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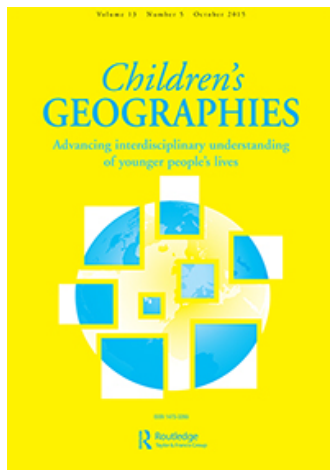
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Middle-class childhood and parenting culture in high-rise Hong Kong: on scheduled lives, the school trap and a new urban idyll

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This exploratory study seeks to understand childhood in Hong Kong in relation to the high-rise living environment and dominant parenting culture among middle-class professionals. The empirical results suggest that it is parenting culture rather than the built environment that creates children's busy, scheduled lives, high levels of adult supervision and limited outdoor play. Building on a strong portfolio is considered to be both necessary to enter the popular British educational system and to counterbalance a curriculum that is supposed to offer less structured learning compared to the local Cantonese schools. It is argued that this paradoxical situation must be understood in the context of parents' personal childhood histories and the highly competitive global labour market in Hong Kong. The paper ends with a reflection on new discourses of childhood that creates cities and its many consumption spaces as urban idylls for raising children.

Keywords: intensive parenting; enrichment activities; urban consumption; middle-class families; gender

1. Introduction

Childhood is a social construction varying across time and space. Today, children grow up differently than they did in previous decades, and the everyday lives of children vary globally. Childhood is contextually shaped by a conglomerate of spatial and social variables. In this paper, we concentrate on children growing up in a specific environment – the highly urban – and in a specific family, the middle-class family.

Families and children are increasingly likely to live in cities (UNICEF 2012), and many cities are growing in density. High-density apartment buildings, including high-rise flats, are becoming more widespread, particularly in new cities across Asia. Apartment living, limited outdoor space and high levels of motorised traffic make cities more difficult to negotiate for families and children. The effect of high-density urban environments on children's outdoor daily lives, however, has received little contemporary academic attention (Vliet 1983).

Along with urban transformations, middle-class families have changed considerably. Families have become smaller and the participation of mothers in the labour market has grown significantly. Working motherhood has made the outsourcing or delegation of child care a necessity, and dual-income families have resulted in higher household incomes that can be spent on fewer children. Global processes of competition have contributed to rising standards for personal achievement for both parents and children. Prestigious schools and extracurricular activities have

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become part of life for middle-class Chinese children (Chua 2011), but so far, research has mainly focused on child-rearing practices in the USA (Lareau 2003) and the UK (Vincent and Ball 2007). Investments related to the raising of children are becoming an important dimension of the construction of a middle-class family position (Katz 2008).

The city of Hong Kong contains several features characteristic of a highly urban middle-class childhood. It combines a high-density environment with high levels of middle-class working motherhood and rising standards of personal achievement. This makes Hong Kong an interesting case to study. This paper seeks to understand Hong Kong childhood in relation to the high-rise living environment and the dominant parenting cultures among the middle-classes. This paper aims first to contribute to the thus-far limited data on Hong Kong childhood and, second, to add to our knowledge of a type of childhood that is expected to become more widespread. The particular form of growing up in Hong Kong is considered to be both specific (relatively unique compared to childhoods elsewhere) and close to childhoods developing in the near future.

2. Literature

Cities are growing larger and increasingly high and dense (Dempsey 2010; Yeh and Yuen 2011). This process is accompanied by higher levels of anonymity, an increase in motorised traffic and more crowded public spaces, all of which contribute to the transformation of public space into adult space (Valentine 2004). The freedom of movement of urban children has been considerably reduced and outdoor play is becoming less a matter of course in children's everyday lives (Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Karsten 2005; Freeman 2010). New play equipment at home (including the Internet) has further contributed to the decline in children's outdoor lives.

The situation of children living in high-rise apartment buildings may be even worse, but contemporary studies are few and far between. Several studies from the 1960s and 1970s report on children having problems negotiating the lift and other obstacles to go outdoors (review: Vliet 1983). Parents feel insecure when children play outdoors unsupervised, and regulations in some housing estates forbid children from playing downstairs in communal space (Stevenson, Martin, and O'Neil 1967). The tight outline of the outdoors between the high-rise flats results easily in noise that is little appreciated by childless neighbours. Most studies prior to 1980 focus on social rental housing estates. After some decades of silence, new studies on family life and owner-occupied high-rise living have been carried out in Australia. Costello (2005) and Fincher (2004) focus on recent high-rise developments for the middle-classes and make clear that children as small residents are not taken into account by developers and urban planners. Apartment living is generally viewed as inappropriate for young families, but as Easthope and Tice (2011) reveal, in practice, many young families reside in flats. This situation applies most fully for high-rise cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore (Appold and Yuen 2007).

