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Motherly narratives: motherhood,  
caring employment and the tensions of  
Chinese kindergarten teachers

By

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## **Motherly narratives: motherhood, caring employment and the tensions of Chinese kindergarten teachers**

### **Introduction**

In 1969, Daqing, a woman was carrying a child without paying attention to her crying son when the leader inspected the temporary kindergarten. When asked why she did not care for her own child, the woman answered: “Why bother? Their mothers are working for our state, I am relieving these women’s burden by taking care of their children” (Jin, 2013). When this woman chose from the public motherly employment and her own motherhood responsibility, she decided to realize the motherly responsibility as a kindergarten teacher. The public discourses about motherhood, along with women’s understandings and experience, consist of the complexity of motherhood in China.

Motherhood in China has been historically and culturally framed by the public ideologies. Confined to the domestic sphere, Chinese women were assigned with the traditional motherhood obligations to care for children (Friedan, 1963). However, the urgent needs of the workforce are to change the representations of romanticized motherhood and encourage women to work in the public. Starting from the 1950s, the government worked on its way to establish the collective childcare system to share the care work of women (Jin, 2013), which dramatically transformed the image of motherhood. Later, the one-child policy emphasized the importance of child rearing. Although helped by their parents with care work, women are encountered with new challenges to fulfill the new requirements of motherhood.

The experience of kindergarten teachers can reveal the institutional framed motherhood and gender norms. Given naturalized discourses that equate femininity with domesticity, not

surprisingly, employment in childcare is deemed appropriate for women. Consistent with the gendered understandings of care, kindergarten teachers are commonly understood collectively mothering young children in the kindergarten. Beside their employed care work, kindergarten teachers rear their own children at home as well as others' children in the kindergarten, which provide us an insightful perspective in understanding motherhood in current China.

The tensions and complexities of motherhood performed by kindergarten teachers are evidenced in sociological literature, though specific observation in complex fields is needed. Viewing themselves as second mothers for children (Nelson, 2010), some are frustrated that they are “unable to effectively synthesize caring for their own children and others' children” (Rutman 1996). The mismatch can be concluded as a caregivers experience “a conflict between their responsibilities as caregivers and paid workers” (Tuominen, 2003), which shows us the nuances of childcare practices in more specific situations. However, sociocultural contexts have different norms. Specific observation is needed in the complex situations of Chinese kindergarten teachers.

Examining daily care activities of kindergarten teachers, this thesis will use the lens of motherhood to see how care work is framed in the language of mothering. The gap of understanding care practices remains as the analogy of motherhood requires kindergarten teachers to love their students selflessly, demanding the emotional labor that Hochschild identifies in a range of women's work (1983) without seeing the deviation of their care practices. The discourse of collectivism also contribute to the profound care practices in the kindergarten. By studying the meaning of motherhood to these women, my thesis begins to address questions that go beyond the technical solutions of the institutional motherhood and how mothers balance their work and family demands of care, elucidating how female caregivers' deal with the different ideological tensions aligning with and deviating from the narratives of motherhood in

their everyday care practices. While the sense of self is shaped by the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering (Ruddick, 1989), the self can also redefine motherhood through their profound experience. From their interpretation of their care experience, we can see the care diversity and “mother is not understood as a monolithic identity” (Chandler, 2007).

The exploration of care in specific situations can help us relocate the concept and practices of motherhood in the current China. Also, we can explore how their mothering experience transform our gendered ideological assumptions about childcare. As motherhood is a model in ethics of care, the analysis of the motherly framing could be beneficial in understanding care in China’s context. To examine the care practices, this article will rebuild the vague concept of care through a detailed example, which can support further evidence for interdisciplinary studies.

## **Literature Review**

Motherhood is perceived as the best model for care, prompting questions about the tension of the understandings of motherhood and the experience of motherhood. The dominant social expectation of motherhood remains committed to meeting the demands “by work of preservative love, nurturance and training” (Ruddick, 1989) to fulfill the emotional and physical needs of children at the cost of mothers own well-being (Peterson, 1984; Smith, 1984). The gendered expectation internalizes traditional norms of labor, which is criticized by many feminists that motherhood is institutionalized patriarchal motherhood (Rich, 1976). To recognize the gender norms and further cultural changes, feminists define motherhood as motherhood as “identity of subjectivity”--how women sense themselves in the gendered frame and experience of mothering (Rich, 1976; O’Reilly, 2010).

