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Differences Between Chinese Mothers' and Fathers' Roles in their Children's Education *

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Abstract

As researchers, we attempt to better understand the mechanisms and processes of parental involvement in children's education since it is often negatively associated with child academic outcomes. China provides an interesting context in which to investigate this issue knowing that Chinese parents are extremely invested in their children's education and are heavily involved at home. This study examines how young adults in Dalian City, China, perceive and evaluate their parents' involvement in their education during their childhood and adolescence, and how they make meaning of their experiences.

In 2011, ten participants from Dalian provided retrospective narratives about how their parents tutored them during their childhood and adolescence. These students had been recruited in 1999 from a college prep high school, a vocational high school, and a junior high school as part of a longitudinal study of Chinese singleton children. We focus especially on their fathers' home-based involvement, as literature on fathers' educational involvement is almost non-existent in China in spite of its potential importance.

Our participants' parents were found to engage in several strategies absent from previous research, such as *jiang daoli* (reasoning about the importance of education), watching children study, or offering food. Our findings suggest that motivational factors and parental beliefs about children's potential were especially critical mechanisms of influence. Fathers were less involved in their children's education than mothers but, when involved, were often engaged in disciplinary action in response to poor performance.

Differences Between Chinese Mothers' and Fathers' Roles in their Children's Education

Many studies conducted in the United States and worldwide have shown that parental involvement in children's education is beneficial for children's school success (Epstein, 2001; Hill & Chao, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). But most scholarship on parental involvement in children's education in the United States and worldwide has focused mostly on mothers, leaving fathers out of the picture, and ignoring the voices of the children themselves (Barnard, 2004; Greif & Greif, 2004). Few studies have looked at children's retrospective understandings of differences between mothers' and fathers' involvement in children's education anywhere in the world, and none have looked at them in China. Our study investigates the salient mechanisms and processes of mothers' and fathers' home-based involvement as experienced by young Chinese adults through their retrospective narratives. In this study, we specifically examine the processes and mechanisms of the fathers' home-based involvement, and how they differ from those of the mothers'.

Theoretical Framework

In China, parents are often involved only in home settings (Gu, 2008). Kong (2008) refers to this type of involvement as invisible forms of parental involvement in their children's schooling. Previous studies have attempted to explain why Chinese parents tend to be more involved in home settings instead of participating in school settings like European American parents (Chao, Kanatsu, Stanoff, Padmawidjaja, & Aque, 2009; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). In a study conducted in Beijing, parents and teachers were found to work together in non-overlapping spheres, and parents did not understand the importance of school involvement as they believed that teachers, not parents, should be responsible for children's education at school (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Another study conducted in rural China supported the idea that the lack of parents' active school-based involvement in China stemmed from the traditional view that teachers are responsible for children's education and have authority at school while parents' authority lies at home, and parents' roles are separate from that of the school (Chi & Rao, 2003).

Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) distinguished between two broad categories of home-based involvement identified in US literature: intellectual enrichment refers to home activities that are not directly related to school but can help develop children's cognitive and

metacognitive processes (e.g., taking children to the museum) while the second type of involvement refers to home-based activities that are more directly related to school (e.g., homework help or responding to school performance). In this study, we focused on the second type of home-based involvement, which is more controversial because research has shown that it is often negatively associated with school performance, and because the processes involved for this type of involvement are not yet fully understood (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). One explanation for the negative relationship between homework help and children's achievement is that those children whose parents were involved with homework tasks are already struggling at school (e.g., Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005). Pomerantz and Eaton's (2001) longitudinal study of middle-class European families found that parents were helping their children with homework when their children were struggling at school, but that after controlling initial achievement, the direction of influence of parental help with homework was positive. Another explanation is that parents engage with their children around homework tasks in negative ways, such as pressuring them or conveying negative messages about children's ability to achieve (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Leung, Yeung, & Wong, 2010). In the Chinese context, although the research points to the importance of home-based involvement, very little work has been conducted on Chinese fathers' engagement in school-related home-based involvement and their mechanisms of influence.

Most worldwide parental educational involvement studies have focused on mothers while excluding fathers. This focus arises partly from widespread beliefs among both researchers and research participants that mothers are more closely involved in children's education than fathers (e.g., Lamb, 2010; Lareau, 1989; Parke, 2002). As a consequence, because parental involvement measures are often reported by mothers *only*, even in two-parent families, it is difficult to say whether the current definitions of parental involvement provided in this body of research adequately capture father involvement and whether fathers also engage in the activities described in the literature (Barnard, 2004; Greif & Greif, 2004).