Surprisingly little is known about family living in high-rise Hong Kong (Forrest, La Grange, and Ngai-ming 2002). And while studies elsewhere indicate a problematic relationship between high-rise living and children's outdoor play, Hong Kong research in this field is practically absent. We know only of one small-scale study carried out several years ago by Playright (Hong Kong non-governmental organisation (NGO)), which reveals that on weekdays, children (6–16) spend more time doing their homework and watching television than playing, and when they do play, it is typically indoors. This situation contrasts with children's preferences: most children prefer playing outdoors to playing indoors (Playright 1999). In a Singaporean case study, Kong (2000) reveals that children appreciate the outdoors but go outside infrequently and develop a fear

of green and nature. It is unclear from those studies whether and if there is some relationship between vertical living of children and their limited use of the outdoors.

For Hong Kong middle-class families and their children, living in a highly urban environment intersects with their status as middle-class. Lareau (2003) was among the first to report from the USA on what she calls ‘concerted cultivation’: middle-class practices of fostering children’s talents through extracurricular and other enrichment activities to help them develop a wide range of skills. She gives detailed descriptions of mothers in particular who are fully engaged with their children’s activities, from making the ‘right’ choices to the extensive reasoning and the actual work of transportation and attendance. In terms of theory, Lareau (2003) builds on Bourdieu (1984), who argues that consumption is a way to distinguish. Parents transmit cultural capital with children’s enrichment activities and, in doing so, educate their children into the middle-classes. Katz (2008) adds that today’s economic and geopolitical insecurities press parents to secure their children’s futures through high investment in them. Time- and money-intensive parental strategies are used to reproduce middle-class status in the uncertain future. Everyday practices of raising children tend to fully absorb parents. This process of intensive parenting starts as early as pre-school, as Vincent and Ball (2007) make clear and continues during children’s school career (Gustafson 2011). Children are becoming important as little consumers (McKendrick, Bradford, and Fielder 2000; Karsten, Kamphuis, and Remeijnse 2014), the result of all this being that middle-class parents are engaged in a project child that leaves little space for spontaneous activities such as outdoor play. Raising children has become a project of purposefully organising: ‘doing time’ and ‘creating space’ with age-specific ‘deadlines’ (Van der Burgt and Gustafson 2013). Even as parents’ paid work hours have gone up, time with children has increased (SCP 2011; Craig and Mullan 2012). Spending time with children is considered to be an important aspect of parenting that benefits family bonding. This new way of ‘doing family’ is a class-specific project, most strongly manifested among the wealthy middle-classes (Finch 2007; Morgan 2011).

Rising standards of parenting and childhood in the Asian context have been described in depth by Chua (2011) in her book about her personal history as a ‘tiger mother’. Within Chinese culture, childhood is viewed as a time of training with copious exercises to develop skills. Chinese culture, with its emphasis on the family collective and family harmony, does not allow children to protest openly against paternal decisions. Respect for parents is a main pillar of education, although this is beginning to change (Chan 2009; Chan Kwok-bun 2013). Authoritative reciprocal types of parenting are gaining in importance at the cost of the traditional, more authoritarian styles (McBride-Chang and Chang 1998). Nevertheless, children’s personal achievements still stand high on parents’ agendas in Asia. According to Shek (1996), having children puts pressure on Chinese parents’ time and money, and raising children, including organising children’s daily lives, is viewed as a demanding job. Middle-class Hong Kong parents work in professional organisations operating in global competition. In this situation, education is a top priority (Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Waters 2006). Hong Kong parents try to reproduce their middle-class position through their children’s education and after-school activities, but how these parents achieve this remains unclear. Before examining the results of this study, the specific location of Hong Kong and the methods used will be discussed.

3. Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a city with over 7 million inhabitants made up almost entirely of high-rises. With very few exceptions, all of the children are raised in high-rise housing estates. Apartment living is the dominant supply of housing, and also the very rich have no other choice than to purchase a (luxurious) apartment.

