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Contemporary Chinese parents' socialization priorities for preschoolers: A mixed methods study

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Abstract

This mixed methods study focused on the socialization goals for preschool-aged children among parents from three small-sized cities located in northeastern China. A total of 154 parents with preschool-aged children completed questionnaires measuring parental socialization goals for children's social-emotional competence and academic achievement. Quantitative results showed that parents generally placed more importance on children's social-emotional skills than academic skills. Ten mothers were selected from the sample and participated in a semi-structured qualitative interview to help understand reasons for parents' prioritization of social-emotional wellbeing over academic performance. Four themes emerged, including parents' concerns about children's psychological well-being under excessive academic pressure, their desires to "protect" children's childhood, their awareness of children's individual differences in intelligence and talent in learning, and their belief that good grades did not guarantee future success in life. Our findings highlight the importance of using mixed methods to deepen understanding of contemporary Chinese parents' child-rearing ideologies.

Keywords: Chinese parents, socialization goals, preschoolers, social-emotional skills, academic, skills

Chua's (2011) book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* provoked heated discussion in the USA regarding the "Chinese way" of parenting. Her book heightened the widespread impression that Chinese-style parenting emphasizes high parental expectations for children's efforts and academic success and excessive focus on children's academic performance. However, as demonstrated by recent studies on Chinese parenting of adolescent children in contemporary China (e.g. Fong, 2007a; Way et al., 2013), Chinese mothers in some samples are not singularly focused on their children's academic performance, rather they show strong concern for their children's social skills, mental health, happiness, and independence.

Socialization of children begins from a very young age. Chinese parents' socialization goals and practices for preschool-aged children have been less explored compared to those of school-aged children. Yet socialization during the preschool years is extremely important in setting the stage for the primary years. Chinese children are usually under the care of parents or extended families during infancy and toddlerhood, as group care for children under age 3 is not common (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010). Thus, preschool is often the first formal group setting that young children encounter. In addition, during the preschool years, two important parental socialization goals may become more evident and come into play together – socialization goals for children's academic achievement and social-emotional competence (Tobin, Hsueh, &

Karasawa, 2009). Entering preschool allows children to interact with many peers of similar age on a daily basis, which may increase parents' awareness of their child's social-emotional development. Children also take the first steps towards formal learning of academic skills in content areas of literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies (e.g. early counting and number operation skills). To help children establish a good foundation for elementary school, parents may pay more attention to academic skills during the preschool years compared to infancy and toddlerhood. Thus, parents may be more conscious and deliberate about their socialization efforts during the preschool years.

To complement the parental perspective, according to the *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* study (Tobin et al., 2009), some Chinese preschool teachers and directors have expressed a general concern about the quality of contemporary parenting, and they have described parents as giving children too much attention, too little attention, the wrong kind of attention, or all three. According to some teachers in the study, parents were prone to place heavy pressure on preschools to provide more academic preparation. In contrast, the trend today is for Chinese early childhood education experts to recommend for a more play-oriented, creativity-focused curriculum (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Tobin et al. (2009) argue that although parents' putting academic pressure on their children is not a new cultural practice, "what is new is that with the expanding provision of preschool this academic pressure has started earlier and is expanding as an ambition for wider portions of society" (p. 39). Tobin et al. (2009) focused their book on preschool teachers' perspectives on issues concerning Chinese parenting, and parents' views were rarely included. To further understand the dynamic tensions and make recommendations to increase dialogue and partnership between Chinese families and preschools, it is important to examine parents' view on what aspects of socialization they emphasize and why.

This study draws upon the theoretical concepts of Thomas Weisner's ecocultural framework (Weisner, 1997, 2002). An ecocultural approach views child development as being situated in the cultural ecology that creates everyday activities and routines. Children's participation in activities, situated in a local ecology infused with cultural logics, is deemed the most important contextual influence on child development (Worthman, 2010). Children's developmental status and maturation states both influence and are influenced by activities and practices in which the child participates (Weisner, 1997, 2002). The ecocultural context influences expectancies for children's competencies (Weisner, 1997). The cultural meaning of parents' socialization goals are manifested and embedded in cultural scripts that individuals hold for parenting (Padmawidjaja & Chao, 2010). Weisner and colleagues strongly advocate for the use of mixed methods to explore parenting in ecocultural contexts (e.g. Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2013). Accordingly, this study utilizes a mixed methods approach.

