

## Fathers' Parenting Styles in Chinese Families in Urban Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

The primary objectives of this study were to examine: 1) fathers' parenting styles, and 2) the relationships between selected variables within the family ecosystems (e.g., father's age, education, work hours, income, and psychological distress, child's age and sex, as well as family income, number of children in the family, and marital quality) and fathers' parenting styles within the Chinese families in Malaysia. One hundred fathers, with children between the ages of 7 to 10 years from two-parent Chinese families residing in three urban cities in the state of Selangor in Malaysia, participated in the current study. Respondents completed a self-administered questionnaire which consisted of the following measures: Edwards Parenting Scale, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale – K10, Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, and a Demographic Sheet. Descriptive analyses reveal that the proportion of the respondents practicing authoritative (37.0%) parenting styles was the highest, and this was followed by authoritarian (34.0%) and permissive (29.0%) styles. Correlation analyses indicated that fathers' level of psychological distress and the number of children in the family significantly and positively related to the authoritarian parenting style, whereas fathers' level of education and report of marital quality significantly and positively related to authoritative parenting style, with the number of children being significantly and negatively related to the authoritative parenting style. Findings are interpreted in line with the Chinese cultural expectations for fathering behaviour.

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### INTRODUCTION

Confucian philosophy has been very instrumental in shaping the role of the father in the Chinese culture for centuries (Ho,

1987). The notion of filial piety describes children's absolute loyalty to the family as well as parents' responsibilities in raising their children. In their parenting roles, mothers and fathers in Chinese families are expected to play sex-specific interaction styles. For example, although Confucius teaching emphasizes on the harmonious relationship between men and women, men in the ancient time were socialized to be stern and extroverted, whereas women were required to be submissive and introverted. This sex-specific interaction structure provides the fundamental guidelines for paternal behaviours in Chinese families. The father needs to be a strict educator and discipline enforcer for his children. He must also ensure that this parenting style is practiced intergenerationally within his male blood line, and the father is entrusted with responsibilities to preserve his daughters' honour and dignity. In general, Confucian practices have elevated a Chinese father to a superior status in the home which resembles him as a controlling and authoritarian parent (Ho, 1987). The current paper examined fathers' parenting styles and the relationships between selected variables within the family ecosystems and fathers' parenting styles in contemporary urban Chinese families in Malaysia.

Despite the fact that cultural beliefs have been influential in defining parental behaviors among fathers across cultural groups, much of the psychological studies (see Lamb, 2004) on fathers have been mainly based on the Western concepts of parents' interaction styles in the family.

Such trend is evident in the availability of advanced research and extensive theorizing on fathers in the Western countries whereas little research has been done on international families (see Lamb, 2004). Furthermore, there is a tendency to use the Western parenting styles as a norm to understand mothers' and fathers' involvement in the family in other cultural groups (Hulei *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, the lack of research on fathers in Asian families has gradually been redressed as contemporary scholars have started to contribute to the fathering literature (Endicott & Endicott, 2008; Kamo, 1994; Lu *et al.*, 2000). Yet, there is a paucity of data on fathers' parenting styles, especially in the Chinese families in Malaysia.

To date, little information is known about how Chinese fathers in the urban Malaysia differ from Western parenting ideologies, which are apparently brought by modernization and globalization. Due to the great social and economic changes in Malaysia, today's Chinese fathers face tough challenges to fulfil their roles as breadwinners and caregivers simultaneously. Furthermore, the employment of women outside of the home has considerably changed the parenting dynamics of Malaysian families. In the year 2007, the Department of Statistics, Malaysia, reported that the rate of women participation in the workforce was as high 46.4%. This large proportion of women working outside homes may demand men to stay close to their family in order to share childcare and other household responsibilities. Therefore,

information obtained from this descriptive study is significant to help us understand Malaysian Chinese fathers' parenting styles and the family ecosystem variables related to their parenting styles.