Hong Kong is a tightly planned city within strict borders and an excellent urban transport system. It is also a mall-city with shopping centres being built at almost every metro station. Malls offer a clean and air-conditioned alternative to the street markets and small shops in the old central districts. Commuters must walk through malls along a complex system of walkways and flyovers which is both a relief and a difficult-to-escape trek into consumer palaces. Each mall has several shops directed exclusively at children as young consumers, particularly clothing stores, and all the big brands from Dior to Versace (for children) are well represented. Most malls also have commercial attractions for children, such as game halls and ice-skating rinks.

Public space is limited, but there is a modest supply of playgrounds, sports locations and parks scattered throughout the city. Additionally, Hong Kong has natural parks and beaches on the outskirts of the city. Climate conditions are such that the outdoors is too hot and sometimes also too contaminated to play outside for parts of the year. Hong Kong is both complimented for its carefully planned character and criticised for its lack of creativity and the pressure on its citizens to always behave correctly (Ng 2009). The designated public space with their abundance of rules is not particularly welcoming to the free movement of families and children. Parks and playgrounds reflect Chinese-style order.

Children begin kindergarten at two or three years old, and this 'education' is considered to be the first step in children's schooling career. Some private schools demand specific kindergartens as means to enter their primary schools. Competition between schools is rife and English-language schools, many of British and Christian missionary origin, are the most popular, particularly among the middle-classes. In Hong Kong, children's education goes beyond school attendance. New industries focusing on children's extracurricular activities are flourishing all around the city.

Hong Kong's working week is officially 44 hours, but many jobs have over time as a rule. Working parenthood places high demands on families who try to combine care and career. Part-time working contracts do not exist or are only available for certain low-standard jobs. After the handover to China (1997), Hong Kong became a Chinese Special Economic Region (SER) (2005). The handover was not much supported by the Hong Kong population, however, and fears of stricter Chinese governance have been discussed abundantly in the newspapers. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic disease in 2003 and the recent global economic crisis have added to feelings of uncertainty surrounding the geopolitical situation.

Like elsewhere, in traditional Chinese culture, women are identified as the main family care-takers (Wai and Chui 1997; Chan Kwok-bun 2013). It is important for women to run their homes efficiently and raise their children successfully. Tam and Lam (2013) reveal that the role of fathers in Hong Kong child rearing is marginal when compared to that of the mother, but with increased educational levels, the involvement of fathers grows. Hong Kong has a high number of female professionals (Brooks 2006) but work-family conflicts sometimes push young mothers out of the labour market. Live-work policies are not on the agenda in capitalistic Hong Kong. Within this context, caring tasks cannot be carried out without help from others (Lo, Stone, and Ng 2003). Divisions of care are arranged with family members, particularly grandparents and/or domestic helpers, neither solution being stress-free (Tam 2001; Lee 2002; Brooks 2006; Ko and Chui 2010). The supply of domestic helpers is mediated by the state (working contract with minimum wages and working hours), but they are hired privately by individual families. It is an important industry (Cortes and Pan 2009). The system of domestic helpers makes clear that Hong Kong's modern economic society remains essentially based on patriarchal traditions and that economic modernisation has made very little impact on traditional gender relations at home (Wai and Chui 1997; Lee 2002). This may be one of the reasons that the mean number of births is low. Hong Kong is an ageing society and only 11.6% of its population is under 14

(www.census2011.gov.hk). Nevertheless, over 800,000 children live in this mega city. This study wants to highlight some of the social implications of growing up in the tightly planned and economically pressurised society of Hong Kong.

4. Research methodology

Hong Kong childhood has not been widely studied. The fieldwork was carried out by the European author of this paper, who was temporarily working and residing in Hong Kong. It was decided to focus this study on dual parent middle-class families with professional working careers who could be interviewed in English. Hong Kong is a dual-language city with about half of the population able to speak English. The fieldwork for this exploratory study was carried out in spring 2013, an excellent period for being outdoors with a temperature between 20 and 26 degrees Celcius. Methods used were children's weekly diaries, interviews with one of the parents, interviews with informants working at child/family/housing institutions and observations in children's spaces varying from playgrounds to ice-skating rings in malls. Weekly diaries were used to make a precise calculation of children's everyday lives, including school, after-school activities, exact locations and travel modes. The weekly diaries were reported by one of the parents with whom the interview was held (13 mothers and 7 fathers). In the interviews, two questions were central. First, parents were invited to reflect on their child's schedule: the choices they made for their child and the balance between learning and play. Second, they were asked about their housing situation and the way that might or might not influence their child's everyday schedule.

