Chinese Parenting and the Collective Desirable Path Through Sociopolitical Changes

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The Sociopolitical Reform and its Impact to the Chinese Family Parents are the most important influencers to the child's psychological, social, and behavioral development (Chow & Zhao, 1996). The dynamics of parent-child relationships in China are complicated by cultural, ideological, political, economic, and social factors which have changed in the past decades. Therefore, to understand today's Chinese parenting, we must understand the changing social structure in China. Chinese society is ancient and has been characterized by an extensive set of informal social controls and a strong emphasis on internal social control—as reflected in the personal quality of "virtue" (Berndt, Cheung, Lau, Hau, & Lew, 1993). In addition, Chinese society has, for centuries, been organized in a highly communitarian manner; people have been oriented toward collective rather than individual goals (Liu, Zhang, & Messner, 2001). Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese family had long sustained itself through the mutual dependency of each family member and as a common property-owning union following the principles of patrilineal tradition (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016). The mutual dependency refers to the tradition that every member of the family should take care of the younger and provide support for the elder. The patrilineal relationship means that males are central to the family's very existence and receive the inheritance of the family from generation to generation. It is this tradition that led to a patriarchal style of the family where power is presumed to be in the hands of male figures in the family (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016).

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The social and economic reforms that have taken place since 1979 have broken down these traditional values. Drastically contrasting with the structure of Chinese families before the economic reform, the patrilineal ideal lost its popularity as it was evidenced by the elimination of inheritable property and patrilineal heritage. According to Jankowiak and Moore (2016), Chinese families in the 1980s functioned as individual enterprises whose members were linked together through bonds of sentiment instead of duties. Lu and Chang (2013) stated that the style of Chinese parenting was long sustained with an authoritarian and restrictive fashion. It was and, for some, is still an ideal parenting style which cultivates an obedience and socially inhibited child. Social inhibition is rather considered as a positive virtue for Chinese due to the Confusion heritage.

The traditional views about Chinese parenting may no longer be widely present due to rapid social changes in the past decades. The one-child policy might be one of the reasons behind these changes. According to Lu and Chang (2013), the one-child policy has affected the traditional understanding of fatherhood and motherhood in Chinese society. The role of gender in parenting has undergone changes in reflecting a new era. Next, the authors will introduce the impact of one-child policy, parental involvement with their child's well-being and intellectual growth, and changing pattern of parenting philosophies in contemporary China.

The Impact of One-Child Policy on Parenting Chinese families in the twenty-first century have undergone a series of significant changes. Among many of these changes, the one-child policy has impacted the structure of families in both urban and rural areas (Wang & Cai, 2017). In the urban area, the family was restricted by size as a result of the passage of this policy. It resulted in one child per family for the majority of families (with some exceptions) in the urban areas. However, the one-child policy in rural families was considered relatively relaxed compared to the urban areas due to the fact that it was assumed that rural families needed more children (at least one male) to take care of the land and family (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016). Accompanying the policy on family size, many other changes occurred during the reform era which specifically impacted the style of family life in the next decade.

The one-child policy resulted in a generation of children who were singletons and were seen as the very embodiment of the future of the family. This generation, also known as the "after the 1980s," are often positioned in a contradictory status: they were newly empowered individuals, but at the same time burdened by the sense that they represented the future to their parents (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016). It is important to understand that the parents who were born in the 1950s and 1960s had gone through a series of social and economic transitions during Mao's era. The movement of "up to the mountains, down to the villages" during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s sent millions of students to the rural provinces to conduct labor works, and many of them lost their opportunities to pursue a higher education (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016, p.15). As a result, in the next decade, many of those who went through the labor reformative (Schiffrin, Robinson, Liu, & Solomon, 1973) had to work as factory workers and earn minimum wages that

barely supported their families. Many of them who became parents needed to use all sources of supports (both financially and emotionally) to allow their child to be academically successful and to be able to find a prestigious and highly paid job.

