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Pathways of influence: Chinese parents' expectations, parenting styles, and child social competence

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Abstract

This study examines relations among Chinese parents' expectations for children's development of social–emotional skills, parenting styles, and child social competence. A total of 154 parents with preschool-aged children from mainland China completed questionnaires measuring their timing of expectations for children's mastery of social–emotional skills, value placed on social–emotional skills, parenting styles, and child social competence. Parenting styles were found to mediate the effects of parental expectations on child social competence. Parents with earlier expectations reported higher levels of authoritative parenting, which, in turn, related to better parent-reported child social competence. Parents who placed more value on social–emotional skills were more likely to adopt an authoritative parenting style, and subsequently, they reported children having better social competence.

Keywords: Chinese parents' expectations, parental values, parenting styles, social–emotional development, socialization expectations, parental ethnotheories

Introduction

Overwhelming evidence has shown that growth and development of social–emotional competence during the early years of life affects children's life trajectories (Broidy et al., 2003; Denham & Brown, 2010). Social–emotional competence describes “a child's capacity to interact with and form relationships with others (e.g. family members, other caregivers, peers)” (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010, p. 127). Empirical research has highlighted the significance of social–emotional competence to children's school readiness, psychological well-being, and social relationships (Broidy et al., 2003; Denham, 2006; Duncan et al., 2007).

One of the most critical socialization goals that parents have for their children is fostering the development of social–emotional competence, so that their children are well prepared to survive and thrive in their future life (Cheah & Rubin, 2003; Edwards, Ren, & Brown, in press; Olson, Kashiwagi, & Crystal, 2001). However, parental goals and values are influenced by the socialization contexts and factors such as culture and individual experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, we cannot assume that all parents expect and value their children's development of social–emotional competence equally. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how variations in parental goals and values relate to parenting practices and children's de-

velopmental outcomes. The current study focuses on one important component of parental goals and values – parental expectations for children’s development of social–emotional competence – and how parental expectations relate to parenting practices and child social competence. Additionally, we selected parenting styles as one important aspect of parenting practices to investigate.

The present study focuses on Chinese parents with preschool-aged children, because contemporary Chinese parents with young children have increasingly recognized the importance of fostering children’s social–emotional competence, perhaps as a result of radical economic and social changes underway in China (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). With these rapid changes, a new type of citizen who is more socially competent, creative, and adaptive may be needed for the new global economy (Tobin et al., 2009). Chinese parents and early childhood educators have expressed an urgent need to foster children’s social–emotional competence and have invested more attention to their young children’s social–emotional development (Hsueh, Tobin, & Karasawa, 2004; Tobin et al., 2009). Thus, it is of great significance to understand contemporary Chinese parents’ expectations for their children’s development of social–emotional competence, as well as how these expectations are associated with parenting practices and children’s developmental outcomes. This study contributes to an understanding of current Chinese parenting, as well as to the understanding of the complex relationships among parental expectations, parenting styles, and young children’s social competence.

Parental expectations and children’s development

Parental expectations refer to parents’ judgement and predictions about a child’s future achievement relative to a goal (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Parental expectations set the context of early socialization as they help organize parenting behaviors to achieve a certain goal (Dix, 1992; Harkness & Super, 1996). Parental expectations are important elements of parental ethnotheories which are culturally derived cognitive models, beliefs, and theories that parents hold regarding children (e.g. children’s developmental stages), families (e.g. family dynamics), and themselves as parents (e.g. effective parenting strategies; Harkness et al., 2010). Parental ethnotheories “shape the choices that parents make in relation to the settings that their children inhabit and the competencies they acquire” (Harkness et al., 2010, p. 68).

Previous research on parental expectations has primarily focused on cross-cultural comparisons of parents’ expectations about the timing of developmental skills (Edwards, Gandini, & Giovaninni, 1996; Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton, & Knight, 1984; Hess, Kashiwagi, Azuma, Price, & Dickson, 1980). Hess et al. (1980) and Edwards et al. (1996) found that American parents tended to expect earlier mastery in verbal assertiveness and social skills with peers than Japanese and Italian parents, respectively. Furthermore, Goodnow et al. (1984) found that Australian-born mothers had earlier expectations for children’s mastery of social skills, verbal assertiveness, and school-related skills compared to Lebanese-born Australian mothers. In general, parents tend to have early expectations for developmental skills that are stressed by their society (Edwards et al., 1996; Hess et al., 1980).

