Parenting Role Beliefs:
Multiple Perspectives from a Suburban Chinese Classroom

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Recent research examining beliefs about gender roles among the Chinese population has shown that parenting roles are becoming less gender-bound in contemporary Chinese society. In the context of socioeconomic and political changes, fathers are becoming more engaged in their children's lives. As depicted in Chinese media (e.g., popular television shows and movies), father-children relationships in everyday family activities are being modeled. Utilizing a sample of 34 third-grade students from a suburban Chinese classroom, the present study investigated parenting role beliefs from multiple perspectives—those of students (distinguishing between boys and girls), as well as their parents (distinguishing between fathers and mothers). Results showed that parenting role beliefs did not significantly differ between fathers and mothers, nor between young male and female students. Children's academic ranking was found to be significantly associated with their own parenting role beliefs and their parents' engagement in specific activities. Furthermore, parents' perceived influence of watching popular reality television shows was positively correlated with their parental role beliefs. Additionally, parental influence, as perceived by students, was positively correlated with students' own parental role beliefs, such that the more children felt their parents played an important role in their parental role beliefs, the more egalitarian their beliefs.

Keywords: parent involvement, gender roles, Chinese families, popular culture.

"Recently, a reality TV show featuring father-child interactions has sparked a heated debate about father involvement in family education. As more and more men among the Post-70s or the Post-80s generation become fathers, many traditional beliefs and practices in child upbringing start to change. Fathers have become more involved in family education in China." (Kan, 2016)

"I argue that the [television] series [*Where Are We Going, Dad?*] is an ideal cultural site to witness the discourse of the changing parenting practices and gender roles in contemporary China". (Jiang, 2018, p. 1)

Adapted from a South Korean reality show, the Chinese version *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (*WAWGD*) has gained huge popularity in mainland China ever since it premiered in October 2013. The show depicts the everyday interaction of five celebrity fathers with their children during a three-day countryside excursion. It ranked as the top Chinese TV show within two months after its first episode aired

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(Jin, 2013) and spurred more than ten million comments on Weibo (a popular social media platform in China), igniting "a popular debate not only on parenting but also on gender equality within the family" (Century, 2013). The show has been popular not only in China, but in other Asian societies including Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan (Liu & Chen, 2014; Shan, 2013). The show has completed its sixth season, attracting undiminished attention nationwide. Its immense success had also inspired along the way the creation of its movie version and another reality TV show called *Dad Is Back!* that similarly depicts father-children relationship with a focus on mostly indoor activities in their daily family life.

According to Yang (2014), what has had viewers hooked to the show is the lens it provides into the "clash between the traditional and 'more progressive' views on parenting, specifically the role of the father." Yang notes that, after each episode, many avid users of the internet (referred to as "netizens") comment on Weibo, with regard to father involvement (Yang, 2014). For example, one netizen commented: "The real appeal of the show is that it teaches and prompts us dads to reflect on how to better communicate and interact with our kids" (cited in Alia, 2013). Another wrote: "Endless work leaves me with little time with my kid. I have no say in the family right now because my kid only listens to his mom. After watching the show, I really feel the need to spend more quality time with my kid" (cited in Alia, 2013). One father reported that a homework assignment of his elementary-school-aged son was to view and write about his feelings towards the new hit movie version of the television show (Joanna, 2014). The impact that this popular television series and movie is having on both the adult and younger generations of traditional patriarchal societies is of great interest and warrants further research (Kan, 2016; Jiang, 2018).

With the rapid change in the economic, political, social-cultural, and educational aspects in contemporary China, the influence that this popular television show has on the current beliefs and practices regarding parenting roles in this traditionally patriarchal society are of great interest but so far underreported. To address this gap in the literature and to further our understanding of parenting roles and involvement in Chinese culture, the present exploratory investigation examines the perspectives of mothers, fathers, as well as their third-grade children in a suburban area in China regarding their parenting role beliefs. These parenting role beliefs refer to attitudes and values about the gender-specific responsibilities mothers and fathers take on in the family's childrearing practices (e.g., which parent dresses the child in the morning, and which parent decides the extra-curricular activities; Bonney & Kelley, 1996; Harkness & Super, 2006; Harkness et al., 2007). Parenting role beliefs may not always reflect the actual behaviors and practices conducted in the home. Therefore, this research also compares the self-reported frequency with which mothers and fathers engage in various parenting activities (referred hereafter as *activity engagement level*).

