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# Chinese Mothers' Profiles of Color-Conscious Socialization and Social Dominance Orientation: Relations to Children's Racial Attitudes

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*Objectives:* This study concerns Chinese mothers' color-conscious socialization and social dominance orientation and how these relate to children's racial attitudes. *Method:* Data were collected from a sample of 155 Chinese children (71 girls) aged 7–11 years and their mothers, from urban regions across China (Shanghai, Jinan, and cities in Jiangsu Province), including observations of mothers' color-conscious practices, self-reported social dominance orientation, and children's attitudes toward light-skinned Chinese, tan-skinned Chinese, and White groups. All children were born in urban areas and from middle-income families. *Results:* Variable- and person-centered analyses suggested three areas of color-conscious practices, racial appearance, cultural background, and grouping, and revealed heterogeneity in associations between color consciousness and social dominance orientation. Mothers' acknowledgment of shared culture was associated with children's positive attitudes toward their racial ingroup with darker skin tone. *Conclusions:* This study emphasizes the importance of a nuanced and contextualized understanding of color-conscious socialization.

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**Public Significance Statement**
Chinese mothers tended to discuss race-related topics in front of their children. Certain topics, such as shared culture, can be a focus for future efforts to reduce children's colorism. Most mothers who adopted color-conscious socialization had higher social dominance orientation, indicating that color consciousness in the context of China carries different implications compared to Western countries.

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*Keywords:* color-conscious socialization, social dominance orientation, racism, colorism, Chinese context

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Parents' talking to children about race has been found to be important for socializing children's racial attitudes. Parental color-conscious socialization functions as a prerequisite for antiracism (Vittrup, 2018). However, many White parents adopt color-evasive socialization, which involves ignoring or denying racial differences by emphasizing sameness (Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Neville et al., 2013). Color evasion reflects a contemporary expression of racism in Western societies and reinforces racial prejudice (Pahlke et al., 2012). Little attention has been paid to how Chinese parents talk about race to their children. Unlike many Western countries with multicultural and racially diverse populations, China is a racially homogenous society, and open discussions and awareness regarding race are relatively limited (Lan, 2022). Therefore, color consciousness in the context of China may have different interpretations and manifestations compared to Western countries. Furthermore, research has shown that Chinese children display racial biases toward other races (K. J. J. Lee & Setoh, 2022; Qian et al., 2019; Setoh et al., 2019). Investigating Chinese parents' color-conscious socialization can

provide insights into whether and how parents discuss race with their children and how such socialization contributes to children's racial attitudes in an understudied context. In this study, we used observational measures to examine Chinese mothers' color-conscious socialization practices and their relation to children's racial attitudes.

## Color-Conscious Socialization Theory

Parental ethnic–racial socialization refers to the transmission of messages from parents to children about race and ethnicity (Atkin & Yoo, 2021). Color-conscious socialization involves parents socializing their children to acknowledge racial and cultural differences, fostering inclusivity and equity within society (Bell, 2016; Vittrup, 2018). In contrast, color-evasive socialization, also referred to as colorblind socialization, is a passive type of parental ethnic–racial socialization that provides very few messages regarding racial differences and cultural pluralism (Annamma et al., 2017). Research shows that the majority of White American mothers reported using a color-evasive approach to socialize their children (e.g., everyone is the same; Vittrup, 2018). Theoretical reflections and a growing number of studies show that color-evasive socialization is related to children's negative racial attitudes (Neville et al., 2013; Pahlke et al., 2012), particularly in the United States where racism and inequality are normative realities (Umana-Taylor, 2016). When parents remain silent and leave children to navigate issues of race and racism by themselves, children may fail to recognize when they need help and may internalize racist ideas (Bigler et al., 2022). By contrast, parents' color-conscious socialization, which involves open discussions about race and the acknowledgment of racism, can help reduce children's racial biases (Farago et al., 2019; Mesman et al., 2022).

