A grounded theory study of becoming and being a Waldorf parent in China

Motives of Chinese parents to send their children to Waldorf school and how they change over time

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Right now, schools are holding just one class: how to deal with the Gaokao[...]. Actually, it starts when students start going to primary school. From then on, students' only goal is to prepare for that final exam. [...] If something will not be tested in the Gaokao, it is not important. (Yu, 2010; *father and columnist for the newspaper Southern Weekly*).

Today's society is deeply affected by processes of change. Waldorf is dearly needed in the 21st century and the fourth industrial revolution. It teaches the children to become whole human beings. Soon, the knowledge taught in mainstream education will be obsolete. Waldorf teaches children things which will be needed in the future: empathy, trusting one's instincts, knowing oneself. (Mrs. Liang, founder and principal of a Waldorf school)

These quotes highlight the fundamental contrast Chinese Waldorf parents are facing: Mainstream education is highly competitive, content- and test-oriented, preparing students mainly for the college-entry exam, the *Gaokao*, whereas Waldorf education[1] focusses on developing students' personalities, equipping them with life-skills, and aims at preparing them for an uncertain future.

In Chinese society, education has been highly valued for centuries, as it has always entailed the promise of upward social mobility. In the past, access to education was limited to a small stratum of people, whereas modern tertiary education can in principle be achieved by everyone. This has contributed to a vast expansion of a well-educated middle class over the last twenty years. Obtaining a university degree has become part of the success story of the performance-oriented Chinese society (Lin & Sun, 2010).

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[1] Sometimes, they are called Steiner schools or Free Schools. I will use Waldorf, as it is the name Chinese Waldorf schools use to describe themselves: 华德福学校 Huàdéfu School.

Today's Chinese education system is designed to lead to university. But as everyone can achieve a university degree, there is a strong competition for the best universities (Vickers & Zeng, 2017, p. 213). Admission to university is regulated through the *Gaokao* score, which is a uniform test, asking students to recite vast amounts of knowledge. Many perceive the *Gaokao* as the one moment that decides on a person's future career. Many parents and students believe that their choice for primary school will decide on all later levels: attending a "good" primary school will enable them to attend a "good" junior-high school, qualifying them for a "good" senior-high school, with better chances in the *Gaokao* (Wu, 2013b). Due to this system, the pressure to test well starts early, with primary students commonly having to do homework until late at night.

In response to this extreme focus on testing performance, alternative grass-root movements for education have gained popularity, with pedagogies like *Guoxue,*[2] Montessori, Homeschooling, and Waldorf (Johnson, 2014; Matuszak, 2014). With its focus on art education and individual development, Waldorf stands in strong contrast to state education.

Waldorf education originated in early 20th century Germany and has been growing worldwide ever since the first school was founded in 1919. It is rooted in the spiritual philosophy of Anthroposophy, which was developed by the Austrian Rudolf Steiner (Steiner, 1996). Today, Waldorf education is a rapidly growing movement in China with more than 400 kindergartens and 77 schools in 2018 (Shanhaiyuan Foundation, 2018).[3]

To exercise compulsory education, a Waldorf primary school can apply for a government license. However, only seven schools had obtained one until late 2017 (Cherry, 2017).[4] Parents make a bold step when deciding for Waldorf. Sending a child to a non-licensed

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[2] *Guoxue* is a type of education that claims to be founded on classical Confucian education, focusing on reading the classic texts of Confucianism and aims at cultivating moral and performing students (Billioud & Thoraval, 2015).

[3] The phenomenon of Waldorf in China first occurred to me through my father, who has been teaching Anthroposophy in China since 2011.

[4] I do not know more current numbers.

school is illegal. Furthermore, they are risking their children's chances in society's success story, as it is unclear if, how, and when they will be able to re-enter mainstream (higher) education.

This thesis attempts to answer the following questions:

- What are the motivations of Chinese parents to send their child to Waldorf school?
- How do they evaluate their experiences of doing so?
- And how does this change over time?

The thesis will give insights into Chinese parents' perceptions and evaluations of alternative education as well as contribute to the academic discourse on school choice. This is especially relevant, as for China, this discourse mostly focuses on choice between different mainstream options, with only few studies on alternative education. As far as I know, there is only one other study on choice for Waldorf in China (Sun 2019).

My research was conducted over the years of 2018 and 2019 in eight Chinese Waldorf schools. I chose an anthropological approach to investigate parents' motivations. It was guided by Charmaz' (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and combined participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011; Spradley 1980) with informal and formal semi-structured interviews (Charmaz 2014; Spradley 1979; Seidman, 2006).

In the field, I adopted a moderate participant[5] research persona, with varying degrees of participation depending on the schools. I was introduced as a German master student researching motivations for choosing Waldorf to almost everyone. I got to know my interview participants through my father, who teaches Anthroposophy seminars in the schools I visited, or through teachers, who I met while participating in his seminars. Most participants were interested in my experience of being an adult, former Waldorf student in Germany, who had left Waldorf after eighth grade.

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[5] Within the scheme of Spradley (1980, p.60), with moderate participation, the researcher "seeks to maintain a balance between being and insider and an outsider [...]".

The structure of the thesis is the following: In Chapter 2, I introduce the socio-cultural framework in which Chinese Waldorf parents navigate, and I briefly explain the core elements of Waldorf pedagogy. From there, I describe the methodological background of the study and reflect on the research process in Chapter 3. Then, in Chapter 4, I present my findings and show that deciding for Waldorf is a continuous process. In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings and place them within the context of research. Finally, I summarize them, mention their limitations, and raise questions for further research on the topic in Chapter 6.

Chapter 2: Education in China and Waldorf

In this chapter, I explain the context of parental choice for Waldorf in China. I first introduce the legal framework of education and alternative education's place in it. Afterward, I introduce Waldorf (in China) and its characteristics.

2.1.   The legal framework

Chinese state education is comprised of six years of primary, three years of junior-high, and three years of senior-high school. Between each level, there is an exam which is important for choosing a school at the next level. These exams can be taken, without having attended a public school before (Wang, 2009).

At all levels, public and private institutes exist. Compulsory education – grades one to nine – is strictly regulated. In public education, students are placed in schools according to proximity, based on household registration. They cannot choose among different public schools. Private schools have more leeway in accepting students on other – often financial – terms (ibid).

In the compulsory education sector, there is a clear distinction between private schools with government license – so-called *Minban* schools – and those without. To receive the license, schools must comply with strict regulations for curriculum and management (Standing Committee, 2017). Most *Minban* schools lead to the *Gaokao,* thus it is difficult

for such schools to fundamentally reduce student's pressure.[6] I refer to all schools leading to recognized high school diplomas as 'mainstream education'.

Besides mainstream education, there is a wide spectrum of non-licensed schools. They are mostly parent-organized and follow special pedagogical concepts. I call them 'alternative education'. From a legal perspective, these schools are illegal (Ministry of Education, 2019). Nonetheless, they have been thriving since the early 2000s (Sheng, 2018). Most Waldorf schools operate as non-licensed private schools. This is the legal framework in which school choice is exercised by Chinese parents.

2.2.　　　School choice in China

Generally, choice is a middle-class phenomenon, largely because it requires certain economic leeway (Lin, Educational Stratification and the New Middle Class, 2006). There are two relevant discourses on school choice in the Chinese context. One examines choice between different mainstream options (Wu 2013a, 2013b; Qin, 2008; Young, 2018), the other focuses on alternatives.[7] The latter only evolved after I started my fieldwork with just a few publications, all of them small-scale ethnographic studies, concerning Christian homeschooling (Sheng, 2014, 2019a), Confucian homeschooling (Billioud & Thoroval, 2015; Dutournier & Wang, 2018; Sheng, 2019b) and Waldorf education (Sun, 2019).

In both discourses, authors identified similar parental concerns, only the solutions being different. Parents choose schools which they expect to fulfil their hopes: they all wish their children to be happy when they are adults. Though, what they regard as happiness and how to achieve it differs strongly. Mainstream parents often regard an economically carefree life as happy. They believe it can be attained through testing well in mainstream education (Wu, 2013a; 2013b). Wu identifies the pursuit of good tertiary education as the overarching motivation for choice between mainstream options. Parents choosing

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[6] See Schulte (2017) for an elaborate distinction between different *Minban* options.

[7] There is also the discourse on school choice of migrant families. See Yiu & Luo (Yiu & Luo, 2017) for education of left-behind children, and Liu & Jacob (2013) for education of migrant children in urban China. In the following, I will disregard this discourse, as it is irrelevant to this thesis.

international schools or homeschooling share this preference, but they disapprove of the pressure in mainstream education, often because of their observation that their children are not striving within the system (Sheng, 2014, 2019a; 2019b; Young, 2018). Sun (2019) reports that Waldorf parents hold a more holistic concept of "happiness". Although they value degrees, they show strong preferences for a healthy development, which they perceive as unachievable in mainstream education.