Although cross-cultural differences in parents’ developmental expectations have been well documented, variations in developmental expectations among parents from the same cultural context have less been exhaustively explored. Cross-cultural psychologists have well recog-

nized the variations of human behaviors among cultures as well as within a single culture and proposed to “distinguish between the population level and individual level of analysis” (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2006, p. 12). Both levels of analysis are necessary to achieve a more complete picture of variations in human behaviors. Thus, it is important to investigate how variations in parental expectations are related to parenting practices and children’s developmental outcomes within one cultural context beyond well-studied cross-cultural differences.

Several studies have focused on the relationships between parents’ developmental expectations and children’s social–emotional outcomes. Holloway and Reichhart-Erickson (1989) found that mothers’ earlier expectations for social skills were related to better child social competence. Holloway and Reichhart-Erickson hypothesized that parental expectations might influence child development through parenting practices. Hess et al. (1980) found that in both Japan and the USA, overall earlier developmental expectations were related to better child cognitive development as measured by a block sort task, child school aptitude, and child IQ at age 6. In both countries, early expectation of verbal assertiveness was the strongest predictor of child cognitive competence. Early expectations of social skills and school-related skills were also positively related to child cognitive competence.

However, Pearson and Rao (2003) did not find significant correlations between parental expectations and child social competence. Pearson and Rao investigated Hong Kong and British parents’ socialization goals, child-rearing practices and child social competence during the preschool years. Their conceptualization of parental socialization goals is similar to the concept of parental expectations. Pearson and Rao defined socialization goals as goals parents have to raise their children to have qualities that are valued in the society they live in. However, unlike measuring the timing of developmental expectations, they assessed how much parents valued each socialization goal. Among both Hong Kong and British parents, valuing the socialization goals of children’s social–emotional development was found to be unrelated to child social competence measured using a peer nomination procedure. The results seemed unexpected, but Pearson and Rao did not explain potential reasons for the lack of relationship.

The timing of parents’ developmental expectations and the degree to which parents value those developmental skills seem to be two facets of parental expectations. Are these two facets associated with each other? For instance, do parents who value children’s development of prosocial skills also have early expectations for the mastery of prosocial skills, so that children will have a head start? Or do parents tend to have later expectations when they value the socialization of certain development skills in order to allow children sufficient time to reach a higher level of development of those skills? To our knowledge, no previous research has addressed these two aspects of parental expectations simultaneously. In the present study, we will examine both aspects of parental expectations — timing and value — to reveal the relationships between the two.

Parenting styles and children’s development

Parenting styles of Chinese parents initially attracted many researchers’ interest as a result of increasing recognition that Asian-American children often have superior academic achievement (Stewart et al., 1998). In contrast to domain-specific parenting practices, parenting style is a global measure of parenting practices (Baumrind, 1989). Parenting styles were defined as “a constellation of attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and create an emotional

climate in which the parent's behaviors are expressed" (Darling & Steinberg, 1993, p. 493). Four types of parenting styles have been identified with two dimensions – responsiveness and demandingness, including authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglecting parenting (Baumrind, 1967; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). However, research on Chinese parenting has mainly focused on authoritative and authoritarian parenting, which may be due to researchers' interests in comparing Chinese parents with parents from Western cultures (Chan, Bowes, & Wyver, 2009). Another possible reason for excluding neglecting and permissive parenting styles is the difficulty of measuring them. Neglecting parenting is usually rare (Holden, 1997) and has often been excluded in many measures of parenting styles. The Permissive Parenting Scale from the widely used Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ; Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995) has been found to have low reliability among Chinese parents (Xu, 2007).

Authoritative parents show high levels of warmth and responsiveness to the child, while at the same time, they hold high expectations of maturity. In contrast, authoritarian parenting involves a combination of low responsiveness and coercive control. Authoritarian parents show low warmth and acceptance, restrain the child's autonomy, and frequently use coercive disciplinary strategies, such as physical punishment, verbal hostility, and non-reasoning (Baumrind, 1996; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

The relationships between parenting styles and children's developmental outcomes have been well documented (Baumrind, 1991; Chen, Dong, & Zhou, 1997; Darling, 1999). Children with authoritative parents tend to have higher levels of social competence and academic achievement as well as lower levels of adjustment problems, whereas opposite relationships have been found for authoritarian parenting (Baumrind, 1991; Darling, 1999; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). These findings are mostly based on Western samples. Studies focusing on within-cultural differences in Chinese parents' parenting styles and young children's social and cognitive outcomes have shown similar patterns of relationships as those discovered among Western samples (Chen et al., 1997, 2000; Zhou, Eisenberg, Wang, & Reiser, 2004).