The current color-consciousness theories and research findings are mostly based on Western research, which largely used White samples in Western societies. Although research has shown that Chinese children display both explicit and implicit racial biases toward White people (Qian et al., 2019), little attention has been paid to the factors that contribute to Chinese children's racial biases. Similar to Western research (Pahlke et al., 2012), it may be that Chinese parents socialize their children to reject other racial groups. Indeed, parents play a significant role in children's racial attitude development, particularly before adolescence when children have more opportunities to interact with and be influenced by peers (Burkholder et al., 2021).

However, China is a highly racially homogeneous society, with the Han majority Chinese constituting over 90% of the population. The understanding and interpretation of (absence of) color-conscious socialization among Chinese parents may differ from that among Western parents. On the one hand, Chinese parents may *not* tend to discuss race with their children due to their limited awareness of racial minorities in China, as opposed to some Western parents who may consciously and strategically avoid such discussions (Vittrup, 2018). On the other hand, the relatively limited social norms regarding racial equality may contribute to Chinese parents' low inhibition to discuss racial differences in front of their children. In China, most Chinese individuals have limited interaction with Western people. Based on intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), lack of interactions between individuals from diverse social backgrounds may foster prejudice. Indeed, prejudice against other racial groups appears to be relatively acceptable in China compared to Western societies (Cheng, 2019). For example, expressions of racism have

been prevalent on Chinese social media platforms (T. Liu & Deng, 2020), and White people in China feel excluded as marginalized "others" (Y. Liu & Dervin, 2022). With China's growing economy, an increasing number of Westerners are immigrating to China for business and career opportunities, yet Western people are still marginalized in Chinese society. The trend toward intolerance of racial differences, fueled by increasing nationalism, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, potentially results in racial prejudice and the exclusion of Western people (Ang & Martin, 2024). Consequently, discussions on race may imply prejudice rather than embracing and valuing racial diversity. Therefore, talking to children about race may not be equivalent to the Western concept of color-conscious socialization, which aims to guide children about different races and to promote diversity and inclusivity (Pahlke et al., 2012). Given the importance of a contextualized understanding of racial socialization in general, this study reconstructed Chinese mother's color-conscious socialization and expanded the Western-based color-conscious socialization theory to the Chinese context.

## Reconstructing the Concept of Color-Conscious Socialization in the Chinese Context

Although White people are considered a minority outgroup, Chinese people hold paradoxical attitudes toward them. On the one hand, some Chinese scholars propose that Chinese cultural heritage should be emphasized to counter Western cultural heritage colonization (e.g., Ye, 2010). Indeed, the Chinese government has ordered restrictions on celebration of Western festivals to protect Chinese traditional cultural heritage from an invasion of Western culture (Union of Catholic Asian News, 2021). For example, the Starbucks café has been popular in China. However, when it was located inside the Forbidden City, one of the most important historical and cultural landmarks in China, it was deemed detrimental to Chinese cultural heritage, and closed down due to increasing pressure from both the government and the public (Han & Zhang, 2009).

On the other hand, due to a global standard of White beauty ideals in the Asian culture, White people's appearance, particularly a light skin tone, is favored by the majority of Chinese people (Yu, 2021). The cultural desire for light skin has been prevalent throughout Chinese history. In ancient China, skin tone was indicative of class distinctions in the formation of early colorism (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Because farmers and laborers worked outdoors for extended hours, they developed darker skin tones resulting from prolonged sun exposure, while individuals of higher social status tended to work indoors (Xie & Zhang, 2013). Historical evidence of skin tone bias is evident in depictions of the social classes in Chinese art and literature (Dikötter, 2015). Darker skin tone is associated with lower socioeconomic status, while lighter skin tone is associated with higher socioeconomic status. This phenomenon of colorism has been further reinforced because mass media such as TV commercials and print ads in contemporary China advocate aesthetic standards of White being more attractive and indicative of a higher social status (Qiao & Wang, 2022). Indeed, researchers found that Chinese adults in China reported perceiving White people to have higher socioeconomic status than Chinese, which was related to their explicit attitudes toward White people (Qian et al., 2016, 2019). The preference and desire for light skin can also be seen in the many advertisements for skin-lightening products and in a growing market for whitening products in China (Su et al., 2020).