Parental Involvement and children's Well-being and Intellectual Growth Parenting is considered highly important to the well-being of the children and the family as a whole since ancient China (Berndt et al., 1993). The perceptions of parenting in mainland China has been well studied (Berndt et al., 1993; Lu & Chang, 2013). According to their studies, mothers and fathers differ in their position to the child on warmth and control. Traditionally, fathers were expected to be not only the main provider for their families, but also the moral guidance for their children. As a result, a father should be the role model and suppress his expression of love toward the children (Berndt et al., 1993). These fathering behaviors could produce resentment and acute anxiety for children in their later life (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016). A mother, according to Jankowiak and Moore (2016), is more likely associated with traits such as being warm, less disciplined, and the primary caregiver of the family. In China, these differences between fatherhood and motherhood in Mandarin Chinese are called *yan fu* (strict father) and *ci mu* (loving mother), and it was considered as the golden standard of the roles for fathers and mothers (Ying et al., 2015).

In contemporary China, the patrilineal structure of the family gradually lost its popularity (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016). In more recent years, this ideology has been abandoned primarily in urban areas due to the improvement of women's status in the workforce. Women have become more likely to be involved with decision-making processes at home, especially when they are one of the economic providers of the family (Ying et al., 2015). One example of such a change is the popularity of the "tiger mother," a Chinese American mother figure who takes on both a caretaker and stern disciplinary role with her children. In this particular case, the "tiger mom" stereotype demonstrates how a mother can be strict and loving at the same time. This phenomenon is also commonly referred to as "tiger parenting" (Chua, 2011; Tam, Kwok, Ling, & Li, 2018), where parents exhort extreme pressure to push their children to achieve the highest academic performances through an authoritarian style of parenting. By authoritarian style of parenting, the parents tend to involve themselves in their children's educational experience, spend time to study with their children, and arrange extensive and diverse extracurricular participation for their children at the very young age. Academic dissatisfaction is considered as unacceptable and shameful to the family (Tam et al., 2018). Opposite to the expectation, a Hong Kong study showed that "tiger parenting" is directly related to children's level of anxiety. For example, there has been a higher rate of student suicide reported due to academic distress.

In contemporary China, parental involvement plays a significant role in children's psychological well-being and intellectual growth (Wang & Cai, 2017). According to Wang et al. (2019), the relationship between child and parents in early childhood has a long-term effect on the child's psychological well-being. The development of a secure attachment requires parents to provide a safe and emotionally

warm environment to the child. Cheung and Pomerantz (2015) compared the level of parent involvement in children's learning between the United States and China. In their study, they found that the level of involvement of the parent with their children fostered the transmission of values from parent to the child. This finding is unique to the culture of Chinese parenting because children's learning is a major responsibility of parents, particularly in the academic arena. Different from American parents, who view intense academic training as inappropriate, Chinese parents may involve with their children's learning as often as they can. For example, Chinese parents may check their children's homework, attend parent-teacher committee hosted by school, attend extracurricular class during the weekend with their children, study with their children for certain school subjects, and let their children know what they want their children to become one day. In a study conducted by Wang and Cai in 2017, it shows that not all types of parental involvement will facilitate academic success of children. Instead, parental involvement should be a combination of both work and leisure involvement. Leisure involvement includes playing sports, dinning out together, and talking about the child's school experience with the parents. In their study, they found that leisure involvement sometimes is more important to academic success of the children. It seems that, for a child, a pair of loving and reasonably disciplined parents is most desirable and highly praised.

The Changing Parenting Philosophy in Contemporary China

Families in Urban Cities   Culturally, Chinese children had been socialized to learn to be obedient, silent, and well-behaved through the threats of punishment from the parents (Quoss & Zhao, 1995). Because of the "open market" reforms (by exposing areas to powerful global influences, particularly the relatively liberal Western societies), Chinese parents in urban cities started to question the validity and effectiveness of the traditional parenting styles (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016).The Western family parenting style is typically perceived by Chinese families as a way of promoting creativity and independence (Quoss & Zhao, 1995). The key difference between Western and Chinese parenting styles is the level of parental control during the informative years of the children's growth. According to Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, and Jin (2006), parental control in Asian culture refers to "a form of parental governing that is demonstrative of involvement and concern" (Nelson et al., 2006, p.2). Parents who prefer a higher control of their child's development tend to behave authoritatively with a high demand of obedience and academic achievement, but not necessarily to be overly restrictive and punitive. Due to the influence of Western culture, the young generation of Chinese have been experiencing a significant culture shift. The media plays a significant role in Chinese youth's everyday life. Music, movies, and fashion trends all somewhat opened a new horizon to the Chinese youths. The intergenerational gap, a term coined referring to the increased cultural and value gaps between the generations, signified a growing emotional detachment between the parents of the 1950s and 1960s to children of the 1980s and

after. In order to amend the cultural divergence between parents and their child, parents during the reform era picked up new skills, including providing parental love while granting a certain degree of autonomy to their child (Quoss & Zhao, 1995).