Sociocultural Context of Contemporary Chinese Society

Chinese society is strongly influenced by the teachings of the ancient philosopher Confucius, who emphasized interpersonal harmony and relational hierarchy. The aspect of relational hierarchy delineates a strict order of authority and circumscribed social roles within the household. Particularly, Confucian patriarchal ideology considers women subordinate to men and emphasizes the father's roles in the family as head of the household and provider and the mother's role as nurturer and caretaker (Chuang & Su, 2009). These traditional gender role beliefs encourage women to manage household chores and raise children, thereby allowing men to concentrate on work outside of the home, as goes the old saying, "men are breadwinners; women are homemakers." While emotional support of children is traditionally the mothers' responsibility, in the home, fathers are tasked with setting boundaries, disciplining, and teaching children (Chia, Allred, & Jerzak, 1997; Xu & Yeung, 2013). The traditional Chinese father role is considered authoritarian—highly controlling and demanding of their children yet emotionally distant and uninvolved (Berndt, Cheung, Lau, Hau, & Lew, 1993; Xie & Li, 2019).

Since the 1950s, the Chinese Communist government has enacted a series of policies that have made profound and swift societal impact. In its first decade of power, the Chinese Communist government announced less gender-bound, more egalitarian principles and offered equitable opportunities to women to be employed by state and collective firms (Tu & Chang, 2000). The Marriage Law of 1950 promoted equal rights

between genders that allowed and encouraged women to choose their own romantic partners rather than be placed in traditional arranged marriages (Xu & Yeung, 2013). As a result of those developments, Chinese women became more financially independent and less reliant on marriage as a means to economic survival (Xu & Yeung, 2013; Whyte, 2005). Related to the family unit, researchers have also noted the impact of China's family planning policy on family dynamics. Instituted in the 1978 to address societal and economic concerns, this one-child policy has had the effect of cultivating a more child-centered family culture, one in which both fathers and mothers invest greater time and attention on their children (Chuang & Su, 2009; Chuang & Zhu, 2018).

Chinese Gender and Parenting Role Beliefs

Modern society has increasingly required men to take on more responsibilities at home. An emerging body of international research across societies has demonstrated the importance of fathers' emotional and physical involvement with their children. Several studies have indicated father involvement to play an important role in predicting children's academic success and psychological well-being (e.g. Ho & Hiatt-Michael, 2012; Ho et al., 2016; Pattnaik, 2012). Research conducted in Shanghai have indicated that fathers are trying to be more emotionally involved and physically present by doing more activities and communicating more with their children (Feng, 2002; Xu & Yeung, 2013). Assessments of parenting styles in the metropolitan area of Shenzhen suggested the emergence of the supportive "panda father" archetype who uses less punitive and more reasoning strategies to manage their children's behaviors (Xie & Li, 2019). There is evidence that Chinese fathers and mothers are in greater alignment about parenting styles (Chang, Chen, & Ji, 2011). Other research has also indicated that urban fathers are actively engaged with their children, especially in play activities but also in caretaking activities such as feeding children, helping them wake up and go to bed, taking them to and from school, and comforting them when they are ill (Chuang & Zhu, 2018; Ito, Izumi-Taylor, & Zhou, 2018).

Despite reports of increased father involvement in parenting practices, some studies have suggested that beliefs about gendered divisions of labor in parenting appear to change at a slower rate (Li, 2018). Egalitarian perceptions can be defined as beliefs that parenting roles should not be separated by gender. Earlier research investigating the beliefs and thoughts about gender roles among the Chinese population have found that women held more egalitarian perspectives on gender roles and endorsed fewer traditional gender role perspectives (i.e., men as breadwinners and women as homemakers) than did men (Tu & Chang, 2000). Ito and colleagues' (2018) more recent investigation surveyed fathers in Beijing about childcare responsibilities and parental role beliefs. Although many report they do participate in childcare tasks, their paternal identities still revolve primarily around the roles of breadwinner, head of household, and teacher—much less so caregiver or supportive spouse (Ito et al., 2018). Explanations for this phenomenon have emphasized the intransigent nature of ideology. Wong (2016) argues that few parents will openly champion traditional Confucian values, but many still hold fast to gender-stereotypical roles. The daily practices and adjustments related to parenting are easier to negotiate than gender ideologies and expectations between spouses (Wong, 2016).

