years—was driven not only by personal reflection but also constrained by structural limitations in China’s urban labour

welfare environment. On one hand, most female-dominated jobs present challenges of long hours, low pay, and a lack of respect and security, making it difficult to balance work and childcare. On the other hand, she lacked reliable caregiving resources within her family, while public childcare support was extremely limited or inaccessible. Under this intertwined pressure, sustained full-time caregiving became the most viable option—even if it was far from ideal.

Shali's position deserves careful analytical attention, because it sits at the intersection of several debates in the literature on mothers and waged work. On one reading, her decision to prioritise full-time caregiving over factory employment could be interpreted as accommodation to gendered structural constraints—she stays home because the available jobs are low-paid, insecure, and incompatible with caregiving, not because she freely chooses domesticity. This reading is consistent with the analysis of Section 5.3.2, which shows that mothers' apparent choices about flexible or home-based work are often structurally produced rather than freely made (Collins, 2019; Orgad, 2019).

But Shali's account goes further than this. She does not merely accept full-time caregiving as a constrained necessity; she actively reframes it as a form of meaningful, skilled, and socially valuable work. As Folbre (2001) argues, the devaluation of care work is not an inevitable feature of economic life but a specific product of social arrangements that render invisible the labour involved in raising children. Shali's insistence that "being a good mother and managing a household well

is also a great achievement—it's not inferior to being a career woman" is a direct challenge to this devaluation. Rather than internalizing society's assessment of domestic labour as lesser work, she constructs an alternative evaluative framework in which caregiving is recognised as labour, contribution, and achievement.

This form of what Rose (1999) calls “reflective agency”—the capacity to critically evaluate and revise one's own position within dominant normative frameworks—is distinct from the neoliberal “entrepreneurial self” that Bröckling (2016) and Scharff (2016) describe. It does not optimize within the existing system; it questions the terms on which the system operates. Shali does not claim that full-time caregiving is superior to paid employment; she claims that the dominant discourse which positions paid employment as the only legitimate source of social value itself is mistaken. This is a critical cultural intervention, not a market-oriented one.

It is important, however, to hold this reading alongside its structural context. As Shali acknowledges, her decision to remain a full-time caregiver for seven years was shaped not only by reflective choice but by the absence of viable alternatives: low-paid, insecure jobs that would not cover childcare costs; no reliable family caregiving support; and minimal public provision. The reflective agency she exercises is real, but it operates within—and is partly produced by—the same structural conditions that the previous chapters have documented. Her reframing of caregiving as work is both a genuine act of critical resistance and a coping response to structural constraint. The two are not mutually exclusive; they are, in fact, the same act.

7.3.2 From Ambition to Acceptance: Adjustment as Individualized Coping

Where Shali's reflective agency operates at the level of values—questioning the terms on which domestic labour is assessed—the aspirational adjustment documented in the following section operates at the level of expectations: revising what mothers hope for within a system whose terms they accept, even as they understand its constraints. The two forms are not in opposition; they are complementary expressions of agency under structural constraint, each revealing a different dimension of what migrant mothers do when the gap between ideology and possibility cannot be closed.

Even when children do not perform well academically, many parents continue to hold strong aspirations for their educational success and are willing to devote significant time, effort, and financial resources to support their improvement. For example, despite her daughter's poor academic performance, Rong (38, a mother of two) still hoped she could get into high school and spend 20,000 to 30,000 yuan on tutoring. However, the results were disappointing. Her daughter's high school entrance exam score was not enough to qualify for vocational school in Shenzhen, so in the end, Rong had no choice but to send her daughter back to their hometown to attend a technical school. Shortly after enrolling in a vocational school, her daughter dropped out and followed some similarly disengaged classmates to Dongguan in search of work. She said:

“I couldn’t teach her myself, so I spent money on tutoring, but even with the money spent, there were no results—it was a waste. I’m not anxious anymore; I’ve let go. After all, I don’t have the ‘studying genes’ — I started working at 15 or 16 myself, and I was never cut out for academics. So how can I expect my child to be gifted in school? Now, I just hope she can find a decent job.”

For many migrant mothers, the original aspiration was to facilitate their children's upward mobility through educational achievement. However, as time passed, particularly in the face of declining academic performance, deteriorating mental health, or school dropout, these expectations underwent a gradual transformation. Confronted with reality, they had no choice but to adjust their hopes to alleviate their own anxiety and self-blame.

As Czaika and Vothknecht (2014) document, migrants typically respond to the gap between aspiration and structural possibility in one of two ways: enhancing capabilities to realize aspirations or adjusting aspirations downward to align with existing capabilities. The mothers in this section follow the second path—but the analytical question is what kind of adjustment this represents. Particularly within the dual good motherhood ideology, when conflicts arise between children's educational achievement and mental health, mothers tend to recalibrate their priorities, ultimately placing greater emphasis on their children's psychological well-being.

One migrant mother Jiang in Shanghai is an example. After sending her daughter back to their hometown in Anhui Province for boarding school at the start of junior high (7th grade), the child initially flourished—happy and performed well academically through her first two years. However, upon entering the third year of junior high (9th grade), the mounting academic pressure, especially in math and science, dramatically changed her outlook. Overwhelmed, the daughter developed an aversion to studying and testing. In a desperate attempt to avoid exams, she resorted to self-harm by cutting her arm, subsequently asking a classmate to inform the teacher so she could be excused from the test.