It is important to note differences between mothers and fathers suggested by previous research in the US and some other Western countries. US studies have found that, in general, mothers are more involved than fathers (Parke, 2002). This might be because men spend more time in paid work especially following the transition to parenthood, while women spend less time in paid work and more time on household duties and child rearing (Budig & England, 2001;

Glauber, 2007). Furthermore, fathers perceive fathering as a voluntary activity they “do” to help their wives, with varying standards and expectations, whereas mothers generally experience mothering as something they “are” (Ehrensaft, 1987). In US and Finnish studies of children in elementary school, fathers were also found to use complex language with their children and use teaching strategies that place higher cognitive demands on children than the strategies used by mothers, whereas mothers were engaged more in caretaking and nurturing activities on a daily basis, and were found to be more involved in indoor, cognitively oriented activities with their children (Biller & Kimpton, 1997; Laakso, 1995; Paquette, 2004; Parke, 2000, 2002). This suggests that mothers might be more involved with their children’s education at home regularly on a daily basis than fathers.

However, in Chinese societies, fathers are no less involved than mothers in their children’s education, as both parents are considered responsible for child training and the academic success of their children (Ho, 1987; Abbott, 1992; Chen, Dong, & Zhou, 1997). Especially after the one-child policy, mainland Chinese parents have become increasingly child-centered, and fathers are increasingly active in childrearing and are heavily involved in their children’s education especially after middle school (Jankowiak, 1992, 2002). Chinese fathers were found to have more influence on children’s learning tactics than mothers (Feng, 2007), and helped with homework more than mothers (Abbott, 1992).

Although our interviews, participant observations, and survey findings suggest that fathers in our Chinese sample play an important role in children’s education, we still hypothesize that important differences exist between mothers’ and fathers’ roles in children’s education. A study of the work preferences of mothers and fathers in Nanjing illustrates how Chinese fathers perceived their roles as distinct from those of mothers in the household (Kim et al., 2010). In China, the popular catchphrase “strict father, kind mother” (*yanfucimu*) further highlights some gendered mother-father differences. This adage describes fathers as the strict disciplinarians and mothers as the nurturing caregivers in the household (Chao & Tseng 2002; Shwalb, Nakazawa, Yamamoto, & Hyun, 2010). The literature on Chinese parenting supports this portrayal, and Chinese mothers were found to be warmer and less restrictive than fathers but also more demanding in mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong samples (Berndt, Cheung, Lau, Hau, & Lew, 1993). Adolescents communicated less frequently with their fathers than with their mothers and reported more negative communication with their fathers (Shek, 2000). Fathers in

mainland China were also found more likely to be punitive and use physical punishment than mothers, especially for boys, when children failed to obtain satisfactory grades in school (Ho, 1987; Hester, He, & Tian, 2009). This suggests that Chinese fathers might be stricter and more punitive when involved in their children's education while mothers are warmer and more supportive.

Research Setting and Methods

This paper draws on data from an ongoing longitudinal mixed-method study of a cohort of Chinese single children conducted from 1998 to 2012 by Fong in Dalian, a large coastal city in Liaoning Province in Northeastern China. In 2011-2012, ten participants from Dalian who had been recruited in 1999 from a junior high school (*chuzhong*), a college prep high school (*putong gaozhong*), and a vocational high school (*zhiye zhongzhuang*), as part of this study provided retrospective narratives about how their parents were involved in their education during their childhood and adolescence. At the time these participants were originally recruited, Fong had taught English between 1998 and 2000 in classrooms and homes while conducting participant observation and surveys that collected information about their academic interests, educational histories, family structures, gender socialization, socioeconomic conditions, and interactions with their parents.¹ These participants were surveyed again in subsequent waves in 2009, 2010, and 2011 about experiences they had as adults, such as their educational attainment, employment, and family formation.

The 1999 survey asked respondents to indicate with a check mark who, among a list of potential tutors (their mothers, their fathers, their friends, their parents' friends, their other relatives, paid home tutors, teachers of extra classes outside of school, or others), had tutored them at any point in their lives prior to the survey. Each tutor a respondent checked was coded as a dichotomous variable. The questions were not mutually exclusive, so those who were tutored by their mothers could also be tutored by their fathers at the same time. Although not an exact measure of parental involvement, this question enabled us to locate those for whom only mothers might have been involved versus those for whom only fathers might have been involved. In the junior high school sample ($N = 738$ in total; $N = 689$ who answered the tutoring questions),

¹ For more about this survey and the participant observations conducted by Fong between 1997 and 2002, see her earlier books (Fong, 2004, 2011).