The tension between a professional care provider and a motherly image is clearly seen in kindergarten teaching. As motherhood is reshaped in sharing caring work between the contemporary working mothers and care helpers, kindergarten has witnessed the alignment and deviation of motherhood from the care providers. On the one hand, childcare stays child-centered and caring for children with love, kindergarten teachers “reproduce docile subjectivities and uncomplaining caregiving” (Colley, 2006). On the other hand, providers foster the professional image of educators (Nelson, 1990) and maintain an emotional distance from their charges (Scar, 1978; Lightfoot, 1984). Based on the deep acting theory, the commercial aspect of care service further defines the care providers as emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor, usually gendered, connects a pragmatic sociology of emotions to a critique of domination.

Motherhood can be also investigated further from the work and child care conflict to women. In its tradition, “the mother and worker roles are distinct” (Short, 2002). The full-time domestic mother and employed supermom (Thurer, 1994) have been pitted against to renew the meaning of motherhood. Women who work as care providers, who care for their own children as well as their students in the kindergarten, seem to dissolve the assumed incompatible expectation. Based on Kahn’s role conflict theory that “simultaneous occurrence of two sets of pressures such that compliance with one would make more difficult compliance with one other” (1964), Greenhaus (1985) further clarifies work-family conflicts consist of time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict. The selfless feature of care draws into denial of both care activities in the care process. These kindergarten teachers are inundated with exhaustion and depression for failing to live up to the impossible standards of motherhood (O’reilly, 2010). Consequently, the care work both “embraces and rejects the traditional mothering model” (Nelson, 1990).

In parallel with these discussions about motherhood and care, research in China has uncovered previously masked connections. Historical literature covers the early stage of the kindergarten in the 1950s from different fields and shows the collective features of the early kindergarten care (Han, 2013; Wang, 2015; Qu, 2017; Xu & Song, Wan, 2020). Literature about current care in the kindergarten describes care from the kindergarten teacher as mother-like care (Qian, 2013, Wang, 2014, Chen, 2020). Zhang's (2015) writing focuses on the roles that kindergarten teachers play, highlighting the differences between being a mother and being a kindergarten teacher. While Chinese literature is a helpful starting point, it relies too much on the perspective of emotional labor, which overlooks the special habitus, especially the origins of collectivism in current Chinese public kindergarten. The particular motherhood frames and mothering experience are left vague.

## **Methods**

Over a half-year period, I conducted a digital ethnography with 25 kindergarten teachers in four kindergartens. These four kindergartens originate from one old kindergarten, and are under one chief. The ethnography involves lengthy semi-structured interviews and the observation of social media in four kindergartens in Zhejiang, China. Questions in the interviews dealt with a wide range of issues, including the care experience as a mother, care experience as a kindergarten teacher, understandings about the framed motherhood. Because I was particularly interested in the motherly rhetoric of motherhood among the kindergarten and the reactions of the kindergarten teachers to the discourse, the questions in the interview were open-ended. Areas of concern raised by women in the beginning of the study were pursued in the subsequent interviews, and questions were designed to encourage a full discussion of issues. Each interview

lasted at least thirty minutes and some ran for several hours. The interviewees were introduced to me through snowball sampling.

The baseline criteria for inclusion in this study is that the interviewees are permanent staff in the public kindergarten with more than one year working experience. Most interviewees are mothers of at least one child, two of them have not married yet. One of them is an unmarried male teacher, and the other one is an unmarried female teacher. The interviewees vary in age from their twenties to fifties. The kindergarten teachers in the public kindergarten are usually equipped with sufficient knowledge and experience to pass the staff examination from the Education Bureau.

To study the care practices of public kindergarten teachers in Zhejiang is good from the point of view of understanding the relation of gender to jobs for three reasons. First, public kindergarten teachers in Zhejiang is not an elite occupation, but also a welcomed job with governmental background; second, as these teachers are not paid directly by the parents in public kindergartens, this study is limited to non-commercial care arrangements—that the commercial factor is reduced; third, as public kindergarten is more welcomed from the parents in Zhejiang, the model these kindergartens set can draw in a clear direction about the care activities in China.

## **Analysis**

### **Frames of motherly rhetoric for kindergarten teachers**

Expectation of ideal care in kindergarten from parents and society

In this section, the motherly characteristics of kindergarten care is addressed to see the frame of motherly rhetoric for kindergarten. In China, the kindergarten is historically considered to provide substitute care for the family. Response to the slogan of building a new China in the 1950s, Chinese women have been encouraged to participate in the workforce (Su, 2012).

