

Changing Chinese Mothers: Coping, pushing, letting go

My mother and I have the same blood running in our bodies, but we are completely different women. – *Jiang Zidan, Dengdai huanghun (Waiting for Dusk)*.

Fu Yuanhong wakes up at 5.45 am every day. As a teacher in a Beijing middle school she leaves for work at 6 am, a little earlier than her eight year-old daughter leaves for her school. “I have a very busy day until 5 pm. I have to take care of my students. On my way back home, I keep calling their parents and talking to them. When I get home, I go through their homework and publish it online so that they know how their child did at school today. Then my daughter returns and I have to spend time with her, cook dinner. Even though her grandma’s around and helps, it is all very exhausting,” she says.

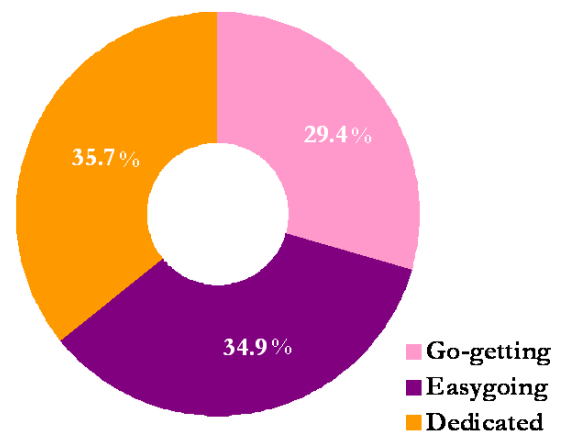
Cai Zhao Rong’s husband looks after the family business in Xiamen, and she helps him manage his fleet of delivery vans from home. She’s on the phone much of the time, but her child is always within sight when at home. She tells us, “I am responsible for my child like a housewife. I do not need to work outside. The child needs a mother’s care and my husband does not want the old to take care of the child. If I go out, there is no one to take care of my daughter. I think the most important thing is the child’s education and I’m afraid of her being left behind in her studies.”

When Xiao Yan returns home from the shopping mall in Shenyang, where she works, at 6 in the evening, there’s dinner to be made. “After doing the housework, and taking my bath, I look at my son and all my tiredness disappears. He is so considerate. He tells me to lie down, pounds my back and sometimes I just fall asleep,” she says. “Occasionally I check his homework, but he says he’s finished. I check nevertheless.”

Ma Yili is one of the most popular actresses in China. Last year, she walked away with the Best Actress award at the prestigious Changchun Film Festival for her performance in “The Good Man”. Her own good man, Wen Zhang, is nine years her junior. Earlier this year, she gave birth to their daughter and put her career on hold to spend more time with her daughter. “Why not? I have plenty of time for work and filming in the future, but only such a short period in which to breastfeed my baby. I don’t dare cut it short. I want her nurtured in the best way,” she said in a radio interview.

Go-getting. Dedicated. Easygoing. All Chinese mothers are not the same. In a China where women indeed hold up half the sky, there are an estimated 320 million working mothers. That’s more than the entire population of the United States.

The least we must do is recognize the differences between them and go beyond the stereotype of a working mother, a mythical superhuman who can effortlessly balance the professional demands of an office, the emotional and sexual demands of a husband, play the nurturing role of a mother – and contribute to the advancement of society, all with the bat of a shimmering eyelid.



Indeed, Chinese mythology recognized the difference between a mother's characteristics. The mother's image was more identifiable with the power of nature than with nurture, or tender love. During the Shang Dynasty (1600-1100 BC), the sun was referred to as *Dong Mu* (East Mother), and the moon as *Xi Mu* (West Mother). The former was not all nurturing. The Goddess Xihe was said to



be the mother of ten suns, which baked the earth so dry that many people died, Hou Yi had to shoot down nine suns and leave the one that we have today. Even Xi Wang Mu, the Queen Mother of the Western Paradise, is portrayed as a complex character. She has the fangs of a tiger and the tail of a panther. She lives alone and is protected by birds of prey and fearsome beasts. She also controls plagues and evil spirits. However frightful her appearance and her powers, Xi Wang Mu is a motherly figure to all the gods in heaven. In her enchanted garden grow the coveted peaches which she plucks and serves at a sumptuous banquet for the gods. She is an alchemist, or a person who practices the art of combining substances that will transform.