Throughout her daughter's third year of junior high, Jiang frequently traveled between Shanghai and Anhui to secure mental health care and emotional support for her daughter. In an environment where both the child's own standards and parental expectations are exceedingly high, the child struggled with self-disappointment and fear of exams, ultimately leading to severe emotional distress and self-injurious behavior as a means of escape. Reflecting on the situation, she noted:

“Why did she become depressed? Because the pressure on her was too great. We placed heavy expectations on her as well. Now we've made peace with it, because her health is all that truly matters. Even though she took a year's break from school, she still made it into high school. It may not be a top-tier school, but we're genuinely grateful she got admitted at all.”

The cases of Rong and Jiang illustrate a process that is neither simple resignation nor active resistance, but what might be called aspirational realism—a pragmatic recalibration of expectations in response to structural constraints that cannot be overcome through individual effort. As Reay (2005) argues, working-class educational aspirations are not straightforwardly "lower" than middle-class ones; they are differently structured, shaped by an acute awareness of the limits that structural position imposes on what is achievable. When Rong says "I don't have the 'studying genes'—I started working at 15 or 16 myself," she is not abandoning educational aspiration; she is locating her own position within a structure that she understands clearly and revising her expectations accordingly.

At the same time, it is important not to romanticize this adjustment. The shift from aspiration to acceptance does not eliminate the anxiety and self-blame that preceded it; it redirects them. Mothers who adjust their expectations still carry the weight of what they hoped for and could not achieve—for their children and, often, for themselves. The structural conditions that produced the original aspiration—the exclusions, the costs, the barriers—remain in place. What changes is the mother's relationship with those conditions: from striving against them to finding a way to live within them. This is the limit of individual coping as a response to structural constraint, and it is precisely what makes structural intervention—rather than individual adjustment—the appropriate policy response.

This chapter examined migrant mothering across three interlocking dimensions: the negotiation of good motherhood ideology under structural constraint, the affective costs that this negotiation produces, and the forms of maternal agency through which mothers actively respond to their conditions. Taken together, these three dimensions reveal migrant mothering not as a cultural phenomenon of adoption or failure but as a structurally embedded practice of selective revision, emotional labour, and critical engagement.

Section 7.1 established that migrant mothers are not simply adopting or failing to adopt intensive mothering ideology. They exist at the intersection of several normative systems—urban scientific parenting discourse, inherited rural practices, state-promoted quality education, and the pragmatic ethics of working-class survival—and they draw selectively on each to construct a parenting practice that is neither a faithful reproduction of middle-class intensive mothering nor a simple continuation of inherited tradition. The educational investment documented in Section 7.1.1 is not straightforward cultural mimicry but an emotionally costly commitment to hope in the face of structural obstacles—what Reay (2005) calls the "emotional burden of aspiration," intensified in the Chinese migrant context by a hukou system that can render educational achievement structurally impossible regardless of effort or investment. The emotional attunement documented in Section 7.1.2 is not a wholesale adoption of scientific parenting discourse but a selective revision of inherited

practices, shaped by biographical reflection on mothers' own experiences of affective deprivation and a conscious desire to break intergenerational cycles of harm.

Section 7.2 traced the affective costs of this negotiation. The anxiety, self-blame, and guilt documented across Sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.2 are not psychological failings or signs of cultural over-investment; they are the predictable affective consequences of a structural contradiction in which mothers are interpellated as the responsible agents of their children's development and future while structural conditions systematically undermine their capacity to fulfil that responsibility. Digital platforms amplify this contradiction by exposing migrant mothers to idealised parenting models produced by middle-class women operating under fundamentally different structural conditions—generating comparisons not between equals but between women whose material circumstances make the same ideology differently realisable. The hukou system sharpens it further: a child who performs well may still be denied educational access simply because of registration status, and it is the mother who internalises this structural failure as her own.

Section 7.3 documented two distinct but related forms of maternal agency through which mothers actively engage with these conditions. Shali's reframing of full-time caregiving as legitimate work is a critical cultural intervention: a refusal of the dominant discourse that positions paid employment as the legitimate source of social value, and a construction of an alternative evaluative framework in which caregiving is recognised as skilled, meaningful, and socially valuable labour. This

form of reflective agency is real, but it is also structurally embedded: it operates within, and is partly produced by, the same conditions that make paid employment an unrealistic alternative. It is both a genuine act of critical resistance and a coping response to structural constraint—and the two are inseparable.

The aspirational realism documented in Section 7.3.2 represents a different but equally structurally shaped form of agency: a pragmatic recalibration of educational expectations in response to structural constraints that individual effort cannot overcome. As Reay (2005) argues, working-class aspirations are not simply "lower" than middle-class ones; they are differently structured, shaped by an acute awareness of what structural position makes achievable. When Rong says "I don't have the studying genes," she is not abandoning aspiration; she is relocating herself within a structure she understands clearly.

Together, these two forms of agency—critical revaluation and aspirational recalibration—illuminate what it means to exercise subjectivity under constraint: not the freedom to choose, but the capacity to critically evaluate, selectively revise, and find dignity within the conditions that structural position imposes. This finding contributes to debates on mothers' justifications for their decisions around waged work (Collins, 2019; Orgad, 2019; Skeggs, 1997) by showing that these justifications are neither simple rationalisations of constraint nor expressions of free preference, but complex moral reasoning performed at the intersection of structural position and normative multiplicity.

