

THE LABYRINTH OF ANXIETY

UNDERSTANDING AND NAVIGATING CHINESE
PARENTAL EDUCATIONAL ANXIETY

Linyuan Deng, Yiwen Tang, and Jiayi Yang



The Labyrinth of Anxiety

This book examines parental educational anxiety in contemporary mainland China, offering a systematic analysis of its cultural roots, conceptual structure, formation mechanisms, and consequences.

Through vivid case studies, the authors delve into three key aspects of educational anxiety: concerns about academic performance, the competitive environment, and parenting self-efficacy. They present a dynamic framework that illustrates how family practices, school expectations, and social competition interact to generate and amplify anxiety. The book also investigates the wide-reaching effects of this phenomenon, demonstrating how it disrupts family relationships and undermines psychological well-being. To address these challenges, the authors propose practical, integrated strategies aimed at reducing parental educational anxiety, offering actionable solutions for families, schools, and policymakers.

Blending empirical evidence with an innovative analytical perspective, this volume is a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners in education, mental health, and family studies.

Linyuan Deng is Professor and PhD supervisor at the Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University. Her research focuses on family–school partnership, family therapy, and the prevention and intervention of adolescent mental health problems. She has published over 100 articles in CSSCI and SSCI journals and co-edited several books.

Yiwen Tang is a PhD student at the Collaborative Innovation Center of Assessment for Basic Education Quality, Beijing Normal University. Her research focuses on family–school partnership and parental educational anxiety. She has published several CSSCI journal articles on parental educational anxiety.

Jiayi Yang is a PhD student at the Faculty of Psychology, Beijing Normal University. Her research interests include family education and adolescent mental health. She has published CSSCI journal articles on parental educational anxiety.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

The Labyrinth of Anxiety

Understanding and Navigating Chinese
Parental Educational Anxiety

**Linyuan Deng, Yiwen Tang,
and Jiayi Yang**

First published 2027
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2027 Linyuan Deng, Yiwen Tang, and Jiayi Yang

The right of Linyuan Deng, Yiwen Tang, and Jiayi Yang to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

For Product Safety Concerns and Information please contact our EU representative GPSR@taylorandfrancis.com. Taylor & Francis Verlag GmbH, Kaufingerstraße 24, 80331 München, Germany.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-041-20865-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-041-20868-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-72462-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003724629

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xi</i>
1 Cultural Roots of Modern Parenting Anxiety	1
2 The Silent Struggle: Understanding Parental Educational Anxiety	24
3 Anxiety in Motion: How Fear Takes Hold	44
4 The Ripple Effect: When Anxiety Becomes a Family Legacy	62
5 Breaking the Cycle: From Survival to Thriving	82
<i>Index</i>	<i>105</i>

Figures

3.1	Mechanisms of the Formation and Maintenance of Parental Educational Anxiety	58
4.1	The Family Cycle of Educational Anxiety	75
5.1	A Multilevel Framework of Coping Strategies for Parental Educational Anxiety	97

Tables

2.1	The Parental Educational Anxiety Scale (PEAS)	38
2.2	The Average PEAS Scores From Our Surveys Across Several Provinces	39

Preface

As social competition intensifies and the instrumental value of education becomes increasingly stressed, parental educational anxiety has become a common feature of contemporary Chinese society. It is no longer a new phenomenon but rather an everyday experience for many parents. When parents gather together, conversations almost turn automatically to their children's academic performance and future prospects, filled with concern and tension. They worry that their children may not be admitted to a good university, that they may not have provided sufficient support, or that other children may outperform their own children. Parents feel overwhelmed by preparing their children for the best opportunities all the way through kindergarten, school, and university, and many parents devote enormous amounts of time and resources to their children's education for fear that their children "losing at the starting line." In this context, education is no longer perceived merely as a stage of personal development but increasingly as a decisive pathway that may shape a child's future opportunities and social position.

Why are Chinese parents so anxious about education? Many scholars attribute this phenomenon primarily to the influence of shadow education. In this view, private tutoring institutions intensify parental anxiety through persuasive marketing and profit from these fears. In response, the Chinese government introduced the "Double Reduction" policy in 2021, which placed strict regulations on off-campus academic tutoring in an effort to reduce students' academic burden and alleviate pressure on families. The policy represented one of the most significant educational governance reforms in recent years and attracted widespread public attention. Although these policies have been strongly implemented and the once widespread tutoring culture has been significantly constrained, parental anxiety has not substantially declined. Some parents have even become more uneasy because they now have fewer immediate indicators or resources for their children's academic performance after tutoring institutions were restricted. This paradox suggests that parental educational anxiety cannot be explained simply by the existence of tutoring markets. Instead, it may reflect deeper cultural expectations, social structures, and institutional arrangements that shape how families understand education and success. This raises new questions: What exactly are parents anxious about? If private tutoring is not the real cause, what fuels this anxiety? Why is it so widespread? Is it merely an individual concern, or is it a structurally produced form

of anxiety? And how does it shape parents' everyday educational practices and children's development?