41.94% of our participants reported having been tutored by their mothers while 41.22% reported having been tutored by their fathers. In the non-keypoint college prep sample ($N = 782$ in total; $N = 754$ who answered the tutoring questions), 19.76% reported mother tutoring while 24.54% reported father tutoring. Finally, in the vocational high school ($N = 753$ in total; $N = 750$ who answered the tutoring questions), 32.97% reported mother tutoring while 31.59% reported father tutoring. These data suggest that across all schools, an approximately equal proportion of mothers and fathers might have been involved in children's education at home.

The participants in this study were selected and asked in 2011-2012 for in-depth interviews about how they experienced their parents' involvement at home. Our ten participants (five males and five females) were aged 25 to 31 at the time the interviews were conducted, and they were selected to illustrate a range of educational levels and a variety of parent involvement experiences. All interviewee's names are pseudonyms. Chen Zuo, Gao Jie, Chen Qian, Qin Kai, and Xing Yu are male while Zhang Min, Jiao Jing, Zhang Yike, Li Yuqin and Zhen Cao are female. Chen Zuo, Zhang Min, and Zhen Cao reported having more involved mothers, while the others reported having more involved fathers in the 1999 survey; Chen Qian and Xing Yu reported being tutored by both parents. Xing Yu completed a post-graduate degree and had the highest level of education while Chen Zuo, Zhang Min, and Zhen Cao were also successful and got into four-year colleges. Qin Kai, Zhang Yike, and Li Yuqin went to some kind of college (adult education or three-year college). On the other hand, Gao Jie, Jiao Jing, and Chen Qian did not continue to college after completing high school.

Fong, who had kept in touch with many of her survey respondents through phone calls, home visits, and class reunions, contacted the selected participants again in 2011. The interviews lasted about an hour each and were conducted in Mandarin Chinese over the phone (for eight of our participants) or in person (for two of our participants). Both authors were present during the phone interviews, which were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. All eight phone interviews were conducted primarily by Kim, while Fong, who was already familiar with the participants, introduced the participants to Kim and sometimes asked supplemental follow-up questions. The two in-person interviews were conducted by Fong during her fieldwork in China over the summer of 2012. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emic and etic codes using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Each interview was followed by discussions between the authors around their understanding of the interview content.

Retrospective narratives were matched up with the ethnographic observations that had been conducted previously by Fong during her participant observation, which placed the interviews and survey data in the broader context of research participants' family lives and educational experiences.

Findings

Overall, the fathers of our ten participants were less involved in their children's education compared with mothers, in spite of the larger roles attributed to Chinese fathers within this sphere's growing body of literature on fathers. Furthermore, when fathers were involved, their involvement was more random and irregular than mothers. For instance, Gao Jie described his fathers' involvement as minimal:

Mainly I studied by myself... [My father] would make me study by myself and master things I didn't understand on my own... My father did not tutor me regularly, only just occasionally. There was no regular schedule. Sometimes when I had some difficulty, he would tutor me a little.

The same applied to Li Yuqin's father: "No, his tutoring wasn't on a regular basis. He tutored randomly." This contrasted with the mothers of Chen Zuo, Zhang Min, and Li Yuqin, who were regularly involved on a daily basis and for longer periods of time. Li Yuqin's mother was an especially interesting case, because although Li Yuqin stated that her mother was not involved in her education due to her lack of education and resources to help, her story revealed that her mother was actually engaging in conversations around school with her on a daily basis, much more often than her father, who was the one more directly involved in her education:

Yes, my mother too. She didn't tutor me, but she would ask me every single day [about school]. Yes, we would often talk about long-term future plans as well, because as you know, there is a lot of exam pressure in China, we would talk about which college/university to enter since high school.

As we have argued elsewhere (Kim & Fong, 2012), many of the students who had answered that they had been tutored only by their fathers and not by their mothers in response to Fong's 1999 survey had forgotten by 2011 that their fathers had tutored them and thus declined to be interviewed, saying they would have nothing to talk about, since neither parent tutored them. However, those who responded that their mothers had tutored them all responded positively

unless they were too busy.² This suggests that mothers' involvement might have been heavier than fathers' involvement, and was thus more memorable to our participants.

