China's Middle Class

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Gilded Age, Gilded Cage

China's sudden prosperity brings undreamed-of freedoms and new anxieties.

By Leslie T. Chang

At the age of four, Zhou Jiaying was enrolled in two classes—Spoken American English and English Conversation—and given the English name Bella. Her parents hoped she might go abroad for college. The next year they signed her up for acting class. When she turned eight, she started on the piano, which taught discipline and developed the cerebrum. In the summers she went to the pool for lessons; swimming, her parents said, would make her taller. Bella wanted to be a lawyer, and to be a lawyer you had to be tall. By the time she was ten, Bella lived a life that was rich with possibility and as regimented as a drill sergeant's. After school she did homework unsupervised until her parents got home. Then came dinner, bath, piano practice. Sometimes she was permitted television, but only the news. On Saturdays she took a private essay class followed by Math Olympics, and on Sundays a piano lesson and a prep class for her entrance exam to a Shanghai middle school. The best moment of the week was Friday afternoon, when school let out early. Bella might take a deep breath and look around, like a man who discovers a glimpse of blue sky from the confines of the prison yard.

For China's emerging middle class, this is an age of aspiration—but also a time of anxiety. Opportunities have multiplied, but each one brings pressure to take part and not lose out, and every acquisition seems to come ready-wrapped in disappointment that it isn't something newer and better. An apartment that was renovated a few years ago looks dated; a mobile phone without a video camera and color screen is an embarrassment. Classes in colloquial English are fashionable among Shanghai schoolchildren, but everything costs money.

Freedom is not always liberating for people who grew up in a stable socialist society; sometimes it feels more like a never ending struggle not to fall behind. A study has shown that 45 percent of Chinese urban residents are at health risk due to stress, with the highest rates among high school students.

Fifth grade was Bella's toughest year yet. At its end she would take entrance exams for middle school. Every student knew where he or she ranked: When teachers handed back tests, they had the students stand in groups according to their scores. Bella ranked in the middle—12th or 13th in a class of 25, lower if she lost focus. She hated Japan, as her textbooks had taught her to: The Japanese army had killed 300,000 Chinese in the 1937 Nanjing massacre. She hated America too, because it always meddled in the affairs of other countries. She spoke a fair amount of English: "Men like to smoke and drink beer, wine, and whiskey." Her favorite restaurant was Pizza Hut, and she liked the spicy wings at KFC. Her record on the hula hoop was 2,000 spins.

The best place in the world was the Baodaxiang Children's Department Store on Nanjing Road. In its vast stationery department, Bella would carefully select additions to her eraser collection. She owned 30 erasers—stored in a cookie tin at home—that were shaped like flipflops and hamburgers and cartoon characters; each was not much bigger than a thumbnail, and all remained in their original plastic packaging. When her grandparents took her to the same store, Bella headed for the toy section, but not when she was with her parents. They said she was too old for toys.

If Bella scored well on a test, her parents bought her presents; a bad grade brought a clampdown at home. Her best subject was Chinese, where she had mastered the art of the composition: She could describe a household object in a morally uplifting way.

Last winter Grandmother left her spider plant outdoors and forgot about it.... This spring it actually lived. Some people say this plant is lowly, but the spider plant does not listen to arbitrary orders, it does not fear hardship, and in the face of adversity it continues to struggle. This spirit is worthy of praise.

She did poorly in math. Extra math tutoring was a constant and would remain so until the college entrance examination, which was seven years away. You were only as good as your worst subject. If you didn't get into one of Shanghai's top middle schools, your fate would be mediocre classmates and teachers

who taught only what was in the textbook. Your chances of getting into a good high school, not to mention a good college, would diminish.

You had to keep moving, because staying in place meant falling behind. That was how the world worked even if you were only ten years old.

The past decade has seen the rise of something Mao sought to stamp out forever: a Chinese middle class, now estimated to number between 100 million and 150 million people. Though definitions vary—household income of at least $10,000 a year is one standard—middle-class families tend to own an apartment and a car, to eat out and take vacations, and to be familiar with foreign brands and ideas. They owe their well-being to the government's economic policies, but in private they can be very critical of the society they live in.

The state's retreat from private life has left people free to choose where to live, work, and travel, and material opportunities expand year by year. A decade ago most cars belonged to state enterprises; now many families own one. In 1998, when the government launched reforms to commercialize the housing market, it was the rare person who owned an apartment. Today home ownership is common, and prices have risen beyond what many young couples can afford—as if everything that happened in America over 50 years were collapsed into a single decade.

But pick up a Chinese newspaper, and what comes through is a sense of unease at the pace of social change. Over several months in 2006, these were some of the trends covered in the *Xinmin Evening News*, a popular Shanghai daily: High school girls were suffering from eating disorders. Parents were struggling to choose a suitable English name for their child. Teenage boys were reading novels with homosexual themes. Job seekers were besieging Buddhist temples because the word for "reclining Buddha," *wofo,* sounds like the English word "offer." Unwed college students were living together.

