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## Middle-class chinese parental expectations for their children's education

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### Abstract

Of family variables contributing to children's school achievement, parent expectation was singled out by researchers to be the most salient and powerful force. Existing literatures have reported that Chinese parents overseas highly expect for their children's education, and actively involve themselves in associated activities. Based on information collected from 322 questionnaire survey and 30 face-to-face interviews with parents, this research attempted to investigate what expectations Chinese parents in Mainland China have for their children's education, and how to understand their educational expectations for their children, then to add in-depth understandings of Chinese parent involvement into the growing literature.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Parent expectations are beliefs or aims that parents hold about their children's future performance and are mainly focused on achievement-related areas such as educational, professional (Barber & Rao, 2005). Of many family variables, parental expectations have been singled out as the most salient and powerful force contributing to children's school achievement (Hoge, Smit, & Crist, 1997; Patrikakou, 1997; Peng & Wright, 1994; Seginer, 1983), especially parental expectations for children's educational attainment (e.g., whether or not attend college) have been found to be significantly related to both the child's current achievement and later achievement (Fulgini, 1995; Marjoribanks, 1988). Considerable evidence have been provided by previous studies for the link between

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parents' high expectations for their children's academic pursuits and children's educational outcomes (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Ganzach, 2000; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Pomerantz, Ng & Wang, 2006). Children with higher scores on measures of achievement, competence, and intelligence have turned out to have parents with higher educational expectations and aspirations for them (Sandefur, Meier & Campbell, 2006).

Existing studies of Chinese parenting have reported that Chinese parents not only have higher expectations for their children's academic achievement, but also place a high premium on their children's education and academic success (Li, 2001; Chao & Tseng, 2002; Shek, 2006; Cheng and Sally, 2009). However, most of these researches targeted at Chinese parents overseas, or in the areas of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Currently, there is limited literature investigating Mainland Chinese parents' expectations for their children's education, and how they involve themselves in their children's education. This research attempts to address the gap and add new knowledge of Mainland Chinese parental expectations and parenting to the growing literature. As Social Reproduction Theory (Bernstein, 1975) advised that the apparently neutral academic standards are laden with specific cultural resources, typically from the dominant classes — middle class, acquired at home, this study focused on exploring middle-class Chinese parents' expectations for their children's professional performance and education attainment in the future, and their practical parenting pattern.

## **2. AIM OF THIS STUDY**

Drew on 322 questionnaire survey plus 30 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with parents, and grounded in Chinese social cultural context, this study aimed to address the current insufficiency of research on Mainland Chinese parental expectations, and to add in-depth understandings of Chinese parenting and Chinese culture to the growing literature. Guided by the aim and the core research, this study investigated three questions:

- What expectations do Chinese parents have for their children's education and future?
- Why do they have such expectations?
- How are they involved in their children's education to help fulfil these expectations?

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

### *3.1 Method*

This study adopted a mixed method of using quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative in-depth face-to-face interview. Questionnaire survey in this study served as the main resource of data, aiming to collect information in a broader range. It included three sections. The first one was about parent's basic demographic characteristics, i.e., gender, age, education level, occupation, and yearly income, etc. The second part looked at parents' specific expectations for their children's professional future, followed by the last section investigating how parents were involved in their children's education to help fulfill their expectations, i.e., time spent on homework supervising, frequency of talking about school issues to their children, extra-curricular lessons currently registered for their children. The face-to-face interview was designed to triangulate information collected from questionnaire survey, and to deepen understandings of Chinese parental expectation. It investigated parents' expectations for their children's education attainment and the reasons for their expectations. Quantitative data and qualitative information gathered were respectively analyzed by descriptive statistical technique and content analysis method (Johnson & LaMontagne, 1993).

### *3.2 Research site*

Data collection was undertaken in Changsha, the capital city of Hunan Province, located in the Centre of Southern China. Although as medium-sized city, it holds the population of more than 6 million. With a higher rate of graduations enrolled into universities, the city has had a high prestige for its successful basic education. Parents here have been greatly involved in scaffolding their children's education achievement. Findings obtained in Changsha, could be generalized to a broad range and added into the literature for better understanding of Chinese parent involvement and Chinese culture.