Accordingly, kindergartens and nurseries were created in the 1950s to guarantee working mothers with support in sharing the care work (Han, 2013; Wang, 2015; Qu, 2017; Xu & Song, Wan, 2020). Kindergarten teachers, who are the main care providers in the kindergarten, care for children under the discourse of family care. The discourse of the family parallels that of the kindergarten. As the responsibility of childcare is first assigned to women in families and later shared by personal or public childcare service, it is culturally believed that the mother is best suited to comprehend her child's needs and respond to their needs intuitively (Macdonald, 1998). Although the reforms of pre-school from the government and the current child-rearing cultures concentrate on the educational aspect rather than physical care aspect, the roles of kindergarten teachers and their practices are largely framed by the motherhood rhetoric.

Under the motherly rhetoric of kindergarten care, the daily work of a kindergarten teacher is made up of care activities and teaching. Care activities and teaching can be understood as one because many of the education goals in the kindergarten are to help children to foster the habit of self-care and some common sense, which can be learned from the care activities. Handing over the children from their family members, kindergarten teachers begin to care for more than ten children per person the whole day. Kindergarten teachers need to help with the potty training, lunch, and getting dressed after naps in the kindergarten. These activities are interspersed with the regular activities such as courses and outdoor playing. At the same time, kindergarten teachers are required to keep eyes on the children to make sure that the children are safe.

Kindergarten teachers find themselves permissively framed by the motherhood rhetoric and hardly do they recognize themselves as the substitute mothers of their students. Yang, an excellent teacher in the kindergarten, who has two children, insists that she identifies herself as the educator first. "I think I am the supporter and playmate of children", she says, "when the children are very young, I am like their mother to teach them the basic living skills. But when

they are older, I will transform my role and help them to gain the sense of rule”. Dong, a teacher with one son, extends the role she recognizing herself, “You should be the protector and companion for children. You are there to help them solve problems”. However, they find that they are still under the social expectations of care providers. Dong finds that “parents still view you as a nanny”. Parents are strict with their children’s appearances when they pick up children after school. “Have the children fixed their collar? Has their saliva been wiped by the teachers? Kindergarten teachers might get criticized if the parents feel that their children were not well treated in the kindergarten”. Ye, a teacher with a daughter, was frustrated that many parents find their work is only guarding children, “you are professional and you have your systematic knowledge in educating children. But these parents just do not realize that.”

Although kindergarten teachers dislike the motherly rhetoric, they tend to use the motherly criteria to view themselves and their colleagues. The comparison of different generations reveal their inclination in the motherly frame for themselves. Kindergarten teachers would always find the newcomers careless in taking care of the children. Fang, who has been in the kindergarten for twelve years, finds that the newcomers cannot take all children into account in class. “It’s very difficult for the young teachers to conduct a class and keep children silent as well. Not to mention that they cannot satisfy the individual physical care needs for children”. Jin has been working as a kindergarten teacher for twenty years, and finds that Fang’s generation still did not fulfill the requirements for care. “When we are young, we change diapers for children. Younger kindergarten teachers now have helpers to do this dirty stuff, they cannot do this by themselves”. Cai and Lin, who have worked for more than twenty-five years, state that younger generations, usually the only child from their core family, are too young and less responsible in caring for children. “You can tell from the look of their eyes”, says Cai, “love is contained in your eyes. Their love is insufficient, compared to those who have children”.

By interacting with the parents and the children practically, kindergarten teachers make sense of the emphasis of the motherhood rhetoric rather than professionalism taught from textbooks. Zheng, the chief of the four kindergartens, finds the importance of family atmosphere in socializing children. “Kindergarten is constructed to be like a family based on the development of the minds of children. Our arrangements and daily routines are organized with educational purpose. For example, we would have children learn how to welcome a guest to their home. In this case, they are the hosts of kindergarten. How they welcome the guests, how they behave are under the direction of kindergarten teachers”. This understanding is in line with Freud that as a child takes himself as an object of desire, the object relations in the social microcosm can help socialize the children in the process of orienting one toward another. In the intimate relationship, the children can be educated by earning recognition from the kindergarten teachers the way they do from their parents. The kindergarten organizes the field with compromises, encouragement and caring. The child incorporates the social in the form of affects. Immersed in the loving atmosphere, children can follow the instructions from their kindergarten with joy as they search for recognition from their teachers.

The motherly rhetoric is further strengthened in their daily care activities. In the narrative of motherhood, the annoying acts of the child turn out to be something tolerable, or even cute. “You cannot make it unless you love the children,” says Cai. They also need to withstand the irrational emotions of children. The narrative of the care process mitigates the reluctance of showing patience to children, and gives a positive voice to overcoming what might otherwise be seen as frustrating work. The role play intertwines with their knowledge about the development of children. They know that children aged three to six cannot understand the logical connection between ideas; the repetition of reasoning is needed. Thus patience is cultivated in the motherly frames.