### *Parenting Models and Literature*

The study of parenting style was pioneered by Baumrind (1967) who later differentiated it into three major styles, as follows: a) authoritarian—characterized by parents who exercise firm control over their children, emphasize conformity, authority and order, and discourage individuality; b) authoritative – characterized by parents who control their children in appropriate manner, display democratic and negotiated interactions and warmth, and encourage independence in children; and c) permissive – characterized by parents who are non-demanding, non-controlling and display relative warmth to their children. Although Baumrind's work serves as a powerful construct in studying parenting styles, some recent studies have raised questions on whether or not Western parenting constructs are equally applicable to non-Western families. For example, scholars (e.g., Xu *et al.*, 2005; Wu *et al.*, 2002; Chao, 1994) reported that Baumrind's parenting typology did not sufficiently explain parental preferences among the Asian and Asian American parenting styles. Despite this limitation, Baumrind's model has been widely used to understand parenting styles across groups. In line with this model, the present study examines the degree to which fathers in the urban Chinese families in Malaysia exhibit

authoritarian, authoritative and permissive parenting styles.

One of the most influential studies that provided insights into the parenting style preferred by the Chinese and Western parents was done by Chao in 1994. The study found that Western parents viewed authoritarian parenting as very negative and almost similar to "militaristic" and "regimented" parenting. These connotations are acquired largely due to the negative outcomes associated with it. For example, authoritarian parental practices result in children's fearfulness, withdrawal, and distrust (Baumrind, 1967) and externalizing behaviours (Gaylord *et al.*, 2003). Paradoxically, Chinese parents do not hold regression towards authoritarianism like parents from other cultures (Porter *et al.*, 2005; Chao, 2001; 1994), but rather they viewed it as a form of positive "training" and "teaching" to the children. Chao (2001) further argued that it was the Chinese value of "training" (also means govern) which accounted for the differences in parenting styles between the Chinese and Western parents. Consistent with these findings, other scholars (e.g., Stewart *et al.*, 1998) were surprised to observe that Chinese children reported feeling relatively high level of parental warmth and self well-being under this parental "training".

Although authoritative parenting has always been known as an optimal parenting style in the West, it may work less effectively for the Asian-heritage children. In a comparative study, Chao (2001) discovered that authoritative parenting brought better child outcomes for the European-Americans

as compared to the Asian-Americans. On the other hand, literature suggests that Chinese parents who adhere strongly to Chinese parental values are more likely to practice authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles simultaneously (Xu *et al.*, 2005; Chen & Luster, 2002; Wu *et al.*, 2002). Nonetheless, it is argued that parental scale conceptualized in the Western countries cannot fully capture the range of variation in the parenting practices employed by Chinese parents as they rarely differentiate between authoritarian and authoritative parents (e.g., Xu *et al.*, 2005; Chao, 1994). The present study was designed to examine the extent to which Chinese fathers exhibit both authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles.

Meanwhile, a large amount of literature has been documented for authoritarian and authoritative parenting, and there is a dearth of research on permissive parenting except some findings on Aka fathers' permissive parenting styles in Africa (see Hewlett, 2004). With reference to parenting, Chinese parents believe that "to spare the rod is to spoil the child" which means that maintaining an indulgent parent-child relationship can be destructive to child's outcomes (Gray, 2003). These sentiments have been documented in the famous "*Three-Character Classic*", "It is the father's fault if a child is not adequately educated" (Mo, 1996, as cited in Chen *et al.*, 2000, p. 404). This particular statement underscores the great responsibilities of the father to discipline and guide his children's behaviour. In other words, Chinese

literature does not seem to encourage permissive parenting style among fathers.

Furthermore, following Belsky's (1984) determinants of parenting model, the present study explored the relationships between fathers' personal characteristics, child's characteristics, and family social contexts with different parenting styles (authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive) among fathers in Malaysian Chinese families. The inclusion of the demographic variables in the present correlation model was guided by the following research assertions, i.e. older parent has greater psychological and parenting resources, and thus, they are less likely to adopt harsh and autocratic disciplinary measures as compared to their young counterpart (Chen & Luster, 2002). Higher education attainment promotes authoritative parenting (Zervides & Knowles, 2007; Xu *et al.*, 2005; Chen & Luster, 2002), whereas hectic working characteristics, lower economic standing and high psychological distress level (Foster *et al.*, 2008; Bayer *et al.*, 2006) would lead to authoritarian parenting.