Parental expectations, parenting styles, and children's development

As reviewed previously, some studies focused on the relationships between parental expectations and children's developmental outcomes. However, few studies have focused on understanding the mechanisms through which parental expectations are linked to children's developmental outcomes. Holloway and Reichhart-Erickson (1989) hypothesized that parental expectations might influence child development through parenting practices; they found that parents who held earlier developmental expectations tended to send their children to early childhood programs with higher quality staff, suggesting that mothers might select programs that complemented their child-rearing beliefs. In the current study, parenting styles are examined as potential mechanisms through which parental expectations impact child development.

Darling and Steinberg (1993) proposed an integrative model encompassing three important aspects of parenting: parental goals and values, parenting practices, and parenting styles. In this model, "the values parents hold and the goals toward which they socialize their children are critical determinants of parenting behaviors," including at least two attributes of parenting: domain-specific parenting practices and parenting styles (p. 492). Parental expectations are an important component of parental goals and values. Thus, parenting styles may be an

important element of parenting that mediates the influences of parental expectations on child developmental outcomes.

The goal of this study is to investigate whether parenting styles serve as a mechanism through which Chinese parents' expectations for their children's development of social-emotional competence influence children's social competence. The following hypotheses were made:

- (1) *Relationships between the two aspects of parental expectations*: When parents have earlier expectations for their child's development of social-emotional competence, they would place more value on the development of social-emotional competence, and vice versa.
- (2) *Relationships between parental expectations and child social competence*: Earlier expectations for children's development of social-emotional competence would relate to better child social competence. The amount of value parents place on the development of social-emotional competence would be positively related to child social competence.
- (3) *Relationships between parenting styles and child social competence*: There would be a positive relationship between authoritative parenting and child social competence, while the relationship would be negative for authoritarian parenting and child social competence.
- (4) *Relationships between parental expectations and parenting styles*: Parents with earlier expectations would adopt authoritative rather than authoritarian parenting. Similarly, parents who place more value on the development of social-emotional competence would adopt authoritative rather than authoritarian parenting.
- (5) *Mediation effects of parenting styles*: Parenting styles would mediate the relationships between parental expectations and children's social competence. Specifically, we hypothesize that when parents have earlier expectations for and place more value on their child's development of social-emotional competence, they would adopt authoritative, but not authoritarian, parenting practices to best promote their child's social competence.

Method

Participants

A total of 154 Chinese parents (133 mothers, 21 fathers) with preschool-aged children participated in the study. Children's ages ranged from three to five years with a mean age of 4.4 years, and 47.4% of the children were girls. Parents were recruited from seven preschools located in three cities in eastern China. Unlike many studies on Chinese parenting that were conducted in big urban cities, all three cities involved in the current study are small-sized cities with a population ranging from half a million to a little bit over one million. In addition, all three cities are below or at average in terms of economic development. Parents completed a demographic questionnaire in which family demographic characteristics such as both the mother's and the father's ages, education, and occupation were assessed (Table 1).

In these participating families, most parents were in their early 30s. About 31% of the mothers and 44% of fathers obtained a bachelor's or higher degree. Parental education was coded from 1 to 6 and used as a continuous variable in further analysis (Table 1). Occupations were

Table 1. Parental age, education, and occupation ($n = 154$).

	Mother	Father
Age (years)	31.93 (24–43)	33.83 (27–54)
<i>Education</i>		
1 = Middle school or lower	15.03%	11.26%
2 = High school	18.95%	15.23%
3 = Associate degree	34.64%	29.8%
4 = Bachelor's degree	27.45%	35.76%
5 = Master's degree	3.92%	7.28%
6 = Doctoral degree	0	.66%
<i>Occupation</i>		
1 = Non-technical or semi-technical worker	38.16%	10.39%
2 = Technical worker	15.79%	18.18%
3 = Semi-professional and public servant	22.37%	25.97%
4 = Professional and officer	20.39%	42.21%
5 = High-level professional and administrator	3.29%	3.25%

classified into five categories. About 38% of the mothers and 10% of the fathers did not have a job (e.g. housewives) or worked as non-technical or semi-technical workers, such as farmers, factory workers, and waiters or waitresses. About 16% of the mothers and 18% of the fathers were technical workers (e.g. salesmen, owners of small stores, drivers, and mechanics). About 22% of the mothers and 26% of the fathers were semi-professionals and public servants, such as bankers, policemen, elementary teachers, owners of small business, and secretaries. About 20% of the mothers and 42% of the fathers worked as professionals and officers (e.g. accountants, doctors, engineers, lawyers, middle- and high-school teachers, middle-rank government officials, departmental managers, etc.). Finally, about 3% of the mothers as well as fathers were high-level professionals and administrators, such as university faculty, chief executive officers, and high-rank government officials (e.g. governors, ministers). Parental occupation was coded from 1 to 5 and used as a continuous variable in further analysis.

