

## CHILD LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: CONCERNS AND PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE URBAN MOTHERS

**Karen Guo**

Deakin University, AUSTRALIA

### ABSTRACT

Child development is deservedly dominant in the discourses on education. In populated communities such as China's, awareness of the prevalent ideas about child development within families is particularly important. Drawing on a series of conversations between parents and teachers through synchronous online text chat, this paper investigated the perceptions and concerns of Chinese urban parents on child development. The participants were mothers of three to six year old children from Changchun, China. Results were presented in terms of the nature of the questions the mothers raised and what they talked about when discussing their questions. Analyses of the mothers' texts revealed their concerns on those elements of child development which challenged their roles in parenting, such as inappropriate social behaviours or regulated emotions. Data from the study provided insights into key characteristics of contemporary Chinese preschool children's learning and development within families that might identify issues and trends of early childhood education on a larger contextual scope.

**Keywords:** Child development, Chinese parenting, context.

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of child development within families has stimulated much research in the field of education. Recent attempts have been made to consider cultural variations in this topic. Findings reveal that despite differences, universal goals of child development across cultural communities are to survive and grow (Rogoff, 2003) and to acquire "the skills necessary to function adaptively in their local communities" (Tamis-LeMonda, Way, Hughes, Yoshikawa, Kalman&Niwa, 2008, p.183).

During the last few decades, Chinese society has had to increasingly grapple with the development that has a global reach. One significant aspect of globalisation has been the flows of child rearing and educational approaches from Western countries. The history dates back to 1983 when the Chinese President DengXiaoPing announced a goal that education was shaped for modernity, the world and the future. For over 30 years, China has extended its educational environment into the global context. Globalization provides Chinese parents with new ways of thinking, specifically introducing the Western concepts of child learning. Ideology of developing competitive global citizens has driven parenting practices towards raising children in a shifting context. As such 'the child in context' is a crucial topic for research by those interested in Chinese education. This paper specifically explores urban Chinese parents' concerns and perceptions on the learning and development of preschool children. It is to understand, that under the influence of their contexts, what the parents believe as important and concerning.

## **Chinese Tradition on Child Development and Parenting**

The idea of child development in Chinese tradition is aligned with the cultivation of proper characteristics, such as self-restraint, emotional control and harmonious interpersonal relationship (Li & Wang, 2004). The notion of ‘family’ provides important insights for understanding the child development expected in Chinese culture. ‘Family’ revolves around two aspects: parents’ responsibility, and children’s obligation. In this view, parents take responsibility to educate and control children, and “children achieve for their family” (Huntsinger, Huntsinger, Ching & Lee, 2000, p. 8).

The roots of parents’ responsibility are also to be found in a belief that hereditary factors are not as important as educational environment and “one can go beyond what nature is given” (Li & Wang, 2004, p.419). With this belief, parents are expected to shape children into the children’s best possibilities by providing children with an environment where children can work hard and reach their full potentials. In Chinese culture, hardworking occurs mainly in the context of academic studies. For many Chinese, academic success provides the fuel for upward social mobility (Guo, 2013).

## **Global Influence on Child Development and Parenting in China**

Global ideas of child development were initially instilled to Chinese parents through the parent school programs. In 1980, first parent schools were established in China to introduce parents to modern education (Bennett & Grimley, 2000). Six hundred million parents across the country joined the program. Twenty years later, in the year of 2000, more than 240,000 parent schools were established (Bennett & Grimley, 2000). In recent years, with the improvement of communication technologies, there has been increased activity and interest in using many other means, such as the World Wide Web to obtain information. It does not need to go abroad to learn about ideas from other countries. Modern parenting knowledge sources become diversified. Parents are more able than ever before to know what happens in other parts of the world. A survey study shows that 90% of educated people in China use the Internet service (Sun & Lancaster, 2013).

A significant consequence of the learning of Western ideas, such as holistic development is that Chinese traditional notions, in particular, the focus on academic achievements are challenged. Contemporary children in China, thus, are growing in a contested relationship space between Western ideologies and Chinese traditions. Chen-Hafteck and Xu (2008) pointed out that “China is facing challenges as a tug-of-war between local culture and global influences” (p.9).