### *3.3 Participants*

This study shed lights on middle-class Chinese parents' expectations for their children's education. Initially, 415 parents consented to be involved in the questionnaire survey with children studying in year 3 or year 6 in the 4 primary schools deliberately selected from the urban area in Changsha. After doubly filtered by the criterion of having education level no less than 12 years, and family yearly income more than 100,000 RMB (Statistics, N.B.O. 2002), there were 322 parents left to actually participate in the present study. Except 11 parents' gender missing, they were 213 mothers, and 98 fathers. Besides the questionnaire survey, 30 parents, of them, 28 mothers and 2 fathers, were randomly selected to undertake the face-to-face interview.

### *3.4 Sampling & Procedure*

Under the standard of having middle-class meanwhile from diverse background parents, this research purposively selected 7 schools from 1024 primary schools in the urban area of Changsha. Principals of these schools were initially contacted with by phone and email for their interest in attending the project. Positive response was received from principals of 4 schools. Within these 4 schools, there are 3 public schools, one affiliated to a "key" university with students mainly from highly-educated families; another one affiliated to local government whose majority of students were born in civil servant families; the last itself is a comprehensive "key" school mainly serves diverse but middle class families. The rest of these 4 schools is a private school, having students predominantly from business background family. The 4 schools selected have students mainly from middle class but different family background, could be regarded as ideal samples for this research. Then detailed information sheet and consent letter were sent to principals to sign. In each school, year 3 and year 6 were selected as sample year level, as both of them play significant role in China's basic education system. Start from year 3, curriculum becomes more comprehensive, and year 6 is the critical year for students to well prepare for the difficult entrance-exam for secondary school. Parents greatly involve themselves in their children's education in these two years. Looking into these two years' parenting could help capture the typical feature of Chinese parenting and better understand Chinese parent involvement.

From each year, 1 class was respectively randomly selected to attend the research. 8 classes in total were selected to complete the questionnaire survey. Information sheet and consent letter for parents were sent to and be handed over to parents by the classroom teacher.

In each class, among parents who consented to participate in the research, five parents, 40 in total, were randomly invited to undertake the interview. 30 of them were pleased to do the face-to-face interview, and were further contacted with about the schedule of interview. All interviews were conducted in Chinese at times and in places nominated by parents. 90% of them were completed within 1 hour. Before interviews started, parents were promised that the information they provided would be confidential; no name of participants, their children, or schools would be reported.

### *3.5 Instruments*

Fan (2001) understood that parent expectations are parental beliefs in their children's academic achievement ability. However, according to Barber and Rao (2005), it should also include parent's views about their children's professional performance. On the basis of previous understandings of parents' expectations for their children's education, this study looked insight to both children's professional performance and education attainment in the future.

As a multifaceted concept, parent involvement includes a broad range of parenting practices. Throughout the majority of the literature, Epstein's Model (1986, 1995) has been widely accepted as a typology and fundamental framework for investigating parenting activities (Cheng & Sally, 2009). This model defines parent involvement at six levels: parenting (addressing daily life needs and material support for children's study); communicating (talking with teachers/schools about school programs and children's progress); volunteering (assisting with schools events); learning at home (supervising children's learning); decision making (participating in school's decision-making); collaborating with community (to access education-related services in community programs). Based on Epstein's Model, meanwhile grounded in China's context, this study specifically investigated three types of parenting significant in Chinese education system: homework supervising, extra-curricular lessons parents registered for their children and parents' communicating school issues to children (as well as their perceptions of the importance of education and test results).

#### 4. FINDINGS

Findings presented in this study focus on:

- Participants' demographic characteristics
- Chinese parents' expectations for their children's professional and academic future
- Typical types of Chinese parent involvement
- Understanding of Chinese parent involvement

##### *4.1 Parent's demographic characteristics*

Information about participants' demographic information could be found in Table 1. As indicated, two thirds of the group was mothers, which is highly consistent with findings of previous studies (Lau, 2006; Cheng & Sally, 2009) that mothers are the ones who shoulder a large portion of parenting. However, this study found that Chinese fathers, nearly one third of the sample (30.5%), also actively participated in parenting. All parents in this study were mid-aged, ranging from 29 to 52 years old, with most of them younger than 46 years. It also could be found from the table that this group of parents was well-educated. More than half of them (52.8%) completed at least 16 years education and held bachelor & above degrees. Almost another 28% of these parents obtained diplomas from their senior or junior college study.

