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## Global Visions

# Parental Influence on Child Career Development in Mainland China: A Qualitative Study

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Compared with adolescents and adults, there is little research that examines child career development and especially how parents might influence such development. This is especially true in Mainland China, where family life is highly valued. This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine how Mainland Chinese parents influence the career development of their 5th-grade children. Six superordinate themes were identified from both the children's and the parents' perspectives: responding to career curiosity, influence on career gender stereotypes, emphasizing the importance of education, encouraging independent career decision making, providing opportunities for career interest development, and mothers as career role models. Suggestions are offered for future career development learning programs and research.

*Keywords:* middle childhood, career development, parental influence, Mainland China

Middle childhood (6 to 12 years of age; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005) is a crucial period of lifespan career development (Super, 1990; Watson & McMahon, 2007). Children in this age span are capable of understanding the occupational world in a relatively realistic way and have begun to learn about the world of work and to develop stereotypical career perspectives (Gottfredson, 2002; Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005; Watson & McMahon, 2005). Furthermore, parents play a significant role in children's career development (Hartung et al., 2005; Watson & McMahon, 2005). Compared with people of Western cultures, Chinese people attach greater value to family by emphasizing *xiao* (filial piety), a core concept in Confucian culture (Fung, 2006). According to Confucianism, filial children should undertake a career that not only makes a name for themselves but also honors their families (Yang, 2012). Chinese parents have high expectations for their children, expecting sons to be dragons (i.e., powerful, super king of animals) and daughters to be phoenixes (i.e., beautiful, queen of birds; Liang, Okamoto, & Brenner, 2010). Recently, it has been found that Chinese parents are more authoritarian than their Western counterparts and that they expect their children to be obedient to them (Chuang & Gielen, 2009; Su & Hynie, 2011). The long-lasting influence of xiao, in addi-

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tion to the one-child policy in Mainland China, which makes the only child the focus of family attention (Hou & Leung, 2011), suggests that Chinese parents may be more influential in the career development of their children than their Western counterparts.

Mainland Chinese parents' expectations play a significant role in adolescent and young adults' career development. Mainland Chinese parents' career expectations were found to be congruent with their high school students' career aspirations in terms of career prestige (Hou & Leung, 2011). Mainland Chinese university students who perceived high parental expectations of their academic achievement were more likely to encounter difficulty in career decision making (Leung, Hou, Gati, & Li, 2011). Some studies have investigated Mainland Chinese parents' expectations of their children in the elementary school years. Such expectations include enrollment at top universities and securing stable and high-status careers (Lao, 1997). Chinese parents consider boys suitable for careers in the natural sciences, engineering, and computer science, and girls suited to teaching, secretarial, and artistic careers (Liang et al., 2010; Liu, 2006). These studies, however, did not consider how parental expectations influence children's career development. Few studies have examined how Mainland Chinese parents influence their children's career development in childhood. In a qualitative study, Buzzanell, Berkelaar and Kisselburgh (2011) found that Mainland Chinese children of 4 to 10 years of age from affluent families are socialized to the world of work mainly through their parents' provisions of direct or indirect information and of activities for children to enjoy. The study emphasized that children play an active role in such socialization as they make sense of their life experiences. However, this study only investigated children's perspectives.

Thus, previous studies about parental influence on career development in Mainland China have (a) targeted adolescents and young adults, (b) focused on the career expectations of parents for their children without examining the influence of these expectations, or (c) investigated parental influence on child career development from children's perspectives only. Therefore, we sought to qualitatively investigate the following research question: How do Mainland Chinese parents influence their fifth-grade children's career knowledge and aspirations?