Parents were very willing to cooperate, but they did not have much time to spend on interviewing. It turned out to be impossible to make a schedule that would allow enabling children's participation. Both parents and children were too busy. The absence of children's voices must be recognised as a serious shortcoming of this study. Interview locations were mostly coffee shops or at the work place and had to be scheduled on convenient times for working parents, often during working day lunchtime. Interviews with informants and additional observations were used for the sake of triangulation.

The 20 interviewed parents were collected in three different ways. First, contacts with academics in Hong Kong have been used. They suggested families (email addresses) working both at the university and elsewhere. Second, some of the informants provided additional addresses, and third, the researcher herself approached some families individually at playgrounds and other family locations. The middle-class status of all the families interviewed was measured using three criteria: academic level of education (at least one of the parents), professional occupation (at least one of the parents), English-speaking ability and housing tenure. All families interviewed lived in owner-occupied apartments or privately rented flats. None of the interviewed families lived in social housing flats that are meant for the Hong Kong working class nor did they live in the richest neighbourhoods of the Hong Kong upper classes (Forrest, La Grange, and Ngai-ming 2004). The research population thus literally reflects a middle status: neither belonging to the less privileged nor to the most affluent residents of Hong Kong. They work as engineers, accountants, teachers, designers, researchers, consultants and in various administrative jobs, often in internationally oriented organisations. The majority of the interviewed families live in enclosed high-rise housing estates (14) in the central parts of Hong Kong Island, New Kowloon and the nearby News Territories on various floors (from 1st to 72nd).

The interviews focused on the everyday life of one child per family and included 12 girls and 8 boys. Most children (15) were aged between 4 and 12 years, 1 child was 14 and 4 children were younger than 4 years. Twenty-six of 40 parents were Hong Kong born; the others have roots in the UK, Australia, China and other Asian countries. All interviewed families had some form of assistance for household and caring tasks, either a female domestic helper (16) and/or a grandmother

living in or nearby (3). Only one family managed very recently (after the only child of the family reached the age of 11) to do without any help.

5. Children's after-school lives

5.1. Children's enrichment activities

The children engage in a mean of four activities, with a variation from zero (baby, aged 0) to seven different activities per week. Most children have busy daily lives, with children aged 8–11 years of age participating in the highest number of enrichment activities. That age category participates in the most activities with more than one scheduled time slot per activity, for example, training sessions during the week and competition/performances on the weekend.

There is little variation in the types of enrichment activities. The most popular activities are after-school classes in English (mostly for the Hong Kong born) and Mandarin (mostly for the international families). No other languages were reported. The next most popular activity is piano lessons, seemingly almost as a matter of course:

Well, the piano: that's a must in Hong Kong. When I was young people would ask: Why do you play the piano? Today it is like: Why don't you learn the piano? It is really a must here in Hong Kong. All kids take piano lessons.

After the popular language and music classes are sports, various forms of maths tutoring and creative skills. Observations reveal that there is a significant market-driven industry for children's enrichment activities all over Hong Kong, but particularly in New Kowloon and Hong Kong Island (central parts around Causeway Bay).

Enrichment activities are expected to begin at a young age like is the case with the middle-classes outside Asia (Vincent and Ball 2007), but in Hong Kong, parents feel pressure to start already when the child is still a baby. One of the interviewed parents who had her first baby:

I'm a mother myself and we have a child of 8 months and my friends say to me, you are late. Your son is already 8 months; he needs to go to a playgroup.

A playgroup sounds innocent, but playgroups are not only to play as was explained by another parent with baby, who had already started with scheduled activities. The father said that the swimming course they had entered with the baby turned out to be unsuccessful, so they stopped that activity. Now the baby attends a playgroup called Tutor Time, which is alternately led in English and Mandarin. With this choice, the parents hope that their daughter will develop her language skills for both English and Mandarin. One of the informants interviewed who works as an English teacher at a child's learning centre said that her institute's biggest success was English classes for babies. The discourse about learning language easily at a very young age is widespread in Hong Kong.

5.2. Outdoor play

The shrinking importance of outdoor play in middle-class children's everyday life (Freeman 2010; Van der Burgt and Gustafson 2013) is apparently visible in Hong Kong childhood. With children's long lists of organised activities, it is not surprising that (outdoor) play received little attention in the interviews. None of the parents spontaneously started to discuss their children's (lack of) play. After some questioning by the interviewer ('And what about outdoor play?'), most parents admitted that playing outdoors was only marginal, particularly for the 5+ age group.