Such preference for light skin tones results in advantages for Chinese women with fair skin, both in terms of job opportunities and dating prospects (Yeung, 2015; Zhang, 2012).

Chinese people's paradoxical attitudes toward White people, that is, negative about Western cultural heritage but to some extent positive about White appearance suggest that the color-consciousness construct may not simply be a copy of its Western incarnation. Instead, it may need to be disassembled and reassembled in the context of China. We propose two separate but related types of color-conscious statements corresponding to the Chinese people's paradoxical attitudes toward Western White people: *cultural background statements* and *racial appearance statements.* Of note, Western culture is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of cultural values and practices that have developed in Western societies. In this study, we have narrowed the meaning of the term "Western culture" to specifically refer to the culture related to heritage, including festivals, common food, and habits, that originates from White people in Western countries.

Furthermore, noticing and mentioning differences regarding cultural background and/or racial appearance may not equate acknowledging the functional meanings of racial differences (e.g., identifying systemic racial disparities in opportunities). Interviews and observations conducted in Australian elementary schools show that some teachers encouraged children to notice racial differences, but remained silent about the meanings of these differences (Walton et al., 2014). This means that although agents may socialize children to recognize racial differences, they may choose to focus on similarities between groups rather than differences, such as grouping characters together regardless of their racial/ethnic background. This hinders children's understanding of the functional meanings of racial differences in society. Therefore, we introduce a third subtype of color-conscious socialization practice, *grouping statements*, and define it as statements on making grouping statements based on race. Conceptually, avoiding mention of group membership (especially when grouping was in fact done according to race and/or skin tone) is similar to the concept of color evasion (Whitley & Webster, 2019). Exploring Chinese mothers' color-conscious conversation involving cultural background, racial appearance, and grouping statements can help better understand the nuances in potential color-conscious socialization practices.

## Social Dominance Orientation and Color Consciousness

To better understand the ideologies underlying and the meaning of Chinese parents talking race to their children, we included mothers' social dominance orientation, which has been found to be related to color consciousness. Social dominance orientation refers to individuals' preference for inequality or hierarchy among social groups (Pratto et al., 2000). As mentioned earlier, Chinese mothers' potential color-evasive socialization may not necessarily indicate maintenance of supremacy. Instead, it may be attributed to their limited awareness of racial minorities in China, which results in their "avoidance" of engagement in race-related discussions. Similarly, Chinese mothers' potential color-conscious socialization does not necessarily imply a tendency to guide their children about different races, but rather reflects their lack of awareness regarding racial equality. Studying the relations between Chinese mothers' social dominance orientation and color-conscious socialization can help interpret the meaning behind their potential color-conscious

socialization practices. Specifically, a positive association between maternal color-conscious socialization practices and social dominance orientation may indicate that Chinese mothers' engagement in race-related conversation leans toward perpetuating racial hierarchy and prejudice, rather than promoting racial diversity and equality.

Western-based research has shown that White people high in social dominance orientation may use the color evasion strategy to maintain racial hierarchy (e.g., Knowles et al., 2009). However, other research suggests that individuals with egalitarian values are more likely to ignore racial differences, while those who embrace social hierarchy may make the distinction between groups matter and thus more likely to stress racial differences (Goff et al., 2013; Milojev et al., 2014). Taken together, color-conscious socialization practices have been found associated with social dominance orientation, but there is no consensus on how they are related to each other (Daughtry et al., 2020; Levin et al., 2012). The inconsistent findings may be attributed to individual differences in patterns of such associations. To our knowledge, previous research has typically used variable-centered analysis, which assumes that the patterns of associations between color evasion and social dominance orientation in a study sample are consistent across the board (Hofmans et al., 2020). Therefore, there are two reasons for including maternal social dominance orientation in this study. One is to facilitate understanding of Chinese parents discussing race with their children. The other is to employ person-centered analysis, which will be further elaborated in the Analyses section, to address a theoretical debate in the literature.