It is worth noting that parental role beliefs may vary depending on personal and environmental characteristics. Research suggests that employment status and education are positively related to egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles in China (Tu & Chang, 2000). The vast majority of studies on parental role beliefs are conducted in urban areas, but there is evidence that the level of industrialization and urbanization in the area affects gender ideologies. In more industrialized and urbanized regions, individuals tend to possess more egalitarian attitudes toward gender and parenting roles (Tu & Chang, 2000; Tu & Liao, 2005). Age also appears to play a part. In Tu and Chang's (2000) study, younger women tended to be less conservative and less in favor of the traditional division of labor compared to their older peers. Plans to delay parenting may also positively predict progressivism. In a study by Zhang (2006) who examined gender beliefs of college students, participants who anticipated delaying marriage and childbearing were more inclined toward egalitarian gender role viewpoints. While studies have observed the effect of age, too few

have examined attitudes about gender roles in the younger generation. Parenting research is dominated by perspectives of mothers, much less so fathers, and far less often children. Zhang's (2006) work gains insights from the children's point of view, albeit from college-age adult children (Zhang, 2006). We argue this paucity is a missed opportunity to investigate parental role beliefs from multiple perspectives.

The present study was conducted to expand the literature on parenting role beliefs and students' academic performance and to fill the research gap about the influence of various factors, in particular popular media, on parenting role beliefs development. This study is also a chance to capture multiple viewpoints on family dynamics from both generations of parents and children—mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. A class of third-grade students and their parents were surveyed to answer the following questions: (1) Do perceptions of parenting roles vary with gender; that is, Chinese mothers vs. fathers, and Chinese girls vs. boys? (2) Do levels of parental activity engagement differ between mothers and fathers? (3) Is student academic performance related to parenting role beliefs (of both parents and children) as well as to parents' level of activity engagement? (4) Do various factors, in particular popular media, influence the parenting role beliefs of parents and their young children?

The Present Study

The present study surveyed 34 third-grade students (20 males and 14 females), from a class in a public school located in a suburban area in Nanhai, Guangdong Province, China. Both mothers and fathers of the students also participated in the survey process. All participating mothers had completed at least high school, and the majority of fathers had completed four years of post-secondary education. Thirty percent of mothers and 100% of fathers worked a full-time job; 70% of mothers did not work. In addition, each household had, on average, two children with one third of the families having only one child. Historically regarded as a rural area, the suburban city of Nanhai, from which we drew our sample, has experienced rapid economic development in recent years. As the one-child policy has traditionally been less stringently upheld in rural areas, families in Nanhai have

typically been allowed two children without incurring penalties, particularly when their first child was a girl. Moreover, with regards to household structure, 45% of parents reported living in a multigenerational household (i.e., one or more grandparents in the same household), while 55% of parents reported a nuclear family structure. See Table 1 for additional descriptive information on the participants.

The *Beliefs Concerning the Parental Role Scale* (Bonney & Kelley, 1996) was modified to assess gender role beliefs regarding parental responsibilities for our Chinese sample. The 25-item survey (see the Appendix) elicited parent responses to address *which parent is in charge of what childrearing tasks? Or are they equally engaged in certain tasks?* Some examples of the items include: *"When a child gets sick at school it is mom's job to leave work or find someone to take care of the child," "In general, the father should have more authority than the mother in deciding what extra-curricular activities are appropriate for the child".* A five-point Likert scale was used for each of the 25 items (e.g., 1 = *"I strongly agree"* to 5 = *"I strongly disagree"*). Survey items that are worded in a reverse direction were recoded prior to scoring.

Similar to the parent questionnaire, a 25-item survey was also developed to assess gender role beliefs of young students regarding their perceptions of *who should do what* in particular parenting responsibilities. Utilizing Cronbach's alpha, the reliability coefficients for the 25 items were .91 for the parents' questionnaire and .78 for the students' questionnaire indicating a high level of internal consistency for these measures. Parents were also surveyed on the frequency with which they engaged in twelve specific activities, such as discussing social events, working on homework, discussing TV programs and movies, and playing (computer) games. The reliability coefficient, using Cronbach's alpha, for the parental engagement activity items was .78.

In order to tap into potential factors that may influence participants' (both parents and students) parental role beliefs, nine items were included in the survey asking participants to rate the amount of influence that individuals such as grandparents, parents, spouse/siblings and peers, neighbors or colleagues, past/current school curriculum, popular reality shows such as *WAWGD*, other types of media (such as newspapers, magazine), and social network services (such as Wechat, Weibo) where 1 = *"no*

influence" to 5 = *"extreme influence."* All parent and student assessments were translated into Mandarin Chinese and then back-translated into English for verification.