Other than the personal characteristics of the father, this present study underscores the importance of investigating the relationships between child's characteristics and fathering style. During the transition period of children into adolescents, Chen *et al.* (2000) noted a significant declination of parental control and warmth on their children. The evidence suggested that fathers would be less autocratic and more lenient as their children grow up. Inconsistent with the above findings, Chen and Luster (2002)

found that Chinese parents engaged in a more authoritarian parenting when the child aged. They explained that Chinese parents believe in the concept of "age of understanding". Parents could only engage in a stricter parenting style after the child has attained this age of understanding, which is approximately at the age of 6 years (Wolf, 1970, as cited in, Chen & Luster, 2002). Thus, Chinese parents are relatively lenient and warm with their younger children. Child's gender is another popular research variable in parenting studies. Studies by Someya *et al.* (2000) and Chen *et al.* (2000) found that fathers generally treated their daughters warmer than the son and exerted lesser control on the daughters. Somayah and Baharudin (2009) noted that Chinese parents are generally stricter with their sons, whereas Indian fathers are stricter with their daughters; perhaps, different cultural emphasis gives rise to distinct fathering behaviour. As a summary, findings on child's gender and parenting styles have never been conclusive, and thus, the present study had attempted to examine the extent to which parenting styles among Chinese fathers is influenced by the sex of the child.

Other family contexts included were the number of children in the family, family income, and perceived marital quality. Our assumption is that having more children will suppress father's ability to exhibit authoritative parenting style. In fact, fathers who reported more number of children found themselves giving low quality of emotional support, basic care, physical play and evocations to their

children (Paquette *et al.*, 2000). This seems to explain that good parenting resources could deplete when fathers need to cater needs of many children. Additionally, dual earner families are emerging rapidly in Malaysia, and this behooves researchers to look into men's parenting style with regard to the consequences of achieving a better economic standing. Besides, a plausible number of studies (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2008; Bradford & Hawkins, 2006; Benzies *et al.*, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda *et al.*, 2004; Muhammad & Rumaya, 2002; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000) noted a link between marital quality and fathering behaviour. There seems to be an integrative learning process along the marital courtship which helps to explain that men who maintained sensitive and warm relationships with spouse would also perform such characteristics with the children. Thus, another logical assumption is that men, who experience distress in their marriage, may be reluctant to perform positive and constructive parenting.

In short, the primary objectives of the present study were to: (i) identify fathers' parenting styles, and (ii) explore the relationships between fathers' parenting styles and selected family background characteristics among Chinese fathers in urban Malaysia.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### *Participants*

The participants of this study consisted of 100 fathers from two-parent Chinese families residing in Puchong, Subang Jaya,

and Klang residential areas in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Fathers from two-parent families were recruited if they had a child between the ages of 7 to 12 years old. This age range was selected because the literature has shown that fathering behaviour during this period plays an influential role in the child development (see Lamb, 2004). The mean age of the fathers was 42.90 ( $SD = 4.62$ ). Other socio-demographic data show that the participant fathers in the present study represent those with moderate to high level of social economic characteristics. On average, fathers have completed 13.37 ( $SD = 4.18$ ) years of formal education. About 72% of them were white collar workers (e.g., businessman, teacher, management executive, programmer, engineer, dentist, and accountant) and 28% fathers were blue collar workers (e.g., trainer, varnisher, welder, carpenter, mechanic, storekeeper, driver, plumber and construction worker). Meanwhile, the median family income was RM5,000 per month, and the median income for the fathers was RM4,000 (US\$1 = 3.50 RM - Malaysian Ringgit). In particular, 53 of the target children were males and 47 were females. The mean age of the children was 9.74 ( $SD = 1.69$ ) years. The average number of children per family was 2.66 ( $SD = 1.09$ ). All the participant fathers are the biological parents of their children.