Authors researching alternative education have found two aspects that differentiate the parents from those in mainstream education. First, they desire a pedagogy that attends to the individual student's needs and talents, values and abilities, in which children can develop qualitatively, motivated by a strong disliking of mainstream education (Sheng, 2014, 2019b; Sun, 2019). Although education policymakers have tried to implement 'quality education'[8] in mainstream education – which pays attention to developing students' skills and attitudes – many parents feel that these efforts have not been successful (Kipnis, 2011).

Second, parents are interested in a spiritual foundation of education. They feel that education should yield more than preparing their children for the job market. Billioud & Thoroval (2015), Sheng (2014, 2019a, 2019b), and Sun (2019) suggest, that parents are looking for an education that nurtures children's spiritual relationship to the world and educates their values and morals. They prefer an education which is integrated into a world view that gives knowledge a deeper meaning.

2.3.   Waldorf education

Waldorf in China is often characterized as a mother-organized grass-root movement (Cherry, 2017; Sun, 2019). In fact, the majority of teachers and staff are female, and parents

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[8] 'Quality' is an inadequate translation of the Chinese *Suzhi*. The government has long tried to promote quality education. Nevertheless, the focus on testing still prevails today. For more on *Suzhi* see Kipnis (2007; 2011)

finance the schools privately, some parents even supporting them through larger investments or by using their political weight.

A characteristic of Chinese Waldorf movement is that every school is different. Schools differ largely in size, in their institutional stability and recognition, in parents' economic situation, and in their stance toward government requirements. It is important to remember that parents are embedded in these different contexts and how this influences their experience.

Principally, Waldorf education is designed to lead from kindergarten to university. But at the time of my fieldwork, there were only three Waldorf high schools, with many schools not planning to establish one. Students who leave Waldorf before high school either return to mainstream education, go to international schools, or join Waldorf schools abroad.

Waldorf education is founded in Anthroposophy as its epistemology. Anthroposophy views human beings as striving towards freedom. Free humans are able to conceptualize themselves not only on a materialistic, but also on a spiritual level. Being free is a life-long learning and reflection process. In its educational practice, Waldorf pedagogy aims at developing the "whole human being" – humans' feeling, thinking, and willing – through focusing on the individual students, their creativity, strengths, and talents (Steiner, 1996). Ideally, Waldorf graduates are on a way of developing "well-balanced maturity" (Easton, 1995, p. 94), being able to think critically, to act as responsible members of their communities, and to face and shape an unforeseeable future (ibid.).

Following Anthroposophy, children's development passes three stages, each of them lasting about seven years: from birth to age seven, from seven to 14, and from 14 to 21. In each stage, developmental needs are different, and the teaching should be accordingly. Learning in the different stages can be characterized as imitation, imagination, and abstract thinking, respectively (Steiner, 1996). This means that, until grade nine, students are learning primarily through stories and experiences. Principal subjects are taught by the class teacher, with specialists only starting to teach in grade nine. Only in high school

are students supposed to develop critical thinking and independent judgement. Ideally, tests and grades are also introduced only then (Easton, 1995, p. 114).

These philosophical and pedagogical foundations differ substantially from Chinese mainstream education. This is important to bear in mind, as it plays an important role in the parents' perception of Waldorf.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

In this chapter, I will present the underlying epistemological and methodological assumptions as well as the employed data-collection methods.

This research is a multi-method grounded theory study, which used ethnographic data-collection methods. It is interested in describing and understanding how members of the Chinese Waldorf community perceive their school choice and what meaning they attach to it. On the basis of this, it attempts to construct an explanation of their experience.

The underlying epistemology of this thesis is constructivism, building on the premises of symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014; Blumer, 1969). It assumes that human beings act according to the meanings they construct based on their perception of reality. Constructions are the result of an "interpretative process" by the actor (Blumer, 1969, p.2), which is influenced by interaction with others. Constructivism rejects the idea of objectivity, but assumes that realities, their descriptions, and interpretations are always a process of co-construction of all actors involved. Therefore, researchers need to scrutinize their perceptions when collecting and analyzing data and drawing theoretical conclusions. This is called researcher's reflexivity (Charmaz, 2014: Pike, 1967).

One way I practiced reflexivity was by keeping a journal where I considered my own position in and perspective on the field. This research is certainly influenced by my research persona (see Chapter 1) as well as my experiences and pre-conceptions from my high school year in China and my Bachelor studies in Political Science of China.

3.1.   Constructivist Grounded Theory

The methodology of this thesis is Constructivist Grounded Theory, defined as:

> *[…] systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative*
> *data to construct theories from the data themselves. Thus, researchers construct*
> *a theory 'grounded' in their data (Charmaz, 2014, p.1).*

CGT is the procedural activity of theorizing how the studied participants perceive and construct their realities and act upon it.

The founders of grounded theory (GT), Glaser and Strauss (1967), describe conducting GT as a continuous process of data collection and analysis, comparison, verification of hypotheses, and theoretical sampling and integration, all simultaneously. Theories are 'grounded' because researchers take an inductive approach to the data and refrain from imposing preconceived concepts.

When developing concepts, defining their properties and the relations of codes, researchers conduct theoretical – not purposeful – sampling with the goal of developing theoretical categories (Hood, 2007). For example, when I realized that I had mostly investigated mothers' perspectives, I specifically interviewed fathers, to investigate if they perceived Waldorf differently.

In theoretical sampling, theoretical abduction is employed. When researchers encounter phenomena they cannot explain within the framework developed so far, they make "inferential leaps to consider all possible theoretical explanations" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 200). With these hunches, they go back to the data (collection) and test and evaluate them. The data must confirm them and let them "earn their way into theory" (Glaser, 1978, p.8). I found abduction helpful to look at my data from new perspectives. However, sometimes these ideas did not seem to fit the data and I had to let them go again.

Following the guidelines of CGT, I started my fieldwork with immersing myself open-mindedly in the field, recording everything as detailed as possible, and keeping reflexive notes. From early on, I summarized, labeled, and analyzed the data to identify patterns,

the guiding question being "What is this data a study of?" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57). From the beginning, I mostly practiced participant observation (see Chapter 3.3.). After I had identified preliminary patterns, I started to do interviews to understand their properties, slowly being able to define 'categories' and their relationships and generate 'theoretical explanations', which I again checked with the data. Through memo-writing, I documented my research process, reflected on it, identified gaps, and defined categories; constantly comparing data, codes, and concepts, and gradually conceptualizing them.[9]

What constitutes "good" CGT? Due to her constructivist stance, Charmaz' (2014) rejects the ideas of reliability and validity, as theories are the results of an emergent process with deep interaction between researcher and participants. She requires CGT researchers' theories to build on deep understanding and comprehensive data of the phenomenon, to resonate with the interpretations of the participants, to contribute to a social and academic discourse, to be embedded within the social context of the researched phenomenon, and to provide writing that is intelligible for their readers. In Chapter 6, I will discuss how this is reflected in my research.

3.2.   Fieldwork

For data collection, I used a combination of the qualitative methods of participant observation (PO) and (informal) interviewing. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) describe PO as a method for collecting ethnographic data while being in the field through observing and/or participating in the culture or community studied. Especially in the beginning of my research, following DeWalt & DeWalt's guide to PO helped me get a sense for the tacit aspects of the Waldorf culture, establish connections, and learn to navigate within the community.

I was introduced to the field through my father, who functioned as a "gatekeeper" (Seidman, 2006, p. 43). Most of his participants are teachers and mothers, with the

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[9] I used Atlas.ti 8 to sort and code my data and as a basis to develop theoretical concepts For more on the use of Atlas.ti in GT see (Konopásek, 2011).

majority of teachers being Waldorf parents themselves. I participated in his workshops and introduced myself and my research. During the courses, I paid close attention to the people, their actions, and surroundings. Whenever possible, I engaged in informal conversations (interviews) about being a Waldorf parent.

Overall, I visited eight different schools and the connected communities all over China, most of them more than once, with more than 50 days of fieldwork and interviewed 18 parents and two foreign mentors.[10] The communities which I became acquainted with best were those of School 2, 4 and 6. School 2 is an unlicensed school in the outskirts of Beijing, which had just experienced a splitting and had moved for political reasons. It had seven grades with less than 100 students when I arrived for the first time. Several of my father's participants from this school organized weekend outings for him and me. Later, they invited me to visit their homes and introduced me to other Waldorf parents who were willing to be interviewed.

School 4 is also a smaller unlicensed school but located in the south of China. There, the principal had invited my father to give an afternoon seminar and participated in a seminar at another school themself. At School 4, I was more of an outside observer, as I was allowed to observe a parent-teacher meeting and later conducted several interviews with parents and the principal but did not stay with the community for long.