Results

Results of dependent *t*-tests indicated no significant mean difference between the overall scores of mothers' and fathers' parenting role beliefs (see Table 2 for all *t*-test results). With respect to the association between fathers' and mothers' parenting role beliefs, results of correlation analysis show a significant positive correlation ($r(23) = .84$, $p < .05$) indicating that couples tended to have similar beliefs about "who

should do what" in terms of caretaking tasks. Independent *t*-tests results similarly revealed no significant mean differences in parenting role belief scores between girls and boys. With respect to overall activity involvement of parents, no mean differences were found between fathers and mothers. Among mothers, age was negatively correlated with level of engagement activity ($r(24) = -.52$, $p < .05$). That is, compared to older mothers in this study, younger mothers tend to be more frequently engaged in activities with their children. While the association of father's age with level of engagement was also in the negative direction, the correlation was not significant ($r(22) = -.21$, $p = .34$).

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics for Boys, Girls, Fathers, and Mothers

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Age of boys	20	8.68	0.67
Age of girls	14	8.50	0.52
Age of fathers	29	38.93	2.71
Age of mothers	33	34.81	2.12
Education of fathers in years	29	14.62	1.97
Education of mothers in years	33	13.57	1.83

Table 2.
T-test Results Comparing Parenting Role Beliefs and Activity Involvement

	Male		Female		t-test		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Parents							
Parenting Role Beliefs	92.43	14.06	91.17	12.95	0.79	22	0.44
Activity Involvement	31.63	4.15	30.67	3.94	0.81	22	0.42
Students							
Parenting Role Beliefs	79.00	7.27	83.10	7.48	-0.39	24	0.69

Note. Dependent *t*-tests were conducted for comparison between parents. Independent *t*-tests were conducted for comparison between students.

Correlation analysis revealed a significant association between children's class rank and children's own parenting roles beliefs ($r(26) = -.46$, $p < .05$), indicating that the higher the child's academic ranking in the class, the more egalitarian the child's parenting role beliefs. (Note that lower numbers indicate higher ranking; e.g., first, second, third class ranking.) Results also showed a significant association

between mother's engagement and children's class rank ($r(24) = -.40$, $p < .05$), indicating that the greater the mother's engagement in specific activities, the higher child's academic ranking in the class.

The study further analyzed the influence of popular reality television shows (i.e., *WAWGD*) on parents' parenting role beliefs and found that parents' perceived influence of such reality

television shows was indeed positively correlated with their own parenting role beliefs (for mothers: $r(25) = .57$, $p < .05$; and for fathers: $r(25) = .68$, $p < .05$). That is, the more the parents believed such television shows influenced their parenting role beliefs, the more their assessed beliefs were indeed egalitarian. Furthermore, students' perception of parental influence was positively correlated with students' own parenting role beliefs ($r(26) = .44$, $p < .05$); that is, the more children believed their parents played an important role in the development of their parenting role beliefs, the more egalitarian were their beliefs.

Discussion

The present study sought to address research inquiries related to parenting role beliefs and practices in contemporary mainland suburban China through multiple perspectives. The inclusion of mothers and fathers as well as daughters and sons provides a unique opportunity to compare and examine beliefs across genders and generations. To address our first inquiry, that there were no differences in parenting role beliefs between fathers and mothers in our findings provide support that suburban Chinese mothers and fathers may hold similar egalitarian parenting role beliefs. Second, the frequency with which fathers engaged with their children in various activities was similar to that for mothers. These results are consistent with a growing trend found in the more recent literature that, more and more, Chinese men and women are sharing responsibilities in the home domain (Chuang & Zhu, 2018; Ito et al., 2018; Oshio, Nozaki, & Kobayashi, 2013). There was also a strong positive association between parenting role beliefs of fathers and mothers; that is, the more strongly mothers endorsed progressive gender role attitudes, the more likely fathers would also report such beliefs. This finding is not altogether unexpected since individuals tend to seek like-minded others in spousal relationships (Watson, Beer, & McDade-Montez, 2014). Nonetheless, research on gender and parenting role beliefs have indicated more conservative views among Chinese men, while our finding suggests more congruent attitudes about parenting between spouses. These first three findings may speak to the impact of rapid societal and economic transformations on cultural values such that both genders report viewpoints

and behaviors in favor of shared financial and household responsibilities.

Our findings also suggest that the changes in parenting role beliefs may, in part, be a consequence of popular cultural media. Specifically, our results indicated that parents who believed television shows depicting progressive father roles were influential to their parenting beliefs were, on average, more likely to affirm egalitarian parenting role beliefs. Popular media is undoubtedly a reflection of sociocultural changes. Analyses have credited reforms such as the one-child policy with encouraging closer father-child relationships, like those seen on *WAWGD* (Jiang, 2018). While exceptions to the one-child policy were made in suburban areas like the site of the present study, the impact of the policy in this community may be felt through media and cultural products. While this study sheds some light on the impact of popular media on the attitudes of parents in China, more research is needed to support these results. China's recent shift to a two-child policy presents promising opportunities to understand how policy affects the family unit and as well as how parenting roles play out in popular culture and in the home.