## The Present Study

To unpack Chinese mothers' color-conscious socialization and how it relates to Chinese children's racial attitudes, this study addressed three research questions. First, we examined to what extent do Chinese mothers adopt different types of color-conscious statements (Research Question 1 [RQ1]). Second, we tested individual differences in Chinese mothers' profiles of observed color-conscious practices and the underlying ideology (i.e., social dominance orientation; Research Question 2 [RQ2]). Last, given that race and/or skin tone prejudice has been found in Chinese elementary-age children, we examined the role of maternal color-conscious socialization and social dominance orientation in shaping these prejudices (Research Question 3 [RQ3]).

To gain a better understanding of Chinese children's preference for light skin tones, we included both tan-skinned and light-skinned Chinese as target groups in addition to the White group. We chose to emphasize dark versus light skin within the same racial group due to the aforementioned "paradox" that White individuals, despite being a numerical minority, are often favored as a function of Westernized beauty standards, particularly in terms of lighter skin tones. Combining the perspective of social identity theory with Westernized White beauty ideals in China, we aimed to examine potential preference hierarchies among the three target groups and how maternal socialization relates to children's attitudes toward these three groups, considering both racial appearance and cultural background. Specifically, the light-skinned Chinese group and the tan-skinned Chinese group share the same cultural background but differ in skin tones, while the light-skinned Chinese group and the White group share similar skin tones but different cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, considering the unique contextual and cultural factors in China, and the absence of research evidence on Chinese parents' color-conscious practices, it remains unclear to what extent the Western-based color-conscious socialization theory can be applied to Chinese society. In addition, there is no consensus on color consciousness's relation to social dominance orientation based on Western research to date. Therefore, we did not propose specific hypotheses but took an exploratory approach to the analyses.

## Method

### Participants

The sample included 155 Han Chinese children aged between 7 and 11 years old (71 girls and 84 boys; $M_{age}$ = 8.85 years, $SD$ = 1.12) and their mothers. We selected this age group because this developmental period is particularly relevant for examining racial attitudes, given meta-analytic findings suggesting that racial prejudice peaks during middle childhood, followed by a slight decline until late childhood (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Participating families were recruited from urban regions across China, including Shanghai and Jinan cities as well as cities in Jiangsu Province. Recruitment was carried out through multiple channels, including organizations, schools, and social media platforms. We based our sample size on an a priori power analysis that provided us with 95% power ($\alpha$ = .05) to detect medium-sized main effects in all conducted analyses. All children were born in urban areas and from middle-income families, and all mothers were primary caregivers and resided with their children. Most children's mothers and fathers had a high level of education (92% mothers and 88% fathers gained bachelor's degree/higher vocational education or higher). The family income was above the average income of urban households in China for 86% of the families. Most children (91%) attended public schools in the absence of children from other racial groups. Children's contact frequency with White people was assessed by asking their mother the following question: "Have your child had any direct contact with White people?" on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*no direct contact*) to 5 (*a lot*). Approximately 78% of children had no or little direct contact with White people ($M$ = 1.66, $SD$ = 1.06).

### Procedure

Data collection was conducted from April 2021 to January 2022. Because of the strict contact restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the data collection was conducted through virtual meetings with participants by well-trained Chinese graduate students. Mothers and children provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were assured that they could quit at any time without consequences. During the video-recorded virtual visits, the mother and child first performed interaction tasks. Then the mother and child individually performed several computer tasks under the guidance of the researchers in absence of other family members. While the child was completing the computer tasks, the mother was instructed to complete her questionnaires on the phone in a separate room. The virtual visit lasted around 1 hr for each family. The family received a small gift after the visit. The study was approved by the Ethics committee of the authors' host institute.

## Measures

### Mothers' Color-Conscious Practices

Mothers and children were videotaped while looking through a picture book that was specifically designed for the present study to elicit race-related talk. The method was adapted from the work of Mesman et al. (2022) to fit the Chinese and White racial contexts. The book contains 10 pictures featuring two light-skinned Chinese, two tan-skinned Chinese, and two White children (a boy and a girl each) in various situations without any text. The first introductory picture features all six children standing next to each other. The following six pictures feature each of the six children alone in ambiguous situations (e.g., a mishap such as a broken vase that could reflect intentionally naughty behavior or an accident). The final three pictures show all six children and a male and female adult for each group in an explicitly cultural setting relevant to the three represented groups (i.e., Lunar New Year celebration settings to represent the two Chinese groups, a Halloween party to represent the White group). Mothers were instructed as follows:

> Please go through each of the pictures and tell your child what you see. Your child may also want to talk about the pictures, which is fine of course, but we would like you to take the lead and tell a story about the pictures.