Except 4 housewives, 7 labors and 6 unemployed parents, the majority of this well-educated sample had decent occupations. Almost half of them were on the managerial positions, as civil servants (9.6%), professional managers (9.3%), administrative officers (10.2%), and business owners (8.4%). Within almost another half of these parents, 31.1% of them were professionals, working as doctors, engineers, designers, lawyers, teachers, journalists, movie directors, etc., with the rest 7.8% of them was professional freelance. From the information of family income shared by 43.5% parents of the group, we could find that these middle class participants were wealthy. The average yearly family income is 304,000RMB. More than half of them have yearly salary more

than 100,000RMB but less than 200,000RMB. Slightly less than another half of these parents earned more than 200,000RMB per year, with 2.2% even more than 1,000,000 RMB.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristic of Parents (n=322)

Variable	Number	Percentage %	Median	Average
Gender	Mother	213	66.1	
	Father	98	30.5	
	Information Missing	11	3.4	
Age (29-52) (Yrs)	[29,35]	66	20.5	38
	[36,40]	175	54.3	38.2
	[41,45]	62	19.2	
	[46~52]	9	2.8	
	Information missing	10	3.1	
Education Level (Yrs)	Doctor Degree (22)	7	2.2	16
	Master Degree (19)	29	9	15.5
	Bachelor Degree (16)	134	41.6	
	Senior College (15)	72	22.4	
	Junior College (12-15)	16	5	
	High School (12)	39	12	
	Information missing	25	7.8	
Family Yearly Income (¥1.0=10,000) [10,600]	[10, 20)	76	23.6	16.9
	[20, 50)	51	15.8	30.4
	[50, 100)	6	1.9	
	>100	7	2.2	
	Information missing	182	56.5	
Occupation	Professionals (doctor, teacher, engineer, accountant, consultant, designer, journalist, editor, IT, Pharmacists, etc.)	100	31.1	
	Civil servant (junior & senior)	31	9.6	
	Freelance	25	7.8	
	Managerial professional (President, CEO, manager, etc.)	30	9.3	
	Administrative officers	33	10.2	
	Business owner	27	8.4	
	Housewife	4	1.2	
	Labor	7	2.2	
	Unemployed	6	1.9	
	Missing	59	18.3	

#### 4.2 Parents' expectations for their children

Information could be found in Table 2 of parents' expectations for their children's professional future and education attainment. More than two third of parents (67.7%) clearly expressed their expectations for their

children’s professional future. Most of them expected their children either to be skill-oriented “professionals”, (52.8%), such as doctor, engineer, lawyer, etc., or to do managerial jobs, i.e., “government officers”, or “business managers/owners”, or to be one of these two groups (7%). Only 0.5% parents considered manual labors could be their children’s career in the future. Although 24% parents did not clearly mention what they would prefer their children to be/do in the future, there were 17% held positive response to this question. Nearly 10% indicated they would respect their children’s own choice, with another 7% hoped their children to be a capable, happy person, and to do their own contribution to the society. Only 7% of all parents held relatively passive attitude about it, either letting the nature take the course or so far lacking of actual consideration.

Similar to parents’ expectations for their children’s professional future, in the face-to-face interviews, 19 out 30 parents (63.3%) clearly expressed that they wanted their children to complete at least university level education, moreover, 23.4% parents reinforced it should be a “key” university or first-class university. Among those parents who did not exactly share the related information, there were two 10% parents respectively wished their children be a professional, or to grasp a certain skill to be financially self-supported.

Table 2. Parents’ expectations for their children (n=322/30)

Parents’ expectations	Category	Number	Percentage%	
Professional future (N=322)	Clearly-mentioned (67.7%)	Professional (only choice)	170	52.8
		Professional or Government officer	11	3.4
		Professional or Business managers	5	1.6
		Government officers	11	3.4
		Business managers, owner	13	4
		Government or Business managers	6	1.9
		Labour	2	0.5
	Not clearly-mentioned (24%)	Respect Children’s interest & dream	30	9.3
		Happy, capable citizen, contributing to the society	24	7.5
		Let the nature take the course	13	4
		Common citizen	2	0.5
		Haven’t considered	8	2.5
		Missing	28	8.6
	Education attainment (N=30)	Clearly-mentioned (63.3%)	Bachelor and above	9
Key university			2	6.7
First-class/Overseas university			5	16.7
Master degree			2	6.7
Not clearly-mentioned (36.7%)		Doctor degree	1	3.3
		To be professionals	3	10
		Good study habit	1	3.3
		Be healthy & happy	4	13.3
		To be self-supported	3	10