## **Similarities and Variations in Child Development in Chinese Families**

It is suggested that Chinese urban children have been experiencing a Chinese-Western hybrid style of development. A pioneer study conducted in 1996 (Wu & Li) in Shanghai with 468 parents revealed the application of both ‘teaching’ and ‘nurturing’ approaches. The findings of another project implemented in Beijing in a similar time period (Li, 1997) with 1000 mothers of two to seven year olds were consistent with that idea. A very recent study in another large city, NanJing, identified exactly the same findings (Way, Okazaki, Zhao, Kim, Chen, Yoshikaway,

Jia& Deng, 2013), reporting that although Chinese urban parents focused on children's structured learning, they provided children with the freedom to make their own decisions. It is evident from these studies that Chinese urban parenting is characterized by controlling and nurturing. In Chinese, this is referred to as 严慈相济 (Wu& Li, 1996).

Parents' educational backgrounds and professional status also contribute to their parenting styles and practices. This idea is revealed by a number of studies, claiming that well educated urban parents, namely those who had university degrees, are moving away from the traditional track on parenting, and they are less autocratic than the parents of last generations and are more understanding of children's needs and interests (Gong, Leigh & Meng, 2012). Educational background and place of residence, however, are only two elements in a range of factors that shape the way in which parents play their roles. There has been mounting evidence of Chinese young children raised by their grandparents alone or with the young parents, because young parents need to spend their time on work (Chen, Liu & Mair, 2011; Gu& Wu, 2012). Gu and Wu (2012) reported, "Grandparents upbringing has become a pattern for the mainland families in China" (p.58). Li (2005) draws a distinction between the sole-parenting families and intergenerational families, reporting that grand parenting practice is commonly couched in simple terms, reducing the complexities of education to unnecessary help and overindulgence. This finding throws light on the extent to which child learning differences are related to family structures.

It is obvious that what constitutes child development in Chinese families is itself complex partly because of the diverse contexts. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system may be one of the most frequently used concepts in discussions of child development in context. In this paper, I use his three interrelated systems, microsystem, ecosystem and macrosystem to provide a contextual analysis of child development from the perspective of Chinese urban parents. The analysis is made in the form of family, Chinese tradition, and Western influence (Figure 1).

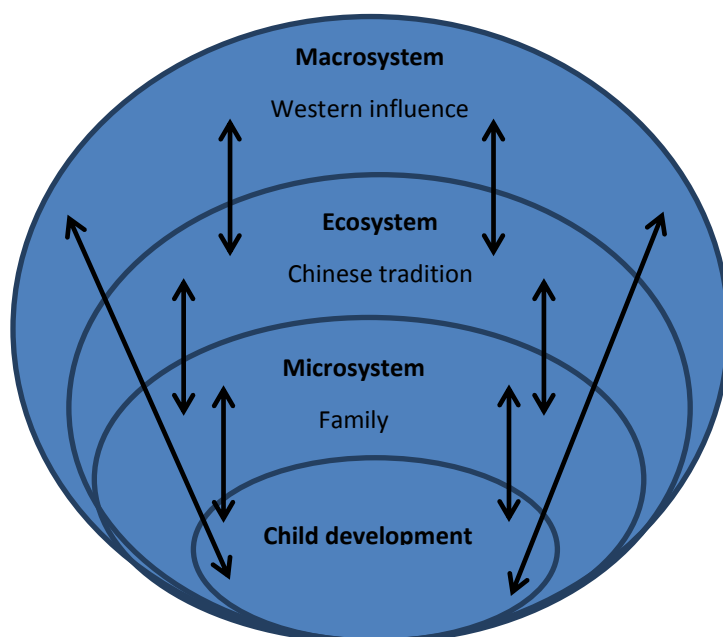


Figure 1

Previous research establishes that child development is oriented to two universal goals: surviving and growing, and developing the skills and knowledge needed for a society (Rogoff, 2003; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). This consensus about child development provides an excellent framework for data analysis on the basis of contexts. It is the nexus between the universal goals of child development, and the ecological contexts of the participating parents that is the focus of the present study. If child growth and development of needed skills are the universal goals of child learning, it is important to see how these goals are understood and implemented in the specific contexts of contemporary Chinese families.

