

Complementary or Cumulative? How Parental Attitudes and Gendered Behaviors Shape Youths' Gender Role Attitudes in China

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Extended Abstract

Gender role attitudes shape individuals' allocation of paid and unpaid work, and influence both labor market and household decisions. In contemporary China, despite increasing emphasis on gender equality, traditional gender attitudes continue to persist across generations and remain a key mechanism sustaining gender inequality (Luo and Kan, 2026; Ridgeway, 2011). Therefore, understanding how gender role attitudes are formed and transmitted is crucial for promoting gender equality. Previous studies have shown that both individual characteristics and family background shape individuals' gender role attitudes, with family socialization playing a particularly important role. Existing research suggests that parents influence children's gender role attitudes through both what they *say* and what they *do*. Parental gender attitudes are strongly associated with offspring's attitudes, while parental gendered behaviors, such as maternal employment and fathers' involvement in housework, are linked to more egalitarian attitudes among offspring.

However, several questions remain unresolved. First, although both parents may influence children's attitudes, it remains unclear whether maternal and paternal attitudes exert similar effects and how their influences interact. Second, evidence regarding whether parental behaviors have independent effects on offspring's gender role attitudes beyond parental gender attitudes is inconsistent, and existing empirical studies examining the interaction between the effects of parental attitudes and behaviors remain very limited. Third, evidence is mixed on whether intergenerational transmission is stronger within same-sex parent-child dyads. Finally, most empirical evidence comes from Western societies, leaving East Asian contexts insufficiently explored.

Drawing on cultural transmission theory (Bisin and Verdier, 2000, 2001) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), this study addresses these gaps by examining how parents transmit their gender role attitudes through verbal transmission and role modeling in China. We conceptualize parental attitudes as verbal transmission, and parental behaviors, including maternal labor force participation and paternal involvement in housework, as role modeling. We investigate the independent effects of parental attitudes and behaviors on offspring's gender role attitudes and whether

these effects exhibit gender heterogeneity. We also explore whether parental influences operate through complementary effects (also termed “egalitarian dominance,” meaning offspring tend to resemble the more egalitarian parent when parental attitudes diverge) or cumulative reinforcement (aligned parental attitudes or behaviors strengthen transmission) (Perales et al., 2021), both between maternal and paternal attitudes and between parental attitudes and behaviors.

Gender role attitudes are measured using three items from the CFPS, each rated on a scale from [1] “*strongly disagree*” to [5] “*strongly agree*”: (1) “*Men should prioritize careers, women should prioritize families*”, (2) “*A woman’s achievements matter less than marrying well*”, and (3) “*A woman is not complete without having children*”. All items are reverse-coded so that higher values indicate more egalitarian attitudes, and summed to construct an index ranging from 3 to 15. Maternal labor force participation is measured by mothers’ weekly hours of paid work; paternal involvement in housework is measured by father’s share of household labor.

We link youths’ gender role attitudes in 2020 (aged 16–34) with parental gender attitudes and gendered behaviors measured in 2014. This cross-wave linkage design reduces concerns about reverse causality. Multiple linear regression models estimate baseline effects, with interaction terms assessing gender heterogeneity and complementary or cumulative effects.

Controlling for youths’ gender, age, years of schooling, log form of household per capita income, marital status, *hukou* status, as well as fathers’ and mothers’ years of schooling in 2020, the baseline results (Table 1, Models 1 to 3) show that paternal attitudes, maternal attitudes, and maternal labor force participation all exert significant positive effects on youths’ gender role attitudes, while paternal involvement in housework shows no significant effect. Interaction analyses reveal no substantial gender heterogeneity between sons and daughters (Table 1, Models 4 to 6) and no complementary or cumulative effects between paternal and maternal attitudes ($\beta = -0.003$, $p = 0.572$; results not shown). This finding contrasts with the complementary effects (“egalitarian dominance”) found in Western contexts (e.g., Davis and Wills, 2010; Perales et al., 2021).

However, maternal gender attitudes and maternal labor force participation exhibit a clear cumulative effect. The interaction term between mothers’ attitudes and mothers’ weekly hours of paid work is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.001$, $p = 0.078$; results not shown), indicating that the influence of maternal attitudes on offspring’s gender role attitudes is stronger when mothers work longer hours, and vice versa. Figure 1 illustrates this pattern clearly: in the left panel, the effect of mothers’ working hours is

Table 2 The effects of parental gender role attitudes and gendered behaviors on youths' gender role attitudes.