#### 4.3 Parents’ involvement in their children’s education

Table 3 described how these parents were involved in children’s education. Three types of parent involvement were examined. Of homework supervision, almost 90% parents actively involve themselves in daily supervising

their children's homework from less than half hour to more than 3 hours. The associated time for 36.3% parents was less than 30 minutes; while to another 33.2% parents, it was more than half hour but less than 1 hour. However, there were 12.4 parents spending 1 to 2 hours a day helping their children with home learning, while to another 3.1% and 2.3% parents, it was respectively 2 to 3 hours or more than 3 hours each day.

Having extra-curricular lessons is a must-do educational activity for Chinese children, with time and money heavily invested by their parents. As shown in Table 2, except 8.1% parents failed to share their information, almost all of them currently registered one to six, with the average of two, extra-curricular lessons for their children. Slightly more than 50% of these parents' children were engaged in 2 to 3 training lessons, with another 21.1% had one subject, and 15.8% had 4-5 subjects. There was even 0.6% of the sample registered more than 6 lessons for their children. Of these lessons, 52.4% focused on enhancing children's academic performance; only 8.8% was to develop their interest in arts and sports; another 32.4% were related to both. Besides completing homework assigned from school, 32.6% of these parents' children had to weekly spend 5 to 10 hours on such training lessons. To another 5% children, the time was 10 to 15 hours. 1% children even spent 15 to 20 hours a week on this after-school training. Fortunately, to 53.7% of children, the time was less than 5 hours per week.

Table 3. Parents' involvement in their children' education (n=322)

Involvement Type	Scale	Number	Percentage	Average	Median		
Daily home-work supervision	Involvement	Yes	289	89.8			
		Not	21	6.5			
		Missing	12	3.7			
	Time spent	≤30mins	117	36.3			
		30-60mins	107	33.2			
1-2hrs		40	12.4				
2-3hrs		10	3.1				
≥3hrs		7	2.3				
	Missing	41	12.7				
After school courses	Amount of subject [1,6]	1	68	21.1			
		2-3	175	54.4			
		4-5	51	15.8	2.47	2	
		6	2	0.6			
		Missing	26	8.1			
	Area of subject	Academic	155	52.4			
		Arts & sports	26	8.8			
		Mixed	96	32.4			
		Weekly hrs spent (by children) [0.5, 20]	(,5]	173	53.7		
			(5,10]	105	32.6		
(10,15]	16		5	5.25	5		
(15,20]	3		1				
Missing	25		7.7				
Yearly Expense ¥ [960, 30,000]	[960, 6,000)	130	40	7,800	6,000		
	[6,000, 10,000)	78	24.2				
	[10,000, 20,000)	70	21.7				
	[20,000,30,000]	70	21.7				
	Missing	32	9.9				
Frequency	Daily	64	19.9				

Communicating study to children	Often	221	68.6
	Occasionally	23	7.1
	Rarely	7	2.2
	Never	0	0
	Missing	7	2.2

Plus time, money also was generously invested on these lessons by parents. To 40% of the sample, the yearly expense was less than 6,000RMB, but to another two 21.7% of parents, it was respectively between 10,000 ~ 20,000RMB; and 20,000 ~ 30,000RMB. There were another 24.2% parents spent less than 10,000 but more than 6,000 on their children's training courses.

In addition to hours and money spent on children's homework supervision and training courses, for these Chinese parents, communicating study to their children also served as an important type of parenting. As information revealed in Table 3, Chinese parents highly concerned their children's study by communicating with them frequently. Nearly 20% of them did it every day, while presumably another 70% did it "often". Only about 10% of these parents seldom or rarely mentioned these issues to their children. There was no parent never has talked about study to their children.