## **THE RESEARCH**

The purpose of this research was to explore perceptions and concerns of educated Chinese urban parents on child learning and development, and to identify the contextual forces to these ideas. A plethora of research confirms the idea that educated Chinese urban parents have been well exposed to Western influence. This provided the reason for the chosen participants in this study. The research collected data through a modern communication tool, 'Tencent QQ, an instant messaging software service which offered synchronous online text chat. Murphy and Collins (1998) promote the use of online chat in research because it allows "a sense of communicative immediacy and presence" (p.3). Similarly, Burnett (2003) states that online chat offsets the problem of some traditional research methods by enabling participants to simultaneously discuss topics at various levels, thus create an arena for more democratic interactions.

Field work was carried out over ten consecutive days. The parents in question were all women with academic or professional qualifications, in ChangChun, a city of 7.677 million population in Northeast China. The study did not include any fathers because only women registered and participated in the online chat. Apart from two mothers who had two children each, all the other mothers all had one child. Their children were aged from three to six and most of them attended preschools on a fulltime basis.

The mothers' ages ranged from 25 to 37 and they all enrolled in the online chat account and participated in the group instant chat forums for two-hour-per-day that discussed their questions and ideas about child learning with early childhood professionals who provided them with professional advice and consultancy. The participants did not see each other and their personal information was only provided during the time of their enrolment so only the people who created the chat forum obtained it. During the online chats, the researcher assumed the role of an early childhood consultant who occasionally joined the chats to guide parents to contribute. However, it is acknowledged that the researcher's identity as an early childhood professional could have legitimately affected what the participants wanted to say.

Data analysis was conducted by the researcher putting aside her knowledge base by memoing about her own experiences as a mother, her dual roles as a researcher and early childhood participant, and the expectations she held going into the research. The data was subject to an ecological analysis that involved putting in contexts the parents' texts. Throughout the process, the researcher generalized content analysis to assess data and engaged in coding and categorization of the verbal and written texts.

## FINDINGS

Four main themes emerged in the parents' data as concerning and important to three to six year old children's growth and the children's development of needed skills:

- Developing healthy living habits
- Acquiring proper social skills
- Regulating emotions
- Experiencing extracurricular activities

### Developing healthy living habits

One of the strongest themes identified from the data was the parents' concerns about children's health and physical growth. Many mothers expressed a strong commitment to children's health, as exemplified by this question:

*My child often bites finger nails. How can I stop that? How to make sure that he has healthy habits?*

Parents' concerns about children's living habits were also reflected in questions such as, *My 3-year old child has a bad habit. He must eat after 8pm and if not, he wails. We all know that it is bad to eat late, but I cannot stop him;*

*My child is five. She was born tiny and could not eat proper meals before the age three and even now, still cannot eat much. Sometimes, she eats takeaways. It is not good. What can I do?*

Health and living habits of the children could also be about health conditions.

*My son is almost four. He sleeps poorly, waking up in the mid night every day and crying. He has been taking calcium. What can I do?*

*My daughter is five. She bites teeth during sleep. Why? Does she need additional nutrients?*

### Acquiring appropriate social skills

Mothers' concerns and expectations of children's social skills were reflected in the following comments:

*My daughter is three. She is in kindergarten. She is active at home but very shy outside. I really hope that she's also active outside. What can I do to help?*

*My child cares too much about whether peers are not nice to her, or if she has playmates. She cries if another child says not to play with her and becomes very happy if she has peers to be with. It would be great if she is not so sensitive.*

Children's social skills were also featured frequently in the mothers' discussions about their family contexts.

*We live with my parents. My mother spoils my son too much. He is four and half. My mother actually has taken my role because she doesn't trust my ability to parent my son. With the grandma behind him, the boy is fearless at home and argues with everyone but he is timid in the kindergarten. A teacher needs to collect him and take him to the classroom each morning. He cannot walk in by himself. He dare not say anything there. Teachers of course cannot spoil him as his grandma does. We haven't given him a proper living environment.*

According to many mothers, grandparents played a crucial role in the children's lives:  
*Grandparents fed them, played with them, took care of them and spoiled them;  
When the child leaves the grandparents, he becomes scared because he has not acquired  
necessary social skills and he doesn't know how to cope with the outside world.*

For some mothers, parenting inconsistency resulted in children's social problems. This happened between the mothers and fathers too. A mother said:

*My daughter is years and seven months. She was bullied by a friend. I told her to keep away  
from her but my husband forced her to confront that child and bully her too. No wonder my  
daughter has social problems. She is confused from us.*

### **Regulating emotional responses**

Children's emotional responses frequently came through in the data. It was hardly surprising that many others talked about their children crying too much. Typical comments included:

*Duoduo cries over everything. She doesn't know how to regulate emotions;  
My son just cries if he cannot get what he wants. He cannot express himself in words.*

Because the majority of mothers in this study were aware of their 3-6 year olds' abilities to talk in words as they said in the sessions, they were worried that "the child could not regulate emotions".