Parents struggle to teach their children but feel their own knowledge is obsolete; children, more attuned to social trends, guide their parents through the maze of modern life. "Society has completely turned around," says Zhou Xiaohong, a sociologist at Nanjing University who first noticed this phenomenon when his own father, a retired military officer, asked him how to knot a Western tie. "Fathers used to give orders, but now fathers listen to their sons."

Because their parents have such high hopes for them, children are among the most pressured, inhabiting a world that combines old and new and features the most punishing elements of both. The traditional examination system that selects a favored few for higher education remains intact: The number of students entering college in a given year is equal to 11 percent of the college-freshman-age population, compared with 64 percent in the United States. Yet the desire to foster well-rounded students has fed an explosion of activities—music lessons, English, drawing, and martial arts classes—and turned each into an arena of competition.

Such pursuits bring little pleasure. English ability is graded on five levels stretching through college, and parents push children to pass tests years ahead of schedule. Cities assess children's piano playing on a ten-level scale. More than half of preteens take outside classes, a survey found, with the top reason being "to raise the child's future competitiveness."

Parents tend to follow trends blindly and to believe most of what they hear. The past is a foreign country, and the present too. "We are a traditional family" was how Bella's mother, Qi Xiayun, introduced herself when I first met her in 2003. She was 33 years old with the small, pale face of a girl, and she spoke in a nonstop torrent about the difficulty of raising a child. She teaches computer classes at a vocational college; her husband works in quality control at Baosteel, a state-owned company. They were appointed to those jobs after college, as part of the last generation to join the socialist workforce before it started to break apart.

Bella's parents met the old-fashioned way, introduced by their parents. But after they had Bella in 1993, they turned their backs on tradition. They chose not to eat dinner with their in-laws every night and rejected old fashioned child-rearing methods that tend to coddle children.

When Bella was not yet two, her grandmother offered to care for the baby, but her mother worried that the grandparents would spoil her. Bella went to day care instead. When she entered third grade, her mother stopped picking her up after school, forcing her to change buses and cross streets alone. "Sooner or later she must learn independence," her mother said.

So Bella grew up, a chatty girl with Pippi Longstocking pigtails and many opinions—too many for the Chinese schoolroom. In second grade she and several classmates marched to the principal's office to demand more time to play; the protest failed. Her teachers criticized her temper and her tendency to bully other children. "Your ability is strong," read a first-grade report card, "but a person must learn from the strengths of others in order to improve." In second

grade: "Hope you can listen to other people's opinions more."

The effort to shape Bella is full of contradictions. Her parents encourage her independence but worry that school and the workplace will punish her for it. They fret over her homework load, then pile more assignments on top of her regular schoolwork. "We don't want to be brutal to her," says Bella's father, Zhou Jiliang. "But in China, the environment doesn't let you do anything else."

Bella teaches her parents the latest slang and shows them cool Internet sites. When they bought a new television, Bella chose the brand. When they go out to eat, Bella picks Pizza Hut. One day soon, her parents worry, her schoolwork will move beyond their ability to help her. When Bella was younger, her parents began unplugging the computer keyboard and mouse so she wouldn't go online when she was home alone, but they knew this wouldn't last.

Recently, Bella's father and his sister and cousins put their grandfather in a nursing home. It was a painful decision; in traditional China, caring for aged parents was an ironclad responsibility, and Bella's parents have extra room in their apartment for their parents to move in some day. But Bella announced that she would one day put her parents in the best nursing home.

"The minute she said that, I thought: It's true, we don't want to be a burden on her," Bella's father says. "When we are old, we'll sell the house, take a trip and see the world, and enter the nursing home and live a quiet life there. This is the education my daughter gives me."

I went to school with Bella one Friday in her fifth-grade year. She sat up in bed at 6:25, pulled on pants and an orange sweatshirt, and tied a Young Pioneers kerchief around her neck. Her parents rushed through the cramped apartment getting ready for work, and breakfast was lost in the shuffle. Bella's mother walked her to the corner, then Bella sighed and headed to the bus stop alone. "This is the most free I am the whole day."

Today there would be elections for class cadres, positions that mirror those in the Communist Party. "My mother says to be a cadre in fifth grade is very important," Bella said.

The bus dropped us off at the elite Yangpu Primary School, which cost $1,200 a year in tuition and fees and rejected 80 percent of its applicants. Her classroom was sunny and loud with the roar of children kept indoors. It had several computers and a bulletin board with student-written movie reviews: *The Birth of New China*, *Finding Nemo*.

By 8:30 the students were seated at their desks for elections. Their pretty young teacher asked for candidates. Everyone wanted to run.