The present study aims to better understand the socialization goals of a sample of parents from three small cities in northeastern China, using mixed methods. The purpose of this study is not to generalize findings from this sample of parents to all contemporary Chinese parents and families, but to deepen understanding of participating parents' socialization goals for their preschool-aged children in a particular Chinese ecology, and shed light on methods and processes that may apply to contexts in other parts of China. The mixed methods approach was chosen to draw on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed methods are often useful in examining parents' behavior and belief systems. For example, quantitative methods can help investigators understand the prevalence and interrelationships of particular practices, behaviors, and beliefs, while qualitative methods are useful for understanding meaning, functions, goals, and intentions (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Most of the research on Chinese parenting to date is quantitative in nature, and it has yielded rich findings. To extend these findings to the preschool age group, and draw connections between academic and social-emotional enculturation, the quantitative phase of the study focuses on parents' socialization goals for their young children's academic achievement and social-emotional competence. To complement the quantitative results, this study also adds qualitative findings. Even though several qualitative studies on

parenting of adolescents in Mainland China have been conducted (e.g. Fong, 2007a, 2007b; Way et al., 2013), qualitative research on contemporary Chinese parenting of preschool-aged children is scarce (V. Fong, personal communication, October 17, 2014). This study uses in-depth qualitative interviews to understand the rationales behind the socialization goals of a group of Chinese parents.

Chinese parents' socialization goals

Parents' socialization goals reflect culturally shared beliefs about desirable qualities that parents endeavor to cultivate in their children through the process of socialization (Chao, 2000). Socialization goals encompass parents' beliefs, attitudes, and expectations for children (Darling & Steinberg, 1993), and are influenced by the surrounding contexts, among which one very influential context may be ethnic culture (Edwards, Ren, & Brown, 2015). The most well-studied Chinese parents' socialization goal may be the goal for academic achievement (e.g. Chao, 1996, 2000), due to repeated findings that Chinese children outperform their European American counterparts in multiple academic domains (e.g. Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007; Stevenson, Chen, & Lee, 1993; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Compared to European American parents, Chinese and immigrant Chinese parents are generally found to place greater value on education, set higher standards, provide higher levels of investment and sacrifice, and emphasize more direct intervention and structural parental involvement practices in children's schooling and learning (Chao, 1996, 2000; Chen & Uttal, 1988). In the Chinese culture, parents' effectiveness is often judged based on their children's school performance, and performing well in school is considered a way to undertake familial obligation and bring honor to the family (Chao, 2000). It is deemed parents' responsibility to provide proper education to the child, so that the child is off on the right course, especially since schooling continues to be the primary path to upward mobility in contemporary Chinese society (Padmawidjaja & Chao, 2010).

However, there may be a decrease in the emphasis on academic performance and an increase in the value of children's social-emotional development in at least some contemporary Chinese populations today. For example, Cheah, Leung, and Zhou (2013) interviewed highly educated Chinese immigrant mothers with preschool-aged children living in Maryland, USA. The mothers were aware of the overemphasis on children's academic performance in traditional Chinese societies, and some decided not to pressure their children, while others chose to allow their children to develop their own interests and choose their future academic paths without decreasing their focus on academic achievement. Also, the mothers increased their attention to fostering children's self-esteem and self-confidence. Studies on contemporary Chinese parenting of adolescent children have shown similar trends. Way et al. (2013) analyzed narratives of mothers of middle-school-aged children from Nanjing, a large northeastern capital city in China. Mothers' primary socialization goals were social and emotional competence, happiness, and independence. Although the mothers wanted their children to attain good grades, most of them placed equal or greater emphasis on children's social and emotional development. Fong (2007a) conducted an ethnographic study on Chinese parenting of adolescents in Dalian, a large coastal city. Fong found that parents hoped to instill simultaneously the values of excellence, independence, obedience, and care/sociality in their children.

Present study

In the present study, we examine the socialization goals for preschool-aged children of a sample of parents from three small cities in northeastern China, using a mixed methods approach. An explanatory sequential design was adopted, in which qualitative findings were used to help interpret and contextualize quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In the quantitative phase, we focus on two aspects of parents' socialization goals: socialization goals for social-emotional competence and academic achievement. These goals were selected because of Chinese parents' longstanding concern for their children's academic achievement

and their increasing attention to children's social-emotional development. It is difficult to hypothesize whether parents value one aspect over the other due to reasons described previously, for example, the fact that preschool is a transitional stage from family care to group care. Parents may value one over the other, or they may value both equally. In the qualitative phase, we aim to understand parents' rationales for prioritizing certain socialization goals over the others through in-depth semi-structured interviews. No specific research hypotheses were generated, because qualitative research is designed for an in-depth understanding of the complexity of human behaviors rather than hypothesis testing (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Method