Example pictures can be found in Figure 1.

All videotaped statements by mothers were first transcribed verbatim, and then coded. The coding system was adapted from the work by Mesman et al. (2022). For all pictures, the presence/absence of statements about the racial appearance of the characters (skin tone and hair/eye color) and the cultural background of the characters (cultural heritage and nationality) were coded. Although hair/eye color can vary within a single racial group, a common stereotype among Asian people is that White people typically have blond hair and blue eyes (Ito & Bisila, 2020), in contrast to Chinese people who are more likely to have black hair and brown eyes (Chaitanya et al., 2018; Leerunyakul & Suchonwanit, 2020). Accordingly, White characters were featured with noticeable blond hair and blue eyes, whereas Chinese characters were portrayed with black hair and brown eyes. In addition, for the first introduction picture (all children are present) and the last three cultural setting pictures (all children and two adults are present), the presence/absence of statements about grouping the characters based on their race and/or skin tone were coded.

Multiple statements about the same category regarding the same character within one picture were only coded once (Mesman et al., 2022). Higher scores reflect higher color consciousness. Two coders developed a reliability set of 10 videos with consensus scores and established intercoder reliability. They then trained graduate students who also coded the reliability set. After reaching intercoder reliability for all variables ($\kappa$s > .80), the trained coders proceeded to code the videos for the rest of the sample, in which 30% of the videos were double coded ($\kappa$s > .71), and generated consensus scores through discussion in case of discrepancies.

### Mothers' Social Dominance Orientation

The degree of preference for social hierarchy between groups was measured with the eight-item Social Dominance Orientation (Pratto et al., 1994). The original English version was translated into Chinese

**Figure 1**
*Example Pictures of the Picture Book*



*Note.* See the online article for the color version of this figure.

and subsequently back-translated by bilingual graduate researchers. The items were rated on a 5-scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). An example item is: "Some groups are inferior to others." The items were averaged and higher scores

reflected a higher preference for social hierarchy. The scale has shown reliability and validity among Chinese samples (e.g., Zhai et al., 2022). The internal consistency of the scale in this study was acceptable, Cronbach's α = .66.

## Children's Preference and Rejection

Children completed a social preference task based on the work by Levy et al. (2005). During the task, children were presented with 12 pictures simultaneously: two boys and two girls of each group (light-skinned Chinese, tan-skinned Chinese, and White people). The pictures were taken from the internet (https://generated.photo s/datasets) and an existing laboratory database (Mesman et al., 2022). The children in the pictures all faced straight and smiled. The skin tone of the light-skinned Chinese in the pictures was noticeably different from that of the tan-skinned Chinese, and was similar to that of the White group. The photos were cropped below the heads and into the same size with a white background. A pilot was conducted for perceived attractiveness and race by Chinese adults aged between 18 and 32 years old ($N = 23$). A 7-point scale was used to rate attractiveness, and a multiple-choice question was used to rate race. Photos receiving extreme scores of attractiveness were dropped, as were photos for which racial categorization was not reliably accurate. The final selected 12 photos were matched on perceived attractiveness ($ps > .05$) and were displayed in a randomized array that was consistent for each participant.

The participating children were asked five questions representing preference or rejection: (a) Who would you like to sit next to in class? (b) Who would you not like to sit next to in class? (c) Who would you like to invite for a play date at your house? (d) Who would you not like to invite for a play date at your house? and (e) Who would you want to invite for your birthday party? Children were instructed to choose one or none of the children in the pictures for the first four questions and to choose any number of children or none for the last question about the birthday party (meaning that this question only yields a preference score, as asking who children would not invite would simply be the reverse of the invitation question). Preference scores for each group reflect the frequency of selecting a child of a specific group to sit next to, play with, or invite to a birthday (potential score range 0–6). Rejection scores for each group reflect the frequency of selecting a child of a specific group to not sit next to or to not play with (potential score range 0–2).