## Method

Our study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative research approach that guides research design, data collection, analysis and writing up (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is a relatively new approach that originated in psychology and has been increasingly adopted by researchers in cognate disciplines. IPA is phenomenological in that it concerns one's lived experience, which refers to either the everyday flow of unconscious experience or, more commonly, a particular experience that has major significance to an individual. In the present research, lived experience mainly refers to the influence of parents on their children's career development. IPA is also hermeneutic in that it assumes individuals' accounts can reflect their sense-making of their experiences, and thus researchers can access participants' experiences through a process of interpretative activity. Such an interpretation takes

into consideration not only what participants say but also the holistic contexts to which participants are related. Therefore, IPA can provide a relatively holistic understanding of participants' experiences. IPA is also idiographic in that it aims to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. Research based on IPA is characterized by small, homogeneous samples that enable an in-depth understanding, in the present research, of how Mainland Chinese parents influence their children's career development.

## Participants

IPA requires purposively selected samples to follow the qualitative paradigm in general (Smith et al., 2009) and to identify participants who are able to "illuminate" the research questions (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 95). Therefore, we purposively recruited and selected children and parents who met three criteria. First, children attended a key public school. Key schools are usually characterized by more investment from government, teachers of higher quality, better equipment, and greater success in preparing students for better schools at the next educational level (Cheng, 2001). The parents of children in key schools are relatively well educated (Xu, 2009), and thus may have more to say about their children's career development. Second, children were from Grade 5. Parents of fifth-grade children begin to take their children's future more seriously because they are about to transition from elementary to secondary school. Third, both of the biological parents of each child (who had to be living with their child) were recruited. Research indicates that children living with both biological parents, compared with those who do not, have higher career aspirations (Cook et al., 1996). These criteria ensured the homogeneous nature of the sample.

Participants were two families who met the above criteria. One family was composed of a boy and his parents. The other family was composed of a girl and her parents. Both children were 11 years old. The children were asked to provide pseudonyms, with the girl naming herself "Tina" and the boy "Xiaoming." The parents' ages ranged from 37 to 42 years, with a mean age of 40.5 years. Xiaoming's father held a master's degree, and the other three parents all held a bachelor's degree. All parents worked full time in professional careers. Tina's mother was a television program producer, and her father managed a company selling television equipment. Xiaoming's mother was a public servant in a statistics department, and his father worked in an electric power company in another city and did not spend much time with Xiaoming. Both children were the only child in their families.

## Procedure

Subsequent to clearance from the relevant university ethics committee, participants were recruited through a key elementary school in Beijing. The first author contacted the school principal and obtained permission to recruit participants. A teacher distributed the information package to children to give to their parents. Parents who were interested in participating contacted the researcher either by telephone or e-mail. Both children and their parents signed consent forms.

One-to-one semistructured interviews are preferred in IPA for data collection because they elicit detailed thoughts and feelings from

participants (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, we developed semistructured interview schedules based on career theory and research (e.g., Bryant, Zvonkovic, & Reynolds, 2006; Buzzanell et al., 2011; Gottfredson, 2002; Hartung et al., 2005; Hou & Leung, 2011; Liang et al., 2010; Watson & McMahon, 2005) related to children's career knowledge and career aspirations and parental influence, such as parents' careers, expectations, and gender role stereotypes. The semistructured interview schedules contained 15 open-ended questions. In addition, prior to the interviews, short demographic questionnaires were completed by the children and their parents so that we could gain background information such as gender, education level, and occupation.

The first author conducted the interviews in Chinese. The Chinese identity and language of the first author enabled her to build rapport with the participants. The children were interviewed separately from their parents. Fathers and mothers were interviewed individually in succession to avoid mutual influence between them. Based on agreement between the participants and the researcher, the interviews were conducted in the school either after school or on the weekend. The children's interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, and the parents' interviews were approximately 40 to 60 minutes in length. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Data Analysis

Following the basic principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009), we conducted data analysis on one interview at a time. The first author read and reread each transcript several times and made exploratory comments in the form of notes that highlighted key words representing the participants' thoughts or some preliminary conceptual interpretation. The exploratory comments were analyzed with reference to the original data to identify emergent themes. This process also involved iterative reference to the original data. The first author then identified connections between the emergent themes by ascribing superordinate themes, which were identified first within families and then between families. The coauthors reviewed the exploratory comments, the themes and the superordinate themes, and the representative statements, and then provided comments and reflections on the process of analysis to ensure the first author's interpretation closely reflected the participants' lived experiences. The three authors resolved any differences and reached agreement on the themes and superordinate themes.