"This semester I want to change my bad nail-biting habits, so people don't call me the Nail- Biting King," said a boy running for propaganda officer.

"I will not interrupt in class," said a girl in a striped sweater running for children's officer. "Please everyone vote for me."

The speeches followed a set pattern: Name a personal flaw, pledge to fix it, and ask for votes. It was self-criticism as campaign strategy.

Those who strayed from the script were singled out. "My grades are not very good because I write a lot of words wrong," said one girl running for academic officer. "Please everyone vote for me."

"You write words wrong, please vote for me?" the teacher mimicked. "What have you left out?"

The girl tried again. "I want to work to fix this bad habit. Please everyone vote for me."

Bella delivered her pitch for sports officer. "I am very responsible, and my management abilities are pretty good," she said breathlessly. "Sometimes I have conflicts with other students. If you vote for me, it will help me change my bad habits. Please everyone give me your vote."

In a three-way race, Bella squeaked to victory by a single ballot. Election day, like everything in school, ended with a moral. "Don't feel bad if you lost this time," the teacher said. "It just means you must work even harder. You shouldn't let yourself relax just because you lost."

The language of child education is Darwinian-grim. "The elections teach students to toughen themselves," Bella's teacher, Lu Yan, said over lunch in the teachers' cafeteria. "In the future they will face pressure and competition. They need to know how to face defeat."

Some schools link teacher pay to student test performance, and the pressure on teachers is intense. Bella's class had recently seen a drop in grades, and the teacher begged parents to help identify the cause. Lu Yan had just gotten her four-year college degree at night school and planned to study English next. All her colleagues were enrolled in outside classes; even the vice-principal took a weekend class on educational technology. A math teacher was fired three weeks into the school year because parents complained she covered too little material in class.

Life will not always feel like this. The next generation of parents, having grown up with choice and competition, may feel less driven to place all their hopes on their children. "Right now is the hardest time," says Wang Jie, a sociologist who is herself the mother of an only child. "In my generation we have both traditional and new ideas. Inside us the two worlds are at war."

In math class later that day, the fifth graders whipped through dividing decimals using Math Olympics methods, which train kids to use mental shortcuts. They raced across a field in gym class, with the slowest person in each group punished with an extra lap around the track. School ended at 1:30 on Fridays. The bus let Bella off outside her building, where she bought a Popsicle and headed inside. Her weekend was packed with private tutoring, so Friday was the best time to finish her homework.

I told her that no American ten-year-old did homework on a Friday afternoon.

"They must be very happy," Bella said.

In the five years since I met Bella and her family, their lives have transformed. They moved into a new three-bedroom apartment—it is almost twice the size of their old one, which they now rent out—and furnished it with foreign brand-name appliances. They bought their first car, a Volkswagen Bora, and from taking the bus they went straight to driving everywhere. They eat out a couple of times a week now, and the air-conditioner stays on all summer. At age 12, Bella got her first mobile phone—a $250 Panasonic clamshell in Barbie pink. Her parents' annual income reached $18,000, up 40 percent from when we first met.

As the material circumstances of Bella's family improved, the world became to them a more perilous place. Their cleaning lady stole from them and disappeared. Several friends were in near-fatal car accidents. One day Bella's father saw her holding a letter from a man she'd met online. Bella's parents changed the locks and the phone number of the apartment. Her father drove her to and from school now because he thought the neighborhood around it was unsafe.

Bella's mother took on more administrative responsibilities at work and enrolled in a weekend class to qualify to study for a master's degree. Bella's father talked about trading in their car for a newer model with better acceleration and more legroom. They frequently spoke of themselves as if they were mobile phones on the verge of obsolescence. "If you don't continue to upgrade and recharge," Bella's father said, "you'll be eliminated."

Social mobility ran in both directions. A friend of Bella's mother stopped attending class reunions because he was embarrassed to be a security guard. A company run by a family friend went bankrupt, and his daughter, who was Bella's age, started buying clothes at discount stalls. Society was splintering based on small differences. Family members only a decade younger than Bella's parents inhabited another world. One cousin ate out every night and left her baby in the care of her grandparents so she could focus on her career. Bella's father's younger sister, who was childless, thought nothing of buying a full-fare plane ticket to go somewhere for a weekend. Friends who were private entrepreneurs were having a second child and paying a fine; Bella's parents would probably be fired by their state-owned employers if they did that.

Bella tested into one of Shanghai's top middle schools, where teachers often keep students past five in the evening while their parents wait in cars outside. She is level three in English and level eight in piano. She still ranks in the middle of her class, but she no longer has faith in the world of adults.