Due to the economic shift supported by changes in the economy, the styles of parenting has changed. One of the changes was that parents valued more on the cultivation of children with social skills and individual creativity (Jankowiak & Moore, 2016). Education and academic success became national obsessions because they were seen as the assurance to enter the best university in the country and secure a highly paid job after graduation. Accompanying with the one-child policy, Chinese parents have set up a goal for their children to achieve academic success.

Some might argue that the eagerness to raise these high-achieving children is a utilitarian-orientated approach because the expected outcomes are highly valued (for the grown child) (Tobin, 2014). In other words, the parent may truly value the process involved in cultivating warm and supporting parent-child relations, while they may also believe that to be able to find a stable and well-paid job is equivalent to the best care they can offer for their child.

Families in Rural Areas Children of rural migrants have experienced very different lifestyles compared to their urban counterparts (Hu, Lu, & Huang, 2014). With the emergence of private enterprises and foreign investment companies, along with the increasing freedom of urban workers (who could now choose their own careers), many urban residents refused to take low-skilled, dirty, and monotonous jobs (Zhou, Chen, & Ye, 2014). As a result, these undesirable jobs were rapidly becoming available to rural migrants—who decided to move to urban areas seeking better paying jobs (compared to their work in the rural areas) in the cities. Over time, more businesses began to realize the benefits of hiring migrant workers who were willing to take jobs with low pay and fewer benefits, along with their desire to learn new skills and migrate permanently (Zhou et al., 2014).

Many of these rural migrants were parents who could not afford housing, food, and education for their children (Zhao, Zhou, Wang, J, & Hesketh, 2017). Recently, Chinese news media has focused on the issue of the children of rural migrants, calling them "left-behind children" as they grew up in rural areas while their parents were away in cities working as rural migrant workers. The reasons vary as to why these migrant workers left their children behind, but a major reason was that the children had rural *hukou* (household registration). The *hukou* system required each citizen to register in one and only one place of regular residence (Wang, 2017). Citizen's rights depend on their *hukou* registration location. A *hukou* holder cannot attend school or hold a job outside of their registered area. The children from the rural area could not attend the schools where their migrant parents would reside (in the cities) nor could they get appropriate health care. Migrant parents who are working in the cities normally would send remittance back to family members and their children. During the Lunar New Year (late January or early February each year), parents normally go back to their rural home with gifts and clothes they bought

from the cities. Many migrant parents expressed their regret toward the separation from their children, but they also expressed some positive aspiration that they could bring their children to the cities one day (Qi, 2018). However, an unwanted consequence of the separation between parents and children is a reported high level of depressive symptoms among left behind children. Wang et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis on the depressive symptoms of the left behind children in China. They found that the depressive symptoms among left behind children is 30.7%, which is higher than the non-left behind children (22.8%). Overall, left behind children in rural China have been experiencing acute depression and maladaptation when facing negative life events due to the long separation with their parents who are working in the cities (Wu et al., 2017).

The Collective Desirable Path (CDP): The Underlying Assumptions about Chinese Parenting Culture

Factors for Adopting the Collective Path Given China's tremendous changes in the past several decades, it is impossible to have a static view on parenting culture in the country. However, there are still some stable cultural assumptions that can serve as an underlying foundation for people to understand the ever-changing and complex parenting culture of China. These assumptions are presented here as a framework, the collective desirable path (CDP; see figure below). The framework describes that parents in China, a collectivist and competitive society, collectively perceive a particular path as necessary to ensure success for their children. The proposed framework CDP could provide some insights into the parenting culture of China.

It is important to understand some contributing factors of the Chinese society's adoption of a collective path. These factors include Chinese culture being a highly collectivist culture, fierce competition among society members, the one-child policy from the 1980s to 2010s, and success as narrowly defined by Chinese society (Cheng, 2011) (Fig. 1).