Measures

Parents completed a set of questionnaires, including the demographic questionnaire and three scales assessing parental expectations, parenting styles, and parent-reported child social competence.

Parental expectations

The Parental Expectations Questionnaire (PEQ) was adapted to measure parents' expectations regarding their child's social-emotional development. No measures on Chinese parents' developmental expectations were found, so items were selected from the widely used Developmental Expectations Questionnaire (DEQ; Hess et al., 1980) developed among American and Japanese parents and the Developmental Skills Instrument used by Willemssen and van de Vijver (1997). The DEQ was the primary measure used in the literature of parents' developmental timetables. Thus, most items were selected from the DEQ and adapted to Chinese culture. Each item describes a social-emotional skill that parents might expect their child to master in

early childhood. Items capture children's relationship skills and skills to make responsible decisions, including initiating and maintaining conversations, cooperating, taking turns, resolving social problems using effective ways, and prosocial behaviors (13 items; e.g. "Share his/her toys with other children").

Parents first rated at what age they expected their child to master each skill (1 = two years or younger; 2 = three years; 3 = four years; 4 = five years; 5 = six years or older), and they then rated how important each skill was for the child during preschool years using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not important; 5 = extremely important). The first author whose native language is Chinese translated the scale into Chinese. An expert in child development from the Hong Kong Institute of Education provided the first author with thorough feedback on the translation; the first author revised the translation based on feedback provided. It took several iterations before the translation was finalized.

Since the scale has never been used among Chinese parents, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using Mplus 7.0 to validate its use among Chinese parents. A CFA was conducted for "age" and "importance" ratings separately. Model fits were acceptable for both "age" and "importance" ratings according to SRMR (i.e. Standardized Root Mean Square Residual). Additionally, all items had significant standardized factor loadings ranging from .53 to .73 for the "age" scale, and from .48 to .75 for the "importance" scale. The Cronbach's alpha is .90 for the "age" scale and is .89 for the "importance" scale.

Parenting styles

The PSDQ (Robinson et al., 1995) was used to measure parenting styles, because it has been widely used among Western parents as well as among Chinese parents. The PSDQ includes three scales: Authoritative (27 items), Authoritarian (20 items), and Permissive (15 items) parenting. The Authoritative and Authoritarian scales each contains four factors, and the Permissive scale contains three factors. Although the PSDQ has been widely used among Chinese parents from big urban cities (Chen et al., 1997; Wu et al., 2002; Zhou et al., 2004), it has rarely been used among parents from small cities in China. To ensure the usability of the questionnaire among this sample of parents, both confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were conducted.

A CFA was conducted with each factor separately; an EFA was conducted with all 62 items to check which factors would emerge among this sample of parents. According to the CFA results, the three Permissive factors did not obtain a good model fit; the factor loadings for most items from the Permissive scale were low according to the EFA findings. Thus, the Permissive scale was not used in the study, which is consistent with previous studies among Chinese parents (Chan et al., 2009; Xu, 2007; Zhou et al., 2004). Based on the EFA results, one item from the Authoritative Parenting Scale and four items from the Authoritarian Parenting Scale were eliminated due to low factor loadings. We conducted a CFA again to further validate the factor structure of each factor after removing those five items, and both good model fit and local fit (e.g. significant factor loadings, small normalized residuals) were obtained.

Interestingly, according to the EFA results, two items from the Authoritarian scale and one item from the Permissive scale loaded on the Authoritative factor: "Tells child what to do," "Demands that child does/do things," and "Sets strict well-established rules for child." These three items seem to measure parents' controlling behaviors in Western contexts. However, as Chen

et al. (1997) described, “parents in China are often encouraged to be controlling based on affectionate attitudes towards the child” (p. 857), which is similar to the notion of *guan* (“to govern”) proposed by Chao (1994). The notion of *guan* implies involved care, concern, and love for the child in addition to governing the child. We conducted a CFA, and factor loadings were constrained equal to assess model fit as there were only three items. Results suggested that the three items measured a single construct, as indicated by both good model fit and local fit. This factor was named as “Clear Guidance” instead of “Directiveness” or “Parental Control” to align with a positive connotation in China. We grouped the “Clear Guidance” factor with the four original Authoritative factors and labelled the scale as Authoritative/Clear Guidance Scale.