Another common theme to emerge in relation to children's emotional responses was children's unhidden pride. The mothers' points referred to children "showing off". Some were very direct:  
*We Chinese need to be humble. I have been bothered so much about my five year old son. Why  
doesn't hide his real feeling and be humble?"*

More generic statements included: *I want my daughter to know how to match her emotion with  
the atmosphere.*

There were also a few mothers who discussed their children being so sensible that they hid their emotions in order to please others:

*My four-year-old daughter wanted a toy so much in a shop. I could see that she just loved it but  
it was expensive so I said 'no, we are not going to buy it'. I thought she would be upset. She was  
quiet for a second then forced a big smile to me and said 'I have lots of better toys, mum. It's  
okay that we don't buy it. Actually, as a mother, I felt quite bad about the way she responded. Is  
this good for her autonomy?*

Another mother said:

*What truly worries me is that my son is demanding at home and he uses any means particularly  
his tears to get what he wants. Outside, he never does this. He did not even cry when he badly  
injured his knee when running in the kindergarten. The teacher told me that he smiled and  
comforted the teacher that he was fine. When he came home after that incident, he cried sadly.  
I'm so concerned that he hid his real emotions outside. Would this harm his personality?*



## Experiencing extracurricular activities

Mothers raised many questions about their children's extracurricular experiences. In particular, knowing what activities to do and how to support children's experiences was very important to them. Their concerns are reflected in comments such as,

*I don't know when my three year old should learn some musical instruments. Academic things are important, but play is also important. I want him to learn some music;*

*My child is almost six. He doesn't like anything. I tried to help, but nothing worked. Other children of his age can do a lot, such as sports, or music. He cannot do anything. I am too worried. Their generation is all trained early. Overall development is important. What can I do to make him learn something?*

*My son is five. I don't know what sports he should do. He wants to learn Karate. He is very naughty. I'm worried that learning Karate will cause him trouble.*

Notably, the mothers mentioned 'English' as an important extracurricular subject and talked about their children's learning of English:

*My son has been learning English for several months. I bought him lots of videos and books and he goes to English classes but I haven't seen him speaking a single English word. What can I do?*

*I'm really worried that my five year daughter is behind others in English learning. In English classes, she is the only child who doesn't talk.*

Some mothers were clearly looking forward to their children displaying desirable learning behaviours, such as concentration, persistence and engagement.

*Ming can only concentrate for half an hour in his tennis class. He then gets distracted. What should I do? He is five and big enough to learn many skills;*

*My child cannot concentrate in any class. I'm worried to death ;*

*My five year old son has been learning Piano for two years. We struggled too much because he could not focus and did not practise hard.*

There were also many mothers who highlighted the importance of play, and following children's interests in extracurricular activities as stated in the following text:

*I want my daughter to have some playful experiences such as dancing, singing or sports. She told me she loved dancing so I enrolled her to a dancing class. But she refused to go with the teacher. I asked her whether we should continue and she said yes. Should we carry on? What is going to happen if we easily give up on an interest?*

## DISCUSSION

The study has shown that the mothers had identifiable perceptions and concerns of children's growth and skill acquisition. The mothers' ideas reflected by children's health, proper social skills, emotional regulation and extracurricular experiences could be the result of interwoven contextual factors in their lives: 1) mothers' own education and their knowledge about child

development; 2) mothers' upholding of Chinese traditional beliefs in parents' responsibilities; 3) intergenerational structures in the families and parenting conflicts; 4) the emphasis on children's overall/holistic development in Western countries.

However, understandings of child learning cannot be only forged on the basis of a particular context. The study confirms the idea of Bronfenbrenner(1979) that contexts interrelate to each other. For example, children's emotional regulation seems to have a basis of both the Chinese culture that focuses on self-restraint, emotional control and harmonious relationship (Guo, 2013), and the Western idea of autonomy (Thomas, 2011). The question of child development in Chinese urban families appears to be linked to the dynamics of the negotiation and connection of contexts. For this reason, it is more appropriate to understand it through the hybrid model suggested in previous studies than making reference to a particular context.