Participants

Parents were recruited in three Chinese cities through preschools. All three cities are "small-sized" cities, with a population ranging from half a million to a little bit over one million. The three cities were chosen because they are geographically reasonably close to each other to represent a cultural entity, but meanwhile provide some variety. In China, there are about 3000 cities with a population of one million or less, and over one third of the population resides in these small cities (Green Book of Small and Medium-Sized Cities, 2013). However, most research on Chinese parenting has been conducted in big urban cities. This study focused on this under-studied population, in hopes of increasing researchers' attention to study parents in small cities.

Thirty-six classrooms from seven preschools were involved in this study. They were all full-day programs. Each classroom had approximately 30–35 children, normally under the care of two teachers and one classroom aid. The seven preschools were considered as "good" or "average" in terms of teacher qualifications, the quality of facilities, and the amount of fees charged. A total of 154 families participated in the study. In each family, either the mother or the father participated, but not both, and 133 mothers and 21 fathers completed questionnaires. Children (52.6% boys) ranged in age from 3 to 5 with a mean of 4.4 years. We asked parents to report their own as well their spouses' demographics to better represent the socio-economic status of the families (see Table 1). Based on the information, this sample might represent middle-class families from small cities of the northeastern region of China. Findings from this study should not be generalized to low-income or affluent families in Chinese small cities, nor should the findings be generalized to families in big urban cities or rural areas.

Table 1. Parental age, education, and occupation. (N = 154 families)

	Mother	Father
Age (years)	31.93 (24 to 43)	33.83 (27 to 54)
Education	13.61 years	14.28 years
Middle school or lower	15.03%	11.26%
High school	18.95%	15.23%
Associate degree	34.64%	29.80%
Bachelor's degree	27.45%	35.76%
Master's degree	3.92%	7.28%
Doctoral degree	0%	.66%
Occupation		
• Stay-at-home parents	25.32%	1.30%
• Non-technical or semi-technical worker (e.g. farmers, factory workers)	12.34%	9.09%
• Technical worker (e.g. salesmen, drivers, mechanics)	16.23%	18.18%
• Semi-professional and public servant (e.g. bankers, policemen, secretaries)	22.73%	25.97%
• Professional and officer (e.g. doctors, accountants, managers)	20.13%	42.21%
• High-level professional and administrator (e.g. university faculty, CEOs, governors)	3.25%	3.25%

Participating parents reported their own as well as their spouses' demographic information. This table presents the demographics of both mothers and fathers from the 154 families.

Rich qualitative data were collected from a subset of the parents. Ten mothers were selected from the sample based on their responses to the Parental Socialization Goals Questionnaire (see Method). Parents were first assigned into four groups with two dimensions: parents' rated importance of social-emotional skills and academic skills for children. A mean-split method was used to create the four groups: low social-emotional – low academic; low social-emotional – high academic; high social-emotional – low academic; and high social-emotional – high academic. Two to three parents were selected from each group. About three to four parents were selected from each city. No fathers participated in interviews due to limited availability. Five of the selected mothers had female children. Three mothers had a college degree; three had an associate degree; three had a high school diploma; and one had a middle-school diploma. Four of the mothers were stay-at-home parents; two were high school teachers; two were general office clerks; one was a nurse; and one was a sales person. The first author conducted all the interviews face to face. Interviews lasted from 0.5 to 1.5 hours. All interviews were audiotaped, and transcribed verbatim. The recruitment and data collection procedures were approved by the institutional review board of the authors' university, and consents were obtained from participants.

Quantitative measures

Parental socialization goals

Parental socialization goals were measured using a questionnaire adapted from the widely used Developmental Expectations Questionnaire (DEQ; Hess, Kashiwagi, Azuma, Price, & Dickson, 1980) and the Developmental Skills Instrument (DSI; Willemsen & van de Vijver, 1997). We named this questionnaire "Parental Socialization Goals Questionnaire" (PSGQ). In the PSGQ, some items were selected from the DEQ and DSI, and we also created several items to assess important aspects of social-emotional and academic development that were not measured by existing items (e.g. "Cooperative in games"). Each item describes a skill that parents may expect their child to master in early childhood.