The everyday life in the kindergarten requires the kindergarten teachers to act like mothers. According to Hochschild's emotional labor theory, kindergarten teachers must dwell on what it is that they want to feel and on what they must do to induce the feeling. The pretending mom image and pretending authority to students helps with everyday problems. The rules in the kindergarten and expectations from parents add up to a longer strip of the understanding of work, and ask them to interpret the trivials in daily care.

#### Internalization of motherly care in employing mothering experience

Apart from the institutional frames, kindergarten teachers interpret their experience of being a mother or their imagination of being a mother to internalize the motherly care in their work. Consequently, the quasi-mother role of kindergarten teacher is strengthened through "mother-only" experience from their understanding. Usually, these kindergarten teachers start working in the kindergarten after they graduate from college or secondary school. Most of them were unmarried when they joined the kindergarten. As many kindergarten teachers gain new understandings from the transitions from a nulliparous to a mother, they attach great importance to mothering experience to be a great kindergarten teacher. For this reason, the advantages of mothering experience to their care work is widespread in the kindergarten. Nearly all the interviewees mentioned that the experience of rearing their own children is beneficial for their students in the kindergarten.

The predominant importance of the mothering experience my interlocutors find is the increased sensitive detection to the children's health. Yang brings an example in checking the health condition of the child, "Because my daughter gets sick easily, I know how to perceive the early stage of a child's fever. Now when I see a child is sweating, I will touch his neck and get him a quick treatment." Yang's daughter is studying in her friend Fang's class. And Fang has not

married yet. “Although Fang claims that she knows more than younger teachers about the conditions of children, she cannot treat children as carefully as mothers. Tiny hints can be missed”. Many kindergarten teachers who have raised their own children find that they gain the care experience of motherhood.

Kindergarten teachers also find that entering in the stage of a mother helps themselves with more willingness and patience with children. Many kindergarten teachers who have children find the unmarried teachers are reluctant to deal with children’s excrement. “When you become a mom and you get used to these stuffs, you are willing to do with excrement”; Chen, a teacher with two children, mentioned that although she knows that children will employ foul language in one stage of their growth from the textbook, she did not know what to do when children did so in her class. However, after dealing with her own son’s use of foul language, she stays calm with the phenomenon of dirty words from children. “You will become more tolerant.” The intensive motherhood concerning care activities makes the care practices in the kindergarten more patient.

According to my interlocutors, the experience of being a mother also makes kindergarten teachers more considerate. Zheng mentioned her experience in conducting a PE class. As there were limited instruments in the kindergarten, she let one child open his arm to pretend that he was a hula hoop, and the other child moved around the former child. She felt that was a great chance for children to learn the mechanism of the exercise. However, one parent passed by her classroom and told her that she found the task of pretending to be a hoop very demanding. This time, Zheng realized that she failed to notice the possible influence on the child. “When you became a mother, you would understand better about the feelings of the children. You will view them from the perspective of a mother.”

My interviewees also claimed that becoming mothers helped them understand the parents of children. As these kindergarten teachers have gone through the family field and work field of care, the cleft between them was reduced. “I came to understand why some parents find care work more important than teaching in the kindergarten.” Many teachers find that the experience of rearing their own children helps them communicate with the parents of their students. Also, the experience of being a mother can help with understanding the love that the parents have for their children which they could not fully understand before. Cai mentions “if you want to send your child to kindergarten, the best choice would be the teacher who gave birth to children several years ago. They can provide the best care work.”

The mothering myth also influences many young kindergarten teachers who have not given birth to a child yet. Asked what the possible differences would be in their care work if they have children, Zhang said, “I think I would care for children from the perspective of a mother, and I would be more careful.” When asked the exact difference between a mother and a non-mother, she is unsure and says that mothering experience help kindergarten teachers with better care practices. Although Zhang and her colleague Bao believe that working experience also influence the quality of care work, they believe that mothering can bring kindergarten teachers unique experience in their work.

The importance paid to the mothering experience from kindergarten teachers cannot be understood without the background of kindergarten teachers. As becoming a kindergarten teacher is thought to be a great investment for women to prepare for the feminine responsibilities in the family, kindergarten teachers are usually the one to care for children at home. Most of the interviewees are in middle class families and marry to men from similar backgrounds. The work in the kindergarten is a gendered investment which seems to promise to take the responsibility of caring for offsprings by these kindergarten teachers. Consequently, most of the kindergarten

teachers rear their children by themselves with intensive motherhood, without much help from their husbands. That's why they could utilize their caring experience in their work, the kindergarten teachers have already offered care work at home.