In discussing childrearing in China, Chen-Hafteck and Xu (2008) suggested a hybrid model: China and West. This seems to be the model that the participating parents have followed in perceiving child development. The established discourse of childrearing in Chinese tradition provides foundations for parents' responsibilities to educate and teach children. This is why the parents were concerned about their children's behaviours and their associated parenting responsibilities. It is noticeable from their questions that the parents all wanted to know 'what can I do?' This is a strong indication of them taking their parenting responsibility.

The question of 'what can I do' is also core to the parents' attempt to open themselves to new learning and ideas. For this reason, the question is as a matter of Chinese belief as it is a matter of Western influence. It is possible to infer from this question that although Chinese traditions maintain significant power, parents have been influenced by an open approach to parenting. They were cautious about what they did and did not want to treat children inappropriately.

Other contextual issues were identified by the parents. They made a distinction between parents' way of education and that of grandparents', and expressed a concern that in intergenerational families, child rearing was inconsistent and difficult. This research demonstrates that parenting is a distinctive form of activity, in which parents' concerns are not only related to children or child development but also reflected by their family issues (Kagiticbasi, 2013).

One further contextual basis for the parents' thoughts and concerns is their own family status. Some parents had particular concerns, generated by the transitional nature of their role as parents, hovering uncertainly between daughters and mothers in their cross-generational families. 'My mother doesn't trust my ability to parent my son' illustrates a mother's contested role as a parent. It is under such conditions that she joined the social media groups where she expected to learn from each other and the early childhood experts.

Some indication of the possible tensions generated by globalization also comes from evidence on the extracurricular experiences of young children. It is interesting to see that the parents in this study did not give importance to the traditional learning subjects such as mathematics or science as many other Chinese parents tended to do (Lau, Li & Rao, 2011), but to the more playful experiences such as music or sports. However, with these playful experiences, the parents wanted children to experience them through being taught in classes. Play of young children



didn't seem to be taken in the sense of free exploration as in Western ways by these Chinese urban parents.

This apparent tension is a reflection of the success with which Chinese society has brought in Western education in their country (Way et al., 2013). It also suggests that traditional ways of teaching and structured learning are not yet a thing of the past. It is important to note again therefore that while specific contexts are important considerations in Chinese parenting, understanding parents' concerns only through a specific lens is simplistic.

Viewed from this perspective, it should be clear too that it is hard to understand child development only through the contextual factors, because it is difficult to determine the contextual basis of parents' perceptions. It was almost impossible to understand what contexts were making the influence on the parents' questions simply because the contexts were interplaying. To make the ecological model a reality in respect to child development would involve profound and fundamental understandings of many other elements, for example, children's personalities and parents' parenting styles. The use of 'context' to explore child development rests on the assumption that the contextual effects of families, cultures and worldwide situations are very important in determining the character and personality of the parents and their children, and on the recognition that one's character and personality can be altered in order to bring about needed contextual impacts. However, there is little definitive research that can unconditionally indicate the influence of contexts on personality (McGinty, Justice, Piasta, Kaderavek & Fan, 2012).

In the case of the current study, while the parents were selected based on their educational and professional backgrounds, their personality and characteristic were unknown to the researcher. In addition, the study did not involve other important family members, such as fathers and grandparents, so the data collected could be single sided. The mothers were positioned within an ecological discourse as being influenced by a range of contextual dimensions. Contexts did make impact on their parenting practices. For example, the mothers raised questions about children's English learning. This is obviously the result of the influence of English-speaking countries. However, it is possible too that some of the concerns they expressed were the result of their personality or that of their children or the influence of other family members on them. Barab and Plucker (2002) have proposed that relationships between people and their contexts are complex and situated within a very complicated framework of many dimensions. For this reason, the findings of this study are constrained by a strict focus on contexts, which limit ways of understanding, for example, how the mothers' own personal attributes or their relationships with other family members contributed to their understanding of child development. This gap needs to be bridged in future studies.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on Chinese urban mothers' concerns and perceptions of learning and development of their preschool children. In line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the findings highlight how the families, Chinese educational traditions and the global dynamic appeared to have influenced the mothers' beliefs in ways that they gave particular importance to children's health, social behaviours, emotional regulation and extracurricular experiences.

