

# Case Study: Chinese Motherhood

“Imperfection Whispers” – Paper series from NuanceTree  
The *other true-half* of Chinese mother and child relationship



## ***There is no iconoclastic notion here.***

This half is true too: the sunnier side of motherhood and life with kids. Messages inadvertently skew positive: show talents kids, gratified all-rounded moms, harmonious and smiley-on-all-faces beaming across the family. Communication on child-related products in China is becoming “safe”. Almost cynical but not without a reality douche, mother and baby communications may soon wind up snuffing out any true emotional tinges.

There is no lack of heart-warmth and rainbows during focus group sharing among moms. Often appearing with sleep deprived panda-ish eyes, none is uneager to jostle their cuddly fresh experiences of motherhood with beaming hormones of new-set bliss.

Several moments we do ponder why clients’ unwavering hunt for “emotional insights” & “moms aspiration” almost always end up in a land of positive “brand” promises. Perhaps: 1. We as insight-miners, did not elicit as much eclipses of mothers’ world and true stories around them, compared to the sunnier side. 2. The communication media censorship board, like its own governing mother, believes in dissipation suspending particles of “positive air”. 3. Moms’ natural bash in a contrived group environment to talk about shortfalls of herself/ babies/ families.

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Just to raise a few examples:



Audrey Chia  
Director



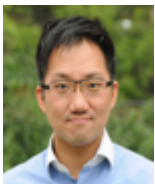
Maxwell Wang  
Director

All these TVCs ride on a very similar storyline and communicate very similar message of "Talented child - Happy parents".

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***Are you able to differentiate the brand values from one to another? Too much early talents, too much joy, too perfect.***

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Lawrence Lam  
Associate  
director

**It isn't rocket science to suspect mothers face as much fears and worries notes as their positive beats around a fast growing child. The older the child gets, the more mother challenges and redefines herself in means and values.**

“Alright and safe” routes for advertisers to be more focused on Chinese mothers' desire for a happy, excelling child in a highly “positive-charged” expanding economy. How about to connect/ embrace with their less proud side for a second, slices or stories we hear much less in group sharing? We are not saying any side is less true, but both are just as real as dusk and dawn everyday. Happy moments are readily shared, whereas toils glooms and frustration in motherhood are day-to-day recurring events that could claw DEEP into consumers' personal real life and unmet pleas.



**NuanceTree attempts to go beyond the cliché “bliss and happy” for communication inspiration. We spoke to post-80s moms with pre-school kids of more than 3 years old.**

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## moms’ 3 core beams of distress in child-upbringing

### Inadequacy

Chinese mothers often have a feeling of inadequacy.

This feeling of inadequacy usually revolves around three points: 1. Feeling of not spending enough time and effort on their child, such as working mothers' guilt of not having enough energy to play with their child after a long day of work. It can also be the guilt of missing their child's school activities or not being able to pick their child up from school. 2. Feeling of not having enough resources (mainly money) to provide the best education and opportunity to her child, such as not having the money to pay for extra tutoring or extra-curricular classes. 3. Not having enough knowledge to give the best care and guidance to her child, such as realizing she has been disciplining her child in the wrong way after reading a circulation from Wechat composing what to and not to do according to “experts” or “the more successful moms”.

#### Observation:

*Amy wishes she could afford a bigger house for her child. Her son will be soon attending a prestigious school in a rich neighborhood. She is very worried that her son will feel inferior to his classmates who mostly come from rich families, living in villas.*

This feeling of inadequacy invades across social classes. For the mid and upper class mothers, it can be the feel of not having enough knowledge to educate their child. For example, some high income families are increasingly aware of the value of English as a second language, and many parents feel handicapped as they do not know English themselves and personally unequipped to educate their child.

#### Observation:

*Catherine is an entrepreneur who works 6 days a week. She works extra hard as the default parent who handles all her two children's affairs. Yet, she still feels terrible for missing her daughter's teacher's meeting. She feels like she is "that mother" who is never there for her child.*

This feeling of inadequacy is rooted in the realization that child's total dependency on the parents. Moms come to realize their child is totally shaped and molded by their effort. They get very anxious when they feel they do not have enough time, effort, money or knowledge to raise their kids in the best possible way. No matter how much they have already done for their child, Chinese mothers constantly feel that they have not provided enough for their child.