This conclusion parallels the observational study: at playgrounds, only a small minority of older children were present.

The enclosed housing estates all had playgrounds on the ground level and some had indoor playgrounds as well. Most children used the playground infrequently, focusing more on the clubhouse with its supply of after-school classes. Parents explained that as children grow older, their heavy schedules allow for less play time. When asked after the complications of living in a high-rise and having access to the outdoors, parents put forth little support. Some parents who had lived abroad mentioned the limited outdoor play as a negative point, but did not feel that the situation was primarily related to high-rise housing. In the words of a mother with roots abroad and a son of 6:

He would love to play outdoors more often, but he doesn't get the company. Maybe only once a week. His class mates who also live at the estate are always busy with classes and learning things. That's really a pity for him. I remember when I was young; I always was moving around and playing outdoors with the other kids. My son's life is very different.

According to one of the informants, who works at an NGO on children's right to play (outdoor) play has a low status in Hong Kong:

Play is seen as a luxury by parents and actually by the whole society. Parents are more concerned about learning things. And we try to educate them that play is also learning. Children's leisure time is seen as time that can be spent on further after school learning, improvement of skills basically and to staple certificates. Children build a portfolio from a very early age and with 'just' playing you don't qualify your child.

This way of reasoning is adopted by some toy shops in Hong Kong that call themselves early childhood learning centres as to emphasise that playing is learning as well.

5.3. Weekly schedules

Children's highly scheduled lives demand great organisation as is revealed by the concept of the back-seat generation (Karsten 2005). Middle-class children are constantly supervised on their travel to different activity spaces. The weekly diaries of the Hong Kong children show exactly where children go, how they travel and by whom they are supervised. Three types of schedules can be distinguished: weekday, weekend and mixed time schedules.

Table 1. Weekday schedule (girl, aged 10).

Weekdays	What	Day	Where	Travel mode
Activity 1	Gymnastics	Monday and Wednesday after school	At school	
Activity 2	Drawing	Tuesday	Learning centre nearby	On foot with helper
Activity 3	Piano	Thursday	Outside the neighbourhood	By bus with helper
Activity 4	Flute	Thursday	Outside the neighbourhood (same location as piano)	By bus with helper
Activity 5	Private maths tutoring	Friday	Housing estate	On foot with helper
<i>Weekends</i>				
Activity 6	Church programs	Saturday	Outside the neighbourhood	Car with whole family

Weekday schedules (Table 1) have most of the extra activities taking place during the week and children are mostly supervised by the female domestic worker: 'She goes to all the different places.' In many families, parents do not arrive home before 8 in the evening, by which time children have often already had dinner with their helper. The act of supervising also applies to activities located within the estate: children are accompanied (by the helper) even over very short distances.

Weekend schedules (Table 2) have a concentration of activities during the weekend and it is parents themselves who are most actively involved in travelling to children's activity spaces. During the week, the children have either no or a limited number of enrichment activities, and/or those activities are school-based. In this latter case, no extra adult involvement is required.

A mother with a weekend schedule who tries to combine the activities of both her children in one go said:

Then on Saturdays, we start early with drawing class in W. We go there by car all four together. Her brother also attends the drawing class. His sister has already classes from third age on and she loves it. She is also good at it (laugh). Then we go to swimming lessons in C. And from there we go to piano lessons, also in C. Her brother learns the piano as well. He doesn't swim but just watches it together with us.

This quote highlights the impact of the schedule of one of the siblings on the whole family (compare: Van der Burgt and Gustafson 2013). The Sunday English lesson at home is chosen to allow for a little relaxation for everybody:

On Sunday morning the English teacher comes. She comes to our home. We started with English lessons a few years ago but then I convinced the teacher to come to our house. Now she has private lessons. That's more relaxed for all of us. Then the rest of the Sunday is family day. We go to the park maybe, or we have a gathering with friends. Sometimes there is a birthday. And sometimes one of us has to work a little bit as well.

The third type of schedule is a mixed week- and weekend schedule, which can take different forms. One is the weekday schedule with performances on the weekend, usually the case with children who want to become best in one activity in particular. This includes training hours during the week and competitions or performing acts during the weekend. In such cases, the weekday hours are mainly supervised by the helper, while the weekend activities are arranged as family time with the whole family involved. In the words of a father who has two daughters:

Table 2. Weekend schedule (girl, aged 9).