School 6 is located in Jinan, where I studied in 2018. It had 16 students and no license at the time of my research. I got in touch with the founder through WeChat and, after participating in two festivities, I taught two classes of English and German each week for one semester. I did not conduct formal interviews there.

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[10] See Appendix I and II for the complete overview.

In the second half of my research, while still conducting PO, I focused more strongly on semi-structured interviews. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009, p.124) describe this method as:

> *[It] seeks to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena; it will have a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as some suggested questions. Yet at the same time, there is openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions.*

Semi-structured interviews are means of exploring first-hand experiences of the interviewees concerning the topic. They use open-ended questions to inspire detailed responses to allow for in-depth exploration and understanding of the participants' experience of events and the attached meanings and feelings. Within the interview, the researcher gives participants the space to lead the conversation and explore the issues in their own ways (Charmaz, 2014). To outline the basic structure of the interview and have a list of topics, I prepared several interview guides.[11]

Language is an important tool to communicate perceptions and meanings. Learning a language means learning to see the world from another perspective (Spradley, 1979) Therefore, research should be conducted in the local language to fully account for the meanings of the participants. I conducted my research in Chinese. Although my Chinese is not entirely fluent, it increased tremendously throughout the year. Whenever I did not understand something essential, I asked for an explanation. I did not feel that my language abilities hindered my research. Quite to the contrary: the majority was excited to talk to a foreigner who was an insider of both worlds, China and "the West".

Researchers must treat their research participants respectfully and protect their dignity and rights (Seidman, 2006). For my PO, this meant that in the beginning of the courses, field visits, and interviews, I always introduced myself and my research and invited people to share their thoughts. I did my best in presenting the parents' voice as accurate as possible by extensive notetaking and relying mostly on quoting recorded interviews

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[11] See Appendix III for one example.

in this thesis. To protect the participants' identities, I use synonyms for their names and render only the information needed to understand the situation.

Chapter 4: Deciding for Waldorf

In this chapter I describe the parents' experiences with Waldorf education as a process with four different phases and two touchpoints. Throughout this 'Waldorf journey', parents pursue their aspiration that their children will become mature and self-confident, and also successful in society. They hope that with Waldorf, they provide their children with a "good" education.

I will describe how these expectations influence their balance of motivations throughout the four phases. The first phase is dominated by an antipathy to mainstream education, which drives parents to look for alternatives. The second phase starts after learning about Waldorf and becoming sympathetic with it. A combination of antipathetic and sympathetic motivations lead to the initial decision to send a child to a Waldorf school, which is the first touchpoint. The first time after this decision marks the third phase, the honeymoon phase, in which parents' evaluation of Waldorf is mostly positive. After experiencing the school's practices for some time and with their child growing older, parents enter into the fourth phase which is characterized by different kinds of anxieties and changing evaluations. A possible second touchpoint is the decision to leave the school.

To give a more comprehensive understanding of the situation, this chapter starts with a description of Waldorf parents: Who are they? What are their backgrounds?

Most of my participants were born in the 1970s or 1980s, with only a few fathers born earlier. Thus, they went to school when it became normal to attend university, with the mainstream system becoming more competitive. They mostly have children in grade one

to eight. Therefore, the children were relatively young when the decision was taken, which is an important factor to keep in mind. [12]

In many families, both parents hold a university degree, and there is at least one high income. Before they embarked on the Waldorf journey, parents mostly worked as mid- and high-level managers in large companies, owned their own companies, or were in academia. This means that most of them had attained an economically high status undergoing the career path, which they are deciding against for their children.

After they had their first child, many women decided to become full-time mothers. I encountered only a few mothers who were working full-time or part-time outside of Waldorf. They take it upon themselves to care for the children and their education. Therefore, mothers have more time to engage with the Waldorf community than the fathers. In many cases, they were housewives or teachers, managers, or support persons at school or in a Waldorf kindergarten. Generally, there is few male personnel in Waldorf in China. That is not to say that the fathers do not care, but as one mother put it, there is little money to make in teaching, and many families cannot afford to live on two teacher salaries.

4.1.　　　Phase one: Deciding against mainstream education

Becoming a Waldorf parent is a journey which, in most cases, starts with disliking mainstream education. This antipathy drives parents away, but not toward a specific alternative. It stems from observations they make of children, conclusions they draw from their own development, and their ideas of good education. They feel that "it is not right" to treat children this way and that education should not only focus on exam results. Consider this statement as an example:

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[12] I was not able to sample for parents who joined Waldorf after grade 5, but talking to Mr. Zhang, whose son had joined for grade 5, gave me the impression that motivations of parents who join later differ somewhat from those who join when the child is very young.

When our son entered first grade, he had difficulties finishing his homework. As his teacher refused to reduce them, we saw no other chance than conforming with the demand of the teacher to help and change him. To meet the teacher's demands, we had to sacrifice his sleep. Sometimes he had to do homework until 11pm in first grade. But looking at him, we both felt deeply hurt. We thought this was not right, but we also didn't know how to balance the situation. […] In the beginning, we thought we could just change the class, change the school, but after thinking about it longer, we concluded that the problem lies in the system. It is a system with strict social selection and high competition. So, we could only leave the system to fundamentally solve the problem. We had to choose another school. We looked at everything: private schools, international schools, Waldorf. After comparing them, we decided that from the perspective of respecting the individual character of the child, Waldorf was already very close to what we had in mind. (Mrs. Yan)

The quote illustrates how parents who are dissatisfied with mainstream education conclude that the problem is a misfit between system and child, often going so far as to entirely reject the system. This conclusion makes them look for alternatives.

4.1.1. Observing the child's "state"

As in Mrs. Yan's description, the most prominent reason why parents decide against mainstream education is their observation of what many of them called the child's "state".[13] It includes the physical and mental state but was also sometimes used for describing children's inner attitude towards things and people.

In mainstream education, it "hurts" many parents to see the state of their children. Many Waldorf parents told me stories about unhappiness, sickness, change of character, or that the child developed a learning disorder, for example:

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[13] "State" is the inaccurate translation of *zhuangtai*, which could also be translated as "state of mind" or "condition".

The teachers were very strict. They didn't understand children's development. She [his daughter] became unhappy, cried often, and became introvert. That was not how I saw her. (Mr. Hao)

One out of five months of the semester, my son would be sick. The whole family suffered from the educational pressure. So, we decided Waldorf would just be better for us. (Mr. Fang)

In the second half of year one the homework and the teacher's demands increased. The children had to practice reading out loud. The parents had to record it and send it to the teacher. He did not want to do that. Afterwards, he refused to do homework at all. It hurt me to see him that way. (Mrs. Wu)

Some parents describe the mere unhappiness of their child as a reason to look for alternatives. Other parents only decide against mainstream education when they have the feeling that "it did not work anymore". Although many of them see the cause of the negative state in the teachers, they consider the problem a misfit between system and child, often going so far as to rejecting the system entirely. This makes them look for alternatives.

4.1.2. Personal experience

Most of today's Waldorf parents' perception of Waldorf is strongly influenced by their own experiences with mainstream education. They experienced a lot of pressure themselves, with often lasting negative impressions. When they become parents, they start to learn how to raise children differently, as the quote from Mrs. Yang illustrates:

I first received a very oppressive education. I think that all my study interest was destroyed by this kind of education. But within myself, there was a perplexity. I always knew in my heart that humans shouldn't study in such a detesting way. In my heart there was this question. […] That's why I was still willing to try another time, why my hope was not entirely destroyed. When I became a mother, maybe that is part of human nature, that parents want to give their children a very good education [sic.]. But I absolutely didn't know what good education was.

I just knew that today's mainstream education is something I could not approve for my children. Because I had already tried. I had already made my own experiences.

Mrs. Yang describes her impression that, for many years, her education had caused a confusion in her, that it had caused her to have no interest in anything at all, to not know who she was. Some parents express that they were feeling that their knowledge from school was "useless" and that the pressure had caused them psychological trouble. They do not want their children to experience this as well.

This aspect remains crucial throughout the whole Waldorf journey. Engaging with Waldorf makes parents reflect on their own development, especially those who embrace Anthroposophy. Several parents told me they had realized that, before becoming parents, they had always followed the path society had mapped out for them, without reflecting. They did not know who they were and what they liked. Only when they became parents did they start to reevaluate what was important for them, like this father:

We realized that success does not guarantee happiness. We realized that we do not want our daughter to become successful at any price, but to become happy. It was my own experience that I had become successful, had lived abroad, worked hard but was not happy. It is important that one is at peace with oneself. It has inner reasons when the spirit is balanced. If this is accomplished, I am convinced that our daughter will find her way. (Mr. Hao)

Although this idea is not shared by all parents, many expressed that they thought mainstream education neglects the importance of personal and inner contentment.