The data were analyzed in Chinese. The exploratory comments, themes and superordinate themes, and representative statements were translated using a back-translation technique. By translating concepts and categories that emerged from analysis in the source language rather than the whole transcript, the first author, who is also Chinese, could better immerse herself in the participants' world in the iterative interpretative process and thus could code themes and superordinate themes that better represent the participants' realities (Chen & Boore, 2009).

## Results

From the perspectives of both the children and their parents, six superordinate themes were identified related to parental influence on child career development: responding to career curiosity, influence on career gender stereotypes, emphasizing the importance of education, encouraging independent career decision making, providing opportunities for career interest development, and mothers as career role models. In presenting these superordinate themes, the authors followed IPA guidelines of not only accounting for the data but also offering an interpretation of the data (Smith et al., 2009). Representative statements from participants are included where appropriate.

### Responding to Career Curiosity

Both children reported that their parents did not intentionally teach them about careers but that they themselves, out of curiosity, asked their parents for information. Tina explained that "I saw something about careers in daily life. Then I asked, 'What is this? What is that?' Then my parents explained to me." This was also the case for Xiaoming: "Sometimes, out of curiosity, I don't understand [about careers] and I asked my mom and dad. Then my mom and dad explained to me."

All four parents similarly reported that they did not intentionally teach their children about careers but responded to their children's curiosity. For example, Xiaoming's father answered his son's questions related to careers when they watched television together. Tina's mother explained about careers when Tina came to her. As she explained, "The society you see is multilayered. If you come to ask me, I will explain to you. In relation to careers, it must be that if she was interested and came to me, I would explain to her." According to all of the parents, the purpose of responding to their children's career curiosities was to help them learn about society and to broaden their horizons rather than to build a foundation for their future career development. As Tina's mother said: "I don't care whether it is about a bowl of rice or something else [e.g., a career] . . . what I care is [that] it is something new. She must learn new things." The parents believed that it was not necessary to intentionally teach children about careers because children were too young to understand career-related concepts and that career learning could only benefit those who, at a young age, had determined to do certain careers.

Compared with the fathers, the mothers responded more to the children's questions about careers. Xiaoming's father worked in another city, returned home every 2 weeks, and had less physical access to his son. Thus, Xiaoming had more chances to ask his mother about careers. Although Tina had more physical access to her father than Xiaoming did, she suggested that her mother responded more to her: "Although my dad often stays at home, he talks less with me. My mom often answers my questions." This was consistent with her mother's perceptions that she might be more influential and that Tina's father was not a good communicator.

### Influence on Career Gender Stereotypes

Both children evidenced career gender role stereotyping. Xiaoming reported that girls did not suit high-risk masculine careers such as

firefighter and police officer. Tina thought that girls were not suited to be archeologists or presenters in adventure documentaries, who have muscular bodies. Both children agreed that their parents had said nothing about which careers boys or girls were suited to, a point on which the parents concurred.

All parents, except Tina's mother, suggested that there were differences in male and female careers. Tina's mother thought women could work like men because her workload was as heavy as a man's. The other three parents thought it was unnecessary for girls to commit to a career and make good money because they would not need to support a family, and thus girls could choose whatever careers they liked. By contrast, boys were expected to endure hardship to establish a career to earn well to support their families. Parents also gave examples of careers that they thought were not suitable for boys or girls. For example, Xiaoming's father thought boys were not suitable for feminine career positions such as nurse and kindergarten teacher. However, despite holding such beliefs, none of the parents believed that they conveyed career gender stereotypes to their children.