## Analyses

Preliminary analyses revealed outliers ($z$ score $> |3.29|$) for maternal color-conscious practices (four outliers for racial appearance statements, three for cultural background statements, three for grouping statements) and for child attitudes (11 for rejection). These outliers were winsorized to bring them closer to the rest of the score distribution (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2021). There were missing data for 14 cases. Specifically, one case lacked picture book observations due to the loss of the virtual visit video. Another case lacked data on child attitudes (preference and rejection) because the wrong material was accidentally used. Additionally, the Social Dominance Orientation questionnaire was not filled out for 12 cases. Because the missing data did not exceed 10% of the total sample, we used pairwise deletion for cases with missing data when addressing each research question (see Smits et al., 2002).

To address RQ1, variable-centered descriptive statistics of three subtypes of maternal color-conscious statements (i.e., racial appearance, cultural background, and grouping) were calculated. Cochran's

$Q$ test was conducted to examine whether the *presence* of such statements differed among the three subtypes. Of note, we did not consider the *frequency* of the statements when comparing the three subtypes, as each subtype involved a varying number of pages in the picture book. Dunn's test was used to carry out a post hoc test. Additionally, for each type of maternal color-conscious statements, repeated-measures analysis of variance was used to test differences in responses to the three target groups (i.e., light-skinned Chinese, tan-skinned Chinese, and White people). Regarding RQ2 focusing on individual differences in patterns of color-conscious socialization practices and social dominance orientation, a person-centered approach was used. Compared to variable-centered approaches, which assume population homogeneity (Hofmans et al., 2020), person-centered approaches are more appropriate when the goal is to understand individual differences. We used a person-centered approach of K-means clustering which groups similar individuals into clusters by minimizing variation within profiles and maximizing variation between profiles (Henry et al., 2005). The NbClust package in R was used to determine the optimal number of clusters according to 30 popular indices (Charrad et al., 2014). Euclidean distance was employed as the dissimilarity measure. The K-means cluster analysis was conducted on the standardized variables using SPSS's default Lloyd algorithm. To address RQ3, we conducted multivariate regression analyses to examine the effects of the number of maternal statements and social dominance orientation on children's attitudes toward the three target groups. Given the focus on ingroup versus outgroup attitudes, children were asked to identify which target group they believed they belong to (i.e., light-skinned or tan-skinned Chinese) by selecting a child from the presented task photos that they perceived as most resembling themselves. We considered this variable (i.e., children's self-identity of belonging to a target group) as a potential covariate.

# Results

## Preliminary Analyses

Supplemental Table S1 shows the correlations between the main study variables. Supplemental Table S2 presents the means and standard deviations for all the key variables. We examined child gender, child age, family income, maternal education, child contact frequency with White people, and children's self-identity of belonging to a target group in relation to the study variables, to decide which ones should be included as covariates in later analyses. Out of 112 associations tested, only 11 were significant. Child age was positively associated with preference for the tan-skinned Chinese and White groups and maternal grouping statements about the White group, and negatively associated with rejection of the tan-skinned Chinese group ($ps < .05$). Higher educated mothers made more racial appearance statements about all three target groups ($ps < .05$). Children who had more frequent contact with White people had mothers who made more statements about racial appearance of White and light-skinned Chinese people and scored higher on rejection of the tan-skinned Chinese group ($ps < .05$). Children who perceived themselves as belonging to the light-skinned Chinese group had mothers who made fewer statements regarding cultural background of White people ($p < .05$). We conducted multivariate analyses with and without covariates (children's age and contact frequency with White people, which were significantly related to both the predictor

and outcome variables), to better understand the impact of these covariates on our findings.