#### 4.4 Parents' understanding of their expectations for their children's education

As described in Table 4, most of parents considered that education was important to their children. It was "significantly important" to 63.4% parents, 'relatively important' to another 10% parents. However, to the minority of these parents, it was "Relatively not important" or "Not important at all". 53.3% of those parents who appreciated the value of education regarded it as an effective means of enhancing their children's social status. Similar to this view, another 13.3% parents considered that education was an important way for their children to learn, and to know more about the world. In the rest of 33.4% parents' opinion, education was crucial for children's whole life. While being asked the reasons for their expectations for their children's education, half of the group claimed that it was to well prepare their children for the high competition of workforce. Another 30% parents contributed it to the influence of Chinese cultural tradition, where parents highly respect education and expect for the next generations' future. Different with this, another 20% parents think it was caused by the university-entry system, where students have to pass the difficult entry-exam to get enrolled into a university.

Table 4. Parents' involvement in their children' education (n=30)

Variables	Parents' perceptions	Number	Percentage %
Importance of study to children	Significantly important	19	63.4
	Relatively important	3	10
	Relatively not important	7	23.3
	Not important at all	1	3.3
Significance of education	Means of enhance social status	16	53.3
	The way to learn, know the world	4	13.3
	Crucial for children's whole life	10	33.4
Reason of emphasis on education	Cultural tradition: respect education, parents' high expectation	9	30
	preparation for the competitive workforce	15	50
	Impact of university-entry system	6	20



## 5. DISCUSSION

Different from previous research focusing on Chinese parents overseas, or in Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Chao and Tseng, 2002, Shek, 2006; Li, 2001), this study looked insight to middle-class Chinese parents in Mainland China, and aimed to explore an in-depth understanding of Chinese parents' expectations for their children's education. Based on Epstein's model, combined with information collected from questionnaire survey and face-to-face interviews, this study investigated middle-class Chinese parents' expectations for their children's education, the reasons for their expectations, and the pattern of their parenting.

From information shown in the above tables, this study found that Chinese parents at home, as their peers overseas, put children's education in a critically important position (Li, 2001; Cheng & Sally, 2009), and seriously concerned on their children's learning (Pearce, 2006). The majority of parents in this research considered education as "crucial" for their children's whole life, and valued education's function as the way for their children to learn more about the world, to enhance their social status in the future.

Closely related to their philosophy of education, more than two thirds of parents expected their children to complete at least university level education, and almost all parents wished their children work as professionals, business managers or civil servants. Only 2 parents in this big sample did not mind if their children work as a manual labor.

In order to fulfill the high expectations for their children's future, parents in this study were found to be highly committed to their children's learning and school success, and actively involved in their children's education. About 90% of this group not only daily supervise their children's home-learning, but also communicate study to their children in a high frequency. Quite different with their peers overseas, 100% of these middle-class parents heavily invested in their children's extra-curricular training lessons. More than two thirds of these parents registered at least 2~3 courses for their children, and the yearly expense is more than 10,000 RMB, even up to 30,000RMB. Most of these lessons focused on improving their children's academic performance.

While asked about the reason for their expectations, 50% parents attributed it to the realistic context where the younger generation was under overwhelming pressure from the workforce. With more and more people could afford to study in university, it becomes highly competitive for undergraduates to find a decent job and to live comfortably. In order to make their children win the fierce competition, to lead a comfortable life, what parents in this study wanted to do was to push their children study hard and study well. As Taylor et al. (2000) noted that parenting cannot be understood unless it is placed within its economic, social, political, and historical context. In Chinese context, children's education is somehow a business for the whole family.

As another 20% parents noted, the current university-enrolment system is also a powerful force pushing them actively engage in their children's education. According to China's education policies, children cannot get enrolled in universities, especially "key universities" unless they can successfully pass the difficult university-entry exams. Slightly inconsistent with previous research, where Chinese parents' high educational engagement was attributed to Chinese culture tradition; in this study, only 30% parents thought they were culturally motivated to participate in their children's education, and influenced by the cultural tradition where people highly respect education, and expect for their children's academic success.

Take all together, it could be safe to make a conclusion that Chinese parents in this study not only highly expect for their children's education, but also actively involve themselves in their children's learning by extensively supervising home learning; frequently communicating school issues to their children and generously investing in

children's after-school training lessons. The most powerful driving force of their involvement was the high expectations for their children's future and the fierce competition coming from the workforce.

However, considering the sample of this research as middle-class Chinese parents, and the cultural and economic diversity in mainland, China, it would be cautious while generalizing the findings of this research to parents from other classes and other areas of China.

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