Addressing the anxieties documented in this chapter requires more than cultural intervention or parenting support. It requires structural change: expanding public educational access for migrant children, removing hukou-based barriers to school enrollment, and reducing the financial costs of urban education that transform the aspiration for children's mobility into an impossible burden. It also requires a fundamental rethinking of how care work is valued—both in policy and in culture. As long as the dominant discourse continues to position paid employment as the main legitimate source of social value, the mothers who perform the invisible labour of raising the next generation will continue to bear its costs without recognition. And as long as the hukou system continues to foreclose educational opportunity for children who have earned it, the emotional burden of aspiration—real, costly, and structurally produced—will continue to be borne by individual mothers as if it were a personal failing. Without such changes, the gap between dominant good motherhood ideology and the structural conditions of migrant life will continue to produce the anxiety, guilt, and self-blame documented here—not as individual pathologies but as the predictable affective consequences of a system that demands achievement while foreclosing its conditions.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and Discussion

8.1 Conclusion

Guided by theories of social reproduction and intersectionality, this study examined how migrant mothers take on the task of raising children in four mega cities, how social policies and institutional inequalities intersect to shape their mothering practices, and their contributions to the process of social reproduction. The study drew on multi-city qualitative fieldwork across Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, combining in-depth interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions with policy and document analysis.

This study approached migrant mothers' parenting not only as a private or domestic activity, but also as a political and structural process embedded in broader institutional and economic transformations. Chapter 4 analysed motherhood in the context of an urban-rural divide in social welfare, tracing how the post-2014 household registration and education systems in the four megacities have brought Hukou-linked Motherhood; Chapter 5 documented the rising costs of social reproduction and the care deficits facing migrant families, but at the same time the social security system and public education favour those with urban household registration and formal jobs—conditions captured through the concept of a conditional social reproduction regime.

Chapter 6 examined how motherhood is shaped by the intersection of gender, labour regime, and social welfare dynamics, finding that mother-led caregiving is a

consistent pattern under conditions of family migration. The intersection of labour regime rigidity and welfare exclusion was shown to exacerbate the cumulative mothering penalty that migrant mothers bear across the life course. Chapter 7 examined migrant mothers' negotiation of dominant "good mother" ideology and the affective costs that this negotiation produces, while also documenting two distinct forms of maternal agency through which mothers actively engage with the structural conditions they inhabit.

Taking these findings together, this study developed four contributions that build on each other in a cumulative logic. The first contribution is empirical and conceptual: it demonstrated that migrant mothering is multidimensional, encompassing economic mothering, care mothering, and Hukou-linked Motherhood—three dimensions that intensify under the specific institutional conditions of megacity migration. The second contribution is conceptual: it introduced the conditional social reproduction regime to explain how these conditions are organized—how the intersection of hukou status and employment form produces a stratified system in which the costs of social reproduction are not uniformly privatized but differentially distributed, falling most heavily on those at the most disadvantaged intersection. The third contribution framed migrant mothering as urban infrastructure whose provision exacts a cumulative penalty—social capital erosion, economic dependence, contribution gaps, and pension insecurity—that compounds across the life course in ways that are not recoverable within a woman's working life. The fourth

contribution is theoretical: it demonstrated that these three findings could only be generated by holding social reproduction theory and intersectionality together. SRT explains why the costs of sustaining the urban labour force have been transferred into families; intersectionality explains who specifically absorbs those costs and how the penalty compounds in the particular ways it does. It is in their combination that the compounding exclusions documented in this thesis—and their gendered consequences—become analytically legible.

8.1.1 Multidimensional Migrant Mothering: Economic, Care, and Hukou-linked Motherhood

The first contribution of this thesis is empirical and conceptual: a demonstration that migrant mothering is multidimensional in ways that existing research has not fully captured. In addition to economic mothering and care mothering, this thesis identified a third dimension: Hukou-linked Motherhood, which encompasses: securing local education, obtaining hukou for children, providing mobile caregiving, and managing the economic strain due to limited public resources.

The urban-rural policy divide and the population control restrictions associated with megacities since 2014 have led to higher thresholds for school enrolment, exacerbating Hukou-linked Motherhood. Importantly, what varies across cities is not simply how hard mothering is, but what form Hukou-linked Motherhood takes. In Beijing, exclusion from secondary-level public exams pushes mothers toward mobile mothering—managing care across cities and absorbing the costs of

family separation. In Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, where points-based systems offer a pathway to local status, the same pressures of rural hukou and informal employment redirect mothers' efforts toward credential accumulation—pursuing self-funded degrees, professional certifications, and social insurance contributions in order to meet enrollment thresholds. The form differs across cities; the underlying dynamic does not.

Pressures across all three dimensions of migrant mothering—economic, care, and hukou-linked—intensified together and reinforced each other. A sharp rise in social reproduction costs, documented in Chapter 5, further intensified the economic dimension of migrant mothering. Simultaneously, the diffusion of "scientific parenting" discourse raised the normative bar for care: mothers were expected not only to invest in children's education but also to prioritise their emotional and psychological wellbeing. These demands intersected with a persistent care deficit and the exclusions of the conditional social reproduction regime to exacerbate women's caregiving burdens and reinforce the gendered division of labour in the household.

What distinguishes this finding from existing accounts of Chinese intensive mothering is precisely the role of hukou. Intensive mothering ideology and rising educational costs affect all Chinese mothers; but for migrant mothers, these pressures are compounded by institutional exclusion that transforms. The Hukou-linked Motherhood concept captures this specificity: it names the distinctive labour—bureaucratic, financial, and emotional—that migrant mothers perform not in pursuit of

middle-class parenting ideals but simply to secure for their children the baseline educational access that local registration confers automatically. Within this exclusionary systems, these maternal practices—often taken for granted or overlooked—actually serve as compensatory measures for a policy framework that fails to recognise the rights of migrant families to social reproduction.