The good ends of the care practices cannot be only related to mothering experience, but the continuity of care practices. Other than motherhood, the repetitive care practices can be the answers to the good care work. The intensive motherhood at home, which is already gendered, internalizes the gendered norms of care thus inactivating the mothering myth in the kindergarten. As Bourdieu mentions, "the degrees to which the body is invested in this relation is measured by their duration and intensity" (Pascalian Meditation, 141). The understanding of "invest" in Bourdieu's theory cannot be understood as conscious or unconscious specifically. That is, kindergarten teachers care for their students bodily. The guidelines, or the broader social orders inscribed in bodies thus turn out as caring and positive care. The mothering experience are internalized in the gendered norms of care thus inactivating the mothering myth in the kindergarten.

### **Gendered emotions management in motherhood narratives**

#### Care exhaustion in daily care activities

The ideal care image originated from motherhood cannot be fully realized in the daily care of kindergarten teachers. The motherhood myth idealizes the care that women could provide to her children, urging the relentless attention and tolerance from care providers. Therefore, kindergarten teachers experience care exhaustion. Besides, the protection that the kindergarten teachers build from themselves to avoid emotional loss also shows the deviation of the motherly model in the care practices. This section would explore emotions management of kindergarten

teachers at work to see how they apply the motherly rhetoric and how they understand their actual care experiences.

Kindergarten teachers are living in fairy tales which they concocted for themselves in their daily acting. The chief of kindergarten, Zheng mentions the buzzword in the kindergarten is “Never forget why you started (your career)”, which led the kindergarten teachers to internalize the discourse of motherhood in their life. “The kindergarten is depicted to be a sweet paradise away from the tedious work from the world. This fairy tale description is absolutely not what kindergarten teachers are experiencing. But they are used to thinking about their life in this way.” Zheng also admits that she would make suggestions to help the teachers view problems from the perspective of mothers and professional educators to kindergarten teachers.

Kindergarten teachers handle troublesome cases in class with the motherly strategy. Like I mentioned before, they try to cope with children’s actions from a motherly perspective. The perspective is combined with the professional self-recognition. Although children can be naughty and annoying, the narratives of kindergarten teachers subscribe as positive as they find the children are forgivable. Ye, says, “You cannot get angry with them, really. You might be driven mad for a while, and you find they are no more than funny.” Yang says, “Children do things for reasons. I would like to know what happened to them and work with them to deal with the issues that lead to their dysfunctions.”

Both of the teachers find acting as a mother is a proper way to understand the annoying situations of children. In Ye’s case, she would use the “emotional memory” to reconceive the children from the positive perspective; In Yang’s words, she was expected to see the children as victims of uncontrollable impulses somehow related to their undeveloped minds, and in need of enormous doses of kindness and indulgence in order to help them learn in the kindergarten.

They understand the actions of kindergarten children from sympathy, tenderness and love toward their charges, despite their animal-like behavior.

Managed motherhood cannot always be achieved by the kindergarten teachers. Bao and Zhang, who work together in one class, both find their assumed genuine careful intuition can be turned down by the children if the children do not listen to their words constantly. “I can shout to them sometimes, though I know I should not behave like this”, “Sometimes they just don't listen to you”, says Bao. Ye mentions her experience in persuading a child not to put finger into his mouth. “I can only do that part with a clear conscience. Sometimes I really can't change the habit if the child and his parents are stubborn”. Kindergarten teachers cannot always behave tolerantly if they find that they cannot change the children in the way they want and their repetitive care activities are not proved effective on children.

According to Hochschild, emotional labor “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (1983). In this case, the kindergarten children’s contentment should be protected by the teachers in a safe and convivial way. Following the theory of emotional labor, caring work poses challenges to kindergarten teachers' sense of self. In the case of tolerating or caring for children, the issue of estrangement between what a person senses as her true self and her inner and outer acting becomes something to work out, to take a position on. Care exhaustion occurs when the kindergarten teachers find that the mess of the inner and outer self.

However, merely using emotional labor as a generic term to describe the emotions in the work will deprive ourselves of the tools of empirical description. As the kindergarten teachers in the public kindergarten are hired by the government, the commercial factor is reduced in the context. Also, kindergarten teachers and their students develop a longer time relationship than passengers and flight attendants. The attachment kindergarten develops with the children, in line

with the motherhood story, would view the wellbeing of children as the end of the labor rather than the caring actions. Consequently, the divergence between the inner and outer self is not obvious in caring for children, more tricky though. Nevertheless, even though the motherly rhetoric is a great emotional management for kindergarten teachers, it is divorced from the actual feelings of kindergarten teachers.

#### Emotional distance from children

Unlike the general chasm between the care providers and the ideal model, kindergarten teachers are encountered with special disconnections in their care practices. To cope with the emotional loss after they farewell their students, they form the emotional distance from their students as an emotional management in their daily care.