Additionally, four items from the Self-confidence subscale of the Permissive scale loaded on the Authoritarian factor based on the EFA findings. The four items measure parents’ confidence in their parenting (e.g. “Is afraid that disciplining child for misbehavior will cause the child to not like his/her parents”). The CFA results showed that the four items measured a single construct which we called “Insecure Guidance,” and we grouped this factor with the four Authoritarian original factors. We labelled the scale as Authoritarian/Insecure Guidance to reflect the changes. It is worth noting that whether to include “Clear Guidance” and “Insecure Guidance” items or not yielded the same patterns of results, which may be due to the small amount of items. We reported results including those items to illuminate future research on current Chinese parenting.

The five factors of the Authoritative/Clear Guidance scale were positively correlated with each other with correlation coefficients ranging from .33 to .70; the correlation coefficients of the five Authoritarian/Insecure Guidance factors ranged from .15 to .48 (Table 2). Thus, items from each scale were combined and average scores were created, resulting in two composites – Authoritative/Clear Guidance and Authoritarian/Insecure Guidance. The Cronbach’s alpha is .90 for the Authoritarian/ Clear Guidance Scale (29 items) and is .81 for the Authoritarian/Insecure Guidance Scale (20 items).

Table 2. Correlations between Authoritative scale factors and Authoritarian scale factors.

	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Authoritative/Clear Guidance</i>					
1. Warmth and involvement	–	.67***	.70***	.55***	.35***
2. Reasoning/induction		–	.69***	.56***	.50***
3. Democratic participation			–	.53***	.41***
4. Good nature/easy going				–	.33***
5. Clear guidance					–
<i>Authoritarian/insecure guidance</i>					
1. Verbal hostility	–	.48***	.32***	.32***	.41***
2. Corporal punishment		–	.46***	.31***	.42***
3. Non-reasoning			–	.35***	.29***
4. Directiveness				–	.15
5. Insecure guidance					–

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Child social competence

Parents rated their child's social competence using the Social Competence subscale of the Early School Behavior Rating Scale (Caldwell & Pianta, 1991). This subscale was selected for two reasons. First, it is short and easy to fill out for parents. Second, it was used among Chinese parents in a recent study by Zhang (2011). The subscale consists of 16 items assessing a parents' perception of his or her child's social competence. Parents used four response alternatives (1 = hardly ever; 4 = almost always) to rate how well each behavior listed in the scale described the child (e.g. "Plays well with other children"). Zhang (2011) translated the subscale into Chinese and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .87 for Hong Kong mothers' ratings of their preschool-aged children. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha is .79.

Results

Descriptive statistics of Chinese parents' expectations, parenting styles, and parent-reported children's social competence are presented in Table 3.

Parental expectations and child social competence

Parents reported that they expected their child to master those social-emotional skills listed in the PEQ around four years of age on average, and they perceived those skills as moderately important on average (Table 3). It is worth noting that parents' "age" ratings and "importance" ratings were not correlated, $r(154) = -.06, p = .47$, which suggested that a parent who had earlier expectations for his/her child's social-emotional development did not necessarily perceive those social-emotional skills as important for the child during preschool years. Thus, our first research hypothesis was not supported.

Parents' rated expected age of mastery was negatively correlated only with fathers' education (Table 4), which suggested that when fathers in the families had higher education, parents tended to have earlier expectations for the development of children's social-emotional skills. Parents' rated importance of social-emotional skills was positively correlated with parental education and occupation (Table 4). Parents with higher education as well as fathers with higher levels of occupation in the families tended to value social-emotional skills more. The findings were consistent with Kohn's (1969) findings that middle-class American parents tended to value children's self-direction more than did working-class parents (e.g. valuing children's internal standards for managing the relationships with other people and one's self).

Consistent with our second hypothesis, correlation analysis showed that parents' rated expected age of children's mastery of social-emotional skills was negatively correlated with par-

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of parents' expectation, parenting styles, and child social competence ($n = 154$).