Weekdays	What	Day	Where	Travel mode
Activity 1	Choir	Thursday after school	At school	
Activity 2	Brownies	Friday after school	At school	
<i>Weekends</i>				
Activity 3	Drawing	Saturday	Outside the neighbourhood	Car with the whole family
Activity 4	Swimming	Saturday	Outside the neighbourhood	Car with the whole family
Activity 5	Piano lessons	Saturday	Outside the neighbourhood	Car with the whole family
Activity 6	English	Sunday	At home	

Saturday is all ballet. For both of them. Sometimes she (one of them, lk) has classes in the morning and then later some kind of performance in the evening. She has to go to lessons a few times a week. So it is twice on Saturday and Sunday and we go there as a family.

And when the interviewer asks: 'You're whole weekend is scheduled around the ballet?', the answer is 'Yes!; we are then basically in the T. area' (not the families' residential area).

All three schedules clearly reflect the weekend as family time, with parents and children spending most of their time together, but with very different contents. The weekday schedule reduces the pressure on the weekend by arranging most of the activities during the week and by delegating the travelling to the helper. The weekend is for family, grandparents, sharing meals together, outdoor hiking, etc. However, even then, not all weekend time is free time. Supervising children's homework, planning the next week and parents (over) work were also mentioned as weekend activities. The weekend schedule shows parents and children travelling around for large parts of the day, particularly Saturdays. This travelling time is also viewed as family time. Parents are proud to do the travelling themselves and enjoy spending time with their child. Mothers are most active in travelling with their children, but fathers are engaged as well and some mothers deliberately stated: 'Saturday is Daddy's day.'

6. Parental cultures

6.1. *Balance*

The children's heavy schedules created ambivalent feelings. Parents were proud on the wide range of children's activities and their progress in developing skills, but they also felt some hesitations about too much pressure. They did not want to be portrayed as over-demanding parents. Some started the interview laughingly, saying: 'I'm not a tiger mother' as to defend the way they raise their child. Analysing the narratives, three ways of 'balancing' children's busy lives were found. First, some parents start to compare their child's schedule with those of other children they know. A Hong Kong-born mother said:

I think this is a good balance, not too ambitious when I compare it to my girl's class mates. They often have extra activities during weekdays too. That would be too tight, I would say. We only have the Saturday. I don't want to over-burden them.

In this comparison she 'forgets' that her daughter has also two classes on weekdays (at school). This reveals a second way of 'balancing': parents tend to easily forget some activities. Another mother who had already summed up the whole list of extra activities earlier in the interview: 'Actually, they (he and his brother, lk) have piano class, I forgot. They have piano class. It's only half an hour a week.' Her son is six years old and has six scheduled activities per week. The mother continues with explaining the families' philosophy about best ways to learn:

We try to establish a balance between learning and playing. I believe when they play they are happy. When they feel relaxed they learn faster. I teach them things in a playful way. Not textbook style. I want them to be happy; I think the learning comes when they are ready.

Like the NGO informant cited above, she constructs playing as learningful. And to further illustrate how playing is learning:

Now and then we go to Lego classes. It's a little bit engineering, to look at how the one piece together with the other makes something move. It is also a little bit creative and they just love it.

By defining part of the extra classes as playful learning, a third way of 'balancing' children's busy after-school lives is revealed. The intermingling of playing and learning, playful learning, is mostly referred to by parents with young children.

Parents born in Hong Kong compare their children's lives with their own childhood, which was not playful at all for most of them. They have memories of excessive homework, rote learning and high levels of discipline without any or very few 'nice' after-school activities: 'It was learning and learning and learning.' These personal histories make it understandable that parents are glad that they can afford their children's diverse activities that help them to develop a broader range of skills than they themselves had experienced during their childhood.

6.2. *Intensive parenting*

To enable children's busy schedules, parents are fully engaged. Intensive parenting is about making the right choices, communicating with institutes, instructors and domestic helpers and supervising activities and travelling. Enrichment activities and school work are demanding for both parents and children. Although all families have some extra people (helpers/grandparents) to assist, some mothers decide to quit their jobs or to reduce their working hours. Intensive parenting is very much – but not only – a mother's task (see also Tam and Lam 2013). This sample contained two stay-at-home mothers and four part-time working mothers. Parents feel very responsible for their children's upbringing even when they have a domestic helper, as this mother – who left the labour market temporarily – explained:

It's a job in itself raising children. I decided to quit my job when my second child was born. I think it is exhaustive to raise two. It takes a lot of energy.