Much of the mother image in early Chinese mythology emphasized her reproductive function rather than her tender love. It was during the May Fourth cultural rebellion that this image was reconstructed. An idealized maternal figure became a key feature of China's new literature. What was created was a gentle nurturing figure, selflessly and naturally loving, sometimes suffering, occasionally joyful. Opposite her would be a child, usually male: an infant in her embrace, a schoolboy making his first foray into the world, or an adult-child finding solace and strength in her love. This reconstruction of motherhood amounted to a rediscovery of genuine human nature at a time when traditional Chinese personalities were being castigated; and commentators have suggested that this was a deliberate effort by young intellectuals to discover and define what humane social relations in a future modern Chinese society might look like.

We have taken this brief detour for one simple reason: to emphasize the point that mothers in China have had conflicting expectations thrown at them over centuries. Two decades of modernization is not going to change the severe identity crisis which they encounter. We know quite well that women adapt to change. It is just that everyone isn't quite adapting in the same way. There are significant variations in their attitudes and beliefs. It is these differences which we've been able to uncover through out study, and would like to explain in this cover story.



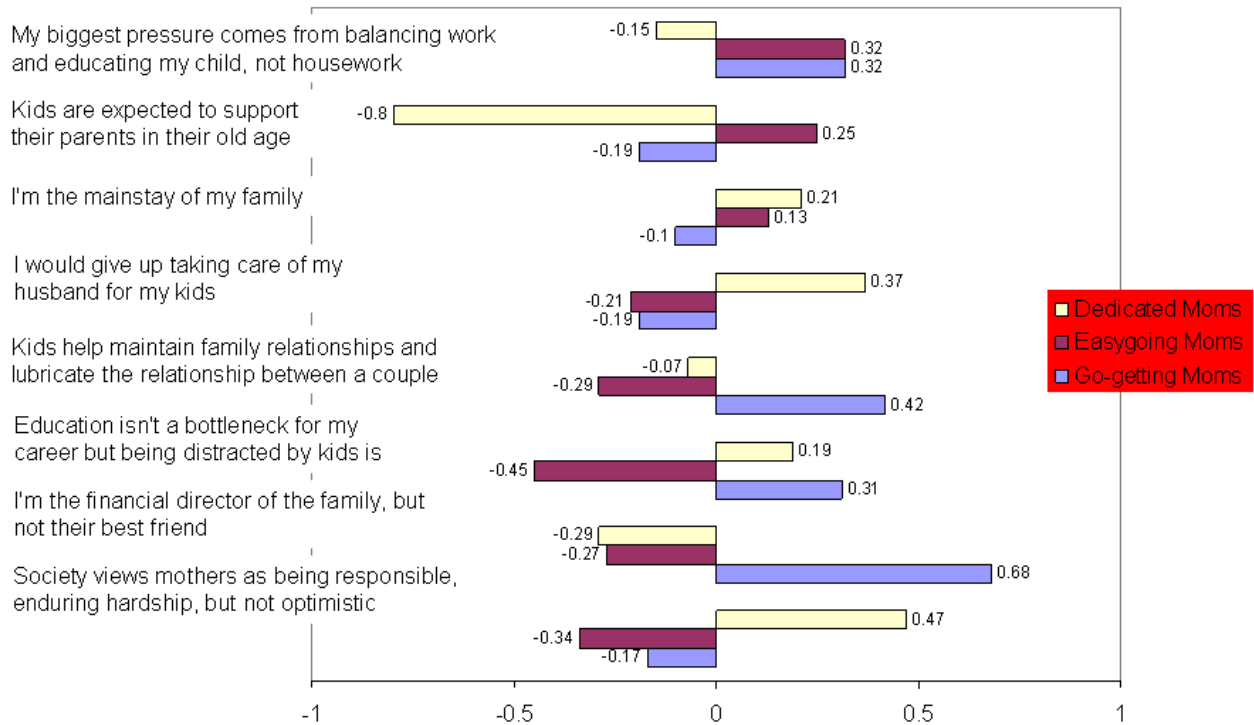


Chart: Significant Variations in Mothers' Beliefs & Attitudes

Many of the mothers we spoke with belong to the post-80s generation. The popular notion about this generation is that they are all career-oriented, the husband and wife equally share the responsibility of raising children, but keep their financial affairs to themselves. We found that this is true for less than one-third of the mothers.