4.1.3. Ideas about good education

Like Mrs. Yang, Waldorf parents want to provide their children with the best possible education. Rather than having realistic notions of what this would be concretely, they oppose characteristics of the mainstream system.

The most important characteristic of mainstream education is its competitive and test-driven nature. The pressure it exerts even on very young children is the most-frequently mentioned criticism, especially by parents of small children or of children who have trouble coping with it. Parents often mentioned the high workload, with students only able to finish late at night with a lot of support from the parents. One father does not criticize pressure per se, but concludes that the timing and degree of pressure are the problem:

> *We all need to learn to deal with pressure. But when we learn it depends on the individual. The rhythm of mainstream education is just not right. (Mr. Zhang)*

He draws the same conclusion many parents come to:

> *Leaving him there would have sabotaged his character.*

They feel this education is not good for their children's physical and mental health. Therefore, they search for an environment that is "better", by which they often mean: more relaxed and giving their children "a longer, happier childhood".

Happiness is a core concept of Chinese Waldorf parents, especially when the children are young. It relates to the "state" of the children, as parents want them to be happy. This is especially true for young children. Parents think it is not right that a first grader suffers from school. However, while some parents see being happy as a goal in itself, others consider it as the expression of a deeper psychological contentment, of knowing who you are, trusting in one's abilities, and having a healthy self-esteem.

Thus, some parents only oppose the direct effects the system has on their children, such as causing them to no longer laugh. Others, however, question the purpose of education:

> *I thought public education was not getting the essence of education. So, I sent him here. (Mrs. Peng)*

> *Children in mainstream education have to study much and take many tests. But nobody knows why they have to study this and if it suits their development. […] Being a teacher is hard because you get so much pressure that your students do*

well in tests. […] Grades are much more important than the students themselves. The children don't have any hope. (Mrs. Deng)

These two quotes show that parents believe education should be about more than grades and a fixed set of knowledge, that the "essence" of education should be caring about the individual. Mainstream education appears to be fair, because it judges everyone by the same standards. But Waldorf parents point out that everyone has strengths, weaknesses and individual needs. They reject the mainstream system's notion to press everyone into the same mold. They feel that the inability of the system to respect and support the individual character and the needs of their children causes many problems. Thus, they want an education that fosters individual development, which they believe to find in Waldorf education.

As seen above, parental thoughts about "good" education are quite diffuse and rather contrasting mainstream education than comprising concrete options. When parents think about alternatives, their objectives are short-term oriented, toward finding solutions for the current, unsatisfying condition.

4.2.   Phase two: Feeling drawn toward Waldorf

Most parents get to know Waldorf through recommendations by friends already engaged with the Waldorf community. Another path is through general interest in alternative education. Some first engage with Montessori but change after having acquainted Waldorf. Others read self-help books on early-childhood education or blogs by Waldorf teachers reporting their experience.

Sun (2019) argues that parents first become intrigued by Waldorf pedagogy on an intellectual level. They hear about its activities and its pedagogical principles. After a while, they get in touch with the community and experience it through visits or workshops, which attracts them on an emotional level. Through both, they develop sympathy for Waldorf, which eventually concludes in the decision of sending their child to a Waldorf school. My findings confirm this argument.

4.2.1. Finding a "better" education

Waldorf pedagogy attracts the parents on an intellectual level because of the curriculum, which emphasizes arts, crafting, and sports, and its connection to traditional Chinese culture. But more importantly, they seem to be attracted to Waldorf because it provides an answer to the question what education is for.

In China, Waldorf is often described as "art education". Arts and crafting, but also play and theatre are used to stimulate students' creativity and comprehensive experience of the environment, especially in the early years. Mothers of younger children are often attracted by this aspect. In all schools, workshops for parents on handicrafts and storytelling are well attended.

Chinese Waldorf schools deeply integrate traditional Chinese culture into the school routine. They celebrate traditional festivities with the whole community, often dressing up in historical robes and performing traditional rituals.[14] Teachers use classic texts to teach students reading and writing, and most schools' early history classes focus on Chinese myths and legends. One teacher articulated the importance she attaches to this:

> *We have already lost our connection to the great traditional culture of China. With Waldorf, I can help my students to connect to this heritage. Anthroposophy has so much in common with Daoism and Buddhism. The Tao-te-Ching, the Four Books, Confucian values, we can find everything in Waldorf. (Mrs. Wen)*

Just like her, many parents feel that mainstream education lacks a connection to traditional culture. The schools' activities give them the feeling their children will not only learn the stories, but also the values they see embedded in them (see section 5.1.).

Generally, parents are strongly drawn toward Waldorf practices focusing on the individual student and giving them the freedom to develop at their own pace. Their initial sympathy is heavily influenced by their antipathy, however. They do not have a

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[14] See Gusheng Xueyuan (2019) for a report on how one school celebrated the Dragon Boat Festival.

deep understanding of what Waldorf means in great detail but project their hopes on it and perceive it as the negative of mainstream education. Consider, for example, Mrs. Yang's description of natural development:

> *We chose Waldorf because we deeply wished for such a free and natural condition. […] Most Waldorf students have a relatively relaxed and natural development, unlike those corrupt practices in public schools, where students' characters get suppressed by the competitive environment.*

Parents perceive Waldorf as liberating from unreasonable demands, learning for oneself, and being independent. For others, freedom also means the possibility of pursuing the children's interests:

> *I feel very lucky because, in this environment, our children can have a little bit more choice. Last time you came to our house, we were studying Daoism. Here, our son has the time to continue these studies. (Mrs. Xi)*

Mrs. Deng, however, saw in Waldorf something more than just the chance to escape the pressure of mainstream education:

> *When I saw a Waldorf teacher, I was touched how he paid attention to the development of each individual child. How he helped them to realize themselves. I thought, "This is what good education should be like!"*

For her, like for many others, the way Waldorf teachers care about the students and their goals answer the question of the purpose of education.

4.2.2. Experiencing Waldorf

Whenever I asked parents why they had chosen Waldorf, almost everyone answered, "Because of the environment!" Nearly always, entering Waldorf premises in China is a moving experience, as they mostly differ greatly from the outside. As several parents told me, visiting the school actually was the turning point in their decision-making.

> *Friends had recommended Waldorf to us before, but we didn't investigate any further. Then, we were in the village for work and thought, we would just visit*

the school to get an impression. We were deeply impressed. It was such an amicable, novel place. Children were playing, climbing on trees, and there was no pressure. We thought it over for two more weeks and then decided to enroll our son in Waldorf. The environment just convinced us. (Mrs. Chen)

Like this mother, many parents are touched emotionally by experiencing Waldorf because of the extent of actual nature around, and the use of natural materials inside the schools. As most schools are in the outskirts of cities, they tend to be spacious, often with small pools, gardens where students can plant their own crops, trees to climb onto, and small meadows to play games on. In the classrooms, tables and chairs are made of wood, and students' artworks are hanging on walls, which are brightly painted in a natural color scheme. When they see children in the school, who seem to be in a healthy and happy state of mind, they wish their children to be the same.
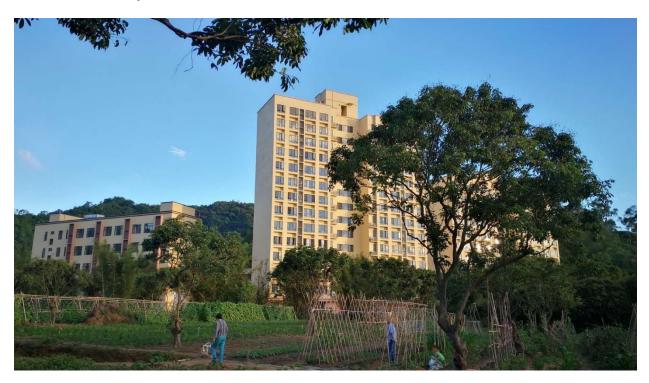

Figure 1: Parents gardening in front of a Waldorf school (c: Lea Schaumann)

Figure 2: School ground (c: Lea Schaumann)

Figure 3: Classroom (c: Lea Schaumann)

Experiencing the teachers plays an important role as well. This mother describes how she experiences the deep care and awareness from the teacher for the students:

> *When engaging with the children, the teacher is aware of their essence. […] But because the teacher has this kind of gentleness and self-satisfaction, they give them such an opportunity. It's such a naturalness that is closer to life. And not such a man-made, scientific environment. (Mrs. Liu)*

Experiencing such passionate teachers is important for parents' decision. This caring approach can differ strongly from their perception of mainstream teachers. When speaking of them, parents mostly described them as strict, harsh, unsympathetic, and neglecting the individual's need.

