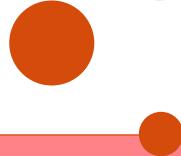


UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES



# HOW TO MOTHER?

Practices of infant feeding and the formation of maternal subjectivity among middle-class mothers in Beijing

PHD DISSERTATION 2017  
MICHALA HVIDT BREENGAARD



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## **Practices of infant feeding and the formation of maternal subjectivity among middle-class mothers in Beijing**

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PhD dissertation  
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Social science cannot remain at the surface of social becoming, where certain schools wish to have it float, but must reach the actual human experiences and attitudes which constitute the full, live and active social reality beneath the formal organization of social institutions.

(Thomas and Znaniecki in Rosenthal 2004: 48)

## 1. Introduction

As in most places in the world, mothering in China unfolds in an interplay of cultural knowledge and personal lived life; as subject to both private and public interests. The merge of interests is obviously put to the forefront in China's one-child policy asking women to postpone and reduce childbirths. The Chinese population project has not surprisingly given rise to much theorizing on the new orders of Chinese family practices, parenting and childcare. Social researchers have found that the policy's quantitative regulation was expanded with a qualitative ambition, asking Chinese women "to reproduce less in order to nurture better" (Anagnos 1997b: 214; see also Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). They place the urge to better nurture in a societal discourse of raising the quality of the Chinese population. A discourse that broadly guides the making of subjectivity in the Chinese society. Although the discourse of human quality frames the Chinese population at large, it has been said to particularly designate three subjects to societal investment and control. These are the 'reproductive woman' obliged to bring down the fertility rate, the 'quality single child' responsible for the future of the nation and the 'good mother' expected to nurture the quality single child (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005: 30).

The location of mothers as central in the making of a modern nation is both sociological and feminist thought-provoking. Not only are women's reproductive functions subject to regulation, good mothering appears almost as safeguard for a modernized Chinese nation. In this dissertation I pursue my interest in regulations of mothering and formations of maternal subjectivity in the context of contemporary urban China. While much research identifies mothers as particularly important to the Chinese development project, there is a tendency to draw very broad lines of how these social processes play out. Scholars have been particularly concerned with the political and historical background to the transformations of the Chinese society (Anagnos 2001; 2004; Greenhalgh 2003a; 2003b). Although their work provides solid knowledge of the overall discourses, they offer little insight into everyday life of the people who are said to live out the changes. One may say that despite the fact that the good mother is identified as crucial in the Chinese project, the practices of mothering are referred to a slightly peripheral position in the literature on the field. Yet, it is important in sociological work to understand how discourses work on actively lived life. Not least since China is so rapidly changing, research might benefit from a close relation to lived life instead of departing in general discourses (Kuan 2015).