## Research Question 1: To What Extent Do Chinese Mothers Adopt Color-Conscious Socialization Practices?

Descriptive statistics and example quotes of mothers' statements during picture book reading are presented in Table 1. There were no positive or negative statements (only neutral statements) about any characters or cultures, regardless of the target group. Descriptive analyses showed that 11% of mothers made none of the three subtypes of the statements about the characters. In other words, the majority of Chinese mothers made at least one statement about racial appearance, cultural background, or grouping. Specifically, 68% of mothers made at least one statement about the *racial appearance* of the characters, 83% made at least one statement about the *cultural background* of the characters, and 36% made at least one statement about the *grouping* of the characters. The results of Cochran's $Q$ test showed that the proportion of mothers who mentioned and did not mention statements across the three subtypes was significantly different, $\chi^2(2) = 87.65$, $p < .001$. A pairwise comparison using Dunn's test indicated that Chinese mothers were more likely to mention cultural background, followed by racial appearance, but less likely to make statements about grouping the characters based on these racial differences ($p$s < .01).

Regarding mothers' statements for each target group, 82% made statements about the light-skinned Chinese characters, 81% made statements about the tan-skinned Chinese characters, and 81% made statements about the White characters, revealing no significant target group effect, $F(1.88, 287.45) = 1.35$, $p = .26$. However, separately inspecting the three types of statements, the number of the statements about the three groups differed. Specifically, with regard to racial appearance statements, mothers made the most statements about the White group, with the tan-skinned Chinese group being

the next most frequently mentioned, followed by the light-skinned Chinese group, $F(1.78, 271.74) = 20.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta_G^2 = .02$, with all contrasts $p$s < .05. We also found significant differences regarding the cultural background statements, $F(1.87, 286.14) = 15.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta_G^2 = .01$, with mothers making more such statements about the light- or tan-skinned Chinese group than about the White group (both contrasts $p$s < .001). There was no significant difference between the three target groups in terms of the number of grouping statements mothers made about them, $F(2, 306) = 2.02$, $p = .13$.

## Research Question 2: Does Chinese Mothers' Social Dominance Orientation Cluster With Their Color-Conscious Socialization Practices?

Correlations showed that Chinese mothers' social dominance orientation was positively related to the number of maternal grouping statements ($p$s < .01), but was not significantly related to the number of racial appearance or cultural background statements. We further used the K-means cluster analysis to identify clusters of maternal color-conscious statements with social dominance orientation. The NbClust package in R showed that a two-cluster solution was supported by four indices, a three-cluster solution was supported by 13 indices, and a four-cluster and a 10-cluster solution were both supported by three indices. Given these results, and applying the parsimony principle, we report the three-cluster solution (Table 2; Henry et al., 2005). The first cluster ($N = 79$) reflects mothers lower than the mean on all three types of color-conscious practices and lower than the mean on social dominance orientation. The second cluster ($N = 22$) reflects mothers with the exact opposite pattern. The third cluster ($N = 41$) reflects mothers lower than the mean on grouping statements but higher than the mean on racial appearance and cultural background statements, and lower than the mean on social dominance orientation. All variables distinguished significantly among the three clusters present in Table 2.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Example Quotes of Mothers' Statements in Picture Book Reading*

| Variable | Example quote[a] | Range[b] | $M$ $(SD)$[b] | %[c] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number of racial appearance statements | That boy has blond hair and blue eyes; she looks like us | 0–18 | 4.06 (4.08) | 68 |
|   Light-skinned Chinese | because she has black hair and a "yellow" skin tone; | 0–6 | 1.15 (1.34) | 55 |
|   Tan-skinned Chinese | this boy has a darker skin tone; their skin colors are | 0–6 | 1.31 (1.40) | 59 |
|   White | different. | 0–7 | 1.60 (1.62) | 65 |
| Total number of cultural background statements | Dragon is something special in Chinese culture; this is | 0–21 | 4.68 (4.86) | 83 |
|   Light-skinned Chinese | Chinese New Year; they are making pumpkin | 0–7 | 1.66 (1.75) | 73 |
|   Tan-skinned Chinese | lanterns to celebrate Western Halloween. | 0–7 | 1.70 (1.74) | 68 |
|   White | | 0–6 | 1.32 (1.61) | 58 |
| Total number of grouping statements | These are the parents of these two children (pointing to | 0–10 | 0.88 (1.59) | 36 |
|   Light-skinned Chinese | tan-skinned children); these two White children are | 0–3 | 0.30 (0.57) | 25 |
|   Tan-skinned Chinese | siblings. | 0–4 | 0.27 (0.58) | 21 |
|   White | | 0–3 | 0.32 (0.58) | 27 |