A week before the graduation ceremony, some kindergarten teachers of the graduating grade enacted a dream list with the students in their class. Students can do whatever they want, such as visiting the fire department, conducting a model show, or very simply, the whole class stays awake during the scheduled nap time. Teachers tried their best to fulfill the dreams of their students. Both teachers and students were continuously excited, until the end of the graduation ceremony. Some teachers would burst into tears during the graduation ceremony. Many kindergarten teachers would spend some dinner time with their students and then they waved their students goodbye.

Usually, the intimate relationship between children and kindergarten teachers stops abruptly after graduation. Some mention that due to social media, some parents would organize some greetings in the group chats, so they would keep a close relationship with their students for a few years beyond their graduation. “Some kids told me that they miss the life in the kindergarten where they can be encouraged to do everything they want. But I have no idea how

long the relationship will last.” The most common situation would be that children would forget their kindergarten teachers in two years. The wonderful relationship seems to be limited to a specific time and location.

Kindergarten teachers said that they gradually accept the fact that relationships between children and themselves cannot last long. “I shall not blame them,” said Zheng. “Their forgetfulness is due to their psychological characteristics.” Ye also claims that “That’s why many people say that the kindergarten students are the ones that broke your heart. One will remember your primary school teachers, but one may not remember the attachment you have with your kindergarten teachers. I was frustrated at first, then I decided to accept that. At least I can remember them, so I can be the one to say hi if I bump into some of my former students.”

The destined separation makes the mothering analogy dubious. The difficulty of dealing with the sense of loss is reinterpreted in kindergarten life. The work of kindergarten teachers is to help the children grow up better. As a result, kindergarten teachers view their students as their educational goals, different from other jobs that can quantify and objectify the care recipients. Thus the relation between kindergarten teachers and students is closer than other emotional labor. Colley (2006) finds that the separation of kindergarten teachers and students makes the emotional investment in vain. She approaches the separation by shaping the vocational culture into emotional detachment. This emotional distance is revealed in the words of kindergarten teachers in the ethnography.

The acceptance of the not long lasting relationship can be accumulated as the kindergarten teachers become more experienced. “You can parallel this situation to romantic love. You hurt a lot when you ended up with your first love, then you will continue to fall in love with others. You will hurt less in the later romance because you are mature. Similarly, as you are more experienced, you can be calm to deal with the separation.” Zheng insisted that the only

transformation of their care practices is their calmness; their level of care for their students has not decreased. Zhang agrees that she has very different feelings toward her first class and the latter, “It’s very different that you know when the children finally leave you.” When her colleague Bao, conducting her first class, says that she finds all children are same, and shall view all her children same, Zhang refutes the words, “I had the similar thought as yours before. You will feel what I felt when your first class students leave, the first class students in your career are different.” Zhang finds that she would become more skillful rather than pour all her attention to the children, “otherwise it will be too harmful.”

The distance the kindergarten teachers try to obtain from their children also shows the deviation of mother image that kindergarten teachers are encountering when they have to say goodbye to the kindergarten children. Unlike the contribution to reduce the care exhaustion, the duration of the care providers and care recipients turns out to decrease the completion of care. Although the meaningful relationship is formed, when kindergarten teachers fulfill their goals of promoting “gradual independence and self-reliance amongst young people” (Holland, 2010), they are at loss. Realizing that the love they pour into the kindergarten children turns out to be one-sided and temporary, the kindergarten teachers reluctantly alienate the children at a certain distance in the future to prevent emotional damage.

### **Encountered the real motherhood: care role conflicts of kindergarten teachers**

#### Incompatibility caring roles

Based on the traditional mother image, kindergarten teachers are described to own women’s virtues as tenderness and consideration. The kindergarten teachers are believed to best satisfy the needs of their own children then care for other children. However, according to my interlocutors, they find it difficult to both fulfill the care obligations at work and at home, and

many of them are unsatisfied with their allocation of care at home. Based on the role conflict theory (Greenhaus, 1985), this section would examine the care roles conflicts and see how collectivism contributed in forming the care practices of the kindergarten teachers.

The time stress is the most fundamental issue in the work-family conflict. Apart from hours of employed care, kindergarten teachers need to spend extra time with parents who have questions about the care work. Kindergarten teachers who do not have children find they get used to talking to parents after school on the phone. Zhang said, "Sometimes I cannot finish talking until late at night. If I have my child, I would spend less time talking with those parents"; Yang, who has two children, manages her communication time after class for half an hour. Still, she needs to bring other unfinished work after home. And both she and her children are getting used to the fact that sometimes she is so busy with her work that she does not have time for her. Lin, who is occupied in constructing three new kindergartens, says she cannot take care of her son because she is too tired. "My son is experiencing the last year of his high school. I wanted to care for him but I am too tired to do so. I always fall asleep after I am off work, and my son would go back home after that. He would get up at six in the morning, and leave before I got up. I don't think this is what I want, I want to spend more time with him." Lin emphasizes family a lot, but she turns out to be busy with work.