If you closely examine the chart above, what is really striking is that for every one of the statements, there are two groups which are concurrent in their beliefs, whereas the third group's beliefs are quite the opposite. There is, however, no predictable pattern which the groups follow in their concurrence. For example, while Go-Getting Moms and Easygoing Moms believe that the greatest pressures they face comes from balancing work and educating their child, they have diametrically opposing views about kids supporting parents in their old age. Easygoing Moms feel that it's being distracted by kids while at work which is a bottleneck for them in their careers, as do Dedicated Moms; but the two groups do not agree on giving up taking care of their husbands for their kids, with the latter believing that this does happen with them.

What this means is that mothers in urban China follow different styles of parenting. These styles are determined by a mix of factors:

- ☞ their own career ambitions and workplace expectations,
- ☞ the kind of financial control and independence they enjoy,
- ☞ self-image in terms of role in the family,
- ☞ beliefs about how children much be raised, and
- ☞ ambitions for and expectations of their own child.

Go Getting Mothers

Having achieved a modicum of success in their careers or businesses, these mothers expect their children to follow their path of success on their own, without much pushing. They clearly believe that they are providing their children the very best, and it is up to the child to take advantage of all the opportunities they provide. But these are also mothers who often spoil their kids.

Gao Wei, from Shenyang, told us, “We love her so much that we cater to all her needs, clothing, eating and playing. We never calculate.” Lan Hongwei, another mother of a three year old boy in Shenyang said, “I give him everything he wants, I even give him my cosmetics. I just don't want him to cry, nothing else.” Liu Xiaoling, owner of a noodle shop in Chongqing sent her 12 year old son off to a boarding school, because she thought that the schools near her home weren't quite to her satisfaction. “I give him the money every month. He is quite independent, so I set him free.” These are all mothers who would like their sense of financial independence, of not having to feel deprivation, rub off on their children.



Go Getting mothers do not outwardly profess to put pressure on their children. Fu Yuanhong, the mother from Beijing told us, “She need not be too competitive, just do the best she can. We don't have to compare her with other kids. I won't demand her to be the top student in her class or get full marks in her exams.” But talk about finishing homework and she changes her line. “I do ask her to do her homework carefully. If she didn't finish her homework but I talked to her mildly, she wouldn't take me seriously.” Li Ying, a mother in Shenyang said this about her son, “He takes

You gain knowledge in school, and you cultivate a personality at home.

acting and arts classes out of his own interest, and I'll let him study only if he asked to. Art is good for his sense of beauty and emotional health.” And then this, “I make sure he finishes his homework because he is tardy and plays a little while doing his homework. I can't allow him to make too many mistakes.” Li Jiajou added this about her daughter, “She is about average in study among her classmates. Since she is extroverted and optimistic, I just let her develop according to her interests.” Liu Rui told us, “If one is not good in languages or at computers but has good manners, you can still call her a good girl,” lamenting a little later, “I don't expect her to be so brilliant, yet I'm afraid if she is not.” Wu Ping told us that while she didn't expect her son to be first in his class, she would be very proud if he did.

Cultural Tension: The inner desire to let the steam off their child vs. an educational system and a society which expects them to excel.

Often, Go Getting mothers appreciate the softer, relational, caring skills that their kids have developed. Li Jiajou narrated this incident: “When her grandpa was sick, my daughter helped fetch medicines for him and helped him to the bathroom like a grownup. She also wrote an interesting



composition about a little nurse taking care of her grandpa.” Fu Yuanhong had a similar story: “When her grandma or I fall ill, she stays besides us, brings us water or medicine, massages my head. Every time I get back from work, she will massage my shoulders.” Both Gao Wei and Wu Ping are proud that their kids aren’t awkward with strangers.

The pressure of pursuing one’s own interests and the dual demands of ambition and caring means that most Go Getting mothers are stressed out. Our quantitative study

reveals that these mothers believe that society expects them to endure hardship. Lan Hongwei feels: “I feel I don’t have enough time for him. I have no rest. I’m always tired.” Li Jiajou says, “I’m not patient and lose my temper easily. My work is so tiring. If I face some difficulties at home, I try not to let it affect my work.” Li Ying adds, “I have my baby, yet I have my own dreams.” Lu Di says she misses the time and freedom she had before the child arrived. Wu Ping’s daughter loves reading. Being short of time, she compensates: “I inculcated this habit of reading books in her, since I don’t have much patience.”

