

## Research note

# Father-daughter relationships during girls' adolescence in urban China

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## Contextualization

Contemporary Chinese families are experiencing tremendous changes, with the adoption of economic reform and the implementation of the one-child-per-family policy. These changes are inevitably leading to changing parent-child relationships in families, especially for girls' relationships with their parents. However, family study is a very underdeveloped area in China, and existing Chinese family research has mostly been conducted in Hong Kong. There are reasons for expecting the Chinese experience to be very different.

**Abstract.** *The long history of Confucianism and Taoism in Chinese society gives both girls' and fathers' roles in Chinese families their own specific meanings. The paper is to research girls' and fathers' perceptions of father-daughter relationships among two cohorts of girls aged 13/14 and aged 16/17. It will seek to understand, from fathers' and daughters' perspectives, fathers' influences on girls' lives in the domains of education, work and career aspirations. In addition, how their relationships change across adolescent girls' lives will also be explored. The study of father-child relationships which has been relatively neglected is now receiving more attention. However, most of this research has been on the impact of fathers on younger children, and mostly on boys. This study is aiming to provide a clearer picture of the father-daughter relationships in a changing society, by learning from studies which have been conducted in the west.*

## Introduction

Ever since the Chinese government introduced more pragmatic measures for social and economic reform, such as the open-door which was to promote foreign trade and economic investment (Howell, 1993) and population control policy "One Child Policy" introduced in 1979 which restricted the number of children married couple should have (Fong, 2004), China has been experiencing dramatic changes and the majority of Chinese people have enjoyed both social and economic benefits. As a result, with the vast expansion of western technologies and ideologies, Chinese families are facing rising conflicts as they move from a traditional lifestyle to a new way of living, with different opportunities and challenges. For example, most urban mothers no longer stay at home as housewives, going out to work instead. Women are expected to share more financial responsibilities with men, while men are expected to play a far more active role in the family, since domestic duties need to be shared when both are in waged work. These factors inevitably lead to changes in expectations and attitudes towards the roles of fathers and mothers.

Another well-known change in China is the one-child policy that started in 1979, introduced to control the population. Several studies have revealed that this has had unintended consequences of narrowing gender biases against girls which are traditionally rooted in Confucianism (Laroche *et al*, 2007; Shek, 2006) in Chinese society, especially in the urban areas (Tsui and Rich, 2002; Liu, 2006; Veeck *et al*, 2003). A survey of 1040 high school students in Wuhan, a large city in central China, found that there were no gender differences related to educational attainment between single-girl and single-boy families (Tsui and Rich, 2002). Nowadays, since most families have only one child, parents may devote more care to

their only child, whatever its gender. Consequently, changes in parents' attitudes towards children may lead to changes in the influence parents have on them and how they shape their development.

## **Literature Review**

Mothers' and fathers' involvement has a strong influence on their children's development, especially educational achievement. In western societies, researchers have gathered extensive evidence suggesting that fathers as well as mothers play an important role in adolescent development (Videon, 2005; Golombok, 2000). Specifically, fathers have been shown to have a powerful effect on children's academic achievement (Harris *et al*, 1998; Flouri and Buchanan, 2004) and make an important contribution to children's social and cognitive development (Bronte-Tinkew *et al*, 2006; Doucet, 2006; Golombok, 2000). A UK longitudinal study about the effect of mothers' and fathers' involvement in early childhood on children's later educational outcomes showed a strong association between fathers and mothers' involvement with children's educational attainment in late adolescence (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004). They also found out that parental involvement had a greater effect on the educational attainment of daughters than of sons (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004).

There are a growing number of studies about father-child relationships and fathers' influences on children's development in the west that suggest a gender bias. For example, Bronte-Tinkew's (2006) research about father-child relationships on risk behaviours indicated that fathers' involvement is influenced by the sex of the child and, more importantly, that outcomes are different for girls and boys. Data from the National Survey of Children (NSC) in the USA found that fathers of 7 to 16-year-old children are more likely to be involved with sons than daughters (Harris *et al*, 1998; Harris and Morgan, 1991). This is consistent with Manlove and Vernon-Feagans's (2002) research which showed that fathers are significantly less involved in care-giving tasks with daughters than sons when they are very young.

In spite of this evidence, we cannot conclude that fathers' effects on their daughters' lives are negative, especially in different social and family contexts. Indeed, research has shown that fathers' levels of education in big Chinese cities were found to have a significant association with adolescent girls' educational aspirations, but not with boys' aspirations (Tsui and Rich, 2002). It is possible that fathers are engaged in girls' lives in a different way than mothers, but that does not mean they are less involved (Way and Gillman, 2000). Parents' gender and children's gender, as well as other factors, especially social and family background, may have different effects on parent-child relationships and children's development (Milkie *et al*, 1997).

There are several gaps in this growing body of research. The few enquiries into father-daughter relationships make it difficult to get an overall understanding of paternal involvement in daughters' lives. Furthermore, the research in the west has focused almost exclusively on father-adolescent relationship in white, middle class families (Way and Gillman, 2000). Chinese studies have focused on Hong Kong (Shek, 1995; 1998; 2000; 2002; 2005a; 2005b; 2006). There has not been much research on the impact of fathers on adolescent girls, especially research in collectivistic societies such as mainland China. So we have no clear evidence for what specific effects fathers have on their daughters in a western context, let alone a Chinese one.

## ***Proposed research aims and research methodology***

My research is aiming to explore the nature of urban Chinese father-daughter relationships from both the perspectives of fathers and daughters, and to understand how both daughters and fathers see fathers' influences on daughters' lives in the domains of girls' education, work aspiration and personal lives. In addition, how the relationships change over time is

also a question that the study is trying to address. Put precisely, it addresses three main themes: first, girls' and fathers' perceptions of father-daughter relationships during adolescence, "a dynamic period for children and their families" (Harris *et al*, 1998); and second, whether both fathers and daughters see fathers as having influences on girls' lives in the domains of a girl's personal life, education and work aspirations. Third, it will examine how father-daughter relationships vary across girls' life course.

## Methodology

In an effort to gain a comprehensive understanding of father-daughter relations and fathers' influences on their daughters' lives, especially in the context of a changing Chinese society, a multi-method data collection approach will be employed to gather information from adolescent girls and their fathers. The study will adopt an interpretive or phenomenological perspective, which means that data will be collected based on both girls' and fathers' reflections on their relationships. The approach which combines both quantitative and qualitative data will offer an opportunity to achieve an overall understanding. The three methods are: focus groups, questionnaires and interviews. These three methods are employed to address both different and similar issues, and the data generated by each will be used to complement each other. Focus groups will first be employed to gain a basic understanding of daughters' perceptions of their fathers and their relationships. This can help to produce a general idea of girls' views of being a daughter, being a father and father-daughter relationships, both generally and in their own cases. A questionnaire survey will be used for discovering broader aspects of father and daughter relations from both fathers and daughters. It will also help examine whether fathers have different influences compared to mothers on girls' lives, particularly on girls' views of themselves, educational aspirations and career aspirations. Opportunities will be given to fathers and daughters to talk about their views of father-daughter relationships in their own terms in the interviews. They are encouraged to explore their perceptions of father-daughter relationships and beliefs about how fathers' impact on girls' lives.

## Expected Contribution

This research will explore father-daughter relationships in China from a new angle through learning methodologies and theoretical perspectives from western countries. Fathers' influences on adolescent daughter's development in Shanghai will shed light on a broader vision of father-child relations in the changing world of urban China. More specifically, perspectives from developing countries like China will fill the void created by changes in different societies and different cultural backgrounds.

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