8.1.2 Conditional Social Reproduction Regime: How Intersecting Exclusions Structure Migrant Mothering

The concept of the conditional social reproduction regime, which captured how the intersection of hukou status and employment form produces a stratified system of welfare access in which the costs of social reproduction are not uniformly privatized but differentially distributed. Access to public education, social security, and housing was shown to be stratified by the intersection of hukou status and employment type. Families with local hukou (or 120 points in Shanghai) and a formal labour contract receive higher levels of support, while families in informal employment without local hukou (and without 120 points in Shanghai) are relegated to limited support and are required to obtain social insurance at their own expense as well as rent qualified housing in order to gain access to schooling for their children.

Through this concept, this study demonstrated that China's system of social reproduction is not only a public-private hybrid regime, as Dong (2020) has shown, but one that is stratified and conditional: it distributes reproductive resources unevenly across families positioned differently in relation to hukou status and

employment form, and it requires the most vulnerable migrant families to compensate for institutional exclusion through private expenditure and familial labour.

Due to the conditional social reproduction regime and the commodification of education, housing, and care services, at all levels of the urban and rural arenas, the costs of social reproduction have risen sharply. Migrant families now face the double burden of maintaining urban livelihoods and rural roots. With the rapid development of cities, urbanization has made it common for migrant families to buy properties in their hometowns, and it has become one of the necessary conditions to guarantee access to education and marriages for their children. Household registration rules typically exclude migrant families from guaranteed urban public housing. This, coupled with the fact that houses and schooling are now tightly bundled, makes it even more expensive for migrant workers to live in cities. These rising costs are closely related to the conditionalization of welfare, the commodification of housing, and the deep stratification of education. The care deficit, rising costs and differential treatment of social reproduction experienced by migrant families in this urban-rural divide and labour polity reveal a persistent lack of State support for their daily reproduction.

8.1.3 Mothering as Urban Infrastructure and the Cumulative Motherhood penalty

The third contribution brought together the political economy framing of motherhood as urban infrastructure with the longitudinal analysis of its costs. If the

first two contributions establish what migrant mothers do and why they are positioned to do it, this contribution establishes that doing it costs them—across the life course.

This thesis argued that migrant mothering constitutes a form of urban infrastructure that is essential yet largely invisible: the care, coordination, and compensatory labour that keeps urban households functioning and urban economies running. Using evidence from China's four megacities, this study provided empirical support for a core claim of social reproduction theory: that unpaid domestic and care labour is not peripheral to capitalist production but essential to the reproduction of labour power. The invisible labour of migrant mothers—absorbing the costs of schooling, caregiving, and welfare navigation that the state no longer covers—demonstrated concretely how accumulation depends on forms of work that are systematically unrecognised and uncompensated.

If under split-household arrangements, the unpaid care labour performed by rurally based kin—often older women—constitutes a covert form of “surplus value” extracted by global capital (Pun & Chan, 2012), then under family reunification migrant mothering likewise underwrites accumulation. This includes “economic mothering” that absorbs financial and social costs; “care mothering” that fills the urban care deficit and scientific parenting expectations, and “Hukou-linked Motherhood” that converts documents, credentials, and insurance contributions into eligibility of children’s education. In this sense, mothering becomes both a site of

social reproduction and a means of its realization. Migrant mothers' unpaid and underpaid work essentially constitutes an implicit subsidy of urbanization in China.

The infrastructure framing is theoretically significant because it shifts the analytical lens from what migrant mothers lack to what they provide. But this thesis went further than existing accounts of women's labour as hidden subsidy by documenting the cumulative cost of providing that subsidy across the life course. The Motherhood penalty analysed in Chapter 6 is not a discrete, recoverable episode but a structural trajectory: caregiving withdrawal constrains re-entry options; constrains re-entry produces informal employment; informal employment generates contribution gaps; and contribution gaps produce pension insecurity in later life.

The women who function as urban infrastructure—absorbing the costs that the conditional social reproduction regime does not cover—pay for this function not only in the present but across decades, in ways that the system neither recognises nor compensates. Framing this as infrastructure decay rather than individual misfortune reframes the policy problem: it is not a matter of helping individual mothers cope better, but of addressing a structural process that systematically extracts value from the most vulnerable workers while denying them the protections that would sustain their capacity to provide it.

8.1.4 Theoretical Contribution: The Complementarity of Social Reproduction Theory and Intersectionality

As Chapter 2 argued, social reproduction theory and intersectionality are not parallel frameworks that can be applied independently—they are complementary and mutually necessary. This study demonstrated how social reproduction theory provides a crucial complement to intersectionality by revealing the structural roots of women's oppression. Where intersectionality maps the patterned distribution of disadvantage across axes of social inequalities, social reproduction theory traces their origins through which social reproduction costs are produced, transferred, and absorbed under capitalism. In the Chinese migrant context, this meant showing that the gendered and hukou-based distribution of caregiving burdens is not simply an outcome of traditional norms or policy design, but a structural condition of urban accumulation.

Social reproduction theory explains the structural logic: why the costs of sustaining the labour force have been transferred from the state and employers onto families, and why this transfer is a systematic feature of China's neoliberal restructuring rather than an incidental policy gap. But SRT alone produces an undifferentiated account of privatized care—it can show that families bear costs the state no longer covers, but it cannot explain why some families bear far more than others, or why, within households, the burden falls on women rather than being shared. This is where intersectionality becomes analytically necessary: it reveals that the conditional social reproduction regime does not distribute its costs randomly but

in a patterned, predictable way organized by the intersection of hukou status, employment form, and gender.

The concept of motherhood as urban infrastructure, and the cumulative motherhood penalty that sustains it, could only be developed by holding both frameworks together. SRT shows what migrant mothers' labour sustains and why its costs have been transferred onto families; intersectionality shows who specifically is positioned to absorb those costs and why the vicious cycle and motherhood penalty compounds in the particular ways it does. Neither framework alone could have generated this account.