Fu Yuanhong, the teacher from Beijing, makes a candid confession: “Some women are good leaders at work, but they are neither good mothers nor good wives.” She admires her school headmistress who manages to take good care of her family, her staff and also maintains great relationships with leaders from the regional government.

It is not surprising, then, that this is the group that is most likely to engage the services of an *ayi* – a housekeeper. Li Ying explained, “She does the cleaning and washing for me. I don’t really like the way she does the housework, but I no longer want to spend five hours to clean the house myself. It’s time wasting.” Lu Di says, “There is too much a child demands – time, energy, money. I used to hire a full time babysitter before because he’d wake up at night. Now the babysitter is only for the daytime, and quite worth the Rmb 2000 I spend.”



Cultural Tension: A desire to be equally good at work and at home, yet deep fear that she would fail in both.

Given the pressures Go Getting mothers handle, what they expect is some appreciation: from their husbands, from their kids and from society. Lu Di complained, “The saddest part is that he always prefers my husband. Why doesn’t he prefer me as I spend more time with him?” Li Ying, on the other hand, seemed delighted in telling us: “One Christmas eve, I was very tired and fell asleep. My husband asked me to get up. He’d bought candles, red wine, some glasses; he’d put fruits in little bowls and when he lit those colorful lights, I really liked it.” In contrast, almost plaintively, Liu Rui told us, “My baby always says I’m beautiful, but my husband never does.”

For Go Getting mothers, work is much more than just a way of earning an income. It is a way of showing the social worth of their position through pursuing a career. And they want to be recognized for it. They want to challenge the popular Chinese saying ‘Behind every successful woman is an aggrieved family’.

So, this group of mothers likes to be in control, albeit in different ways. Fu Yuanhong says, “The mother has the say in everyday life. Almost all decisions are made by us.” Li Ying told us, “I take all decisions about our child.” The family’s financial affairs, especially in the metropolises of Shanghai and Beijing, are managed by the woman. Some of this control is necessitated by the mother’s own inflexibility in terms of time, and the need to arrange her child’s time according to her own, or vice-versa. Lu Di has curtailed her own TV viewing, for example. “I don't watch much TV because he’ll watch with me. So I only watch after he’s gone to bed.” Lu Di says, “I used to chat with others after work. Now I just get straight back home.”

Why does the Go Getting mother have this strong need for control? For one part, it’s because staying in control allows her to plan and regulate everything in her child’s life, so that she can pursue her career interests. She wants to minimize uncertainty and surprises. On the other, control serves as a kind of circuit breaker: for all the rope she provides her child, standards cannot be expected to fall below a certain level. Society’s always judging her by the way she brings up her child, and she cannot afford to be seen to be a negligent mother.

Cultural tension: What Go Getting mothers seek is appreciation for their tightrope walk; what they get is intense scrutiny.

Easygoing Mothers

If there’s a group of mothers that is letting their kids be, then this is it. The arrival of a child seems to raise their importance in the eyes of their husband; and being a good mother and a good wife is more important for them than being a good worker. Jin Yan, a Beijing mother said, “I’m not a successful woman but I am a responsible mother. Successful women may not have so much time to take care of their family.” They remain content in having a job, a steady source of income – without the demands of a career.

Their expectation from kids is not an immediate one - of performance. Instead, they believe that their children would support them in their old age. Several of these mothers say that they hoped that once their children were grown up, they would realize that their mother had gladly sacrificed everything to raise them.

Naturally, their concerns for the child are more to do with his or her health, and she devotes time and money to make sure that her child gets all the nourishment s/he needs. “I give her different food every day for breakfast. My biggest concern is her diet – that she should have proper amount of fruits and vegetables every day”, says Jin Yan. She adds, “When she was in kindergarten, I didn’t have to worry much since the food there was specially designed for children”. Easygoing

Children always think what their friends have is nicer; so I let them choose their food.

mothers start buying nutritional supplements for their kids around the ages 4-6, and are much more open to seeking advice at the time. It is all part of being a good mother.

Cultural tension: A sacrifice today does not necessarily mean that she will wait decades before she earns appreciation. She yearns for plaudits even today (and if it is from her husband, it's especially sweet).