Deciding for Waldorf is by no means always a rational process. Mrs. Xi described her decision-making as follows:

> *All of this [the school] suddenly moved me very deeply. I thought, if my children could grow up under these conditions, it would be so much better than in those high buildings in their school, although their school is designed quite well, quite modern […], but maybe you cannot see the earth on the school ground. […] When I choose the things, it is often according to my instincts. In this environment, they might just be happier. I briefly discussed this with my husband, and we made the quick decision to come here to study.*

The "environment" does not only imply the material surrounding of the schools. Parents describe the circumstances of their children's "natural development". When speaking of it, many parents also characterized it as "free" and "embracing".

4.3.   Touchpoint one: Initial decision

To summarize, as a result of the interplay of their antipathy and sympathy parents have the following expectations when deciding for Waldorf school:

- Less pressure on the child and the family,
- The child's "state" becomes happy and healthy again,

- The child's natural development is seen and cared for by the teachers,
- The child grows up in a natural environment with classes that nurture their interests and creativity, gives them practical skills, and instills traditional Chinese values.

Thus, there is no single reason that explains parents' initial decision for Waldorf. They long to improve their child's condition on short terms and hope for an education that is "better" than the status quo.

When parents look for alternatives, they do not have much choice, however. As one principal pointed out:

> *Compared to Montessori, Waldorf is more systematic, and teachers are more passionate about education. It is not merely a toolkit, but parents notice that there is an epistemology behind it. Compared to international schools it has a much stronger connection to Chinese culture – they do not want their children to become foreigners. And compared to Classical Reading schools, most Waldorf schools are larger and more strongly institutionalized. (Mr. Zeng)*

Thus, for parents whose antipathy dominates, Waldorf is not necessarily the answer to all their wishes, but the best option available.

4.4. Phase three: Being enthusiastic

After having moved to a Waldorf school, most parents experience a phase in which they are enthusiastic because they see most of their expectations met: the state of their child changes positively, and they feel that teachers care. They feel relieved from all the negative influences of mainstream education.

When asked about their perceptions of the change, many parents answered similarly to Mr. Zhang:

> *I observed a tremendous change with my son! Firstly, he liked studying again. I didn't have to help him with his homework anymore. Now, he likes to engage in class, and the teachers praise his study condition. His mood became cheerful and*

happy again and he likes to tell stories to me. Secondly, he became self-confident. And thirdly, his body became strong. This is a magical school! Not only the students, but also the parents are growing here! (Mr. Zhang)

4.4.1. Changing lifestyle

Deciding for Waldorf often has an impact on the whole family. Mr. Hao, whose daughter had become introverted and sick, describes the change:

After sending our daughter to Waldorf, our family life improved a lot. Everyone became happier and more satisfied with our lives. She became happy and healthy again. […] My wife quit her job and started to learn Anthroposophy. She became more and more engaged. That's why we moved to [the neighborhood of] the school and eventually founded this community. (Mr. Hao)

Like in Mr. Hao's family, the decision for Waldorf often results in a fundamental change in lifestyle for many. Since the schools are mostly on the outskirts, many families move, often involving a job change, or a separation of the parents, when only the mother moves with the child. This is not always an easy transition. Being in the school and living in a community helps the families master it.

As most parents are strangers to the areas they move to, it is a common phenomenon to establish small, sometimes gated communities in proximity to the school, where (only) members to the Waldorf community live. Parents living there report that living together with peers who cherish the same educational values contributes immensely to their appreciation of Waldorf.

Getting involved with the schools through workshops and parent-child activities is very common. It means that not only the child opts out of the stressful school life, but also the families adopt a more relaxed and simpler life. Many parents mentioned they were spending more time with their family and living more consciously in general. They experienced this as very enriching.

4.4.2. Growing personally

For many parents, moving to Waldorf is also the beginning of a personal learning journey. Like Mr. Zhang, many parents feel they are "growing" as well through engaging with Waldorf.

I encountered many mothers, who had taken up studying Waldorf and Anthroposophy to gain better understanding of the curriculum and their children's development. Equally important, it lets them reflect on human development. Many parents, like Mrs. Xi, feel they begin to reflect on their own past and future. Mrs. Yang describes the effect studying Anthroposophy has on her:

> *You asked me how Anthroposophy influenced my life. You can say it reflects my life. It gives me support; it helps me to handle my life. Of course, it doesn't help me to transform my life. I really believe that transformation can only happen out of one's own power. But every time you transform a little bit, it can give you a reflection. You get a confirmation. It gives you an underlying feeling of security.*

In another conversation, she said: "I woke up". This is an expression that some of my father's participants used as well to describe the effect of his Anthroposophy classes upon them. As mentioned in Section 4.1.2., many parents had rather traumatic experiences during their own time at school, often resulting in insecurities lasting until today. When they speak of "waking up", they express their feeling that by studying Anthroposophy they gain a sense of who they are, what they want in life, and that they feel ownership of their lives.

My data suggest that "growing" personally contributes to parents' evaluation of Waldorf. When experiencing and gaining deeper understanding of what Anthroposophy means by "well-balanced maturity", the hopes they have for their children's development align with Waldorf's educational ideals and notions. Mrs. Liu's explanations show how parental hopes shift and become clearer:

Regarding the hopes for my children, I have been through a maturing process. In the beginning, I think it was as much of a growing process for me as well, so my hopes experienced some changes as well. In the beginning, I think I was a person who had a lot of dreams. I liked to have a goal that I could chase. And at that time, I also had a lot of thoughts of what kind of person my children should become. But when I started studying Waldorf, I learned that I need to accept the children and let them become who they are. I never fully understood this sentence. This understanding only came slowly over the years, that I realized what it really means and also learned to make it my own, that it became my own outlook [sic]. No matter what, they have their own talents and their own lives. They have their own life path. And no matter if they will become poor, or have a very basic life, as long as they are themselves doing their own thing, that's the right way. It's easy to say this sentence, but its understanding is different. And it doesn't matter if they become a highly promoted scholar, an artist, or if they become a street vendor, a very normal person. I think, my heart will not change because of this. I just believe, as long as they have their own firm perspective on life [sic]. […] Especially since the last two years, I don't have any expectations or prospects [sic]. As long as they can realize themselves, it's ok.

The expressions "to accept the children" and "let them become who they are" are main ideals of Waldorf and many parents used them to express their hopes. But Mrs. Liu's explanation shows, that through studying Waldorf, her understanding of it changed and aligned with that of Anthroposophy.

Parents' reflection also reinforces their antipathy for mainstream education. When speaking of her children in their twenties, Mrs. Yang said:

I hope that, through Waldorf education, my children can, as far as possible, feel less lost and learn who they are as much as possible.

She means her children will feel "less lost" than she had and hopes their path to becoming self-confident will be easier. Often parents said: "I followed the path society had laid out

for me" or "I simply did what my parents wanted me to do". Like Mrs. Yang, many blame their education and upbringing for their often hurtful experience of facing identity questions as an adult. They hope that through Waldorf, it will be easier for their children to become content with their adult selves.

This enthusiasm, however, is typical for parents' relative newness to the schools. Although the appreciation does not vanish, parents' evaluations become more ambivalent, the more they are confronted with the school's politics and the more the child's age gets closer to the *Gaokao*.

4.5. Phase four: Facing conflict

Parents' perception of Waldorf changes over time. Asking a principal about parental attitudes correlating with their child's age, she summarized:

> *In the first two years, they are enthusiastic about everything. The mothers engage in all kinds of workshops and get engaged in the community. But most don't get too deep into it. In grades three and four, they start asking questions about the curriculum. What are you doing? What is my child learning? They start to worry about the learning development of their children. In grade five and six, they are worrying about their children's education career. Those who remain are heroes. (Mrs. Liang)*

Mrs. Liang's summary indicates that parents' preferences for education change with the age of their children. In phase four, parents' evaluation of Waldorf becomes ambivalent because they see themselves confronted with the conflict of how to balance their hopes for who the child will become with the perceived difficulties of getting there.

4.5.1. Hoping the child will "be able to do what they like"

I investigated parents' hopes by asking what they envision for their children in their twenties. Parents, especially those who had been with Waldorf for some time, were often much more articulate about these hopes than they were about their initial expectations.

While at the time of their initial decision, parents had hopes Waldorf would solve their immediate problems, their hopes become more long-term oriented over time.

Parents are concerned with who their children will become as adults. One aspect is their hope that the children will have a positive state of mind and a healthy sense of their own identity. "Knowing who they are" or "being content with themselves", being "independent" and "balanced", as well as "becoming themselves" were frequently-mentioned characteristics.

This does not exclude parents' hopes for a good material and academic future for their children, however. Most parents hope their children will attend university. This hope goes along with a general approval of Chinese higher education. This can be explained with their idea about the effects of stress. Parents perceive stress in higher education as less harmful than in primary school, sometimes even necessary. Parents' support of Chinese higher education often accompanied with their hope that the children will have an "economically carefree life".