Recently, she began to work again, but this time she started her own business to facilitate her working part-time from home. She tells that her 11-year-old son is able to travel to his after-school classes by himself but she prefers to travel with him: 'That is what I actually try. It's a good way to communicate with your child. You can follow his progress and hear what he thinks about the teaching and the teacher, whether he still likes it.'

The weekly schedules show that children in Hong Kong are always supervised, at least until the age of 12 years, as is confirmed in the observational portion of this study. Between 8 and 9 in the morning is rush hour for school buses, private cars and taxis that bring children to school, and at playgrounds in middle-class neighbourhoods, supervising adults often outnumber children. The interviews reveal that those practices are not related to fears about city safety. Indeed, all the parents stated that Hong Kong is very safe. Supervising your child is strongly related to middle-class Hong Kong discourses on good parenthood. Leaving your child alone is interpreted as irresponsible behaviour. A father with roots abroad spoke about the level of safety in Hong Kong:

Very safe. As an expatriate it's very safe. My daughter has been allowed to move around the estate since she was four or five. She was three when we came. So maybe the help was there to keep an eye on her first and then her brother was there and we are Western. Hong Kong neighbours will say: do you want to get rid of your children? They think it is irresponsible to let your child freely move around.

He continued by telling the interviewer that some of his 12-year-old daughter's Chinese friends are still not allowed to travel alone: 'That's too liberal for them.'

7. The school trap

The growing importance of middle-class children's education (Ball 2003) is referred to by the parents of this case study. The highly pressurised Hong Kong school system is widely discussed in the interviews. Most parents argued that they do not want to put undue pressure on their child, but that they sometimes felt forced to do so. Public schools with Cantonese as the first language are generally considered to be too demanding, with strict discipline and excessive homework, and so most families choose a school following the British educational system with lower levels of homework and higher emphasis on creativity and critical thinking. Those schools have an additional advantage: they use the English language, which is generally viewed as a plus for children's futures. In Hong Kong, British system schools (including dual-language schools) are mostly private schools or some form of hybrid private–public (subsidised) schools.

It is not easy to enter a British system school; becoming accepted to such a school requires much effort. School markets are such that private schools can demand not only high tuition but also a rich portfolio, and sometimes also the right neighbourhood. During official interviews, children must demonstrate that they have developed certain skills and/or that they have completed the right kindergarten. Depending on the school, they must also prove that they live in the school catchment area.

Parents who succeed in entering their children in a British system school, however, may come to feel ambivalent. Seeking to avoid the pressure of the local Cantonese schools, they choose the British curriculum but then discover that the latter education is 'full of playing', as they put it. It is precisely this observation that leads them again to schedule extracurricular activities. As a Hong Kong-born mother said about the highly preferred English-language school of her daughter (aged 6): 'I think the school is very playful, not so very academic. She learns a lot at school (laugh) but different things. It has good academic results, but I like the more structural learning also...' For this structural learning, she turns to the market-driven learning centres with its ample supply of after-school classes.

Narratives reveal thus that parents legitimate children's enrichment activities in three ways. The first is the supposed playful learning quality of part of the after-school classes. The second is found in the necessity to build a portfolio with enough credits to enter popular schools. And third, the supposed lack of structural learning at school drives parents again to after-school courses. All three ways of legitimising contribute to a construction of middle-class childhood that thrive in the urban consumption spaces that are so well represented in Hong Kong.

The interviewed parents understand that much has changed since their childhood. Many of the Hong Kong-born parents are first-generation college graduates and they now work as professionals in internationally competitive organisations. They know that global competition will only increase and they want to prepare their children for this new and insecure future. They feel forced to engage in different types of mobility to educate their children well. Several interviewees moved houses to obtain an apartment within the catchment area of a particular school. Almost all hired helpers to travel around the city with their child to the best schools and after-school classes available. Middle-class Hong Kong parents see their families and friends doing all the same: putting great effort into their children's futures. According to one of them: 'You must be very self-confident as a parent to neglect all that pressure.'

8. Conclusion and reflection

This paper reports on an intensive but small-scale case study that reveals some of the mechanisms behind the development of a specific middle-class childhood in high-rise Hong Kong. It is argued that within a global context of further urbanisation and a growing (Asian) middle-class, this study

reflects some features of a childhood that will become more widespread. The results of this study are, however, exploratory and can only be interpreted as trends that require further study.