Easygoing mothers believe in letting their children learn things naturally and are not always strict with them. Zhou Qin, the mother of a toddler in Shanghai said, “I don’t coddle him. I never rush to pick him up if he trips and falls over. Let him get up by himself. When we go to parks I let him play on his own and discover new things. He should also learn to bear some hardship and face difficulties early on, as it is very competitive in society.” She went on: “When he goes to college, I will only pay his tuition fee. For his living expenses, he can earn his own money.” Shenyang resident Xiao Yan told us “I’m not strict with him, but his father wants him to study hard and thinks he shouldn’t have so much leisure time. I don’t think so – I think he should not be so tired as a child.”

It isn’t surprising, then that Easygoing mothers are less pushy. “I want my son to be a good person, useful to society when he grows up,” Xiao Yan said. Jin Yan felt: “I hope she can study well, enter a good university and have a stable job.” No specific targets, no universities named. In the same vein, Zhou Qin added, “Kids at his age start to

learn the piano, and English. What is the need for it so early?” For Wen Li, a mother of a 5 year old in Wuhan , being less pushy also means controlling her temper: “You cannot get angry with the child, neither should you quarrel with your husband in front of the child. You have to be careful.”

These mothers seem to find joy in every little thing the child does, not only in major milestones. “You do spend time and money once you have a child, but she brings you endless amusement,” says Jin Yan. “If I make myself look better, by dressing up, it is also good for my child,” she adds. Sometimes, she goes swimming with her child. Xiao Yan says, “When I get back home, I have to do everything, it’s tiring. But all that disappears at the sight of my lovely son.” She too liked the fact that her son liked her dressing up. “My son asked me why I used cosmetics. I told him I worked in a shopping mall and had to look nice, and he was pleased.”

Cultural tension: A fair share of mothers we’ve interviewed fit the label Easygoing, yet it is a segment that is hard to find represented in marketing communications. Are brands afraid to chill out?

Dedicated Mothers

35.7% of the mothers we interviewed – the largest proportion by far, have completely dedicated themselves to bringing up their child well. They have taken upon this responsibility willingly, because they believe strongly that society judges them by how good their kids turn out to be, particularly academically. Xie Yuanying, a mother from Xiamen said, “Many parents go out to make money, leaving their children with grandparents. Although they make lots of money, they ignore the most important thing about their child – educating them.” Huang Qinghua, also from Xiamen concurred, “I don’t want a transferable job. I’d rather stay with him than put him aside to make more money.” Jin Qingyao, a Shenyang mother told us, “Sometimes we get criticized by our parents for her low scores; she was good in the first and second grade, but her scores have dropped recently.” The child is the benchmark, and she must give him or her all she’s got, even as she keeps her job.



What she does, however compromise is on is caring for her husband and his needs. In this respect, her beliefs are quite the opposite of Go Getting mothers and Easygoing mothers.

Dedicated mothers have defined goals for their child, and urge them to follow that path. Who doesn’t want her kid to go to a famous university, they all ask. Wang Li, the mother of a nine year old in Chongqing, told us that her daughter wanted to learn English and Korean. “She knows what Tsinghua and Beijing University have to offer, but she would like to go to a university in the US,” she said. Parents whose children are achievers are often cited as role models. Cai Zhao Rong, a mother from Xiamen told us, “My sister-in-law is a teacher, and knows more about educating kids than me. Her life and her kid’s life are more disciplined than ours. She takes her child abroad to see what the world has to offer. And she has high expectations of her child.”

When the kids meet or exceed their expectations, the Dedicated mother is very proud. It is a vindication of her personal effort. Wang Li showed off the red tie her daughter

had won in Grade One. “She was one of the five students who won it. I hadn’t expected her to win it,” she said, ruffling her daughter’s hair.

Cultural tension: Unbridled ambition and unwavering dedication on the part of the mother, at the cost of the mother’s own personal goals keep fuelling a sense of inadequacy (and many brands do try and fill in that gap).

To enable their kids stay focussed, Dedicated mothers design and follow routines for their children and for themselves. Huang Chaunzen, another mother from Xiamen, explained: “He finishes his homework first after coming back from school, goes to bed on time, gets up early and has his meals on schedule. All this makes me very satisfied.” Jia Qingyao, a mother in Shenyang was even more specific and demanding. Her daughter’s post-school routine runs like this: on Saturday, English class from 8 to 9 in the morning, painting class from 10 to 12. Sometimes she has painting class on

Sunday, and English class on Thursday evening. “She has little time to rest,” says Jia about her daughter.



We all live on our own efforts.