The most commonly mentioned hope combines these aspects. Many parents hope that their children will "have the ability to do what they like". This includes both the aspect of knowing themselves and what they "like" as well as having the abilities to achieve their goals. It implies that parents believe it does not suffice to be self-confident if the children do not have the means to achieve what they want. This includes the ability to master society's impediments such as the *Gaokao*, but also abilities like "being able to express themselves" and "critical thinking", abilities, that are at the core of Waldorf.

I observed that fathers tend to be more oriented towards material security through academic success, while mothers tend to focus more on a healthy personality. On one occasion, a father had overheard my interview with some mothers. Afterward, he told me that this was "just the mothers' perspective", and further: "We [fathers] think very differently about this". In my later interviews, I observed that fathers were paying more attention to observable abilities and tended to worry more about degrees.

4.5.2. Worrying about the future

Being a Waldorf parent consists of a lot of anxieties and worries. At every school, parents reported a "feeling of insecurity". This relates to parents' hopes described above and their doubts of Waldorf's ability to fulfil them. Some parents question, if Waldorf as a pedagogy can fulfil them, while others are worried if the circumstances hinder the pedagogy to unfold its full potential. I distinguish two kinds of worries: regarding the quality of teaching and the institutional stability of the school.

4.5.2.1. Quality of teaching

Most teachers are not teachers by profession. Having different backgrounds, they only get trained in Waldorf pedagogy when they started teaching. Parents are worried about their pedagogical qualities. Some described teachers as being "too immature" or as not knowing "what they are doing and who they are". Some feel that teachers are not able to recognize and cater for their children's individual needs enough. Many parents told me they were afraid that the teachers were "not qualified enough".

Furthermore, parents perceive a conflict between the principals of Waldorf education and standards set by the mainstream system. They hope their children will "know who they are", but they also want them to be able to reach their goals within Chinese society, which is of a highly competitive nature. Parents of older pupils especially worry deeply about this. Consider my recount of a parent-teacher meeting of an eighth-grade class, where the setup for the ninth grade was discussed:

> *In the beginning of the meeting, I had the feeling of an intense tension between parents and teachers. They discussed how they could find adequate high-school teachers and what teaching material should be used. The parents questioned the teachers' refusal to use state published books and to invite retired mainstream teachers to give specific classes. They repeatedly asked how much Anthroposophy mattered in this moment when their children's future was at stake. The teachers, however, insisted on the importance of the curriculum and on teachers having an Anthroposophical background. After the principal had*

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asked the parents to take a "step by step" approach for setting up the high school together, I had the feeling the tension reduced. Later, four parents told the teachers "we trust you". (summary of a fieldnote)

When I visited this school again six months later, half of the students of that class had left the school.

In my interviews, I observed a considerable difference in parents' worries relative to their understanding of Anthroposophy. Parents who had studied Waldorf pedagogy and Anthroposophy had more understanding for the teachers and more trust in them, and their hopes aligned more strongly with those of Waldorf. They seemed to worry less about the reintegration of their child into the performance society. Like Mrs. Liu, whose understanding of "letting the children become who they are" changed over time, they tended to have– or tried to have – more trust in the ability of their children to "find their way".

Several teachers complained, however, about parents lacking a deeper understanding and therefore measuring Waldorf too strictly by the requirements of mainstream education. One principal told me:

> *I am admiring the parents for their bravery. They send their children here without even understanding Waldorf. But they study too little! Because they are not interested in Anthroposophy and Waldorf education, they don't understand what we are doing. If they would study, they would worry less! (Mrs. Liang)*

Understanding Anthroposophy can be difficult. Therefore, all schools organize courses on parenting and education, in which teachers explain the development stages and the respective teaching methods. The same principal was desperate over parents only attending the courses when the students are young. Later, when mainstream students spend 15 hours per day with rote learning, while Waldorf students acquire knowledge through stories and experiential learning, parents do not attend the workshops anymore. Therefore, they worry because of the discrepancy between the learning they observe with their children and their expectations of what students should learn.

This worry directly leads to the question of fitting into society as an adult. Although parents reject the means of mainstream education, they still value its end: attending university in China. For this, students need to pass the *Gaokao*. Parents struggle with the question of if and how Waldorf will be able to prepare the students for this. At the time of my fieldwork, no Waldorf student ever had taken the *Gaokao* at the end of their Waldorf career.[15] At schools in the process of establishing their high school, parents and teachers negotiate how to balance Waldorf principles and state system requirements.

4.5.2.2.   Institutional stability

The Chinese Waldorf movement is still young and far from consolidated. There are many open questions about how to implement and localize the pedagogy and to adapt to social and political realities. Furthermore, their status of illegality renders them to political pressure. Parents' worries about the school's stability have many aspects: fear of splitting, internal friction, high fluctuation among parents and staff, and political pressure. They are a part of each school's reality, as this father points out:

> *In the current period, there is almost no example of a smoothly running Waldorf community in China. There are always divisions, constant disputes, and frictions. One group of parents after another happily join this education because of their happy yearnings. But they always lose hope because of some people or some happenings and dejectedly leave us again. In the class of our child, not even 50% of the students have been around from grade one to five. The class teacher also changed once. There are classes, where the class teachers changed three times in three years. There is no end in sight for this phenomenon. (Mr. Lu)*

Many parents and teachers leave after some years. Parents and teachers told me that, whenever a teacher or a parent leaves, the other parents are confronted with the question of whether staying is the right decision.

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[15] There are students, who successfully passed the *Gaokao* after having left Waldorf at the end of grade eight.

Larger struggles often resulted in one body of teachers leaving together and founding a new one, each school becoming weaker. Cherry (2017), a long-time supporter of the Chinese Waldorf movement, highlighted this as one of the main challenges. Except for school 6, all schools I visited had either experienced a splitting or were the result of one.

Another factor strongly contributing to institutional instability is the legal status of most schools. As Cherry (2018) points out: "The big change in China at the moment is the much stricter attitude of the government towards independent education". Two of the schools I visited faced strong political pressure during my research. Both were facing the risk of having to move the school ground again.

These insecurities worry the parents because they threaten the security of their children's education. Even if the school has a plan for what will happen after the local government will close them down, the transition will mean psychological stress and missing lectures. Parents ask: "What happens to my child if the school ceases to exist?"

At schools that have decided not to establish a high school, parents face the question of what will happen after eighth grade. They feel whichever option they choose will be difficult. If they go back to mainstream education, the children will have to go through a challenging adaptation process, with the parents possibly betraying their values. When going abroad, parents are afraid of filial and cultural alienation. They question their children's "preparedness" to face the challenge of integrating into a foreign environment and are worried what effects this would have on their children's "natural development".

4.6. Coping with insecurity

One term I often encountered was approaching problems "one step at a time" or "step by step". Like at the parent-teacher meeting described above, it often came up when talking about insecurities of the future. For parents, taking "one step at a time" is a strategy of coping with their anxieties. They dismiss future insecurities and focus on their present situation. This way they reason that they have to do the next step first and that worrying about a vague future will not help. Thereby, they do not have to answer fundamental

questions, like that of staying or leaving. Some parents mentioned things like: "Look at the mainstream parents, they don't worry less either". Being dissatisfied with their school brings them back to the question at the beginning of their journey: what are the alternatives?

To conclude, parents' Waldorf experience is significantly shaped by insecurities, most importantly that of not knowing where the journey will lead them. As the Chinese Waldorf movement is still at its infancy, there are no models, whose paths they could follow, to get a feeling of more security. Many parents are deeply worried about their children's future. But as their hopes are connected to Waldorf pedagogy without alternatives that are more compelling, they take the active or passive decision to stay with Waldorf.

4.7.   Touchpoint two: Deciding to leave

Like Sun (2019), I observed that many students leave Waldorf after grade six, seven, or eight. Generally, the older the students are, the smaller the classes. Leaving after before or after grade six is a common strategy. Parents decide for Waldorf because they want to give their children a "happy childhood", but after that, they see their academic ambitions best catered for within mainstream education.

Other parents consider leaving because they cannot see their expectations and hopes for their children's education - and consequently for their future - being met. This does not imply their general disapproval for Waldorf, though. I interviewed only three parents who had left a Waldorf school. They all had chosen another Waldorf school or another kind of alternative education because of the worries that many parents have: the abilities of the teacher to care for their child appropriately.

However, since the majority of my participants were still with Waldorf, this research cannot sufficiently answer the question of why parents actually leave.

4.8.   Conclusion: The Waldorf journey

My results show that Chinese parents have diverse motivations to send their child to a Waldorf school, and that these motivations change over time. Generally, parents are deeply affected by both their impressions of mainstream education and of Waldorf. Before taking the initial decision, parents are dissatisfied with the mainstream system, often because they see their child suffer or because they are disillusioned with the system due to their own educational experience. This leads them to look for alternative education. What draws them toward Waldorf intellectually is its pedagogy with its emphasis on the natural and free development of the individual child and with its diverse activities. On an emotional level, they are attracted by the contentment they observe with Waldorf students, the environment, and by the teachers' passion. When deciding for Waldorf, they hope that Waldorf can best fulfil their expectations of a more child-oriented education with less pressure.