	Mean	Std	Min	Max
Parental expectation – age	3.19	.63	1.64	4.54
Parental expectation – importance	3.35	.61	1.75	4.85
Authoritative/clear guidance	3.75	.49	2.45	4.86
Authoritarian/insecure guidance	2.13	.38	1.35	3.40
Child social competence	2.67	.37	1.80	3.73

Table 4. Correlations among parental expectations, parenting styles, child social competence, and parental education and occupation.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Expectation – Age	–	–.06	–.27***	.09	–.36***
2. Expectation – Importance		–	.31***	–.13	.22**
3. Authoritative/clear guidance			–	–.23**	.47***
4. Authoritarian/insecure guidance				–	–.23**
5. Social competence					–
Mom’s education	–.07	.29***	.18*	–.12	.05
Father’s education	–.003	.22**	.18*	–.17*	.11
Mom’s occupation	–.03	.17*	.09	–.06	.08
Father’s occupation	–.21*	.15	.27*	–.13	.17*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

ent-reported children’s social competence, $r(154) = -.36, p < .001$ (Table 4). The results indicated that if a parent had earlier expectations for his/her child’s social–emotional development, the parent tended to perceive that the child had better social competence. Parents’ rated importance of those skills was positively correlated with children’s social competence, $r(154) = .22, p = .007$ (Table 4). Parents tended to report their child having better social competence when they reported valuing those social–emotional skills more.

Parenting styles and child social competence

Paired sample t -test suggested that contemporary Chinese parents were more likely to adopt an authoritative than authoritarian parenting style, $t(153) = 29.91, p < .001$. Authoritative and authoritarian parenting were negatively correlated with each other, $r(154) = -.23, p = .005$ (Table 4). Consistent with the third hypothesis and previous findings discovered among Chinese parents and children (Chen et al., 1997), authoritative parenting was positively related to children’s social competence, $r(154) = .47, p < .001$, whereas authoritarian parenting was negatively associated with children’s social competence, $r(154) = -.23, p = .004$ (Table 4).

Parental expectations and parenting styles

Parents’ rated expected age of children’s mastery of social–emotional skills was negatively correlated with authoritative parenting, $r(154) = -.27, p < .001$ (Table 4). When parents had earlier expectations for their child’s development of social–emotional skills, they tended to adopt an authoritative parenting style. Parents’ rated importance of those social–emotional skills was positively related to authoritative parenting, $r(154) = .31, p < .001$ (Table 4). When parents placed more importance on children’s development of social–emotional skills during preschool years, they were more likely to adopt an authoritative parenting style. However, neither expected age nor rated importance was related to authoritarian parenting. Thus, the fourth hypothesis was partially supported.

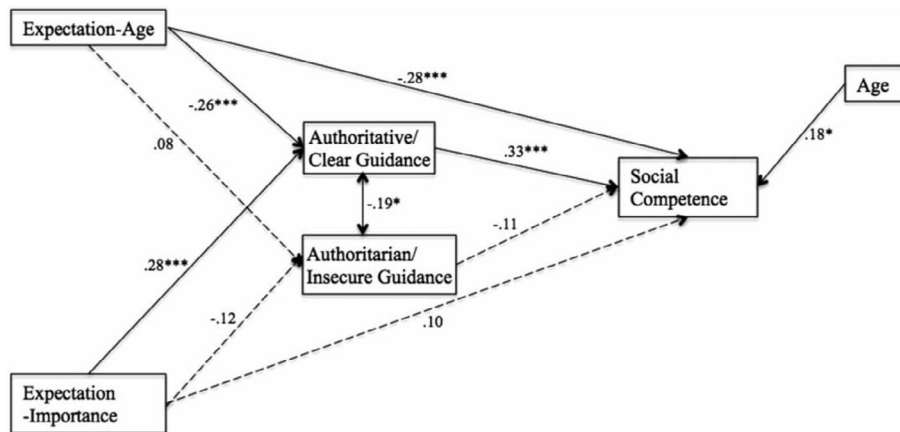


Figure 1. Mediation model showing the relationships among parental expectations, parenting styles, and child social competence. Solid lines are used for significant paths and dashed lines are used for non-significant paths. (* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$)

Parental expectations, parenting styles, and child social competence

To test the last hypothesis that parenting styles would mediate the relationships between parental expectations and children's social competence, a path analysis was conducted using Mplus 7.0 under maximum likelihood estimation. In the mediation model (Figure 1), parental expectations were treated as predicting variables, while parent-reported children's social competence was the outcome variable. Authoritative and authoritarian parenting were entered in the model as the mediation variables. Authoritarian and authoritative parenting were allowed to correlate as they were significantly negatively correlated with each other and the model fit was not acceptable without correlating the two variables. Child age was also entered as a predicting variable to control for the effect of age as age was positively correlated with children's social competence, $r(154) = .17, p = .042$. The model achieved a good model fit, $\chi^2(2) = 4.61, p = .10, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .09$, and $SRMR = .04$ (where χ^2 is "Chi-square," CFI is "Comparative Fit Index," RMSEA is "Root Mean Square Error of Approximation"). A non-significant chi-square test indicated that there was no significant difference between the predicted and observed covariance matrices, and thus, absolute model fit was achieved. CFI and SRMR also indicated a good relative model fit.