#### *Procedures*

A total of 210 questionnaires were distributed in a purposive sampling manner in the three urban residential areas. With high level of economic opportunities, these

three areas (i.e., Puchong, Subang Jaya, and Klang) are the fastest growing urban districts located in the Klang Valley region of the state of Selangor. Two trained native Chinese females, who were college educated and spoke fluent Mandarin and English, approached the potential respondents directly or indirectly (e.g., through the wives or the children) in the residential areas after making a brief assessment on the families' eligibility (e.g., married, employed, and had a child between the ages of 7 to 12) for participating in the study. Informed consent form and a set of questionnaire were given once the families had agreed to take part in the study. The participant fathers were advised to fill out the questionnaires and were informed that the completed questionnaires would be collected three days later. The final sample consisted of 36 fathers from Puchong, 32 from Subang Jaya, and 32 from Klang resulting in the response rate of 48%.

#### *Measures*

##### **Kessler Psychological Distress Scales**

The psychological distress level of the fathers was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale K10 (Kessler *et al.*, 2002). The scale has 10 items. The fathers were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*none of the time*) to 5 (*all of the time*) to describe the extent to which they experienced symptoms of anxiety and depression in the most recent 4-week period. The items were scored by summing up the number attached on the K10 scale. K10 was a moderately reliable

instrument with the internal consistency reported at 0.90 (Donker, van Straten, Marks, & Cujipers, 2010). In the present study, the reliability assessment of the scale was high (i.e.,  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### **Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS)**

Marital quality perceived by the participant fathers was measured by Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS) (Schumm *et al.*, 1986). The original scale was a 3-item wife-report questionnaire regarding the satisfaction level on marriage and husband. In two items, we used the word "husband" instead of "wife" since the participants in the current study are fathers or husbands. Responses were in a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied). The total scores ranged from 3 to 21 with higher scores showing higher level of marital satisfaction. The reliability assessment on KMS for this study yielded a 0.96 of alpha coefficient.

### **Edwards Parenting Checklist**

Edwards (2000) Parenting Checklist was used to assess fathers' report of authoritarian, authoritative and permissive parenting with their target child. The scale was built based on three general parental behaviour classifications (i.e., authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) introduced by Baumrind (1967). It is a 21-item scale based on the scoring of 1 (usually yes) and 0 (usually no). The checklist was scored by summing up the responses for

each parenting style (e.g., authoritarian, authoritative and permissive), and the subscale with the highest score was the respondents' dominant parenting style. The items have been reviewed by a parenting expert for content validity. Items 13, 20, 21 (authoritarian), 7, 10, 19 (authoritative), and 9, 11 and 16 (permissive) were dropped prior to calculating the reliability coefficient as these items showed low inter-item correlation with the rest of the items in the respective subscales. They may also measure more than one type of parenting style.

In the authoritarian subscale, item 13 "I make most of my child's decisions, even though that would be developmentally appropriate for my child to make" could measure the responsive behaviour of a Chinese father towards his child. In fact, the Confucius teaching has portrayed a father who makes decisions for his child as a responsive and caring father (Ho, 1987). Similarly, item 20 in the authoritarian subscale "Many of my rules are general rather than specific; My child knows what I really mean" could measure both authoritarian and authoritative parenting. According to Baumrind (1966), authoritative parents set standards or rules for their children, but they also share with the child the reasoning behind the policy, thus children are likely to conform to the rules without feeling restricted. Lastly, it was less appropriate to use item 21, i.e. "I spend little time with my child" to indicate authoritarian parenting among the Chinese parents. Culturally, authoritarian parenting in the

Chinese parents conceptualize authoritarian as “Guan”, which carries the meaning of monitor, teach and training (Chao, 1994); hence it could be deduced that authoritarian parents do not necessary spend lesser time with their children.