Yet when analysing the data further, it was realized that a contextual way of understanding child development was problematic in the absence of other factors, such as the children's attributes and mothers' personalities. Even so, the study shows how the mothers positioned themselves as 'learners' by being engaged in the opportunities of learning with early childhood professionals. By acting the way they did, the mothers demonstrated willingness and commitment to exploring appropriate ways of supporting children's learning and development. While the study was narrow in scope and exploratory in nature, it constitutes an empirical basis on which to investigate how motivation to learning of the mothers influences Chinese urban preschool children's growth and development. The very idea of parents' learning carries with it significant implications, and so, the present study leaves room for the development of research into the interplay between parents' learning and the developmental experiences of urban Chinese preschool children.

## REFERENCES

- Barab, S., & Plucker, J. (2002). Smart people or smart contexts? Cognition, ability, and talent development in an age of situated approaches to knowing and learning. *Educational Psychologist*, 37(3), 165-182.
- Bennett, J., & Grimley, L. (2000). Parenting in the global community: A cross cultural/international perspective. In M. Fine & S. Lee (Eds.), *parenting education: The changing faces of parenting and parent education* (pp.97-129). California: Academic Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burnett, C. (2003) Learning to Chat: Tutor participation in synchronous online chat, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(2), 247-261.
- Chen, F. Liu, G., & Mair, C. (2011). Intergenerational ties in context: Grandparents caring for grandchildren in China. *Social Forces*, 90(2), 571-594.
- Chen-Hafteck, I., & Xu, Z. (2008) Pulling the river: The interactions of local and global influences in Chinese early childhood music education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 109(3), 9-16.
- Gong, H., Leigh, A., & Meng, X. (2012). Intergenerational income mobility in urban China. *Review of Income and Wealth*, 58(3), 481-503.
- Gu, J., & Wu, D. (2012). Grandparents upbringing in mainland China: The status and prospect of research. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(3), 58-64.
- Guo, K. (2013). Ideals and realities in Chinese immigrant parenting. *Journal of Family Studies*, 19(1) 44-52.
- Huntsinger, C.S., Huntsinger, P.R., Ching, W. D., & Lee, C.B. (2000). Understanding cultural contexts fosters sensitive caregiving of Chinese American children. *Young Children*, 55(6), 7-12.
- Kagitcibasi, C. (2013). *Family, self, and human development across cultures: Theory and applications* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed). New York: Routledge.
- Lau, E., Li, H., & Rao, R. (2011). Parental involvement and children's readiness for school in China. *Educational Research*, 53(1), 95-113.
- Li, H. (2005). How grandparents educate grandchildren in families. *Studies in Preschool*

- Education*, (6), 28-30.
- Li, J., & Wang, Q. (2004). Perceptions of achievement and achieving peers in U.S. and Chinese Kindergartens. *Social Development*, 13(3), 413-435.
- Li, L., & Pang, Li. (1997). 2-6 year old children's mothers' educational philosophy and influential factors. *Psychology*, 20(3), 243-247.
- McGinty, A., Justice, L., Piasta, S., Kaderavek, J., & Fan, X. (2012). Does context matter? Explicit print instruction during reading varies in its influence by child and classroom factors. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(1), 77-89.
- Murphy, K., & Collins, M. (1998) Development of communication conventions in instructional electronic chats, *Journal of Distance Education*, 12 (1-2) 177-200.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sun, J., Lancaster, S. (2013). *Chinese globalization: A profile of people-based global connections in China*. New York: Routledge.
- Tamis-LeMonda, C., Way, N., Hughes, D., Yoshikawa, H., Kalman, R., & Niwa, Y. (2008). Parents' goals for children: the dynamic coexistence of individualism and collectivist in cultures and individuals. *Social Development*, 17(1), 183-209.
- Thomas, R. (2011, October). *Autonomy, responsibility, and families: Connections, questions, and complexities*. Keynote address presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Theory of Education. Barcelona, Spain.
- Way, N., Okazaki, S., Zhao, J., Kim, J., Chen, X., Yoshikawa, H., Jia, Y., & Deng, H (2013). Social and emotional parenting: Mothering in a changing Chinese society. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 4(1), 61-70.
- Wu, Y., Li, H. (1996). Report on Shanghai preschool parents' educational philosophy. *Shanghai Educational Research*, 5(101), 27-29.