In Figure 1, standardized regression coefficients are presented. Standardized regression coefficients indicate the amount of change in the predicted variable with one unit of change in the predicting variable. The model shows that parents' earlier expectations for children's mastery of social-emotional skills predicted higher levels of authoritative parenting, which, in turn, predicted better child social competence. The indirect effect of expected age on children's social competence through authoritative parenting was significant with a standardized estimate of $-.085, p = .006$. It is worth noting that even after controlling for the mediation effect of authoritative parenting, expected age continued to significantly predict children's social competence. Thus, the relationship between expected age and children's social competence was partially mediated by authoritative parenting. Similarly, parents' rated importance of those social-emotional skills significantly predicted higher levels of authoritative parenting, which, in turn, pre-

dicted better child social competence. The indirect effect of rated importance on children's social competence through authoritative parenting was significant with a standardized estimate of .094, $p = .004$. Nevertheless, after controlling for the mediation effect of authoritative parenting, parents' rated importance no longer significantly predicted children's social competence, which suggested that authoritative parenting fully mediated the relationship between parents' rated importance of social-emotional skills and children's social competence.

However, neither expected age nor parents' rated importance significantly predicted authoritarian parenting, and authoritarian parenting did not significantly predict children's social competence in the model. Finally, the mediation model explained 31.8% of the variance in children's social competence, $R^2 = .318$, $p < .001$, suggesting that a significant amount of variance in children's social competence has been accounted for by this model.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore contemporary, small-city Chinese parents' expectations regarding their child's social-emotional development, parenting styles, and children's social competence. The results indicated that Chinese parents' adoption of authoritative parenting with clear guidance mediated the effect of parental expectations on children's social competence. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationships among parental expectations, parenting styles, and children's social competence. Furthermore, the study adds to the literature on parenting of contemporary Chinese parents with young children who are faced with new expectations due to the current rapid economic and social changes taking place in China.

First of all, we examined two aspects of parental expectations for children's social-emotional development – the timing of parents' expectations and value placed on social-emotional skills during preschool years. It seems counterintuitive that the timing of parents' expectations and the amount of value parents attach to those skills are not related. The findings suggest that a parent may expect earlier mastery of social-emotional skills for his/her child, but he/she does not necessarily perceive the development of those social-emotional skills as very important for the child during preschool years. More intriguingly, consistent with Holloway and Reichhart-Erickson's (1989) findings, the present study suggests that parents' earlier expectations were related to better child social competence. In addition, parents' rated importance of social-emotional skills was positively associated with children's social competence, as perceived by parents. As a whole, there seem to be multiple pathways through which parental expectations contribute to the development of children's social competence. As Holloway and Reichhart-Erickson's (1989) proposed, parents may adopt parenting practices that are congruent with their expectations. Thus, parents with earlier expectations for their child's mastery of social-emotional skills may consciously or subconsciously instruct, teach, model for, and correct their children to promote their abilities to interact, and build and sustain relationships with others. Having one of the two – early expectations or placing value on social-emotional skills – may be motivating enough for parents to adopt parenting practices that promote children's development of social-emotional competence, but having both may not be necessary.

Furthermore, we explored the relationships between parenting styles and children's social competence reported by parents. Consistent with previous findings discovered among Chinese samples (Chen et al., 1997, 2000; Zhou et al., 2004), authoritative parenting (with clear guidance) was

found to be related to better child social competence, and the opposite relationship was found for authoritarian parenting (with insecure guidance). It is noteworthy that the effect size (correlation coefficient) for authoritative parenting (.47) was larger than that for authoritarian parenting (-.23). There was less variability for authoritarian parenting, and moreover, parents in this sample rarely adopted authoritarian parenting practices according to their self-reports, which might have undermined the possibility to discover statistically significant relationships. About 50% of the parents' mean authoritarian parenting scores fell below the mean of 2.06, while possible scores ranged from 1 to 5, so the data were positively skewed. Most families in this sample were middle-class families as evidenced by parents' education levels and occupation types presented in Table 1. Therefore, parents from more diverse backgrounds may need to be included in order to detect the relationship between authoritarian parenting and children's social competence.