The PSGQ includes four subscales: social skills (13 items), emotional competence (7 items), compliance (4 items), and academic skills (17 items). The social skills, emotional competence, and compliance subscales are used to measure different aspects of social-emotional development (S. Denham, personal communication, March 7, 2013). Social skills items capture children's relationship skills such as taking turns, resolving conflicts, and initiating and maintaining conversations (e.g. "Resolves disagreements without fighting"). Emotional competence items measure children's abilities to control and manage emotions (e.g. "Doesn't cry easily"). Compliance items concern children's compliance behaviors (e.g. "Doesn't do things forbidden by adults"). Academic skills items capture reading, writing, math, and science (e.g. "Recognizes numbers from 1 to 10"). Parents rated how important each skill was for their child during the preschool years, using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not important at all; 5 = extremely important). All subscales had acceptable Cronbach's alphas: social skills ($\alpha = .90$), emotional competence ($\alpha = .77$), compliance ($\alpha = .77$), and academic skills ($\alpha = .94$).

Qualitative interviews

Semi-structured interviews

In the study, quantitative data were first collected, and they informed the selection of participants for the qualitative phase. The interview questions focused on mothers' view on children's development in social-emotional and academic domains. Mothers were first asked to talk about their children's relationships with others, emotion regulation, and learning. The purpose of the questions was to build rapport with the mothers, and prime the mothers to think about their child's development in various areas. The following question was used to elicit mothers' responses regarding their value on children's social-emotional well-being and academic achievement, and especially their rationales and reasoning: "A mother told me that she doesn't care greatly about her child's academic achievement, but she cares a lot about

whether her child gets along well with others or regulates his/her emotions well. How do you think about that?" Probes were used to elicit further explanations from the mothers, such as "Can you share a story about it?" "Tell me more about that." and "Why do you think so?"

Data analysis

Thematic analyses were conducted. First, the first author transcribed all interviews verbatim, and then read through all the transcripts and noted insights, themes, and patterns (van Manen, 1990). Next, the first author translated the longest and seemingly richest interview into English, in order for the second author whose native language is English to tag themes. Both authors and a Chinese professor (a visiting scholar in the USA at the time) independently read the selected interview and attached codes to segments. The three met and discussed potential themes to look for. The Chinese colleague and the first author coded two more interviews in the original language, and there was no disagreement on the major themes.

The first author coded all the transcribed interviews using a sentence-by-sentence approach. A code was assigned to each sentence or segment identified. In the process of coding, the coding scheme was elaborated, and codes under each theme were added. A memo was created after coding each interview to summarize the main ideas expressed in the interview, as well as to document reflective notes about what the researcher had learned from the data. To fully capture the themes, an abstraction process was conducted. Similar and overlapping codes were first grouped together to reduce the number of codes, and then, overarching themes were developed to capture the commonality of the codes and to describe the phenomena (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). The first author met regularly with the second author to have ongoing discussion about the coding and theme generation process.

Finally, a theme validation process was performed. This involved presenting themes to four of the participating mothers for verification and further explication (i.e. "member checking"). All four mothers thought that the themes accurately summarized their views expressed in the interviews and their parenting experiences. One mother added that she might pay more attention to her daughter's academic performance when she gets older.

Results

Quantitative results

One-way MANOVAs were conducted, and the results showed that ratings on the PSGQ subscales did not differ by the gender of the parent completing the questionnaire or child gender. In addition, child age was not correlated with parents' ratings. Thus, further analyses were conducted using aggregated data. Paired *t*-tests showed that parents valued emotional competence, social skills, and compliance more than academic skills, $t(151) = 10.21, p < .001$, (Cohen's $d = .83$ (for emotional competence); $t(151) = 12.80, p < .001, d = 1.04$ (for social skills); and $t(148) = 10.23, p < .001, d = .84$ (for compliance). They valued emotional competence and social skills more than compliance, $t(148) = 2.26, p = .025, d = .19$, and $t(148) = 4.14, p < .001, d = .34$, respectively. Parents valued emotional competence and social skills equally.

Qualitative results

Mothers' emphasis on academic achievement varied. Ying,¹ a mother who was not employed outside the home, explicitly said, "I don't have high academic expectations for her ... I am okay with it as long as she does her homework carefully." In contrast, Xin expressed the highest expectations among all mothers. Xin said:

I don't expect her to be the best in every subject. She may be interested in some subjects, but not others. I respect her own interests, but her grades cannot be too bad. She may not be the top one or top two student, but she needs to be top ten at least.