None of our participants felt that their parents had any conflict over their education as their mothers and fathers coordinated their roles in the family. When those whose fathers were mostly involved were asked why it was their father and not their mother, a common explanation was that their mother was not educated enough and did not have the ability to tutor them. However, when those whose mothers were mostly involved were asked why it was their mother and not their father, a common explanation was that their father played a different role in the household and that it was their mother's role to take care of their education. For instance, Zhang Min said: "He [my father] almost never gets involved. He does not participate in things such as my studies [...] Let me think... [laughs]... He was involved in our family's finances mostly. He did not get involved with me as much." Zhang Yike also provided a similar explanation based on role differentiation in the household:

Zhang Yike: My mother thought that I could improve by following her. My father didn't have the time.

Kim: But what about your mother, wasn't she working too?

Zhang Yike: Yes, she was also always working. It's because they both coordinated... such that when my father would return from work, he would prepare meals while my mother supervised me in my studies.

Thus our participants' narratives highlighted the perception that education was still seen as women's area of expertise and that if capable and knowledgeable enough, mothers were expected to be involved in their education more so than fathers.

Three types of involvement more specific to fathers emerged from our participants' narratives. First, fathers were engaged in concrete activities such as knowledge transmission in specific subject areas, which tap into skill development. This was the case with Chen Qian or

² Among the 12 who were asked in 2011 for interviews about their tutoring experiences, three of ten survey respondents who had reported in 1999 that they had been tutored by their fathers but not their mothers declined to be interviewed and said the reason was that they did not remember being tutored by either parent, and therefore would not have anything to talk about during an interview about parental tutoring. In contrast, none of the five survey respondents contacted in 2011 who had reported in 1999 that they had been tutored by their mothers but not their fathers said that they did not remember being tutored by their mothers (see Kim & Fong, 2012).

Qin Kai's fathers, who tutored in math because they were good at this subject. The same applied to Li Yuqin's father:

When there was something I did not understand when I was doing my homework at home, he would explain that to me. He didn't read with me, he wasn't involved with my Chinese. He was a science major and especially good in science, he could only tutor those subjects.

The second type of activity that fathers engaged in at home was asking about grades, especially when report cards were due. Zhang Yike contrasted his father and mother's behaviors when his final grades were due: his father only monitored his final results while his mother was more involved in the details and the process by which his grades were obtained:

Well, my father was not involved... My father would just ask for my grades. My mother was more scrupulous, and would ask details such as do you have a lot of pressure, why do you cheat in your class, and so on and so forth... I approve of my mothers' way of getting involved.

Zhang Yike's narrative illustrates that simply asking about grades (which was a behavior many fathers engaged in) was not an effective strategy and did not greatly influence his education. Asking about grades was also described by other interviewees as a rather perfunctory action that did not tap into any of the mechanisms of influence mentioned earlier. It was not associated with negative or positive affect; nor did it communicate positive or negative messages about the value of education, as our participants were already aware of the importance of performing, even if fathers did not ask for their grades.

The third major type of involvement fathers engaged in at home was taking disciplinary action when children were underperforming. Fathers were often portrayed as the strict disciplinarian in the household by our participants. Gao Jie explained, "He [my father] wasn't really involved in general. Except when I was naughty. He was relatively strict. When I would not listen to my mother, he would get involved." This applied to all other areas of the child's life, including education and school-related activities. Many of our male participants, notably Chen Qian, Qin Kai, and Chen Zuo, described that their fathers would use corporal punishment when they were underperforming. Chen Zuo even mentioned that his father would get angry and curse at him or hit him when he did not study. These three participants all agreed that they disapproved of this method and that they would not adopt such strategies with their child in the future. Qin

Kai stated: “No, I would not use such a method [corporal punishment] with my child... I would give my child pressure, but not hit. Giving pressure is a good thing, but not hitting.”

Our participants’ narratives often contrasted their mothers’ and fathers’ involvement in ways that illustrated the Chinese adage “strict father, kind mother.” Mothers acted as buffers against fathers’ harsh disciplinary parenting strategies. Li Yuqin’s metaphor of the hero and the villain in Peking opera illustrates this idea:

Well, one of them [my father] was white-faced (bailian), one [my mother] was red-faced (honglian); actually one was red-faced (honglian) [my mother], one was black-faced (heilian) [my father]. Well, one was strict [father], while the other [mother] was more flexible with the child.