Besides parental expectations and parenting styles, the present study also contributes to parenting research through the exploration of the relationships between parental expectations and parenting styles. Holloway and Reichhart-Erickson (1989) examined how parental expectations were related to specific parenting practices, such as early childhood programs parents chose. Rather than domain-specific parenting behaviors, the present study focused on parenting styles that reflect parenting in a broad manner (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). When parents had earlier expectations for their child's development of social-emotional skills, they tended to adopt an authoritative parenting style. Similarly, parents were likely to adopt an authoritative parenting style if they perceived the development of social-emotional skills as important for their child during preschool years. This concurs with findings from two studies among Hong Kong mothers with preschool-aged children (Chan et al., 2009; Pearson & Rao, 2003). Both studies showed that mothers tended to adopt authoritative parenting when they valued the socialization goals for social-emotional development.

However, authoritarian parenting did not relate to either the timing of parents' expectations or the amount of importance parents attached to social-emotional skills. Although unexpected, this lack of linkage was also found in the two studies among Hong Kong mothers mentioned previously (Chan et al., 2009; Pearson & Rao, 2003): emphasis on the socialization of social-emotional development did not relate to authoritarian parenting. One possible reason for these findings is that parents reported rare use of authoritarian parenting practices, as discussed previously.

Another possible reason is the difference between our "authoritarian" dimension and that in previous research. In general, authoritarian parenting is defined as a combination of low responsiveness and high coercive control (Baumrind, 1996); this construct originated in Western culture. Our data indicated that items involving low responsiveness and high coercive control also co-varied with items indicating parental insecurity in applying that control. Parents in this study were from small cities, and they might have less access to resources (e.g. parent education programs) on parenting compared to parents living in big cities such as Beijing or Shanghai. Lack of resources may lead to parents' low confidence and insecurity in their parenting. Perhaps, alternative measures of parental control that are sensitive to Chinese contexts are more useful than the usual measures of authoritarian parenting (Chao, 1994; Pearson & Rao, 2003). Chao and Sue (1996) argued that the "conceptualization of parental authoritarianism ignores the purpose of parental control and fails to capture the essence of the authoritarian behaviors of Asian parents" (Leung, Lau, & Lam, 1998, p. 158). It would be interesting to include Chao's *Training* measure in future studies among Chinese parents. Further studies are

needed to examine the element of parents' insecurity or ambivalence in their parenting that we have found. Different types of parental control exist across cultures and societies and may lead to different outcomes. Researchers (Lau, Lew, Hau, Cheung, & Berndt, 1990) have distinguished two types of parental control: dysfunctional and functional. Other researchers (Barber, 1996) have proposed another two dimensions of parental control, including psychological and behavioral control. Examining these different types of parental control and how they are related to parental expectations and children's development may be more fruitful than simply using the construct of authoritarian parenting among Chinese parents.

Finally, the present study showed that parenting styles, authoritative parenting in particular, mediated the relationships between parental expectations and children's social competence. Parental expectations help organize parenting behaviors to achieve a certain goal parents have for their children (Dix, 1992; Harkness & Super, 1996). Thus, when parents expect children to acquire social-emotional skills, they may consciously or subconsciously adopt authoritative parenting behaviors that can best lead to higher social competence in children, and as a result, children develop higher social competence as a result.

It is worth noting that the authoritative parenting style only partially mediated the relationship between the timing of parents' expectations and children's social competence, suggesting that parental expectations may also influence children's social competence via other pathways than parenting styles, and therefore, future research is needed to explore other potential mediators. In the integrative model proposed by Darling and Steinberg (1993), in addition to parenting styles, which by definition is independent of specific socialization content, parental goals and values also influence domain-specific parenting practices that directly impact children's specific developmental outcomes. Thus, domain-specific parenting practices can be important potential mediators depending on children's developmental domains of interest. For instance, if children's academic achievement is the outcome of interest, specific parenting behaviors, such as helping children with homework, may be an important variable to include.

However, according to the mediation model, authoritarian parenting did not mediate the relationships between parental expectations and children's social competence. As discussed previously, this sample of parents reported low levels of authoritarian parenting, which might undermine our ability to examine the mediation effects of authoritarian parenting. Also, as proposed previously, taking into consideration of various types of parental control may be a better approach to disentangle the complex relationships among parental control, parental expectations, and children's development.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that parental expectations for children's social-emotional development and parenting styles together influence children's social competence. Parenting styles were found to mediate the relationships between parental expectations and children's social competence. These findings have some implications for practitioners attempting to promote the development of children's social competence through improving parenting practices. The findings suggest that parental expectations may be important factors to consider in designing intervention and prevention programs that are aimed to enhance children's development via advancing parenting practices. In addition to data presented in the present study, we also collected videotaped data of parents playing with toys and reading a book with their child. Future research is needed to examine the role that specific parenting behaviors during parent-child interactions play in the relationships between parental expectations and children's developmental outcomes.

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