### Emphasizing the Importance of Education

Both children believed that their parents expected them to enroll at a top university and that graduating from a university was a precondition for finding a prestigious career. Tina reported that, provided she completed university study, her parents would not interfere with what she wanted to do. In addition, Tina's mother told her that if she was not well educated, she would get a career like a street cleaner. Xiaoming's parents directly told him about the connection between good academic performance, good universities, and good careers. Xiaoming stated:

> I think, in the future, if I study well, I can go to a good junior high school, then a good senior high school, then a good university, and then I can find a good career. As long as I study well, it will be OK. . . . My family—my dad and mom and my grandpa and grandma—all said so. I also think so.

Consistent with the children's perceptions, the parents had high educational expectations for their children and had conveyed such expectations to their children. Tina's parents expected their daughter to at least obtain a bachelor's degree, and Xiaoming's parents expected their son to at least obtain a master's degree. All the parents hoped that their children could go to a good university. For example, Xiaoming's father often told his son: "I graduated from ** University [a first-class university]. The university you go to should not be worse than the one I attended." Similar to the children's perceptions, the parents also conveyed to their children the importance of education in pursuing a high-status career. All parents expressed their career expectations for their children to obtain high-status careers, although they used different terms such as "mental work," "careers with good social recognition," or "careers providing a relatively good salary." Although the parents reported that they did not convey such specific ideas to their children, unintentionally, they did convey their expectations for their children to pursue high-status careers by emphasizing the importance of education in the pursuit of a career.

For example, according to Tina's father, he provided her with positive career examples to encourage her to study hard:

> We occasionally talked a little bit about careers [to her]. For example, good lawyers can make good money. . . . We also talked about doctors. She said, "Wow, they are so excellent." Then I said, "It is not enough for you to just say how excellent they are. You must do well at what you are doing [i.e., study], then you may become as excellent as them."

Similarly, Xiaoming's mother conveyed her expectation for her son to engage in high- rather than low-status careers, with her purpose being to encourage him to study hard: "When we drove and stopped, there were often people coming to give you small pieces of ads [i.e., advertising leaflets]. I asked him, 'Do you like this?' I said, 'If you do not study hard, you will do a job like this.'" In this way, the parents conveyed to their children the concept of career status, mainly referring to the education required. High-status careers such as lawyer and doctor were portrayed as usually performed by individuals with a good educational background. On the other hand, low-status careers such as street cleaner and ads distributor were portrayed as usually performed by less well-educated people.

By encouraging their children to study hard, the parents did not anticipate that their children would develop biased attitudes toward or foreclosure of certain careers as a result of their influence. Xiaoming's mother reflected on how her son might have developed stereotyped ideas under her unintentional influence:

> I think this is to educate him. I intend to educate him in a positive way, say, what is the purpose of study? This may more or less make him look down on physical labor. I think he may think people doing these jobs work very hard but get little money and only those who are not well educated do such jobs. . . . I think this may be not good.

Furthermore, Xiaoming's mother suggested that her son had foreclosed on some careers related to physical labor: "He definitely does not want to be a street ads distributor. Whenever I said so, he became very angry."

### Encouraging Independent Career Decision Making

The children had a sense that they could make their own career decisions. Tina repeatedly reported that her parents would allow her to choose a career that she wanted:

> Since you have no requirement, as long as I feel happy, it is OK for me to sweep the street. Then I asked my dad. My dad said, "You can do that if you like." My mom thinks I have grown up and can take care of my own things. They don't have any requirement. My mom said, "Any job is OK if you want."

Xiaoming said his father might want him to be a teacher. However, he did not consider that his father expected him to pursue this career. He explained, "My dad feels I am good at communication and so wants me to be a teacher. But I don't want to be. My dad just has a little bit of an idea, he also agrees [for me not to be a teacher]." Xiaoming sensed respect from his father for his own career decision making.