What intersectionality added to SRT in this thesis was therefore more than a recognition that multiple axes of inequality exist. It showed precisely how those axes interact—how hukou status, employment form, and gender combine not additively but constitutively, positioning the most vulnerable women at the most disadvantaged intersection not by chance but by the institutional logic of China's welfare and labour systems. Conversely, what SRT added to intersectionality was an explanation of why that positioning persists: what material interests are served by maintaining it, and what political-economic forces reproduce it across time. Together, the two frameworks made visible the central finding of this thesis: that migrant mothers are not simply among the many who bear the costs of China's retreating welfare state, but are structurally positioned—at the convergence of hukou exclusion, labour market informality, and gendered caregiving expectations—to absorb what the system

offloads, so that the urban economy can continue to function on the basis of labour it neither recognises nor adequately compensates.

8.2 Discussion

The following discussion will focus on outlining the main insights of this study in terms of theory, policy development and service practice, as well as reflecting on the limitations of this study and pointing to possible future directions for expanding research in this area.

8.2.1 Extending Intersectionality: From Race to Hukou in the Chinese Context

A broader question raised by this thesis concerns the translatability of theoretical concepts developed in Western contexts into different cultural and institutional settings. As Chapter 2 noted, both social reproduction theory and intersectionality emerged from specific historical and political contexts—the former primarily from Western Marxist-feminist scholarship, the latter from Black feminist and critical race theory in the United States. This thesis demonstrated that both frameworks retain analytical power when transposed into the Chinese migrant context, but that transposition requires deliberate adaptation.

Social reproduction theory had to be reconfigured to account for the specific role of the hukou system as the mechanism through which care costs are not merely privatised but differentially allocated according to registration status—a dimension absent from the framework's original formulations. Intersectionality similarly had to

be decoupled from race as its primary axis and recentred on hukou, employment form, and gender as the co-constituting structures of disadvantage in the Chinese context (Anthias, 2012; Su, 2016). In both cases, the core analytical logic of the framework was preserved while the specific axes and mechanisms were made responsive to local institutional conditions.

In this respect, this study extended intersectionality beyond its original race-centred formulation, offering a localised analytical framework for understanding gender inequality in China—one in which hukou status, employment form, and gender function as the primary co-constituting axes of disadvantage, replacing race while preserving intersectionality's core analytical commitment to the mutual constitution of structural positions. This transposition demonstrated that intersectionality is not culturally bound in its logic but can be productively adapted to illuminate how differently positioned women bear different shares of the costs of social reproduction under conditions of institutional stratification. More broadly, it suggested that intersectionality's analytical power lies not in any fixed set of categories but in its insistence that social positions are co-constituted by multiple simultaneous structures of power.

8.2.2 Neoliberal Subjects or Critical Agents? Rethinking Maternal Agency under Structural Constraint

In neoliberal discourse, a "good mother" is defined not solely by care and companionship but by her ability to manage children's access to school, optimize her

child's future, and maintain emotional stability—all while taking full responsibility for the outcomes of her maternal labour (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Within this framework, mothers' responses to structural constraints are easily misread as expressions of individual resourcefulness or entrepreneurial self-management. This study resisted that misreading by distinguishing between two analytically distinct registers of maternal response—and in doing so, contributed to a broader theoretical debate about what agency means under conditions of structural constraint.

The first register comprised survival strategies: time management, flexible employment, and mutual-aid networks documented across Chapters 5 and 6. These are not expressions of agency in any meaningful sense—they are what the neoliberal system demands and what it produces. Mothers who ration their lunch breaks to cook for their children or shift from stable employment to precarious self-employment to accommodate caregiving, are not circumventing structural conditions but internalizing them—performing the efficient, self-optimizing subjectivity that neoliberal governance cultivates (Bröckling, 2016; Scharff, 2016). As Collins (2019) documents, the shift to flexible or entrepreneurial work in contexts lacking adequate childcare is a recognizable neoliberal pattern driven by the absence of alternatives rather than the exercise of preference. As Orgad (2019) argues, the promise of flexibility rarely delivers what it promises—it relocates the problem rather than resolving it and does so in ways that further individualize what is a collective and structural failure.

The second register comprised genuine situated agency: the critical revaluation of caregiving's social worth documented in Chapter 7, and the aspirational realism through which mothers revise their expectations in the face of structural impossibility. What distinguished these responses from the first register is not their outcome but their orientation: they do not optimize within the system's terms but question those terms themselves. Shali's insistence that caregiving constitutes legitimate and valuable labour was not an adaptation to her structural position but a refusal of the dominant discourse that renders it invisible—an exercise of what Rose (1999) calls reflective agency, the capacity to critically evaluate and revise one's position within normative frameworks rather than simply internalizing them. Rong's aspirational realism was similarly not a resignation to structural constraint but a structurally informed recalibration—what Reay (2005) describes as working-class aspiration that is differently structured rather than simply diminished, shaped by an acute awareness of what structural position makes achievable. Both represent forms of moral reasoning that operate at the boundary of the possible, finding dignity and meaning within conditions that individual effort cannot overcome.