After integrating into the Waldorf community, parent's motivations change. Their observations mostly confirm their initial hopes and create new ones. Especially when they study Waldorf pedagogy, their hopes align with the goals of Waldorf education. With increasing age of their children, however, their academic ambitions become more pronounced and diverse anxieties of the approaching, insecure future arise. For parents, this time is characterized by balancing their hopes for a well-balanced and mature child and their worries about their child failing academically. I would argue that for parents who stay with Waldorf, the hopes prevail, amplified by their antipathy for mainstream education.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I contextualize my findings by comparing them to existing literature on parental choice for alternative education in China and for Waldorf globally. Furthermore, I highlight the contribution of my findings and point out implications for Chinese parents and schools.

The only research directly comparable to mine is Sun's ethnographic study (2019). She investigates Chinese parents' reasons and the process of taking the initial decision for Waldorf. Furthermore, she illustrates parents' experience of Waldorf, the contradictions they see, and how they handle them. Moreover, she conceptualizes Waldorf as filling an "institutional-paradigmatic gap" because parents perceive it as reflecting Chinese philosophical thought better than other social institutions.

Sun also identifies an interplay of antipathy and sympathy as leading to the initial decision. Likewise, she finds the same positive (change in lifestyle and personal development of parents) and negative aspects (worrying about teaching quality and the *Gaokao*) of experiencing Waldorf. However, she does not relate them to parents' evaluation of Waldorf a whole. Also, her findings do not seem to suggest a high importance of worries. This could be explained by the schools she did her fieldwork at. One obtained their license a few years ago, the other in 2019. In my study, contrarily, parents' voices of non-licensed schools are dominant.

5.1.   Deciding for a philosophy-based pedagogy

Like in the discourse on alternative education in China (compare to section 2.2.), I found that one parental motivation to choose a specific alternative is its philosophical underpinning. Sun (2019) claims that parents are drawn to Waldorf because "there was a longing for reconnection with holistic, spiritual development" and that parents experience Waldorf as reflecting traditional values like no other social institution in modern China.

I only partly agree with this claim. In my fieldwork I encountered many parents who engaged in Waldorf because they perceived a connection between Waldorf and traditional Chinese values. Some, like Mrs. Xi, explicitly highlighted how it allowed the children to experience Chinese values. However, many others valued this connection only on a superficial level. The aspects of Daoism, Buddhism, or Confucianism parents saw reflected in Waldorf varied considerably, sometimes even conflicting with each other or with Anthroposophy. Conclusively, I would argue that to these parents, the

philosophical underpinning is what differentiates Waldorf and therefore makes it a "better" education – it is a value in and of itself. Sheng (2014, 2019b) reports similar observations. Parents of both Christian and Confucian homeschooling showed some affection towards the religious underpinnings of the chosen education, but academic considerations were much stronger.

My data suggest this preference is mostly important in phase two and three. In phase four, it was only mentioned in relation to parents' own learning journey. I observed that even after years, many parents still have a shallow understanding of the Waldorf methodology. They showed the attitude of knowing enough, while using mainstream measures to evaluate their children's learning. Based on this in connection with Sheng (2014, 2019b), I would argue that the meaning of the philosophy-based pedagogy changes over time and that its importance for parents' satisfaction with Waldorf decreases in the face of an increasing preference for a feasible path towards successful integration into society.

Sun highlights another function of the philosophical foundation of Waldorf. She shows that studying Anthroposophy has a "healing" quality due to its guided reflection and spiritual orientation. This is supported by my findings (compare section 4.4.2.). Going beyond Sun's findings, my research suggests that studying Anthroposophy does not influence parents' evaluations of their children's learning directly, but reinforces their antagonism to mainstream education, deepens their understanding of the teachers' strategies and strengthens their believe in the righteousness of the goals. This would explain my observation that parents who engage in systematically studying Anthroposophy worry less.

5.2.   Changing meanings: Evaluating Waldorf over time

In Chapter 4, I have shown that the meaning Waldorf has to parents changes over time. Before the initial decision, Waldorf means the opposite of everything that is bad about mainstream education. Thereafter, it means a more relaxed and happy life for all family members and the beginning of a personal development journey for some parents. In

phase four, however, parents' perspectives changes. Waldorf keeps meaning liberation from mainstream education and freedom and happiness. But at the same time, parents start to assess it with a long-term orientation: Is it able to meet societal quality standards? Will it be able to provide the child with enough "hard skills" to survive in the competitive Chinese society? From this perspective, their choice becomes more ambivalent. To many parents, Waldorf starts to also mean less qualified teachers, no comparability of learning outcomes, political pressure, and insecurity of the child's (academic) future.

This insight clearly distinguishes my research from the existing studies on parental choice on alternative education. Studies of Billioud & Thoroval (2015) and Sheng (2019a, 2019b) conceptualize choice as a single decision and only describe parents' short-term impressions afterwards. Although Sun's findings indicate the evaluation process I illustrated, she is mostly interested in describing and understanding parents' general experience, the connection between their affection to Anthroposophy and Daoism and its implications for Chinese society. Further research will have to show if the process I describe can also be found in other forms of alternative education and whether or not it is different when the academic future of the children is secured.

5.3. The special case of China? Comparing the Waldorf journey internationally

How do my findings compare to Waldorf parents' experiences in other countries? I am only aware of two other studies investigating parents' motivations to choose Waldorf: Easton (1995) for the U.S.[16] and Liebenwein et al. (2012) for Germany.[17] Both report similar motives to those I found: Parents in the U.S. and Germany also choose Waldorf to give their children a "longer and happier childhood" and they appreciate the "holistic education". Both share the preference for tertiary education. Like in China, critical aspects were parents' discontent with some teachers' abilities to deal with difficulties and to

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[16] In 1995, Waldorf was excluded from state support in the US. However, students could still take the college-entry exam and faced no institutional discrimination to enter tertiary education (Sagarin, 2011).
[17] In Germany, Waldorf schools receive financial support from the government and additionally charge tuition fees. Waldorf high schools prepare students to participate in the college entry exam.

explain their teaching in an accessible language. This suggests that dissatisfaction about these aspects seems to be commonplace for Waldorf parents across countries.

Despite these shortcomings, parents of both studies evaluated Waldorf as overall very satisfactory, with 80% of German parents reporting they would take the decision again (Liebenwein et al., 2012). Although parents in Easton's study had to invest more, they also saw their expectations met. Parents of neither study doubted students' ability to integrate into society. Quite the opposite was the case: parents stressed their satisfaction with students' independence and self-assuredness.

There are two aspects that clearly distinguish Chinese parents from those in Germany and the U.S.: their antipathy to mainstream education and their worries. Although German parents mentioned some dissatisfaction with the early pressure mainstream education exerts on students, it is only a minor aspect (Liebenwein et al., 2012). Easton does not mention this subject at all. But most importantly, neither Liebenwein et al., nor Easton report worries as a significant part of the Waldorf experience. What, then, is different about China?

Following my observations, the most striking differences are the age of the movement and the education system. Unlike in Germany and the U.S., the Waldorf movement in China is still at its beginning. Waldorf in China has not yet consolidated its practices and internal institutions. The history of Waldorf in Germany and the U.S. has shown that this might change over time (Sagarin, 2011). The other aspect is more challenging. For most Chinese Waldorf schools, it is still uncertain if they will ever be able to obtain a government license and find other ways to provide students with feasible ways into society. These factors are distinctive for China. Parents and teachers will have to find solutions out of their own capabilities.

5.4. Lessons for parents and schools

Despite these uncertainties, many thousands of Chinese parents are sending their children to Waldorf schools. This brings me back to the fundamental conflict Chinese

Waldorf parents are facing: They can either place their children into the competitiveness of the mainstream system (which they perceive as failing the children as human beings but as providing a plannable future), or they can choose Waldorf (which promises to educate self-assured young adults but is rather unpredictable as a career path). Waldorf parents today are the early adopters who are missing role models. The further down they follow the paths, the more appealing the advantages of the mainstream system become. This stimulates reconsideration, with many parents leaving, but others nevertheless pursuing their visions.

My research shows that nowadays, the challenges to Chinese Waldorf schools are twofold. Firstly, schools need to consolidate the quality of teaching and learn to explain their approach better. From my perspective, both parents and teachers have some reason to complain about each other. It is important for parents to understand the Waldorf view of child development and of the pedagogy derived from it. As it aims at long-term character development, mainstream education's standardized measurement cannot be applied validly. On the other hand, in my fieldwork I met several students whose knowledge was far below the level of their age. It is also schools who need to educate more, better-skilled teachers.