	Model1	Model2	Model3	Model4	Model5	Model6
<i>Measurement in 2014 Wave</i>						
Father's gender attitudes	0.058***		0.057***	0.044	0.057***	0.044
Mother's gender attitudes	0.059***		0.059***	0.051*	0.059***	0.051*
Mother's weekly hours of paid work		0.004**	0.004**	0.004**	0.006**	0.006**
Father's share of household labor		-0.093	-0.139	-0.139	-0.364	-0.359
<i>Measurement in 2020 Wave</i>						
Youth's gender (male=1)	-1.549***	-1.560***	-1.559***	-1.801***	-1.596***	-1.828***
Youth's age	-0.113***	-0.114***	-0.110***	-0.110***	-0.110***	-0.109***
Youth's years of schooling	0.249***	0.248***	0.245***	0.245***	0.245***	0.246***
Youth's log form of household per capita income	0.190***	0.187***	0.187***	0.189***	0.186***	0.187***
Youth is married (dummy variable)	-0.803***	-0.820***	-0.805***	-0.804***	-0.803***	-0.802***
Youth has a urban <i>hukou</i> (dummy variable)	0.111	0.145	0.122	0.120	0.128	0.125
Father's years of schooling	0.029*	0.035**	0.029*	0.028*	0.029*	0.028*
Mother's years of schooling	0.005	0.013	0.005	0.005	0.005	0.005
<i>Interaction terms</i>						
Father's gender attitudes*Youth's gender				0.024		0.025
Mother's gender attitudes*Youth's gender				0.016		0.015
Mother's weekly hours of paid work*Youth's gender					-0.002	-0.003
Father's share of household labor*Youth's gender					0.412	0.402
<i>Constant</i>	7.403***	7.937***	7.289***	7.402***	7.320***	7.428***
<i>Observations</i>	3209	3209	3209	3209	3209	3209
<i>R</i> ²	0.258	0.254	0.259	0.260	0.260	0.260

Notes: Robust standard errors are presented in parentheses. *10% significant level. **5% significance level. ***1% significance level.

stronger among mothers with more egalitarian attitudes; in the right panel, the effect of mothers' attitudes is stronger at higher levels of maternal employment. Notably, when mothers hold the most traditional attitudes or when their weekly working hours are zero, offspring's attitudes show little variation. This pattern suggests that maternal attitudes and employment reinforce each other, consistent with cumulative effects. No such interaction emerges between paternal attitudes and maternal employment, or between parental attitudes and paternal housework involvement.

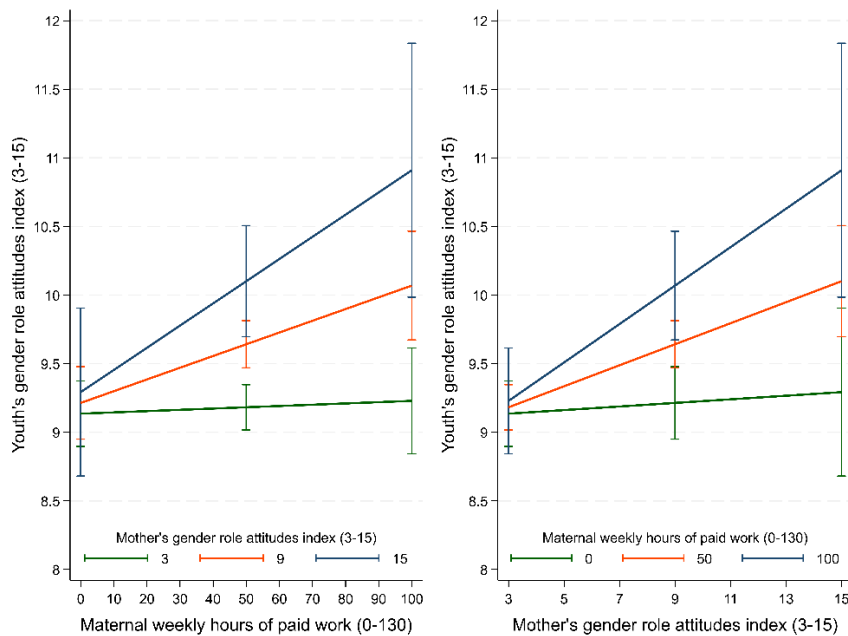


Fig. 1. Predicted means of offspring's gender role attitudes, marginal effects from model interacting mother's gender attitudes with mother's weekly hours of paid work.

Notes: Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals.

This study provides important evidence on the intergenerational transmission of gender role attitudes in China, a society where traditional gender norms remain deeply ingrained. Unlike in Western countries where one egalitarian parent is sufficient to result in attitude change in the offspring (Davis and Wills, 2010; Perales et al., 2021), our findings suggest that one parent's egalitarian attitudes may not be enough to reverse traditional gender attitudes among offspring in the Chinese context, and mothers in particular need to practice what they preach to more effectively transmit egalitarian attitudes. These findings underscore that the road toward the equalization of gender role attitudes and the advancement of gender equality in China remains long and challenging.