The routines extend to leisure as well. “She can go to McDonalds once a week; we spend about 100 yuan per person,” Jia goes on. Wang Li, the mother from Chongqing said, “We care a lot about controlling her time. She listens to us and plays only during her allotted time.”

It isn't quite that Dedicated mothers aren't conscious of the fact that they are putting too much pressure on their children. Jia observed, “Have you noticed how many middle school students have white hair? That's because they have too much pressure.” It also means that parents keep dangling carrots in front of their children, unlike Go Getting and Easygoing mothers, who provide the goodies anyway. Cai Zhao Rong said, “To encourage my son to get a high score, my husband tells him that if he gets the highest score in his class, he will take him for a trip.” They also are more involved in their child's education, and know all that's going on in class. Cai gave us an example: “His teacher tells him to use his imagination more and discover new things in his writing. But he's confused about why he should write about things that don't exist!”





The desire for control means that Dedicated mothers are often low on patience, and hold strong opinions about what's good and what's bad for their kids. Wang Li confessed, "I would scold her if I had to ask her to do her homework more than three times. When I'm working, I ask her to do her homework quickly because we have something urgent to do afterwards. I get angry if she does not listen to me." Huang Chuanzen said, "Sometimes we're a little fierce when he is being disobedient. Then he blames us for our loud voice." Cai Zhao Rong told us, "My son searches the Internet every day, which I'm strongly against." Xie Yuanying had a comment on fashion which she considered inappropriate for her daughter: "Many kids are now wearing camisoles or low-waist pants, which I'll never allow my daughter to wear." Wang Li insists on buying 'toys with practical utility'. "Barbie dolls are very expensive and I think have no practical value. They are also easily damaged. I would never buy Barbie," she says vehemently.

Cultural tension: Even though Dedicated Mothers keep the pressure on, there are few outlets for them or their kids to let off steam.

So is there any part of the Dedicated Mother's child's life where he or she can exercise choice and opinion? Quite surprisingly yes – and promising for us, it is in the area of buying things for their own consumption. Cai Zhao Rong said, "When I go to the supermarket, I ask him what he wants. He usually wants juices and likes to pick up anything new that's on offer. As for clothes, he wants to choose by himself, preferring styles that are in white and yellow." Jia Qingyao's daughter also decides which clothes and styles she'll wear. "She only buys the clothes she likes and cares about colors and styles. She also likes my dresses and asks her to leave it for her to wear when she grows up." For Huang Chuanzhen, her son is the source of new information. "My son told me that this drink is great because it had added honey and jasmine. When we go to the supermarket, he insists on buying it."



So how does the reality of Chinese mothers get represented in marketing communications? Put bluntly, it does not. A vast majority of the representation remains mired in depicting her in one of the two situations: a) the helpless mother who is frustrated by a difficult problem, and the ‘heroic’ brand rescues her by solving the problem; and b) the ambitious mother who is only satisfied when her child emerges a winner, or is better off than her friend / neighbour / colleague’s child. Here, the brand is the enabler. Out of the three kinds of mothers we’ve described above, it is usually the Dedicated mother we see.

The modern Chinese urban woman perceives herself as being in control of all situations, however difficult. And the problems and issues she encounters are neither threatening nor dramatic – she faces them everyday. Her inner confidence helps her in tackling difficult situations. So it’s the woman who’s the heroine, not the product or the brand. Mothers find it demeaning when their efforts are pulled down by an object.

There are exceptions, of course, and these examples keep popping up in conversations. In a TVC for the pharmaceutical company Ha Yao Liu Chang, the mother is overwhelmed after she returns from work, tired, when her small boy fills up a basin of warm water for her to soak her feet in. He has, of course, learnt this by watching his mother do the same for Grandma. One of the many ads that we do for Kentucky Fried Chicken shows a woman working late at office (a Go Getting mother) receiving a phone call – her husband and son have brought her takeout. Her delight is evident. Both ads are remembered and connect because the mother is being appreciated. An ad for the Chinese kidswear brand Balabala depicts mother and daughter having a conversation after a bath, wherein the daughter asks her mother why she has a scar on her tummy. When the mother answers that the doctor had to take her out, the curious girl wants to know why her mother ate her. It’s charming, there’s none of the ‘makes your girl stand out’ nonsense.

Will more brands step up and ease the tensions different kinds of Chinese mothers face, please?