In the authoritative subscale, item 7, “I reward my child for acting appropriately” was dropped due to the reason reinforcement of children’s behaviour through rewarding is also seen in authoritarian parenting (see Chao, 1994). Likewise, item 10 “I value my child’s school achievement and support child’s effort” item could be also applied on Chinese authoritarian parents, who have been well known for emphasizing on children academic attainment (Chao, 1994; Ho, 1987). For item 19, “I communicate rules clearly and directly”, it is a characteristic of both authoritative and authoritarian parenting. The difference between the two parenting styles is that the authoritarian parents use forceful measure in enforcing rules; on the other hand, the authoritative parents attempt to enforce rules in a firm but rational way (Baumrind, 1966, 1967).

In the permissive subscales, the three dropped items are item 9 (“I keep my annoyance and anger about my child’s behaviour to myself”), item 11, “I feel overwhelmed and am almost ready to give up on my child”), and item 16 (“I strongly value my child’s free expression of wished and impulses”). In particular, parents’ intention to hide their anger as well as the parents’ giving up behaviour on their children are in fact the extension of a great care of a parents on their children,

and hence, they are not permissive parents. Lastly, item 16 may be measuring the characteristics of both permissive and authoritative parenting. According to Baumrind (1967), authoritative parents would adjust their parenting behaviour to suit the unique characters of their children.

After dropping these items, the reliability coefficients ( $\alpha$ ) for authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive subscales were 0.40, 0.61 and 0.38, respectively. Although the reliability coefficients for the authoritarian and permissive parenting categories in this study appear to be low, the alpha coefficients are within the acceptable standard set by Cronbach and Guilford (see Guilford, 1965; Zhang *et al.*, 2009). It should also be noted that the use of a Western parenting style instrument may fail to capture the Chinese concept of “Guan” in the parenting behaviour (Chao, 1994), and this may hence lead to low internal consistency in the subscales. Although using a Chinese parenting style instrument will accurately measure the Chinese fathering styles, the development of Chinese parenting style instrument that incorporated the concept of “Guan” was at its infancy stage during the data collection period of this study, and thus, a Western parenting style instrument was used in this study.

For the current study, each scale was written in both Chinese and English. The scales were translated into Chinese by a panel of translators using the repeated ‘forward-backward’ procedure. The translators are fluent in English with Chinese as their

mother tongue, the primary language of the respondents in the study. The translation procedure was conducted several times whereby any inconsistency between the original and the back-translation was identified and until an agreement was reached for the final Chinese version. Meanwhile, the Chinese version of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale was obtained from the K10 team, the Edwards' Parenting Checklist and the Kansas Marital Scale were translated from English to Chinese.

## RESULTS

### *Parenting Styles*

In order to take into account the differences in the value of means and standard deviations obtained from the three parenting subscales (i.e., authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive), raw scores were computed into a standard score (i.e., z-score). The parenting style which had the highest standard or z-score was considered as the dominant parenting style. Descriptive analyses showed that authoritative style was reported by most (37.0%) of the fathers compared to other styles. A slightly lesser proportion (34.0%) of the fathers practiced authoritarian parenting, whereas 29% were found to have practiced permissive parenting style.

### *Relationships between Family Ecosystem Variables and Parenting Styles*

Given the fact that the data for the present study came from a purposive sample, a non-parametric statistic, i.e., Spearman

Rho correlation analysis (Morgan *et al.*, 2007) was conducted between the selected family ecosystem variables (e.g., father's age, education, work hour, income, level of psychological distress, child's age, child's gender, number of children in the family, family income, and marital quality) and the three parenting styles. Table 1 presents the results of the analyses (Morgan *et al.*, 2007). The findings indicated that the fathers' level of psychological distress and the number of children in the family significantly and positively related to the authoritarian parenting style, but the number of children in the family is significantly and negatively related to the authoritative parenting style. Meanwhile, fathers' level of education and report of marital quality are significantly positively related to authoritative parenting style.

## DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing within Baumrind's (1967) parenting typologies and Belsky's (1984) determinants of parenting model, the main objectives of this study were to examine fathers' parenting styles and the relationships between selected variables within the family ecosystems and fathers' parenting styles amongst Chinese families in this study. Although Baumrind's parenting typologies are based on the Western family context, this paradigm has been widely used across cultural groups. The notion of family ecosystem variables from Belsky's determinants of parenting model has encouraged us to examine whether selected family ecological variables are related to

TABLE 1  
Relationships between Selected Family Ecosystem Variables and Father's Parenting Styles

	Authoritarian n=34	Authoritative n=37	Permissive n=29
FATHER'S PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS			
Age	.07	-.01	-.003
Education	.06	.18*	-.01
Working hour	-.02	.01	-.05
Income	.01	-.06	.02
Psychological distress	.23*	-.15	.15
CHILD CHARACTERISTICS			
Age	.03	.12	.02
Gender (1, 0)	-.03	.06	.04
FAMILY SOCIAL CONTEXTS			
Number of child	.20*	-.26**	-.04
Total family income	-.01	-.04	-.01
Marital quality	-.21*	.26**	-.01

Gender was dummy coded as 0 = male, 1 = female, \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

fathers' parenting styles in the Chinese families in urban Malaysia.

The results from this study revealed that the authoritative parenting was the most reported form of parenting style among the Chinese fathers in the current sample, followed by authoritarian and permissive styles. It should be noted that the Chinese parental values, largely founded in Confucian philosophy, may encourage fathers to exhibit both the authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles. Findings from other studies (e.g., Xu *et al.*, 2005) showed that the Chinese values of "collectivism" and "conformity to norms" were correlated with authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles. This means that Chinese parents are not only strict and emphasize on children's discipline, but they also value parental responsiveness

and acceptance of their children. In fact, earlier studies showed that Chinese parents who adhered strictly to Chinese cultural values scored high on both the authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles (Chen & Luster, 2002; Wu *et al.*, 2002). Our findings lend support to this claim as it was observed in this study that on average, 75% of the Chinese fathers in our sample reported to practice both the authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles.

In contrast to the Western interpretation of authoritarian parenting, Chinese parents regard authoritarian parenting as a form of positive "training" that is associated with the notion of "educating" and "teaching" (Chao, 1994). These authoritarian fathers show warmth and affection in their unique ways that underscore the context of Chinese saying "Da shi teng, ma shi ai", which means

“beating someone is caring for someone and scolding someone is an expression of love.” Culturally, the Chinese parents seem to have unconditioned disposition for controlling and autocratic parenting behaviours compared to the Western parents. For example, in a comparative study between Chinese and Euro-American parents, Porter *et al.* (2005) noted that the Chinese parents were more controlling and authoritarian with their children than their American counterparts. Furthermore, Chao (1994) noted that when the level of education was controlled, Chinese mothers scored significantly higher on authoritarian subscale compared to Euro-American mothers. Findings from the present study also show that a moderate number of Chinese fathers practicing this parenting style.

Only 29.0% of the fathers in the current sample reported practicing permissive parenting style. Permissive parents are also known as indulgent parents who are often viewed negatively in the Western psychological literature. Although these fathers can be nurturing and responsive to children, may impose lesser control on children's behaviour, and promote good parent-child relationship (see Crockett *et al.*, 2007; Hewlett, 2004), the present study has shown that permissiveness is the least practiced parenting behaviour among the Chinese fathers. Permissive parenting may be viewed as a less effective parenting style, and therefore, fathers appear to be unwilling to embrace this style when raising their children. As an authority figure, a Chinese father is expected to be strict and

place requirements on his children (Ho, 1987). If a father does not meet these social expectations, the society tends to blame the father for not adequately raising and educating his children (Gray, 2003; Mo, 1996, as cited in Chen *et al.*, 2000, p. 404). In other words, Chinese fathers tend to parent with the belief that permissive interaction style may harm the harmonious relationship between a father and a child. Furthermore, a child who is not properly trained by the father might not learn skills that are essential in everyday lives. In view of these Chinese cultural accents, most fathers in our sample appear not to practice permissive parenting as Chinese fathers consider it an unreliable construct not compatible with the Chinese cultural values (Wu *et al.*, 2002).