The theoretical significance of this distinction extends beyond the Chinese migrant context. Existing feminist scholarship on maternal agency faces a persistent tension between two inadequate positions: the victimhood narrative that denies maternal subjectivity entirely, and the resilience narrative that celebrates maternal resourcefulness without attending to the structural conditions that make such

resourcefulness necessary and costly. This thesis charted a path between them by showing that agency is not a binary condition—present or absent, constrained or free—but a spectrum whose different registers require different analytical frameworks. Survival strategies require the framework of neoliberal subject formation (Bröckling, 2016; Scharff, 2016; Gill & Orgad, 2018); situated agency requires the framework of reflective subjectivity and moral reasoning (Mahmood, 2005; Rose, 1999; Ortner, 2006). Conflating the two—as both the victimhood and resilience narratives do, in opposite directions—produces an analytically impoverished account of what women actually do under impossible conditions. This thesis demonstrated, through detailed empirical analysis, that the same woman may simultaneously perform neoliberal survival strategies and exercise genuine critical agency—and that understanding the difference between these two registers is essential to understanding what structural change would actually require. It is not enough to celebrate mothers' resourcefulness; it is necessary to ask what conditions would make that resourcefulness unnecessary.

8.2.3 Policy Implications: Rebuilding Social Reproduction Support for Migrant Families

This dissertation demonstrated that migrant mothering in China is multidimensional, encompassing economic mothering, care mothering, and Hukou-linked Motherhood. The intensification of compensated motherhood since the post-2014 policy tightening in megacities is not the result of individual choice or cultural preference, but a structural outcome of welfare exclusion, labour market stratification,

and the gradual withdrawal of the state from social reproduction. These findings suggest that policy responses must move beyond individualized coping strategies and address the structural organisation of social reproduction across multiple institutional levels—at the state, community, and employer levels simultaneously.

At the governmental level, policy reform should shift from a regime of conditional inclusion toward a clearer assumption of public responsibility for social reproduction. Currently, access to key resources—such as education, housing, and social insurance—is governed through hukou status and employment form, transforming welfare into an eligibility-based system rather than a social right. This conditional social reproduction regime systematically transfers reproductive costs to migrant families, particularly to mothers.

Policy efforts should therefore prioritise the gradual decoupling of basic public services—especially compulsory education, basic childcare, and primary healthcare—from hukou status. Reducing inter-city disparities in admission thresholds and welfare criteria is essential to mitigating the uneven maternal burdens produced by differentiated urban governance. In addition, caregiving labour should be institutionally recognised through mechanisms such as childcare subsidies, care allowances, pension credits, or the inclusion of caregiving periods in social insurance calculations. Such measures would not only alleviate maternal pressure but also but also address the cumulative Motherhood penalty documented in Chapter 6, in which

caregiving interruptions translate directly into contribution gaps and pension insecurity in later life.

At the community level, there is an urgent need to build meso-level social reproduction infrastructure that bridges the gap between state policies and household responsibilities. In the absence of adequate public provision, migrant mothers rely heavily on individualised strategies and informal networks, exacerbating inequality across families and life stages. Community-based interventions should focus on expanding accessible childcare services, after-school programmes, and mutual-aid networks that reduce families' dependence on marketised care solutions. Integrating schools, social work organisations, and community institutions can help redistribute caregiving responsibilities and provide more stable support for migrant families. Community-level assistance in navigating documentation, eligibility procedures, and policy transitions can also significantly reduce the invisible clerical and emotional labour—the Hukou-linked Motherhood—that disproportionately burdens migrant mothers.

At the level of employers and labour regulation, the study underscores the role of labour regimes in reinforcing the feminization of care. Long working hours, platform-based employment, and insecure labour conditions limit fathers' participation in caregiving and intensify mothers' reproductive responsibilities. Policy measures should promote family-friendly and gender-sensitive labour protections, including flexible working arrangements, caregiving leave, and the extension of social

insurance coverage to informal and platform workers. Encouraging employers to participate in childcare — either independently or through partnerships with local governments and communities — can further reduce the privatization of care responsibilities. Recognizing employers as stakeholders in social reproduction is essential for sustaining a stable and productive workforce.

More broadly, this dissertation argued for a reframing of migrant mothering from a private family matter to a form of public infrastructure that sustains urban economies. Migrant mothers compensate for institutional deficits through unpaid labour, emotional regulation, and bureaucratic navigation, thereby reproducing labour power and stabilizing urban accumulation under conditions of structural exclusion.

As the infrastructure framing makes clear, the deterioration of this capacity—through exhaustion, pension insecurity, and the cumulative motherhood penalty—represents not only a private family crisis but a structural risk to urban sustainability. Policy interventions should therefore avoid valorizing maternal resilience as a substitute for institutional support. Instead, they should aim to redistribute reproductive responsibilities across the state, communities, and employers. Shifting the analytical and policy focus from how mothers cope to how institutions provide support is not only a matter of gender equality—it is a condition of the long-term sustainability of China's urban development.

8.2.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study provided valuable insights into the caregiving practices of rural-urban migrant mothers, several limitations should be recognised.

The first limitation concerns the unevenness of the empirical base. Although this dissertation drew on fieldwork across four major cities, the depth and coverage of data were not equally distributed. The cases from Beijing and Shanghai were relatively limited compared to those from Guangzhou and Shenzhen, and no focus groups were conducted in Guangzhou. This unevenness constrained the comparative analysis across cities that the research design originally intended to support, and limited the extent to which city-specific findings can be systematically compared.

A more evenly distributed multi-city design—with equivalent data collection instruments across all four sites—would strengthen the comparative dimension considerably. More significantly, the study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. A longitudinal study would provide more robust evidence of how caregiving interruptions accumulate into contribution gaps and pension insecurity, and would allow for analysis of how policy changes—such as the post-2014 tightening of megacity enrollment policies—affect caregiving arrangements and maternal wellbeing over time.