The remaining eight mothers fell somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, with relatively average/realistic expectations. For instance, Lulu, a high school teacher with a four-year-old son, said, "I hope my son will be slightly above the average in the class." Almost all mothers thought children's social-emotional well-being was more important than academic performance, except for Xiao who believed that they were equally important. These findings may seem incongruent with the view that Chinese parents, at least during the preschool stage, tend to have unreasonably high academic expectations (Tobin et al., 2009). However, the findings can and should be understood in light of mothers' rationales for their expectations. Four themes emerged, and they captured mothers' rationales for their emphasis on children's social-emotional well-being over academic performance.

Concern about child psychological health

Four mothers expressed concerns about their child's psychological health under excessive academic pressure. Although mothers did not explicitly define what they meant by "psychological health," it appeared to have much to do with children's self-esteem and mental health, according to their explanations. For instance, Zhen, a 28-year-old mother, talked about her particular attention to her son's self-esteem:

Sometimes my mom would say, "Look at other children. They have learned this and that." We should not compare him to other children. Comparing him with others will influence his self-esteem ... a child will develop a feeling of inferiority if he is often compared to others.

Another mother, Xiao, who was a nurse, elaborated her view on mental health:

I think good mental health means not placing too much pressure on children, and don't constrain or control children too much. I think when a child is physically relaxed, his mind will feel free and serene as well. When his body and mind are relaxed, he will get sick less. Children get sick easily when they grow up in stressful environment. I know this as I had medical training. Also, parents should give children the freedom to do things they like and enjoy, as long as they don't do anything wrong.

The four mothers claimed that they would not sacrifice their child's psychological health for good grades. When asked about her view on the relative importance of social-emotional and academic performance, Linlin, a mother with a four-year-old daughter responded, "I care more about my daughter's emotions. I don't want to constrain or control her about studying. I want her to develop according to her own pace." Huixian, a mother who was not employed outside the home, mentioned that some parents would spank or yell at their children for not studying hard. When asked about her opinion on this issue, she responded with: "Spanking or yelling at the child will not help at all, and they will instead destroy a child's psychological health. I think I won't force my daughter when it comes to study." Zhen went into details about a true story that an academically outstanding adolescent girl committed suicide because of excessive academic pressure and her unwillingness to share her feelings with parents. Zhen said, "After reading the story, I decided that I would not force my son to study. I would respect his interests." Zhen believed that "forcing children to study will cause rebellion/defiance in them." Ziyu made a similar comment regarding her four-year-old son:

It's just like setting a higher goal for him. If he can reach the goal, that would be great. If he can't, I won't force him. I have heard many stories that parents had very high expectations, and the children developed mental health problems when they were not able to reach their parents' expectations.

Ziyu did hope her son to perform well in school, but she seemed to be open to the possibility that her son might not be able to reach her expectation. Several mothers mentioned "stories" about the undesirable consequence of excessive academic pressure that they heard either from the news or friends, suggesting a widespread public awareness that extremely high academic expectations may be detrimental to children's psychological health.

However, Xiao repeatedly stressed the importance of academic achievement. She based this on her belief that poor academic achievement would be detrimental to her son's self-esteem, and eventual happiness. Her son's school assigned homework like writing a whole page of the number "1." Initially she felt

it was too early for children of such a young age to write, and thus, she did not require her son to finish homework if he did not feel like doing it. However, her son was laughed at by peers when he had trouble writing the number "2" at school. The head teachers also told her that, "I asked children to write numbers, but when I went over to your son, he would cover his worksheet and almost burst into tears." She realized that her son's self-esteem was hurt, and she began to help her son practice writing numbers at home. She later found out that her son became more confident. Xiao reflected, "From this incident, I realize that it is unwise not to care about his school performance He will feel inferior if he is mocked at school, and the feeling of inferiority may make him lose faith in himself eventually." She further explained:

The reason why I care a lot about his academic performance is mainly because I am concerned about his self-esteem and psychological wellbeing I think he is a very ambitious and achievement-oriented child. He has a lot of pride. He will be very upset if people laugh at him because he does badly in school. I don't want to see him being upset. I care a lot about his feelings. I want him to be very happy. Happiness is built upon good academic performance. He will not be happy if he is bad at school. Will he be happy if teachers criticize him and peers laugh at him? No, he will definitely not be happy.

Xiao had undergone a shift in her view of the importance of academic performance, and the shift was driven by her knowledge of her son's personal characteristics and focus on her son's self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Children differ in intelligence and talent

Three mothers stated a belief that children have different levels of intelligence or talent in learning, as well as different paces of development. As Meili, a mother of a four-year-old daughter said:

If you force a child to do this or that before a child reaches a certain stage/level, the child may lose interest Every child has different levels of intelligence It depends on her where she will land (academically) in the future. I hope she will be well-balanced in different areas such as getting along with people and problem solving. I care more about these aspects. I can't say that I don't care about her academic performance. I sure do, but I won't force her to do this or that. For example, I won't force her to go to afterschool programs when her grades go down a little.