Kindergarten teachers also find that they are weary in their work so that they are not available to offer proper emotional care to their children. This situation can be understood from the perspective of care exhaustion, and also from the perspective of role conflicts. Kindergarten teachers are encountered with the situation that they wanted to be a good mother at home, but many of them finally bury themselves in the work. Jin and Chen claim that they are regretful that they cannot spare their time to tell bed stories for their children when their children were young. Jin said, "I have no patience for my son. I know I should tell him bed stories, but I just ran out all

my patience at work. I was too tired to satisfy my son's needs". Lin, Chen, Mou and Lai all agree that they would be easily angry at their children and cannot give their children enough patience when their children make mistakes. "I try my best to care for my students, as a result, my son was less important. I cannot shout to my students due to the regulations for kindergarten teachers, so I would shout to my son", says Lin, "If my son did not listen to my words and annoyed me, I would beat him". In these cases, care exhaustion influences their child-rearing with the delaying representations, which hinders themselves in fulfilling the obligations for their children.

Although the care in the kindergarten and at home are similar, kindergarten teachers also find the nuances in behavior conflicts. They find that the positions make them behave differently in spite of the similarities in care. Different expectations they have on their children make them switch the care strategies. Both Lai and Mou say they are more strict with their own children. Mou says, "If I am strict with my students in class, some parents would be unsatisfied. But when it comes to my own son, I can do what I want"; Yang finds that she is less strict with her daughter, she concludes that her daughter has already fostered the habit of reading while some of her students do not, so she would be strict with her students to help them learn how to read. Many kindergarten teachers are stressed by the gap to the expectations of their own children, especially after they have taught excellent children, which leads to the behavior conflicts in the care life.

The aforementioned three conflicts interact with each other and turn out to be a complex situation in the care practices of kindergarten teachers. Many kindergarten teachers find that what they do is contradicted with what they think they should be doing. They believe that they should take responsibility to care for their children and have high expectations, but they ultimately spend more time with their students. Lin and Yang, who spend much more time on

their work, insist that their life goal is to become a good wife and mother. Ye also mentions that she does not plan to spend so much time on her work. “I do not want to get the promotion for my work, nor for other honors. It is the sense of responsibility that tortures me”. Chen also uses the words of sense of responsibility in her interview, “I set my work priorities though I wanted to put the family first place. But I end up working the whole day”. Yang, Shi and three other kindergarten teachers state that they hire home carers to care for their children to share the family care work.

Feeling that they fall to reach the traditional motherly image, these kindergarten teachers are regretful that they do not fulfill the family responsibilities, their actual works show that they are more into their role as employed care providers rather than mother. What is unanswered is the meaning of responsibility and how the employed work influences the traditional gender norms in their life.

To understand dedication from motherhood and collectivism

The unevenly distributed time, managed emotions and nice behavior show the paradox in kindergarten teachers' care practices. Their enthusiasm for work contradicts their traditional role, especially in the gender field. Back to the case raised in the beginning of the thesis, the kindergarten teacher actually cares for children in the kindergarten instead of her own child. This incoordination is in line with my interlocutors that despite their initial will, they care for their students more than they care for their own children. Based on the argument that the cultural norm of collectivism in China legitimizes giving priority to work by emphasizing reciprocity between family and other, larger collectivities (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Redding, 1993), Xu summarizes the phenomenon as “dedication” (2018) in the investigation of kindergarten in Beijing in 1954-1957, and women in the kindergarten seem to have this spirit especially. Can we

understand the divergence of the care practices from this perspective? How has the ideology of collectivism historically and culturally shaped the understanding of care and how is motherhood intertwined with this notion?

The ideology of collectivism has influenced the care practices in the kindergarten. Passing from the older generation, the strong sense of organization identity helps establish the sense of dedication of kindergarten teachers. According to the elderly kindergarten teachers who are aged 40-50, they repetitively mention that the young generation do not have the “spirit of dedication” to the kindergarten as themselves. Shi mentions the patterns that if the younger partner does not finish the tasks, the older ones are used to finish the unfinished task. The older generation have formed habitus in kindergarten, which created new gender norms in the kindergarten, that helps the younger generation to change their care practices in their work. Many younger kindergarten teachers find that the leader of the kindergarten is working hard in the kindergarten, thus urging them to spend more time on work. The willingness of spending extra time for their students partly due to the passing down of collectivism from the older generation in the kindergarten.