Our interests also extended to the less frequently addressed topic of possible gender differences in parenting role perceptions among the younger generation. In addressing this question, we compared the overall parenting role beliefs scores of boys with girls and found that, similar to their parents, their attitudes about parenting behaviors did not significantly differ. These results are particularly encouraging because research has shown that adults feel pressured to conform to new gender role norms and expectations (Press & Townsley, 1998; Wong, 2016). Chinese parents may also be vulnerable to social desirability and inflate their responses to questions about parenting responsibilities. Young children, on the other hand, may be less susceptible to these demands and more inclined to report gender attitudes based on their own observations of parents' performance of social roles at home. As found in the present study, students who endorsed more egalitarian views tended to rate their parents as influential to their own parenting role beliefs. Therefore, these findings lend credibility to the notion that egalitarian gender ideologies are becoming more prevalent among young people in similar communities in China and may, in part,

reflect the realities of their home environment as well as messages of popular media.

Corroborating prior research on the effect of parents' involvement on students' academic performance (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2007), we found that parents' engagement (specifically, mothers' engagement) in specific activities with their children was positively associated with children's school ranking. Our results suggest that children's beliefs are also linked to this indicator of academic performance; that is, the higher their class ranking, the greater the tendency for the students' parenting role beliefs to be more progressive. More evidence with other indicators of academic achievement is needed to determine the nature of the association: whether the relationship is causal or whether these constructs are a function of other factors, such as parents' level of education. If there is support for a causal relationship, it behoves scholars to explore the meditational processes by which gender and parenting role beliefs lead to educational outcomes.

One limitation of the study relates to its context and sample. The suburban location of our investigations has both advantages and disadvantages. With most Chinese parenting research taking place in more urbanized areas, our research in Nanhai serves the purpose of expanding understanding of parenting ideologies and practices in different settings. Still, the location of the study coupled with its small sample size limits the generalizability of our findings. Future studies would benefit from testing these research inquiries in multiple urban, suburban, and rural environments and with larger sample sizes. Another limitation of this research is the self-reported nature of the data. As discussed, responses about gender and parenting role beliefs can be influenced by social desirability. Moreover, self-reports of parenting responsibilities and frequency of involvement can be inaccurate. Further research would benefit from behavioral documentation of activity involvement, similar to the time diaries parents kept in Chuang and Zhu's (2018) study. Still, the present study brings in a multitude of perspectives on parenting and gender role beliefs and suggests new links between these attitudes, academic ranking, and popular media, which show promise as avenues for future investigation.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix
Parental Role Beliefs Questionnaire

1. A father should pursue the career of his choice even if it cuts into the time he has to spend with his family.

2. Responsibility for the discipline of the children should be equally divided between the mother and the father.

3. When a child is sick, it is more important for moms than for dads to stay at home with the child.

4. With women being employed outside the home, men should share with childcare such as bathing, feeding, and dressing the child.

5. Mom and Dad should both teach a child how to use the toilet.

6. It is mainly the mother's responsibility to make sure that the children get ready for school before leaving home.

7. In general, the father should have more authority than the mother in deciding what extra-curricular activities are appropriate for the child.

8. It's better for women with children not to work outside the home if they don't have to financially.

9. Fathers should attend birthing classes with their pregnant wives (partners).

10. Divorced men should share joint custody of their children.

11. Fathers should participate in the delivery (birth) of their children.

12. Mothers should be more involved than fathers in the physical care of the children (e.g., dressing, feeding, bathing).

13. Fathers should attend parent-teacher conferences.

14. A father's primary responsibility is to financially provide for his children.

15. It is important for a father to spend quality time (one on one) with his children every day.

16. Fathers should attend prenatal doctor's visits with their partners (e.g., ultrasound appointment).

17. Fathers should take the majority of responsibility for setting limits and disciplining children.

18. A father should be emotionally involved with his children.

19. It is mainly the mother's responsibility to change diapers.

20. It is equally as important for a father to provide financial, physical, and emotional care to his children.

21. Mothers and fathers should share equally with the late night feedings during infancy.

22. Mothers and fathers should equally share the responsibility of taking care of a sick child in the middle of the night.

23. When a child becomes ill at school it is primarily the mother's responsibility to leave work or make arrangements for the child.

24. A mother should pursue the career of her choice even if it cuts into the time she has to spend with her family.

25. It is more important for a father to have a successful career than it is to have a family that is closely knit.