Lulu, the high school teacher with a son, said:

It is nearly impossible for parents not to care about children's school performance. However, you have to make your judgment according to the child's abilities. Some children have the talent in studying. If my son is like that, we parents of course will fulfill his desires to learn and help him If he is not very interested in studying, if he is not school material, we should not have very high academic expectations for him then. It depends on his abilities how much he can learn in that case. However, we will try to help him, and we don't want him to give up.

Huixian shared a similar belief, as evident in this quote: "If a child is truly smart, there is no way for parents to stop the children from learning. If a child is not smart and doesn't like studying, the child won't put his/ her mind into it." All three mothers believed that children varied in their intelligence and talent in learning, and some children might not be "academic material," indicating their awareness of children's individuality. In addition, according to several mothers, children should be the ones leading their development, and parents are the facilitators and supporters in this process to scaffold learning and development. It seems that some mothers acknowledged the active role children played in learning.

In addition, Lulu and Meili believed that speeding up children's learning was not really beneficial for children. Lulu further explained that children would lose the advantage of accelerated learning when they reach upper elementary grades, and thus, she mainly concentrated on helping her son develop and acquire abilities to learn rather than on spoon-feeding her son specific academic skills in math or literacy.

Protecting children's childhood

Three mothers said they had not spent much time intentionally teaching their child academic skills, in hopes that the child could fully enjoy preschool life without the added pressure of academic performance. As Jie, a high school teacher with a daughter said:

Children will start their tedious academic life when they enter elementary school. The three years of preschool may be the most carefree time in her life. I don't want to take away her happiness at such a young age. So I haven't intentionally taught her much during this time.

Zhen made a similar comment:

In cities, most families only have one child, and children often have no one to play with at home. During the preschool years, a time that children haven't been heavily involved in studying textbooks, I want my son to enjoy playing to the fullest. I think he can also learn a lot from playing Once he goes to first grade, he will have to do homework after coming back home from school. It is so great that he doesn't have any homework now. I want him to play and have fun.

Both mothers felt that children might not have much time to play in elementary school, and allowing children to play during preschool years seemed to be compensation or a remedy for children's lack of time to play in the future. However, none of the mothers mentioned whether they would still protect their child's "rights" to play during the upcoming school years, thus leaving open the possibility that they might place "homework" before "play" once children enter elementary school.

Good grades do not necessarily equate to future success. Schooling remains an important path for upward social mobility in contemporary Chinese society, and it is not surprising that most mothers hoped their children to perform well in school. Several mothers described schooling as a promising path to a good career. Lulu said:

His dad and I found our way of making a living through school, not through doing business or opening a family-owned store. We went to school, and thus were able to find our current job. We don't have other ways to provide him (my son) with much help. We hope he will be able to make a living through going to school However, we will help him find other paths (if school does not work out for him).

However, in general, the mothers realized that good grades did not necessarily equate to future success. Jie said:

Good school performance does not mean everything, and it does not mean she will be successful when she enters the real world. However, it may mean that she has a relatively good platform, a good foundation for future life in the real world. It would be perfect if she will have this foundation coupled with better interpersonal skills.

Three mothers further pointed out that there are many other avenues to successful careers and a good life. As Xiao said:

Getting into college is much easier now since the admission rate is much higher than before. Children can easily get into college as long as parents are willing to pay, so this is not the issue I feel that many of my classmates who didn't do well in school are doing pretty well now. They work in business or have their own factories, and they may even make more money than people like us who have a regular job. Actually there are many outlets, and the key is helping the child build a healthy psychology.

The realization that good grades do not necessarily guarantee future success might have eased mothers' anxieties about their children's academic performance, and increased their concerns about other aspects of development, for example, children's social-emotional development. However, it is worth noting that mothers did care about children's school performance despite this realization. Mothers commented that it was impossible not to worry about children's academic achievement because of the "big environment" – children's academic performance is always a main subject of conversations among parents; teachers treat high-achieving students better; and testing is a core element of the Chinese educational system. Thus, most of the mothers did care about their child's academic performance, but to a lesser extent.