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### Insecurity

Intimacy between child and mother cannot be taken for granted. A child will eventually need his / her mother less and less.

Mothers' love for their child may be unconditional and unwavering but it is not always reciprocated. Single child households with much involvement of grandparents’ help sometimes dilute moms desired bonding with their young child. Mothers dread the feel of child lessening intimacy and reliance on them.

Mothers have also grown used to and come to enjoy the feeling of their kid relying, depending on and looking up to them. They have become accustom to their little shadow, who run to them when hurt, seeking their comfort, support and counsel.

Yet, as children grow up, they become more independent, sometimes more feisty or challenging. "I don't want to wear this dress. Why do I have to wear a dress?", "I don't want to eat veggie!", "I don't want to sleep yet!"... Little angels suddenly pushing away their mother "I don't want you!" "I don't need you!" Mothers wonder what they had done wrong? "Am I a bad mother?", "Was I too hard on my child?". Moms realize, "Her child can suddenly stop liking her and needing her, and she actually still has to lather adoration from her very own kid". Yet, eventually mothers have to learn to “let go”.

#### Observation:

*Her daughter Joyce was in tears when Mandy was going onto business trip. But when she was away and called her daughter over the phone, Joyce simply refused to talk to her. After Mandy came back, Joyce even didn't want to be with her, and said "I only want papa". Mandy was heartbroken when she hears this.*

Some mothers even feel grandparents are 'stealing' their child's love and reliance. Chinese grandparents have a highly engaging role in child's life, especially in the early years, taking care of the child on a daily basis, feeding him and send him to school, etc. They are also generally more lenient towards their grandchild, thus the child become very close and dependent on their grandparents. Some young children are even remarked of to be “manipulative” of grandparents and parents “power” in the household.

#### Observation:

*Susan is a working mom who hires a live-in maid (ayi) to take care of her son Steven. She was devastated one day when her son calls her "Ayi". She was immediately overwhelmed by a sense of guilt as she realizes her son considers "Ayi" as the closest person.*

Chinese mothers also fear losing little emperor’s favor everyday. Longingness for child’s reciprocating and open display of affection is real thirst. Moms want the reassurance that their child still loves them and will continue to rely on them, be close to them. While many ads play up touching the intimacy of kids and moms, the under-current of moms’ uncertainty in gaining it was hardly seen in communications.



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### Unspoken wishes

Kids are of course the best angels in moms’ eyes, however, mothers constantly doubt themselves whether their kid is competent enough to survive and achieve success in this society, even though the definition towards success is broader than before.

Moms can be hypocrites when mentioning their kid attributes. Honesty, unselfish, guileless, seem to be strong pillars of modern morals. They are proud of this, but meanwhile, they do feel suspecting on how “innocent and good morals” person can compete in this impure world.

Some moms silently “hope” kids to own some small level of cunning, selfishness, shrewdness to better protect themselves in school, at work and in the society. Moms do not want kids to succeed with frayed personality, but just hope kids not to be at a disadvantage with a purely innocent personality out there. Ironically, it’s so hard for moms to openly advocate, educate and cultivate kids to be so. When kids show any traits of this, they are likely put up an educating hat to correct, but inside, could be feeling doubtful and restless.

#### Observation:

*Cindy’s son is very naughty at home, but obedient at school. Cindy’s expectation is just the opposite – (expect him to be) like a sheep at home but a tiger outside. In this way, he won’t suffer losses in the future.*

#### Observation:

*Wendy’s daughter at kindergarten is very nice. All kids like to play with her and her teacher always praise her for her generosity. She would give toys to the other kid when they both like it. Wendy feels all happy to hear this but she had a little bit concern. What if she never fights for her own? When she grows up, would she quit herself if she and her friend fall in love with the same boy?*

In public social culture, mothers and brands always sing the bright side of kids, but would the ‘dark side’ reveal the other half truth of parenting?