Collectivist Culture According to Hofstede (2001), China's score on individualism is only 20 out of 100, which indicates China is a highly collectivist society. Families as societal units in collectivist cultures have much bigger impacts on individuals than families in individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001). At times, members of a family need to sacrifice their own interests to maximize the interests of their family. In return, members will likely receive a strong support from their family (Ling & Poweli, 2001; Shi & Wang, 2011). The family usually supports individuals' successes in education, career, and life. The value of family, harmony, and filial piety are constantly reaffirmed in Chinese parenting (Ho, 1994). Children are taught to think and act as a member of the family who can contribute to the prosperity of their family.
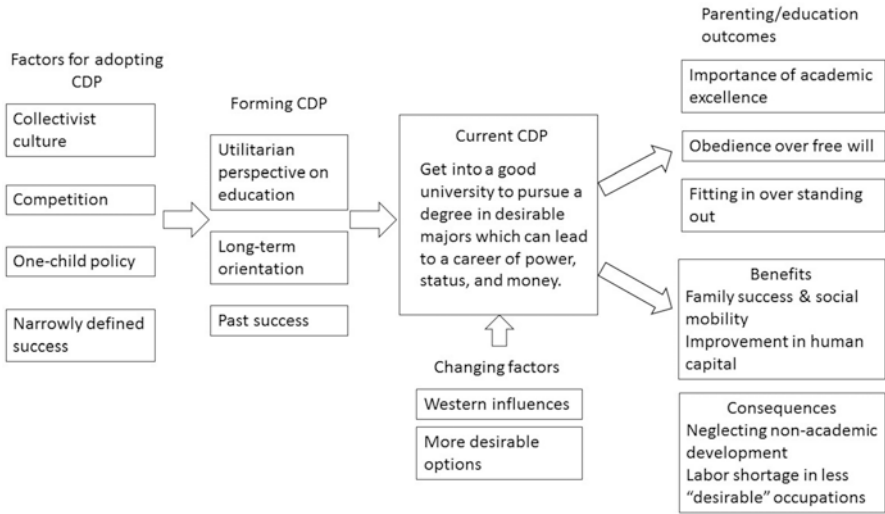
Fig. 1 The collectible desirable path (CDP)

In collectivist cultures, individual decisions tend to be largely influenced or even determined by larger societal units such as families (Ling & Poweli, 2001; Shi & Wang, 2011). This mindset tends to produce conformity in thinking and behaviors of societal members. Members tend to accept these ways as guidelines or even as truth for their thinking and behaviors (Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, it is natural for China, a collectivist society, to adopt a uniform parenting path in its culture.

Competition The cultural factors of high power distance and high masculinity contribute to fierce competition in Chinese society (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). There are two additional contributing factors: the sheer size of China's population and the influence of a collectivist culture (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). The first one is easy to understand as with more population one faces more competitors. In 2018, 9.75 million high school seniors took *gaokao*, the National College Entrance Examination (Tang, 2018). Each student faces millions of competitors in order to gain acceptance into the top-ranking universities. The second factor requires an understanding of differences between individualistic cultures and collectivist cultures. Harmony, compromise, and peace seeking are highly desired in collectivist family. Members of a family are considered in-group members, whereas out-group members are treated with less positive attitude. Competition among families can be as fierce as among individuals in individualistic culture (Triandis et al., 1988). In order to win competitions, families tend to find some proven (almost guaranteed) ways to secure their chance. The one-child policy also contributed to the fierce competition in Chinese education. The previous section has already discussed the impact of the one-child policy on Chinese parenting. Families with fewer children have a greater desire and more resources to help their limited number of children to be successful.

Narrowly Defined Success   This factor is very important because paths to success could vary considerably if the definition of success is widely interpreted. The definition of success in Chinese society has been very consistently narrowly defined. A person's career success is usually linked back to his/her ability to support the family (Cheng, 2011). Monetary success is the core of success in Chinese culture. A person's success is important to the survival and prosperity of his/her collective unit. Therefore, Chinese families favor careers with good monetary returns and paths leading to them (Cheng, 2011).

Forming Collective Desirable Path

Utilitarian Perspective on Education   The influence of Chinese history on parenting is shown in Chinese paradoxical attitudes toward education. On the one hand, there is genuine reverence for knowledge. On the other hand, people approach education with a pragmatic perspective (Jin & Dan, 2004).