The second limitation concerns the range of qualitative materials brought to bear in the analysis. While the thesis drew on individual interviews, focus group

discussions, participant observation, and policy documents, the balance across these sources were not uniform. The analysis was most heavily dependent on individual interview and focus group interview data; the observation and policy material, while present, could have been more systematically integrated. Future iterations of this research agenda should consider more systematic integration of observational data into the analysis of gendered parenting practices and emotional caregiving—precisely the dimensions of migrant mothering that are most resistant to verbal articulation and most in need of the kind of situated, sensory knowledge that observation uniquely provides.

The third limitation concerns the scope of comparison. This study focused exclusively on working-class migrant mothers in four megacities, which means it cannot directly address what is specific to migration status as opposed to class position, or how the conditional social reproduction regime operates differently across city tiers. Future research should extend the comparative frame in two directions: horizontally, by comparing the experiences of migrant mothers with those of middle-class migrant mothers or working-class local urban mothers, to isolate the specific mechanisms through which hukou status shapes maternal experience; and vertically, by extending the analysis to smaller cities and towns where hukou policies and labour market conditions differ substantially from the megacity context documented here.

More broadly, this thesis has demonstrated the analytical value of combining social reproduction theory and intersectionality, and points toward several directions for future research.

Within China, the conditional social reproduction regime documented here reflects a specific historical moment shaped by hukou policy, labour market informalization, and post-2014 megacity governance. This regime is now being reconfigured by new pressures: population decline, slowing growth, and a pronatalist turn in family policy since the early 2020s. Future research should trace how these pressures are lived at the household level and whether they generate new modes of maternal negotiation or new patterns of institutional exclusion.

Beyond China, the theoretical combination developed here has wider applicability. Social reproduction theory and intersectionality have largely been developed and applied separately—SRT in Western political economy, intersectionality in feminist sociology and critical race theory. This thesis demonstrated that their combination works in a non-Western context where the key axes of stratification are hukou rather than race, and employment form rather than citizenship. This suggests the combination can be adapted to analyse how care costs are differentially distributed wherever welfare access is conditioned on the intersection of registration status, employment, and gender.

Finally, the cumulative motherhood penalty documented in Chapter 6 pointed to an important gap in existing research. Most scholarship on the motherhood penalty is cross-sectional—documenting its effects at a given point in time rather than tracing how they accumulate. This thesis has shown, through retrospective accounts, that the penalty compounds across decades in ways that are not recoverable within a woman's working life. Prospective longitudinal research following migrant mothers over time—tracking caregiving decisions, employment trajectories, contribution records, and eventual pension outcomes—would provide stronger evidence of these dynamics and identify the points at which policy intervention could interrupt the trajectory. Such research would contribute both to the study of migrant mothering in China and to the broader feminist political economy of care, ageing, and social insurance.

Appendices

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

No.	Pseudo nym	City	Age	Gender	Occupatio n	Education al Level	No. of Chi ldr en	Living Status Of Children	No. of Inter view s
1	Fang	Shenzhen	33	Female	Stay-at-home mom	Technical School	1	Migration	2
2	Ming	Shenzhen	50	Female	Factory Worker	High School	2	Migration and Left-behind	2
3	Lanlan	Shenzhen	37	Female	Horticultural Therapist	High School	2	Migration	2
4	Min	Shenzhen	37	Female	Factory Worker	Middle School	1	Left-behind	1
5	Dong	Shenzhen	33	Male	Factory Worker	Technical School	3	Left-behind	1
6	Xiaoqi	Shenzhen	36	Female	NGOer	Technical School	2	Migration	2
7	Peng	Shenzhen	36	Male	Food Delivery Worker	Technical School	2	Migration	1
8	Zhuo	Shenzhen	35	Female	Saler	Technical School	1	Left-behind	2
9	Rong	Shenzhen	37	Female	Domestic Worker	Middle School	2	Migration and Left-behind	2
10	Cui	Shenzhen	37	Female	Stay-at-home mom	College	3	Migration	1

11	Pinghe	Shenzhen	40	Female	Factory Worker	Middle School	2	Migration and Left-behind	3
12	Ying	Shenzhen	45	Female	Domestic Worker	Middle School	1	Migration	2
13	Er	Shenzhen	43	Female	Stay-at-home mom	Technical School	1	Migration	2
14	Jianfeng	Shenzhen	37	Female	Shop operator	College	2	Migration	1
15	Yulan	Shenzhen	51	Female	Cleaner	Middle School	1	Left-behind	1
16	An	Shenzhen	33	Female	Factory Worker	Middle School	1	Left-behind	1
17	Tian	Guangzhou	29	Female	Stay-at-home mom	Technical School	2	Migration and Left-behind	1
18	Jing	Guangzhou	42	Female	Factory Worker	Middle School	1	Migration	1
19	Meijie	Guangzhou	45	Female	Shop Operator and School caregiver	Elementary school	2	Migration	2
20	Huaduo	Guangzhou	37	Female	Stay-at-home mom	High School	4	Migration	3
21	Luo	Guangzhou	38	Male	Dockworker	High School	4	Migration	1
22	Yan	Guangzhou	38	Female	Company Clerk	High School	2	Migration	3
23	Sheng	Guangzhou	38	Male	Driver	High School	2	Migration	3
24	Jieli	Guangzhou	39	Female	Factory Worker	High School	2	Migration	2
25	Fenjin	Guangzhou	36	Male	Factory Worker	High School	2	Migration	2
26	Yingying	Guangzhou	40	Female	Shop Operator	High School	3	Migration and Left-behind	2
27	Guan	Guangzhou	35	Female	Factory Worker	Technical School	1	Migration	2