All parents reported that they did not have any definite career plans for their children, who they understood were still developing, and that they did not know what would suit their children. In the future, all parents hoped their children would choose and engage in a career they liked. They considered that it was not right to impose their expectations on their children, as Tina's mother explained:

> Wolf father and tiger mother are exceptional cases. They impose their own wishes on their children. However . . . why should you make a career plan for her or him? You are not her or him. You're not a fish, so how do you know what fish enjoy? [i.e., 子非鱼焉知鱼之乐, a well-known saying from the Taoist book *Zhuangzi*]

Tina's mother specifically told her that she had to make all her own decisions, including career decisions, by herself after the age of 18. She tried to prepare Tina for independent decision making by encouraging her to solve problems in her own way. Tina's father conveyed to her that he and her mother would respect her choice after she graduated from a university. Xiaoming's mother conveyed to her son the idea of doing what he wanted to do: "I did not force him to do things. Since we do not force him to achieve certain [parents'] goals, he will be educated and develop such an idea gradually in a natural way."

### Providing Opportunities for Career Interest Development

Both children determined their career aspirations based on their interests. Xiaoming wanted to be a public servant related to finance because he loved mathematics as a school subject. Tina wanted to be an animal or insect researcher. She said, "The bugs in the book are very funny . . . and I also like animals." The children perceived their parents as providing opportunities for them to develop their career interests. For example, Tina's father took her to the aquarium to watch fish and her family also raised fish, from which she developed her interest in fish and thus her interest in becoming a fish researcher. Xiaoming's mother often took him to her workplace and provided him with the opportunity to learn about her work and thus to develop an interest in his mother's career.

Although none of the parents knew their children's most recent career aspirations, they believed that they played a role in developing their children's career interests. Xiaoming's parents thought that he did not have a clear idea about what he wanted to be in the future but observed that he was interested in finance, which was similar to Xiaoming's career aspirations. Both of Xiaoming's parents perceived that his interest in finance could be related to their frequent discussions about financial issues at home. They believed that they provided a family context in which Xiaoming could observe and listen to their conversations about finance and sometimes even participate in financial activities, such as lending the money he received in the Chinese New Year to his father to invest in the stock market, and thus develop an interest in it. Xiaoming's mother actually expected him to work in her field and reflected that she might unintentionally guide his aspirations toward her career.

Tina's parents did not know her latest career aspirations or interests. Tina's father believed that he and Tina's mother played a role in developing their child's changing career aspirations. Tina often had ideas of

what she wanted to be when her parents took her out for fun, such as going to the aquarium. Tina's mother provided her with examples of career possibilities by taking her to work-relevant activities:

> I try to provide her all kinds of possibilities or different opportunities to experience. For example, I took her to the Paralympics, to all the big games held in Beijing, or all the other opportunities I can show her due to my work, such as press conferences or other big scenes.

### Mothers as Career Role Models

Both Tina and Xiaoming learned about their mothers' careers and were confident about describing their careers. For example, Tina said, "My mom is a producer. These uncles and aunts [i.e., 叔叔阿姨: a polite way for children to address people of their parents' age with no blood ties] in the front line do interviews and shoot videos and then my mom edits the videos and then they start to make TV programs." Xiaoming explained, "My mom is a public servant doing a job related to finance in the statistics department. She sometimes writes papers and materials. She also gives presentations to others."

Both Tina and Xiaoming reported that they learned about their mothers' careers primarily by visiting their workplaces. Xiaoming saw his mother working and thus wanted to be a public servant in finance like his mother. Xiaoming explained:

> It is mainly because I saw my mom working. It has a lot to do with math. Because she deals with statistics, it has a lot to do with numbers and math. I think I can do such a career because I am good at math. . . . My mom is a public servant, so I know something about it. My mom often takes me to her workplace; then I see what kind of work it is and what they are doing at work.