Triangulating quantitative and qualitative findings

In this mixed methods study, qualitative findings help explain and contextualize quantitative results. The quantitative results showed that parents rated emotional competence, social skills, and compliance as

more important than academic skills. Although the quantitative results suggested parents' emphasis on their children's social-emotional development over academic skills, the quantitative data did not illuminate the reasons behind this. Analysis of the interviews revealed four possible reasons for parents' prioritization of children's social-emotional development. First, mothers worried about the influence of excessive academic pressure on children's psychological well-being. Second, they wanted to protect children's childhood. Third, they were aware of children's individual differences in intelligence. Thus, they believed that they should respect children's individuality and not force children to learn. Finally, fourth, although mothers deemed schooling an important means for future success, they were aware of alternative courses to a successful life.

The qualitative findings not only helped explain the quantitative results, but also revealed interesting discoveries that were not captured by the quantitative measurements. According to the interviews, some mothers might increase focus on academic performance when children enter elementary school, suggesting possible change in parents' socialization goals across different stages of a child's life. For example, Xiao said:

It is impossible not to value academic performance, but I am feeling ambivalent about this. I want my son to develop very well in all areas, but it is difficult to do. His studies will be the priority when he gets older.

Jie, a mother who chose not to intentionally teach her daughter academic skills during preschool years, said, "I may teach her when she is a little bit older and when she has the desire to learn." This finding signifies the need for future research to compare the socialization goals of parents with preschool-aged and school-aged children, as well as to examine how, and particularly, why parents' socialization goals may change as children go through different developmental stages.

In addition, Ziyu pointed out that there might be discrepancies between ideals and actions. She found herself not able to control her anxiety and anger when her son was unable to write out the Chinese characters she had taught him, although ideally she did not want to force her son to study and stress him out. This calls attention to the need of examining parents' actual childrearing behaviors in daily interactions with children, in addition to what parents think they value and do. Parents may hold certain values, but their values may not align with their practices. Perhaps it takes time for contemporary Chinese parents to translate their values into practice. The type of parenting that contemporary Chinese parents experienced when they were young is generally perceived as "outdated" by children and parents themselves (Way et al., 2013). It may be difficult for parents to "modernize" their child-rearing methods and strategies without their own childhood experience as a reference, even though they are aware of, or even embrace, up-to-date values regarding child rearing. Contemporary Chinese parents may need time to learn about, observe and imitate, or discover for themselves, parenting practices that are consistent with the values they are coming to cherish. Thus, observational data of parent-child interactions need to be included in future research to better understand the associations between contemporary Chinese parents' child-rearing attitudes, values, and beliefs and their child-rearing practices.

Finally, some quantitative findings remain unexplained. For example, it was found that parents valued children's emotional competence and social skills more than compliance. Unfortunately, no interview question was asked regarding mothers' view of compliance. Thus, it remains unclear why this group of parents perceived children's abilities to regulate emotion and socialize with others as more important than their abilities to comply.

Discussion

The goal of this mixed methods study was to examine the socialization goals of a sample of parents from northeastern China. This study was situated in a particular ecological context: middle-class families living in small cities in northeastern China. Although findings from this study should not be generalized to the whole country in a nation as vast and diverse as China, they do provide insight into the parenting

experience of these participating families and illuminate important issues to explore in further studies of contemporary Chinese parenting. First, the analyses of both the questionnaire and interview data revealed that parents of preschoolers valued children's social-emotional well-being more than academic achievement. As background to these findings, rapid cultural shifts and social changes in China may be contributing to parents' concerns with their children's social-emotional well-being (e.g. Naftali, 2009, 2010; Tobin et al., 2009; Way et al., 2013). In the context of a global economy, increasing numbers of individuals are rewarded for becoming entrepreneurial, initiating, adaptive, and socially and emotionally competent, characteristics important for success in many occupations, for example, in the world of business. These new demands may have contributed to the parents' concerns with children's social-emotional development, since aspiring parents endeavor to instill in their children "the values and behaviours that promote adaptation to the social, economic, and ecological conditions of their society" (Park, Coello, & Lau, 2014, p. 69).

However, these social and cultural forces may not be the entire, or even the major explanations of parents' prioritization of children's social-emotional development during the preschool years. In the interviews, several mothers explicitly expressed their wish to "protect" their child's childhood from excessive academic pressure, and some also said that they might focus more on academic performance after their child entered elementary school. Thus, parents' view on the importance of academic achievement may change as children enter elementary school, a time when formal education begins. Future research is needed to examine whether the phenomena of prioritizing children's social-emotional well-being is specific to the preschool stage, or it continues even when children start formal education.