The second challenge is to find ways to accommodate parents' wish for officially accredited degrees, while remaining true to Waldorf's educational values. Research has shown that there is a strong demand for more holistic education in Chinese society. However, my research suggests that by far not all parents who choose Waldorf are highly idealistic about Anthroposophy. They rather have the expectation that schools integrate into the state system. Schools will have to find a careful balance between accommodating parents' and their own values.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

My study analyzed school choice for alternative education in China from a constructivist, anthropological perspective. It investigated parents' motives and experiences of sending

their child to Waldorf school. Through ethnographic fieldwork and a Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis, I illustrated their evaluation process of being a parent in Chinese alternative education.

The thesis elaborated three questions: What are the motivations of Chinese parents to send their child to Waldorf school? How do they evaluate their experiences of doing so? And how does this change over time?

My main argument is that being a Chinese Waldorf parent is a process of changing meanings. Parents' motives to send their children to Waldorf school are an interplay of parental perceptions of their children's wellbeing, the public school system, and Waldorf pedagogy itself. Between deciding to leave mainstream education and being a Waldorf parent for several years, parents' evaluation of all three aspects changes: from being mainly concerned with the child's physical and mental health to also valuing knowledge and social status, from a strong aversion to mainstream teaching methods to acknowledging the social security the mainstream system may provide, and from admiring alternative educational methods and goals to recognizing this educations' deviance with social standards and its practical shortcomings. Throughout this process, parents' self-perceptions also change because of their interaction with Waldorf and Anthroposophy.

This process shows that parents have different priorities at different times. When the child is young, their physical and mental wellbeing is important to parents, while institutional security and future social status of the child are less so. Parents perceive Waldorf as being able to meet these expectations. With the increasing age of the child, priorities change, and parents wish to provide their child with a future at the same social status as they are having. This has implications for their evaluation of Waldorf, which I have outlined.

One of the limitations of this thesis is that the presented research is not a saturated, substantial Grounded Theory. It is grounded in the data I was able to obtain within the limits of my master program. It is a beginning and needs further exploration, grounding,

theoretical integration and saturation but for such, it provides a good starting point. Furthermore, I have shown how the insights contribute to the discourse on alternative school choice in China and parental experience of Waldorf, in general.

One question which my research does not answer is why parents decide to leave Waldorf. I can only suspect that this is influenced by parents' doubts if children will "be able to do what they want", due to the academic insecurity. Further research will have to inquire this.

Some limitations of this thesis were caused by my relatively low level of experience with fieldwork at the beginning of the project. Looking back to my earlier data, I realized that my notes and descriptions left many open questions, but my notetaking improved through constant reflection. Another challenge was understanding and applying CGT. Charmaz (2014) only provides guidelines, not a recipe ready to apply. I confronted this challenge by constantly going back and forth between not only the field and analysis, but also between research and GT literature. For both challenges, constantly engaging with theory and practice, and the methodological reflection of both helped to increase my skills.

Furthermore, there were several aspects which I could not include in this thesis, either because I had not investigated them well enough, or because they exceeded the scope of this thesis. Among these are the role external pressure on parents plays in the decision-making, such as the grandparents' opposition to the decision or the question or how the changing parental self-perceptions influence their evaluation of the child's development and the school. All of these are worth exploring in future research.

Lastly, this thesis only sheds light on a small portion of the Waldorf movement. I only had the resources to visit eight schools, while there are several dozens. Although the schools I visited covered a wide range of institutional development, schools without government license were dominant. There were many perspectives I was not able to (sufficiently) sample for, such as parents whose children joined in higher grades or the different perspectives of fathers and mothers. Also, conditions change rapidly: while two

schools have changed their names for political reasons, one school obtained a license in the meanwhile.

To conclude, this thesis adds the angle of choice as a process with an emphasis on balancing hopes and worries to the academic discourse on alternative education in China. Further research will have to further ground these insights. Additionally, it also provides the Waldorf movement with an academic perspective on their experiences. Many parents expressed strong interest in my research, and I am committed to write a summary both in English and Chinese to give them back to the community.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Research schedule

Location	Date	Research method
School 1	07.-10.04.2018	Participant observation (incl. Anthroposophy course)
School 2	27.-30.04.2018	Participant observation and interview
School 3	04.-09.05.2018	Participant observation (incl. Anthroposophy course)
School 4	10.-11.05.2018	Participant observation (incl. Anthroposophy course)
School 5	12.-18.05.2018	Participant observation (incl. Anthroposophy course)
Waldorf community, Jinan	02.06.2018	Participant observation
School 6	10.06.2018	Participant observation
School 6	15.06.2018	Participant observation
School 7	21.-22.06.2018	Participant observation and interview
School 6	21.09.2018	Participant observation
School 2	07.10.2018	Participant observation and interview
School 6	09.10.2018	Participant observation
School 2	12.-14.10.2018	Participant observation and interview
School 6	16.10.2018	
School 2	19.-21.10.2018	Participant observation and interviews
Waldorf community, Beijing	21.10.2018	Participant observation and interviews
School 8	28.10.-02.11.2018	Participant observation (incl. Anthroposophy course), interviews
School 4	03.-06.11.2018	Interviews
School 6	13.11.2018	Participant observation

Over the course of the research, I had many informal conversations with parents and teachers. Here, I listed only those which are mentioned above to provide an overview.

I/C	Name	Date	Location	Role
C I	Mrs. Yang	09.04.2018 14.03.2019	School 1 (telephone)	Mother
C	Mr. Fang	10.04.2018	School 1	Father and teacher in training
I	Martin	30.04.2018	School 2	Organizer of a teacher training
I	Mr. Zeng	16.05.2018	School 5	Founder and principal
I	Ben	21.06.2018	-	Long-term supporter of the Chinese Waldorf movement
I	Mr. Hao	14.10.2018 13.03.2019	School 2 (telephone)	Father
I	Mrs. Sheng,	20.10.2018	School 2	Mother and manager of a teacher training
I	Mrs. Yan,	20.10.2018	School 2	Mother
I	Mrs. Liu,	20.10.2018	School 2	Mother, kindergarten teacher
I	Mrs. Xi,	20.10.2018	School 2	Mother
I	Mrs. Yun	20.10.2018	School 2	Mother
I	Mrs. & Mr. Han	21.10.2018	School 2	Mother and father
I	Mrs. & Mr. Chen	21.10.2018	Waldorf community Beijing	Mother and father
C	Mrs. Wen	Multiple times	School 2	Mother and teacher
C	Mrs. Peng	30.10.2018	School 8	Mother
I	Mrs. Deng	31.10.2018	School 8	Teacher
I	Mr. Zhang	04.11.2018	School 4	Father
I	Mrs. Wang	04.11.2018	School 4	Mother
I	Mrs. Liang	04.11.2018	School 4	Mother, founder, and principal
I	Mrs. Wu	05.11.2018	School 4	Mother, kindergarten teacher
I	Mr. Lu	19.11.2018	School 4 (email)	Father

This interview outline rather represents questions I asked in the earlier interviews. I did not cover all questions in each interview.

- 请您做一个简单的自我介绍 （年龄，工作，和华德福的广西）
- 您的孩子(们)是什么时候出生的？上几年级？
- 这么认识华德福？
- 孩子(们)那时候多大？
- 孩子(们)上了主流幼儿园/小学吗？
- 认识华德福的时后，您对它有什么印象？
- 如果您的孩子上了主流幼儿园还是小学，她/他在那过得怎么样？
- 孩子上了华德福学校之后，您观察到什么变化吗？
- 上了华德福之后，您家人之间发生了什么变化吗？
- 您对孩子在学校的状态有什么看法？
- 您会告诉我一个难忘的在学校发生的故事吗？
- 您对孩子（们）将来的教育有什么计划？（小学，初中，高中，高中之后）
- 想到您孩子二十多岁的时候，您有什么希望？
- 在华德福，您遇到了困难吗？
- 您觉得华德福的核心是什么？
- 您对人智学有兴趣吗？
- 您还想提别的吗？

- Please shortly introduce yourself (age, work, relation to Waldorf)

- How old is/are your child(ren)? Which grade are they in?

- How did you get to know Waldorf?

- How old where your children at that time?

- Did your children attend mainstream kindergarten and/or primary school?

- What was your first impression of Waldorf?

- If they attended mainstream education, how did they fare there?

- After moving to Waldorf, did you observe any changes with your children?

- After moving to Waldorf, did your family relations change?

- How do you see your children's state at the moment?

- Can you tell me a memorable story?

- What are your plans for the future education of your children? (Regarding primary, junior-high, senior-high school and afterward?)

- If you think of your children in their twenties, what are your hopes?

- Did you encounter any difficulties in Waldorf?

- What do you think is the core of Waldorf?

- Are you interested in Anthroposophy?

- Is there anything else that you would like to mention?