The reverence for knowledge dates back to the great Chinese philosopher and educator, Confucius. In Analects, he argued that everyone, no matter of their class, could be educated and become a noble person. He claimed that education should include these four aspects: *wen* (literature), *xing* (morals), *zhong* (trustworthiness), and *xin* (integrity; Confucius, 1999). Teaching and education became an important of Confucianism. People in ancient China understood the importance of parenting and education. San Tzu Ching, one of the Chinese classics in the thirteenth century, stated,

> If foolishly there is no teaching, the nature (of human) will deteriorate… To feed without teaching is the father's fault. To teach without severity is the teacher's laziness. If the child does not learn, this is not as it should be. If he does not learn while young, what will he be when old? (Wang & Giles, 2011, p. 1)

Because of these historical influences, Chinese society remains very respectful toward education, teachers, and knowledge (Jin & Dan, 2004). While Chinese society holds a reverent view on education because of Confucianism, it adopted the utilitarian perspective after the introduction of *keju* (the imperial examination system). According to Crozier (2002), it was created in 587 AD in the *Sui* dynasty as a way of selecting talent for the emperor. It became the main method of talent selection since then, survived changes in dynasties, and was finally ended in 1905 by the last emperor. Participants who were successful on *keju* were rewarded with government positions, good pay, and high status. The benefits of *keju* turned education into a tool people could use to achieve prosperity and social mobility. Parenting and education centered on what would be tested on the exam. For example, poetry was part of *keju* in the *Tang* dynasty, which made writing poems an important part of education at that time. Since the *Yuan* dynasty, poetry was no longer required in *keju*; writing poems became a much less important component in education (Crozier, 2002).

Even though *keju* no longer exists in modern China, the concept of using one set of exams to decide students' destinies is still used via *gaokao*. Every year, millions of high school seniors take *gaokao* in early June, with the results deciding which university they can attend. With *gaokao* inheriting the spirit of *keju* in selecting talent, the utilitarian view on parenting and education is held strongly in Chinese society (Crozier, 2002). *Gaokao* has changed millions of people's lives for the better and continues to be seen as a dependable way to success (Tang, 2018). When education is perceived as a dependable way to reach this goal, it became a collective desirable path for members of the society.

Long-Term Orientation According to Hofstede (2001), China's score on this dimension is 87 out of 100. This indicates that China is a pragmatic culture that uses thrift, investing, and perseverance to achieve future goals. A long-term oriented society is likely to invest heavily in education and use it as a path to achieve goals in distant future (Hofstede, 2001). This description echoes the utilitarian view on education. Its outcomes are long lasting and rewarding to the families. It is natural for a long-term oriented culture to choose education as a desirable path to success.

Past Successes The forming of a collective desirable path requires past successes and continuing success to enhance its desirability and collective acceptance in the society. Stories from a relative, a neighbor, or a colleague about people who achieved success through education reinforce other people's confidence in the path.

Parenting Outcomes of Adopting the Path

Importance of Academic Excellence The importance of *gaokao* in the CDP means academic excellence becomes the central focus of Chinese parenting and education (Tang, 2018). *Gaokao* plays a decisive role in placing students into different future trajectories such as no college education, mediocre college education, good college education, and best college education. All the parenting and education efforts since children were born are geared toward the crucial exam that could decides one's destiny in the minds of these parents (Tang, 2018). The heavy focus on students' academic excellence in *gaokao* forces parents to favor practices that can enhance their children's academic performance. Other aspects of education and development, such as physical education, art and music, character education, communication skills, and adventures and experience are ignored especially when *gaokao* is closer in time (Tang, 2018). The ramification of this singular focus could be very negative in children's all-around well-being and development because the development in other areas are ignored (Liu & Wu, 2006).

Obedience over Free Will Having the path predetermined for children eliminates many of their options. In doing so, children have fewer opportunities to explore what they like and what they would like to do in the future. Adopting the CDP indicates that parents know best for their children's education and development.

Therefore, parents are less likely to respect their children's choices (Liu & Wu, 2006; Muthanna & Sang, 2015). Following a path to achieve the predetermined goals requires obedience and rule following. The parents are also likely to discourage disobedient behaviors such as expressing free will, voicing disagreement, and questioning authority. This can be damaging for nurturing independence, critical thinking, and creativity. For example, Chu's (2017) book, which is based on her American son's experience in a Chinese kindergarten, describes a typical Chinese classroom. The learning environment in the book promoted discipline, order, and efficiency and ignored the wills and thoughts of individuals.