She disdains class elections now. "It's a lot of work," she says, "and the teacher is always pointing to you as a role model. If you get in trouble and get demoted, it's a big embarrassment." She loves Hollywood films—especially *Star Wars* and disaster movies—and spends hours online with friends discussing

Detective Conan, a character from Japanese comic books. She intends to marry a foreigner because they are richer and more reliable.

Her parents no longer help with her homework; in spoken English she has surpassed them. They lecture her to be less wasteful. "When she was little, she agreed with all my opinions. Now she sits there without saying anything, but I know she doesn't agree with me," her mother said one afternoon in the living room of their new apartment, as Bella glared without speaking. "Our child-raising has been a failure." In China, there is no concept of the rebellious teenager.

Across Chinese society, parents appear completely at sea when it comes to raising their children. Newspapers run advice columns, their often rudimentary counsel—"Don't Forcibly Plan Your Child's Life" is a typical headline—suggesting what many parents are up against. Some schools have set up parent schools where mothers, and the occasional father, can share frustrations and child-raising tips.

At times educators go to extremes: At the Zhongguancun No. 2 Primary School in Beijing, vice-principal Lu Suqin recently took two fifth-grade boys into her home. "Their parents couldn't get them to behave, so they asked me to take them," she explains. "After they learn disciplined living, I will send them back."

Bella had one free day during the 2006 weeklong National Day holiday. Some of her extended family—seven adults and two children—took a trip to Tongli, a town of imperial mansions an hour's drive from Shanghai. Bella's father hired a minibus and driver for the trip; a friend had just been in a car accident and broken all the bones on one side of his body. Bella sat alone reading a book.

Developing China zipped past the window, city sprawl giving way to a booming countryside of fish ponds and factories and the three-story houses of prosperous farmers. Bella's mother indulged in the quintessential urban dream of a house in the country. "You have your own little yard in front," she said. "I'd love to live in a place like that when we retire."

She was thinking seriously about Bella's future. If she tested into a good college, she should stay in China; otherwise she would go abroad, and they would sell the old apartment to pay for it. She had decided that Bella could date in college. "If she finds someone suitable in the third or fourth year of college, that's fine. But not in the first or second year."

"And not in high school?" I asked.

"No. Study should be most important."

Tongli was mobbed with holiday visitors. Bella's family walked through its courtyards and gardens like sleepwalkers, admiring whatever the tour guides pointed out. They touched the trunk of the Health and Long Life Tree. They circled a stone mosaic said to bring career success. They could not stop walking for an instant because crowds pressed in from behind. It was the biggest tourist day of the year.

Bella politely translated for a great-aunt visiting from Australia who didn't speak Chinese, but it was just an act. "This is boring," she told me. "Once you've seen one old building, you've seen them all."

I sat with her on the ride home. She was deep into a Korean romance novel.

"It's about high school students," she said. "Three boys chasing a girl."

"Do people have boyfriends and girlfriends in high school?" I asked.

"Yes."

"What about middle school?"

"Yes. Some."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

She wrinkled her nose. "There's a boy who likes me. But all the boys in my grade are very low-class."

She wanted to go to Australia for graduate school and to work there afterward. She could make more money there and bring her parents to live with her. "On the surface China looks luxurious, but underneath it is chaos," Bella said. "Everything is so corrupt."

Some observers of Chinese society look at children like Bella and see political change: Her generation of individualists, they predict, will one day demand a say in how they are governed. But the reality is complicated. Raised and educated within the system, they are just as likely to find ways to accommodate themselves to it, as they have done all along.

"Just because they're curious to see something doesn't mean they want it for themselves," says Zhang Kai, Bella's middle-school teacher. "Maybe they will try something—dye their hair, or pierce an ear—but in their bones, they are very traditional. In her heart Zhou Jiaying is very traditional," he says, and he uses Bella's Chinese name.

Bella is 15 now, in the ninth grade. She has good friends among her classmates, and she has learned how to get along with others. School is a complicated place. One classmate bullied another boy, and the victim's parents came to school to complain. Because they were politically influential, they forced the teacher to transfer the bully out of the class.

The incident divided Bella's class, and now her friends in the Tire Clique won't speak to her friends in the Pirate Clique. A friend got into school without taking the entrance exam because her mother's colleague had a cousin in the education bureau.

Bella's teacher nominated some students for membership in the Communist Youth League. Bella thought it meaningless, but she fell into line and pulled an application essay off the Internet. She couldn't afford to get on her teacher's bad side, she told me, citing a proverb: "A person who stands under someone else's roof must bow his head."

The high school entrance exam is a month away. In the evenings Bella's father watches television on mute so he won't disturb her studies. A good friend is also an enemy because they vie for the same class rank. Her compositions describe what the pressure feels like:

I sit in my middle-school classroom, and the teacher wants us to say good-bye to childhood. I feel at a loss. Happiness is like the twinkling stars suffusing the night sky of childhood. I want only more and more stars. I don't want to see the dawn.

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