28	He	Guangzhou	38	Male	Factory Worker	Technical School	1	Migration	1
29	Yuanjuan	Guangzhou	29	Female	Factory Worker	Technical School	2	Migration	1
30	Qing	Guangzhou	28	Male	NGOer	College	1	Migration	1
31	Shali	Guangzhou	35	Female	Stay-at-home mom	Technical School	2	Migration	3
32	Jiang	Shanghai	40	Female	Ngoer	Self-study College Degree	2	Migration and Left-behind	2
33	Lu	Shanghai	34	Female	Stay-at-home mom	Middle School	2	Migration	1
34	Lijie	Shanghai	36	Female	Stay-at-home mom	Middle School	2	Migration	1
35	Yongqiao	Shanghai	36	Female	Shop Operator	Middle School	2	Migration	1
36	Wuli	Shanghai	44	Female	Shop Operator	Middle School	1	Migration and Left-behind	1
37	Xiaoqin	Shanghai	43	Female	Shop Operator	Middle School	4	Migration and Left-behind	1
38	Ca	Shanghai	39	Female	Shop Operator	College	1	Migration	1
39	Yi	Shanghai	45	Female	NGOer	College	1	Migration	2
40	Linfen	Shanghai	46	Female	Company Clerk	Middle School	2	Migration	1
41	Lili	Shanghai	45	Female	Stay-at-home mom	Middle School	4	Migration and Left-behind	1

42	Chen	Shanghai	30	Male	Sale Manager	Middle School	2	Migration	1
43	Zhou	Beijing	37	Female	NGOer	College	2	Migration and Left-behind	2
44	Li	Beijing	40	Male	NGOer	College	2	Migration and Left-behind	2
45	Zhuang	Beijing	38	Male	Driver	Middle School	1	Migration	1
46	Yanli	Beijing	29	Female	Stay-at-home mom	Middle School	2	Migration	1
47	Hamin	Beijing	33	Female	Company Clerk	College	1	Migration	1
48	Liuhong	Beijing	32	Female	Company Clerk	Middle School	1	Migration	1
49	Fanjie	Beijing	48	Female	Company Clerk	Middle School	2	Migration and Left-behind	1
50	Jiixin	Beijing	37	Female	Factory Worker	Middle School	2	Migration	1
51	Fuli	Beijing	40	Female	Saler, full-time	Middle School	1	Migration and Left-behind	1
52	Yege	Beijing	42	Male	Delivery Drivers	Middle School	2	Migration and Left-behind	1

Appendix B: List of Social Policies

Year	Region	Policy Title
2017	Beijing	Beijing Municipal People's Government. (2017). Provisional measures for the employment of non-Beijing fresh graduates.
2020	Beijing	Beijing Municipal People's Government. (2020). Administrative measures for the Beijing points-based household registration system.
2014	China	China's State Council. (2014). The New Type Urbanization Plan.
2020	Guangzhou	Guangzhou Municipal People's Government. (2020). Regulations on household registration administration in Guangzhou.
2020	Guangzhou	Guangzhou Municipal Government. (2021). Statistical communique on the development of Guangzhou's education in 2020.
2025	Guangzhou	Guangzhou Municipal Government. (2025). Administrative measures for the points-based household registration system in Guangzhou.
2021	Guangzhou	Guangzhou Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau. (2021). Reviewing 12 years of Guangzhou's points-based household registration system.
2025	Guangzhou	Guangzhou Nansha District People's Government. (2025). Implementation guidelines on compulsory education for children of migrant workers in Nansha District.
2024	Beijing	Haidian District People's Government of Beijing. (2024). Verification requirements for non-local school-age children receiving compulsory education in Haidian District in 2024.
2019	China	National Development and Reform Commission. (2019). Notice on issuing the key tasks for new urbanization construction in 2019 (Document No. 617 [2019]).
2022	China	National Development and Reform Commission. (2022). Implementation plan for new-type urbanization during the 14th Five-Year Plan.
2020	Shanghai	Shanghai Public Security Bureau. (2020). Interpretation of the "Implementation Opinions on the Schooling of Migrant Children in All Types and Levels of Schools in Shanghai".
2008	Shanghai	Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, Opinions on the 2008 municipal government's implementation of 60 projects for the reconstruction of migrant workers' primary schools and the incorporation of private education management.

2013	Shanghai	Shanghai Municipal People's Government. (2013). Shanghai residence permit management measures.
2022	Shanghai	Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau. (2022). Shanghai residence permits points management measures.
2025	Shanghai	Shanghai Municipal Education Commission. (2025). Implementation opinions on the enrollment and admission work of compulsory education schools in Shanghai in 2025.
2008	Shenzhen	Shenzhen Municipal People's Government. (2008). Interim Measures for the Shenzhen Residence Permit.
2010	Shenzhen	Shenzhen Municipal Education Bureau. (2010). Guiding opinions of the Shenzhen Municipal Education Bureau on the pilot implementation of a points-based admission system for public compulsory education schools.
2016	Shenzhen	Shenzhen Municipal Public Security Bureau. (2016). Notice on several provisions for Shenzhen hukou admission.
2018	Shenzhen	Shenzhen Municipal People's Government General Office. (2018). Notice of the Shenzhen Municipal People's Government on Issuing the Measures for the Administration of Compulsory Education for Children of Non-Hukou Residents.
2023	Shenzhen	Shenzhen Municipal Public Security Bureau. (2023). Measures for the Shenzhen points-based household registration system.
2025	Shenzhen	Shenzhen Longhua District Education Bureau. (2025). Points-based school admission measures for compulsory education schools in Longhua District (revised)
2001	China	State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2001). Decision on the reform and development of basic education (Guofa [2001] No. 21).
2012	China	State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2012). Opinions on Further Promoting the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education.
2021	China	Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2021). Opinions on Regulating the Development of Private Compulsory Education.

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