The main research question sought to determine the relationship between high-rise living and children's everyday lives with a focus on children's after-school activities, particularly living and outdoor play. We had some expectations drawn from the literature about restrictions on playing outdoors for children growing up in a high-rise environment, but our results suggest a much stronger layer in Hong Kong childhood: high expectations concerning children's personal achievements that make outdoor play marginal. This case study on a particular group of middle-class families cannot answer large questions as to how high-rise living determines play behaviour. However, as far as this study reveals, it is parenting cultures and school demands, rather than families' vertical living that influences the low level of outdoor play. This conclusion may well be different for lower class children (Power 2007). As they will have fewer formally organised activities and thus are more dependent on the quality and accessibility of the outdoors. Three further conclusions can be drawn.

First, extracurricular activities are a matter of course for middle-class children in Hong Kong. Those activities start at a very early age and are fairly uniform, made up mostly of language and music classes and to a lesser extent, some form of mathematics tutoring, sports and creative skills. This highly scheduled life leaves little time for spontaneous (outdoor) play, particularly not for children aged 5 years and older. Children are continuously supervised up to the age of 12 by parents, teachers and helpers. Choosing, communicating and supervising extracurricular activities reveal high levels of intensive parenting, particularly by mothers.

Second, parents are very keen on developing children's skills. Play is generally not considered to contribute much to children's qualification and as such it is not high on parental agendas. In their search for balance in their children's lives, parents define some of the extracurricular activities as both playful and learningful. Parents hope that children's enrichment activities create situations of playful learning they themselves had never experienced during their childhood. This expectation is well understood by Hong Kong toyshops who label themselves as early childhood learning centres.

Third, parents consider extracurricular activities as necessary both to enter the popular British system schools and to counterbalance the supposed lack of structured learning at some of those English-language schools. This generation of parents feels like they have to invent a new childhood in a global and competitive city, one that requires a significant investment of time, energy and money for the development of children's skills. They know that the chances of children entering a favoured school grow when they apply with impressive portfolios. Once the child has entered the school, however, parents compare the curriculum with the traditional Cantonese schools they attended themselves or – in case of families from abroad – they have heard about. They miss the discipline and serious homework and feel forced to build on their children's skills after school. This paradoxical situation of the school trap must be understood in the context of the growing competition among the international (English speaking) professional workforce to which the interviewed parents belong. Competition to get the best education starts from babyhood and endures throughout university. In this context, it does not surprise that the children's (including babies) extracurricular activities industry has developed as a significant market in Hong Kong.

This paper throws light on today's ways of raising middle-class children in highly urban environments. The situation in Hong Kong is not fundamentally different from what we see elsewhere, particularly in the USA (Lareau 2003) and the UK (Vincent and Ball 2007; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014), although the Hong Kong case seems to be more extreme in its number of activities, the early (babyhood) start, the way helpers are engaged and the wide supply of learning institutions and consumption spaces focused on children.

In the age of modernity, societal pressures on the middle-classes across the globe are such that becoming a parent means getting engaged in a project called child (Giddens 1991). The parents interviewed in this study behave like professionals not only in their working environments but also in their private lives when raising children (Hochschild 1997). They reflexively organise expert advice and instructions for the personal development of their child. Parents are not much to blame: they love their children and want the best for their future, but higher pressure life-styles will leave only limited agency for children. Children may love playing outdoors, but do not get the chance to do so. It is urgently needed to hear children's voices and to do research with children themselves about their preferences and considerations.

The results of this study reveal further that with this middle-class definition of 'good' childhood, the urban environment changes from a depressing, unsafe and unhealthy environment to an attractive place with a large supply of children's commodities. Katz (2008) pointed to the 'perfect' match of Manhattan with its local industries of education and extracurricular activities and the many professionals with children living in this environment. On a much lower level of intensity, Karsten (2014) draws the same conclusion. She relates the increase in young urban professional parents (Yupps) in an Amsterdam neighbourhood to the rise of a children's consumption infrastructure that fits the new middle-class families well. The urban environment with sometimes poor conditions for children's outdoor play facilitates new practices of raising children by offering all types of commercial services for children. This may ultimately lead to changing discourses of childhood from a rural to an urban idyll. New avenues of research should explore this trend further by incorporating children themselves in the research, and incorporating families with fewer resources. So far, a plea for child and family friendly policies should be held: play spaces, school demands and life-work balance should be much higher on the agendas of global cities.

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