Fitting in over Standing out A related outcome of the CDP is parenting that encourages children to fit into collective norms, rules, systems, and expectations. Standing out as a unique individual is strongly discouraged because the parents believe the benefits of fitting in outweighs the benefits of standing out in the Chinese society (Griffiths, 2013). A famous Chinese saying, *Qiang da chu tou niao* (birds which stand out get shot), shows that Chinese culture tends to favor conformity and modesty. The path usually does not produce unique individuals who challenge norms and collective mindset. On the contrary, it provides an effective template for people to fit in and achieve narrowly defined success, which can be beneficial to the prosperity of the collective unit family (Griffiths, 2013).

Stability and Change of Collective Desirable Ppath

Western Influences Parenting culture and practice from the West has greatly influenced Chinese parenting since the country opened its door in 1978 (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song, 2013; Shek, 2006). This influence is more evident in the younger generation of parents who grew up in the open society (Luo et al., 2013). There are many channels and media for Chinese parents and society to be exposed to Western influences in parenting and education. These channels and media include such things as books, television programs, movies, exchange programs, and educational programs. Qualities such as critical thinking, creativity, leadership skills, voicing opinions, and independent thinking are recognized as desirable qualities in children development for Chinese children (Luo et al., 2013). However, efforts and time invested in developing these qualities are usually limited to the early stages of parenting and education when academic excellence is not an urgency. These influences tend to be less important or even disappear as the students move closer to *gaokao* (Luo et al., 2013).

Variations of the CDP The CDP provides a template for a path to success. As the society changes, the template modifies itself as well. Twenty years ago, a degree from a vocational college or an associate degree was enough to guarantee a good job for the receiver (Tang, 2018). The competition has become fiercer since then; therefore, these degrees are no longer in the path. Nowadays, earning a bachelor's degree, or preferably a master's degree, from a high-ranking university is considered

a viable path to success (Tang, 2018). With globalization, a more desirable path is to pursue a degree from a foreign higher education institution in countries such as the United States, Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, or Canada. According to a report from the Ministry of Education of China (2018), there were more than 1.45 million Chinese students enrolled in overseas higher education institutions. The expectation is that the degrees these students receive will give them an edge in competing for desirable jobs in China.

Benefits and Consequences of Adopting the Path

Two types of benefits are clearly associated with adopting the CDP in Chinese parenting and education. First, it provides a relatively dependable path to success, which can benefit individuals and families. As a result, social mobility can help families to get out of poverty and reach prosperity. Second, the focus on education and investment helps to improve human capital in China. With the continued improvement in human capital, the economy continues to develop in a sustainable way (Hannum, An, & Cherng, 2011).

Adopting a collective path in parenting can also have negative impacts on individuals, families, and the society. Excessive attention on academic excellence will leave less time, energy, and attention to be used on other important aspects of children development such as physical education, art and music appreciation, and character education (Liu & Wu, 2006). Test scores become the focal point of parenting and family communication. Stress, conflict, and disconnect arise in family relationship when children are not executing the collective desirable path well. It also affects the society on a whole when most members adopt a similar path. It leads to a surplus in "desirable" schools, majors, and career paths that could cause shortage in other areas (Kim, Brown, & Fong, 2016).

Conclusion

The parenting culture in China inherited values, beliefs, and practices from people in the past and embraces changes and new ideas brought by societal reforms and open environment (Luo et al., 2013; Shek, 2006). In this process, fatherhood and motherhood are being redefined, the gap of parenting culture between urban and rural families is widening, the differences among generations are showing, and the cancelled one-child policy is still revealing its effects in many aspects of family life, including parenting.

The CDP is an important framework to help people understand Chinese parenting and education in the time of change. Even though many changes have occurred in this country since it opened its door to the world, the conditions for adopting a collective path remain the same despite the fact that the content of the path may

change. As long as China remains a collectivist culture with fierce competition among citizens, the need to adopt a dependable path toward success is desired collectively by members of the society. The negative effects of adopting a path that relies mainly on academic success can be detrimental to the well-rounded development of children and well-being of the society.

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