Tina said that she had wanted to work as a journalist like her mother, but she had subsequently developed negative feelings about her mother's career and did not want to work like her and live such a busy life:

> Why should I work like my mom? [She is] too busy! [She] can do nothing else. . . . My mom gets up very early in the morning and only sleeps a few hours at night. . . . My dad has spare time to accompany me, but my mom cannot.

Despite not aspiring to her mother's career, Tina considered her mother as a role model for pursuing the educational degree required by the career she aspired to. Tina said her mother was pursuing a master's degree, so she thought she might at least get a master's degree to become a researcher. Similarly, Xiaoming stated, "My mother got a bachelor's degree. I cannot get a degree lower than hers."

Consistent with the children's perceptions of their mothers' careers, both mothers reported that their children had a general idea about their careers. Xiaoming's mother thought he more or less knew about her career, such as her workplace and her work related to monitoring banks. Tina's mother said, "She knows I am a producer. . . . She knows 'My mom works in ** TV Station. She leads a large group of people and two of her programs are well known.'" Both of the mothers perceived more opportunities for their children to learn about their careers, for example,

by going to their workplaces. Moreover, both of the mothers intentionally or unintentionally guided their child to aspire to their career field. Xiaoming's mother reflected that she actually expected him to work in her field and so she might unintentionally guide the child to aspire to her career. Tina's mother also understood her role of positive modeling:

> I did not suggest a career goal for her. But I share my experience in my work and daily life with her, those touching moments or big games I experienced. . . . If you are capable, you can experience them yourself or you could have a better experience. In this way, I portray an outlook for her.

Tina's father also perceived the mother as a career role model: "She may think her mother's job is good and sometimes think it is good to work in the field as a journalist or something like that." Despite her mother's positive modeling, Tina perceived her busy working life negatively and consequently did not aspire to her mother's career. Xiaoming aspired to his mother's career even though he said he did not want to do her job because she often worked overtime.

Compared with mothers, the fathers did not serve as career role models. Both children had little access to their fathers' work and knew little about their fathers' careers, and because of this, they did not aspire to their fathers' careers. Xiaoming did not want to do his father's career "because I know little about the job. I think it may have nothing to do with my favorite [subject] math." Tina learned about her father's career by overhearing him talk with family members. Based on this, she thought, "My dad's work is really boring . . . because I think selling those things like cameras [is boring]." Consistent with the children's perceptions, the fathers thought their children knew little about their careers because they seldom talked about their careers to their children or in front of them and the children had little access to their workplaces. The two fathers had no intention of role modeling their careers, in part because they had no clear idea about what they wanted the children to do career-wise in the future. Tina's father thought she might suit a social science-related career rather than a natural science-related career like his. Xiaoming's father thought Xiaoming might not be interested in his career and was not sure Xiaoming would suit his career.

## Discussion

This study offered insight into how Chinese parents influence child career development. Consistent with a previous study (Buzzanell et al., 2011), the children perceived that their parents provided direct and indirect career information by responding to their career questions, encouraging them to study hard, exemplifying careers, and providing opportunities for them to learn about their own careers. Like their Western counterparts who "tacitly" believe that "childhood is a period of fantasy and play" and assume that children are incapable of understanding the world of work (Porfeli, Hartung, & Vondracek, 2008, p. 25), the parents considered their children too young to understand most career concepts, and, thus, they provided career information in an unintentional manner. Despite this, the children not only learned about what people do at work from their parents by asking questions, overhearing parents talk, and observing

mothers work, but also developed biased views under the influence of their parents by making sense of the information parents provided, as illustrated by Xiaoming looking down on physical labor because of his mother's influence. This evidenced children's agency in learning about careers from parents as found in other studies (Buzzanell et al., 2011; Paugh, 2005).