With reference to correlational analyses, the current study finds positive relationship between fathers' perceived marital quality and authoritative fathering, as well as a negative relationship between fathers' perceived marital quality and authoritarian fathering. According to Bradford and Howkins (2006), a good marriage equips men with the essential components in developing supportive and caring fatherhood. This suggests that men who have learned elements like rational control, care, and support from an intimate relationship are more likely to implement appropriate control and warmth in interacting with their children. Thus, fathers who enjoy high marital quality are more oriented toward authoritative fathering, whereas a low marital quality may lead to a more

autocratic and controlling parenting style. Father's level of education was another family ecosystem variable significantly correlated with authoritative fathering. This finding is consistent with the reports from other scholars (see Xu *et al.*, 2005; Zervides & Knowles, 2007) who observed that well-educated Chinese parents tended to adopt flexible and reasoned approaches rather than restrictive and power-assertive methods with children. The finding may imply that educated fathers have greater exposure to parenting literature and consequently are more likely to be authoritative in the way they interact with their children (Xu *et al.*, 2005; Zervides & Knowles, 2007).

The level of psychological distress was positively correlated with authoritarian parenting styles of the Chinese fathers included in the current study. It can be argued that distressed fathers tend to be over-controlling (authoritarian). A similar pattern of association between psychological distress and authoritarian parenting was also noted by other scholars (e.g., Bayer *et al.*, 2006; Chen & Luster, 2002). These studies provided evidence that punitive, directive, over-involved, and protective parenting practices were outcomes of parental anxiety and depression. Papp *et al.* (2005) noted that when a father is troubled with depressive symptoms, he is not able to perform sufficient level of acceptance, psychological autonomy, and firm control over children. Findings from the current study extend support to the findings from other research on the relationship between psychological distress and parenting

styles. Future studies may explore the way (clinically diagnosed) distressed fathers interact with their children.

The findings from the present study also reveal that there are significant relationships between the number of children in the family and authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles. It appears that when there are more children in the household, these Chinese fathers are more likely to take various autocratic measures such as set rules and expectations to sustain control over the children. Moreover, when the number of children increases, fathers may have limited resources to effectively respond to each child's need (Paquette *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, fathers in the current sample tend to adopt the authoritarian parenting style to handle more children in the family. At the same time, more children they have, the less authoritative they become when interacting with their children. More importantly, within the Chinese cultural expectations, fathers' strict and controlling behaviours (i.e., authoritarian) are often compensated by their warm and affectionate interactions (i.e., authoritative) with their children. The co-existence of these supposedly opposite parenting behaviours among Chinese fathers in the current sample not only highlights the influence of cultural expectations of fathering behaviours, it also supports the influence of the family ecological context of parent-child interactions. In sum, these Chinese fathers are strict yet loving and caring in their parental practices.

## CONCLUSION

We observed that Chinese fathers in our sample still exhibit both authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles that are in line with their cultural expectations of parenting role. Fathers' education, number of child in the family, and marital quality were significantly related to their authoritative parenting style. In more specific, fathers with high educational attainment and high marital quality but, with low level of psychological distress and fewer children in the family were more likely to be authoritative. Meanwhile, a high level of psychological distress and more children in the family are related to authoritarian parenting, whereas high level of psychological distress is related to permissive parenting style.

The current findings should be interpreted with several limitations in mind. First, purposive sampling technique was employed to identify the respondents, and therefore, findings cannot be generalized across Chinese families in Malaysia. Second, this study uses self-report data from fathers who might have provided socially desirable answers. Third, the cultural interpretation of our data is tentative since we did not use any measures to uncover the influence of cultural values on fathering behaviour. Future research can employ random sampling and multi-method assessment techniques to collect the data. Notwithstanding these limitations, the present findings have important implications for understanding fathering behaviours in contemporary Chinese families in urban

Malaysia. The current study is one of the very few projects that systematically document fathers' parenting styles in Chinese families. Therefore, these findings can be used as a baseline empirical data to conduct future research on fathers' parenting behaviours within Chinese families.

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