One interesting quantitative finding was that parents valued social skills and emotional competence more than compliance, which appeared to be inconsistent with traditional Chinese cultural values. Chinese culture values compliance to authority from a very early age (Ho, 1986), which aligns with the Confucian doctrine of "filial piety" that emphasizes children's obedience and reverence to parents (Chao, 1994). Although compliance has been an important component of Chinese parents' socialization goals, the importance of compliance may be declining. Park et al. (2014) found that East Asia (i.e. China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) parents of the 2005–2010 cohort showed a decrease in their endorsement of obedience compared to parents of the 1994–1998 cohort. Park and colleagues attributed this shift to social changes occurred in those countries. Unfortunately, the issue of compliance was not explored in the qualitative interviews.

In the interviews, many mothers expressed concerns about children's mental health under excessive academic pressure. They opposed the idea of sacrificing children's social-emotional well-being for good grades. These findings seemed to differ from the common portrayal of Chinese parents as being concerned primarily about child academic achievement. However, they were congruent with recent findings that some contemporary Chinese parents in big urban cities cared about their adolescent children's mental health, social skills, and happiness (Fong, 2007a; Way et al., 2013). Nine out of the 10 families that participated in the interviews only had one child. As Fong (2007a) and Way et al. (2013) suggested, the singleton status of the children might have enhanced the mothers' sensitivities to their children's psychological and social-emotional well-being, and mothers might have shifted their focus to accommodate to their children's needs and wishes in ways that were previously not emphasized within a traditional Chinese extended family structure.

One surprising finding was that some mothers believed that children had different levels of intelligence or talent in learning, which seemed to be inconsistent with traditional Chinese ideologies. Confucian ideologies emphasize the importance of environmental factors for children's proper upbringing, especially in the intellectual domain (Ho, 1986). The notion of "training" and "cultivation" in Chinese culture is rooted in the Confucian ideologies of teaching (Padmawidjaja & Chao, 2010). A central part of training focuses on children's school performance, and parents are thought to be responsible for creating a favorable learning environment for children through providing support and drive for them to succeed in school and to ultimately fulfil societal and familial expectations for success (Ho, 1986). The current

finding suggested that some Chinese parents might have begun to acknowledge children's individuality. Discourses that speak of Chinese young children as "autonomous individuals" have been emerging, and parents are encouraged to recognize their children's unique qualities and voice (Naftali, 2009). The singleton status of children might also have increased parents' awareness and recognition of their child's individual characteristics and needs.

This study adds to the literature on Chinese parenting. Previous findings have suggested that some contemporary Chinese parents acknowledge and value the importance of children's social-emotional well-being, and this study extends previous findings discovered among school-aged children to the preschool age group (Cheah et al., 2013; Fong, 2007a; Way et al., 2013). In addition, mothers seemed to be aware of the "inevitable" academic pressure during school years, and several mothers purposefully decided not to teach children academic skills during preschool to "protect" their child's childhood from academic pressure. This finding was unique to this study. However, it remains unclear whether these mothers would continue to secure time for children to play once they enter elementary school. Perhaps some of the mothers would shift their focus to academic achievement when children reach school age, while some of them might continue to prioritize children's social-emotional development. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how parents distribute and redistribute their socialization efforts across different developmental areas, particularly when children transition from preschool to elementary school. Further, it is important to explore how parents' socialization goals are related to their childrearing practices and children's development eventually. Answers to these questions will help researchers and practitioners have a deeper understanding of contemporary Chinese parents' socialization goals for young children and how their goals may change, and better support parents to navigate their socialization goals and parenting behaviors, in order to maximize children's potential for optimal development. Further, this study demonstrates the strengths of combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The use of mixed methods enables researchers to obtain a more nuanced and contextualized portrait of contemporary Chinese parenting.

Finally, it is important to examine elements of the ecocultural context in which children's development takes place (Weisner, 2002). The findings of the study cannot be generalized to all contemporary Chinese parents, as the study sample primarily consisted of middle-class families from small cities in northeastern China. Many of the mothers sounded "Westernized" in discussing their socialization goals for children. However, based on the findings, it is impossible to investigate whether these mothers' child-rearing beliefs actually reflected their child-rearing practices. Perhaps only their beliefs had become "modernized," but their practices remained "traditional." In addition to parent-reported data and interviews, we also collected videotaped data of parents playing and reading with their child. Comparing parenting behaviors displayed in parent-child interactions with parents' ideologies will be the next critical task.

Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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