**Brands do not have to advocate the ‘dark side’ so clearly and literally. Could it convey a sense of funky and quirky side of the kid (instead of an always smart, creative, caring baby) in the communication? Or grey shades of a less-than-100%-equipped TRUE moms?**



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## IMPLICATIONS

Chinese mothers' feeling of inadequacy, insecurity and 'unspoken wishes' are TRUE emotions they experience in daily life. Such emotions have a profound impact on their lives and how they feel as consumers. Tapping into these emotions can help brands strengthen their bond with their target consumers, speaking stronger to their inner energy.

**How should brands draw upon these needs and fears mothers experience?**

### Empathize with Chinese mothers and build a stronger bond

Mothers need empathy. They can get frustrated easily and yearn for constant affirmation “you are still doing fine, go on”.

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**Brands can build a stronger bond with Chinese mothers by empathizing with their fears and needs.**

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For example, brands can portray mothers' moments of inadequacy such as when they get all clumsy preparing child's meals, or moments of insecurity, when their child is upset at them. And then, brands can empathize with such moments and give mothers affirmation that they are actually doing a great job already, even for not being perfect yet. Brands can actively take up an encouraging role in mothers' ruffled life to bond a “true-knowing” rapport.

For example, in its “MakeltHappy” 2015 commercial, Coca Cola brings out the ugly side of the internet, where people casually express hatred and contempt at each other. And by spilling Coca Cola into the internet cables, it spreads joy across the internet, turning hatred to love, contempt to encouragement. This way, Coca Cola acknowledges the dark side of the internet, but turn its brand into a fun and supporting role.

### Foster a more engaging peer-to-peer relationship with consumers

The ideal child and mother portrait commonly used suggest child-related brands in China are taking a top-down approach towards target consumers, where brands position themselves as something consumers should aspire and move themselves upwards to.

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**Brands can consider appealing to the glooms and frustration mothers experience to convey a more realistic message and foster a more peer-to-peer relationship with Chinese mothers. Learning along as the child grows through daily lives gives a true but encouraging touch.**

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## IMPLICATIONS

For example, Apple taps into a warmer, more approachable, nostalgic approach in its recent China ad, portraying a Chinese granddaughter connecting with her grandmother with new-age media. The ad triggers realer and sincerer emotions, and brings the brand close to consumers. Brands can also use the dark moments as sparks, such as a mother's remorse for not spending enough time to play with her child, or mothers' dismay when her child refuse to hug her for the first time. Chinese mothers will sense that the brand is truly talking to them on a personal level, carefully sensing who she really is and know exactly how she feels in dark.

### Celebrating a wider definition of a good child / mother / family

Privately, China mothers recognize dormant “needs” for their kid to have a certain level of 'darker qualities'. Also the popular TV program "爸爸去哪儿 Where Are We Going Dad" shows a shift in fathers' role in the family.

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Perhaps these are indicative of a social change, where the society is moving away from a singular definition of a good child, good mother or good family, and start to accept a wider definition of “what’s good for the family or child”

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The wider definition suggests *consumers starting to appreciate each unique child, mother and family, not just a singular ideal image*. In the past, mothers may want their favorite child 宝贝 to be all-rounded, smart, and good-looking. Now, mothers' favorite child can have unique characteristics and qualities. For example, the new good child can be shrewd and witty, who is able to play clever yet harmless jokes on his mother. Child-related brands can ride onto this trend and start celebrating the ‘less-than-perfect-goodness’ in each individual child, mother and family, enabling brands to better pose a differentiated impression.

Perhaps an infant milk formula brand can start showing a more lighthearted, cheeky/ naughtier side of child (or even parents)! Other category communication such as Chips Ahoy!, Skittles, M&M would provide some inspiration on how to deliver funky and quirky tone and storyline in brand communication.

### END NOTE

Join a typical FGD asking any Chinese moms to recall recent infant formula ads, very often, they confuse among the always positives cluttering clips and images of moms and babies. While brands continue their ever passion to know moms, and have to do so ever frequently because of rapid shifting values in newer moms, we believe there’s already is a calling for brands to walk the shadowed steps of moms too, and be inspired by their eclipses.