The interpretation of framed motherhood also helps with the atmosphere of dedication. Jin and Ye address that kindergarten teachers spend more time on their work than primary school teachers. Ye mentions a conversation with a primary school teacher that when the primary teacher said that there are nap time in kindergarten, “I showed them the schedule in the kindergarten and they were frightened”. “You cannot work well until you love the children”, says Zheng, “our job is to help the children to grow up better. Our work is based on love.” Many kindergarten teachers find that different from primary school teachers that treat their students with statistics, such as enrollment rate, kindergarten teachers would view the children, rather than the care activities, as their focus in the work. “Even if you get excellent teaching skills and

advanced educational philosophy, you cannot be a good teacher. A good teacher shall be the one that employs the skills and knowledge in their caring activities”, says Wang, who finds the core of education is the children. The characteristics of the job further strengthen their enthusiasm for their work. Unlike other emotional labor, kindergarten teachers care for the children who they spend time with and are familiar with, which stimulates the willingness for their well-being.

The understanding of caring for other individual’s well-being is strengthened in the narratives of motherhood and collectivism. Selfish is the opposite of the meaning of dedication. When kindergarten teachers are obliged to take care of their students and natural children, the natural children are more of a private issue that is related to the understanding of selfishness, which cannot compete with the larger unit of care. Consequently, to care for employed work is encouraged in the work regardless of larger gender norms in society. Some kindergarten teachers, who decide not to have second children, view their students as their own children. In this way, the unrealized motherhood is produced to the students in the kindergarten.

As the kindergarten teachers still live under the expectations of traditional gendered norms, the understanding of dedication is not limited to the work-family care role, but relating to the leisure, the self care compared to the care they serve to others. Lai, whose daughter is grown up and has worked in another city, finds that she does not know how to spend her leisure time. “I am used to the life that I was occupied with the school work and my daughter’s staff. So if I am free now, I do not know what to do in spite of the entertaining facilities just around my home”. The younger generation, who are buried in the care in the workplace and family, would develop their adaptive preference to define leisure in another way. Chen finds that her leisure time is spent with her children.

Kindergarten teachers, while not burning out in their exhaustive care work, are under the romanticized narrative of motherhood. Zheng, the leader of the kindergarten, says “Their

spending extra time for work is not due to the rules or regulations, instead, they do this from the bottom of their heart”. Of course, not all the kindergarten teachers are dedicated to the care work in the kindergarten, but the popular motherhood and love narratives, ask them to sacrifice their time in the perspective of altruism and female essentialism.

## **Conclusion**

Following kindergarten teachers’ understandings of care, this thesis explores how motherhood narratives influence the care activities of kindergarten teachers. Under the expectations from parents and society, kindergarten teachers are framed to provide motherly care regardless of their professional anticipation for their occupation. Also, kindergarten teachers strengthen the motherhood narratives when they employ their mothering experience to their care in the kindergarten. Consequently, the motherhood narratives remain strong in the kindergarten.

However, there is some divergence between the ideal motherhood image and their everyday care activities. Kindergarten teachers find themselves exhausted when they care for children, which is different from the continuous efforts from the motherhood image. Also, due to the forgettable nature of children, kindergarten teachers have to make themselves get used to the separation in the kindergarten. They obtain emotional distance from their children at beginning to protect themselves from emotional loss, which contradicts the whole-hearted image of motherhood. While aligning with the motherhood narratives, kindergarten teachers interpret the divergent occasions in different emotional management.

As most kindergarten teachers practice extensive motherhood at home, they also see the dynamics among the assumed motherly care, the care they conduct to their children and the care they conduct to their students. The ideology of collectivism adds to the tension to care conflicts in dual care providers roles. Kindergarten teachers find that their willingness and their actual

care practices are mismatched, that they want to follow the expectation of a good mother but turn out spending much more time on their employed care work. The usage of the word “dedication” further shapes the care practices of kindergarten teachers, resulting in them sacrificing their leisure time and work for the bigger unit.

The care practice of kindergarten teachers is a great example to see how the narratives are maintained and reproduced by the care agents. The care expectation falls on kindergarten teachers to perceive the needs of different care recipients and respond to them accordingly. Kindergarten teachers in China are in a special context that is historically influenced by the collectivism origins and traditional gendered expectations for them. As far as I am concerned, to study care itself is an act of care. Care cannot only be the labor, emotions, or certain sociological descriptions, but individual valuable experiences. By investigating the dependence and possible caring relationships in the care practices, this thesis provides an example for the current situations of public child care and motherhood, which would further help with the concept of motherhood and care.

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