With these questions in mind, we began our research on parental educational anxiety. We first conducted in-depth interviews with parents from different regions of China, listening to their personal experiences and perceptions of educational anxiety. These narratives provided an initial window into the phenomenon. Through these conversations, we encountered not only parents' worries about academic performance but also their reflections on self-worth, family responsibility, social competition, and the uncertainty of the future. We then carried out quantitative analyses with larger samples to further examine the nature of parental educational anxiety and to investigate its determinants, as well as its potential impact on children. Although these studies have yielded valuable academic findings, we came to realize that research articles alone cannot fully depict the whole picture of parental educational anxiety. During the research process, we encountered many experiences that cannot easily be expressed through the strictly rational language of academic writing: parents' daily struggles, their desire for antidotes to ease their anxieties, and their sense of helplessness within a broader educational system. Many parents described a persistent feeling of being caught between high expectations and limited control over educational outcomes. These stories gave us a deep and vivid impression which ultimately inspired us to document and reflect on them in the form of this book.

In this book, we attempt to provide readers with a comprehensive picture of parental educational anxiety in China. Chapter 1 outlines the broader background of this phenomenon, examining historical factors, cultural values, and changes in social structure that together shape the conditions under which parental anxiety emerges. By tracing these long-term influences, the chapter situates contemporary parental concerns within a wider historical and cultural framework. Chapter 2 presents a series of detailed stories from Chinese parents to illustrate how educational anxiety is experienced in everyday life and offers an in-depth interpretation of its underlying nature from an existential perspective. Chapter 3 analyses the mechanisms through which parental educational anxiety is generated and sustained. Rather than viewing it as a static condition, we conceptualize it as a dynamic cycle, helping readers understand why parents often find it difficult to escape this state of anxiety. Chapter 4 explores the double-edged effects of parental educational anxiety on both parents and children. While acknowledging its potentially harmful consequences, we also consider the possibility that it may play certain motivating roles, thereby offering a more balanced perspective. Finally, Chapter 5 proposes systematic approaches for responding to parental educational anxiety. Rather than offering simple solutions, this chapter seeks to encourage more reflective and balanced approaches to education among families, educators, and policymakers.

Despite the fact that this book focuses on parental educational anxiety in China, this phenomenon can also be observed in many other cultural contexts. In several Asian countries, such as South Korea, anxious parents often invest substantial amounts of time and financial resources in private tutoring to improve their children's academic performance. Similarly, in many Western societies, anxious parents

may adopt helicopter parenting and spend considerable money on private educational consultants in the hope of securing admission to prestigious universities. Although the institutional settings and cultural narratives surrounding education differ across societies, the underlying concerns about children's future opportunities are often remarkably similar. Therefore, although this book draws primarily on the Chinese context, we believe that readers from other cultural backgrounds may also find insights and reflections that resonate with their own experiences.

Ultimately, this book aims to provide a deeper understanding of parental educational anxiety in contemporary China. By bringing together empirical research, theoretical reflection, and parents' lived experiences, we seek to illuminate the broader social and cultural forces shaping this phenomenon. We hope that the discussions in this book will encourage readers to reflect not only on educational competition but also on the values and expectations that define parenting and childhood in modern societies.

Acknowledgements

This book is the result of close collaboration among the three authors, Linyuan Deng, Yiwen Tang, and Jiayi Yang. It integrates theoretical discussion with practice-oriented reflections and is informed by interview-based cases collected during the project.

Linyuan Deng led the overall conceptualization of the book, including the design of the overarching framework and the coordination of the writing process. She took primary responsibility for drafting Chapters 1 and 5. She also served as the overall supervisor of the manuscript and completed the final round of integrated revisions to ensure coherence, consistency, and clarity across chapters.

Yiwen Tang contributed to the development of content outlines throughout the manuscript and took primary responsibility for drafting Chapters 2 and 3. Jiayi Yang took primary responsibility for drafting Chapter 4. Yiwen Tang and Jiayi Yang jointly organized and synthesized the interview-based cases included in the book.

Across the manuscript, all three authors worked collaboratively to review and synthesize relevant literature, incorporate feedback through multiple rounds of revision, and refine the arguments and presentation.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to those who contributed to the completion of this book. We are grateful to Professor Hongjie Tian for her early financial support for our interviews and questionnaire survey. We are deeply thankful to the parents who participated in our interviews. Your honest and open sharing allowed us to better understand parental educational anxiety, and the hope of providing meaningful help for you continues to motivate our research and practice. We also thank the reviewers and editors of this book for their professional dedication and thoughtful suggestions, which greatly improved both the structure and readability of the manuscript. Moreover, we thank Xueqin Wu, Bingquan Yang, and Kexin Qi for their assistance with the literature review and organization during the preparation of Chapter 1, and we are grateful to Anna Mao, Tongtong Qian, and Yaixin Xie for translation support and careful language editing and proofreading.