In traditional Chinese Peking opera, painted male faces (*lian*) symbolize different types of characters depending on the color: the red face represents the hero who is good, upright, devoted, brave, and loyal; the black face represents someone who is rough and fierce; while the white face represents the treacherous and powerful villain. These are also compared to the famous characters of Guan Yu (red face), Zhang Fei (black face), and Cao Cao (white face) in the Three Kingdoms (a classic Chinese novel). Li Yuqin’s metaphor clearly illustrates how her mother (red face) protected her from her father’s harshness (white/black face). She was especially scared of her father, who elicited negative affect when involving in her education:

I felt a lot of pressure. My father was especially strict, he was a serious person. Especially when he tutored me, it put me under a lot of pressure and anxiety, even more than my teacher could give me... When my grades weren’t good, my mother would not criticize me, she would persuade me but not get angry. My father was relatively strict, he would criticize me if I got too lazy [in my studies].

In spite of the often negative strategies fathers used when being involved in their children’s education, our participants all agreed on the importance of fathers in their lives and educational trajectories. Li Yuqin still valued her fathers’ involvement in spite of the negative emotions elicited by his criticizing behaviors: “But yes, I am very satisfied with the way I have been tutored by my father.... Yes... to this day, my father is the person I respect the most in the world.” Zhang Min also pointed out: “I think that fathers can have a great influence on children’s education.”

Discussion

This study highlighted some important mother-father differences as well as the core mechanisms by which the types of involvement fathers engaged in operated. Fathers were first found to be less involved than mothers in general, and their involvement was described as more sporadic and irregular whereas mothers' involvement occurred on a daily basis. As strict disciplinarians in the household who often monitored children's performance by asking about their grades when the report cards were due, our participants' narratives supported the adage "strict father, kind mother" (*yanfucimu*), as well as the body of literature highlighting mother-father differences based on gender differentiation within the household (e.g., Chao & Tseng 2002; Kim et al., 2010; Shwalb et al. 2010). The three types of involvement fathers were often found to engage in were: helping in specific subjects, asking about grades, and carrying out disciplinary action when children failed to achieve. Furthermore, fathers communicated less with their children about school while mothers were often the ones to engage their children in conversations related to school, which corroborates the findings of a previous study (Shek, 2000). Thus the types of involvement fathers engage in at home do tap into the skills model by developing children's skills through instruction on difficult subjects. However, they fail to touch upon the often more valued and important dimensions such as positive affect or positive beliefs about children's potential that can act as powerful motivators enhancing children's achievement outcomes. On the contrary, fathers were found to actually generate negative affect by engaging in criticizing and blaming behaviors. Punitive actions were especially viewed as detrimental by our young adult participants. The negative emotions elicited by fathers' disciplinary action were especially salient because of the lack of other behaviors fathers engaged in that could potentially generate positive emotions. Mothers were often described to act as a buffer against fathers' harshness, as illustrated by the metaphor used by Li Yuqin describing her father as playing the role of the black or white face in Peking opera (symbol of roughness and fierceness/ powerful villain) while her mother played the role of the red face (role of the good hero).

However, regardless of the strategies used and our participants' evaluations of whether they experienced them positively or negatively, the ten adults who provided their narratives all agreed with the fact that parental involvement played an important role in their educational trajectories. High levels of parental involvement at home were definitely better than little involvement, because even involvement that elicited negative emotions reflected the high

expectations parents had for their children. Chen Zuo reflected on his experience: “At the time, of course it’s very annoying because I want to play outside instead of study. But now that I am grown up, I say to my parents, if my mother had not been so responsible, I wouldn’t have been able to go to college.” On the other hand, Jiao Jing disapproved of her parents who had been less involved because they were busy with work, and indicated that she would definitely get more involved in her own children’s education:

My parents did have certain hopes, but did not have such high aspirations for me. It was just up to me to do well on the exams based on my ability... Of course it was not very helpful. Other parents have more education and can help more. I knew that my parents were too busy and weren’t able to help me. So I did not ask too much... At present I feel that such method is a little deficient.

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The conference, organized by Kellogg Faculty Fellow and Professor of Anthropology Susan Blum, witnessed inspiring discussion and collaboration between leading scholars of education from several disciplines and nations.

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