Consistent with previous studies (Hou & Leung, 2011; Lao, 1997), the parents in our study had high educational and career expectations for their children. The parents conveyed their career expectations for their children to obtain high-status careers by emphasizing the importance of education in pursuing a good career. This reflected the Confucian ideology of education as an important social ladder toward high social status (Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002). However, differing from the stereotypical picture of Chinese parents who are controlling or authoritarian (Chuang & Gielen, 2009; Su & Hynie, 2011), the parents encouraged their children to make their own career decisions based on what they liked.

Encouraging their children to make independent career decisions based on what they like but, at the same time, transmitting parental expectations for high-status careers reflects the mixed influence of Western values and the Confucian ideology of filial piety. The rapid social and cultural changes in Mainland China have exposed people to Western values, which emphasize independent thinking, decision making, and self-fulfillment in careers; however, a traditional ideology such as filial piety is still influential in parents' roles in their children's development (Leung et al., 2011). The consequence could be that children learn that they may choose any career they are interested in as long as it is high status and meets their parents' expectations. Bryant et al. (2006) suggest that parents actively regulate children's access to physical and social resources and thus indirectly provide their children with opportunities for career interest exploration. In our study, Tina's parents took her on excursions in their leisure time and Xiaoming's parents encouraged him to participate in financial activities. In this way, the parents actually regulated the children's access to activities and thus provided the children with opportunities for career interest exploration in certain fields.

Finally, consistent with earlier research (e.g., Trice, Hughes, Odom, Woods, & McClellan, 1995; Trice & Knapp, 1992), the mothers seemed more influential than the fathers in that the children knew more about and were more likely to aspire to their mother's careers. The mothers in our study were more accessible physically or/and emotionally. They responded more to their children's questions, often took them to their workplaces, and were more positive about modeling their careers.

The results of this small-scale study have revealed that these Chinese children are actively engaged in career learning. This suggests that at this developmental stage of middle childhood, it could be appropriate to intentionally support Chinese children's career development learning through career-learning programs. Such learning programs could first focus on widening children's career interests and aspirations, given that they are likely to limit their interests to the high-status careers their parents expect them to enter. Second, because all of the Chinese parents in our study did not believe it was appropriate to intentionally educate children about career development in the elementary school years, such

programs could help parents to realize the importance of career development in childhood, especially the roles they play in such development. For example, parents may contribute to internal conflicts, tensions, and anxieties in their children's future career decision making by encouraging their children to make independent career decisions based on what they like while also conveying high educational and career expectations to their children (Hou & Leung, 2011). In addition, the career learning programs could encourage parents, especially mothers, to actively participate in activities aimed to widen their children's career options to avoid potential confusion caused by the inconsistency of career ideas promoted in school and in family life.

The present research has several limitations. The participants were from well-educated families. Findings could be different for children and parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, the research was conducted in an elementary school in Beijing. Regional differences could be considered, given the different economic development in East and West China and cultural differences between North and South China. Therefore, future research could attend to other groups and other geographic regions. This study only involved two families, making the generalization of the findings not possible. Future research could investigate larger samples. In addition, this research only targeted one age group and therefore lacks a perspective of change over time. Longitudinal studies may be conducted to investigate parental roles at different developmental stages of child career development.

## Conclusion

An important contribution of our study is the insight it offers into the process of how parents influence Mainland Chinese children's career development. The parents did not intentionally influence their children's career development, but they, especially the mothers, did play a role in the children's career learning and the development of career aspirations. They responded to their children's career curiosities and provided opportunities for their children to learn about careers and develop career interests. Just as important, along with fostering children's independent career decision making based on what the children liked, the parents also influenced the children to choose careers of high status by emphasizing the importance of academic success to future career status. This reflected a mixed influence of Western values and Confucian ideology and could contribute to children's career decision-making difficulties when they grow up (Leung et al., 2011). Such a finding emphasizes the importance of cultural influence in career development and reinforces the need for the internationalization of career development theory, research, and practice (Leung & Yuen, 2012; McMahon & Watson, 2012).

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