*Note.* Presence/absence of each category of statements was counted per picture, so that multiple statements within one category in relation to the same picture were only counted once.
[a] More example quotes are presented in Supplemental Tables S3 and S4. [b] Statistics obtained before winsorizing (actual observed range). Racial appearance statements variable for each target group could range from 0 to 12. Cultural background statements for each target group could range from 0 to 7. Grouping statements for each target group could range from 0 to 4. The frequency distribution of category-specific statements for each target group per picture is presented in Supplemental Table S5, showing a pattern that mothers were less likely to reiterate their category-specific statements for each target group in subsequent pictures. For example, if mothers discussed the racial appearance of a particular target group in the first picture, they were less prone to revisit this topic for the same group in subsequent pictures. [c] The percentages of mothers who made relevant statements.

## Research Question 3: Do Chinese Mothers' Color-Conscious Socialization Practices and Social Dominance Orientation Relate to Children's Attitudes?

We conducted multivariate regression analyses to examine the effects of the number of maternal statements and social dominance orientation on children's attitudes toward *specific* target groups, considering the findings from RQ1 revealed that for each subtype (racial appearance, cultural background, grouping), the number of maternal statements varied across the three target groups. We found that the three subtypes of maternal statements about the White group and social dominance orientation had no significant effects on children's attitudes toward the White group. However, for the tan-skinned Chinese group, the number of maternal statements about their appearance was positively related to children's rejection of the group, $b = 0.08$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, while the number of maternal statements about their cultural background was negatively associated with children's rejection of the group, $b = -0.06$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. No significant results were found for the light-skinned Chinese group.

## Discussion

This study adapted the Western-based construct of color consciousness to the unique cultural context of China and identified three subtypes, namely, racial appearance, cultural background, and grouping. Chinese mothers tended to discuss race with their children. Maternal color-conscious practices were associated with higher social dominance orientation in both the variable- and person-centered analyses. The study also found that the more mothers made statements that focused on tan-skinned Chinese appearance, the stronger the children's rejection of this group. However, when mothers made more statements about the cultural background of this group, children's rejection of tan-skinned Chinese was less strong.

The results indicated that mothers in China tend to discuss racial appearance and cultural background with their children. This contrasts with studies in White Western populations where most White mothers avoided discussing such topics with their children (Mesman et al., 2022; Vittrup, 2018). However, it is important to note that Chinese mothers' discussion of racial and cultural differences may not necessarily align with the Western concept of color consciousness, which involves emphasizing diversity and racial equality (Bell, 2016). In China, prejudice against other racial groups appears to be relatively acceptable (Cheng, 2019), which may result in relatively limited social norms regarding racial equality. Consequently, Chinese mothers may have low inhibitions about discussing racial and cultural differences in front of their children. Indeed, our findings concerning Chinese mothers' profiles of observed color-conscious practices and social dominance orientation showed that Chinese mothers' absence of discussing race clustered with low social dominance orientation (Cluster 1), and discussion of race clustered with high social dominance orientation (Cluster 2). These results support our notion that Chinese mothers' acknowledgment of racial differences may differ from Western concept of color consciousness, given that the latter signifies the promotion of diversity and justice ideals with low social dominance orientation. Furthermore, these findings indicate that the absence of color consciousness may not equate to color evasion, as mothers who did not tend to engage in race-related conversation had lower levels of social dominance orientation (Cluster 1). It is possible that these mothers did not strategically and intentionally avoid acknowledging racial differences, but rather considered race as less relevant to their story. Indeed, as shown in our data, mothers who mentioned neither racial appearance nor cultural background mainly focused on the events depicted in the pictures (e.g., "He broke the vase," "They are celebrating New Year"). Alternatively, in China's racially homogenous society discussions about race are relatively uncommon (Lan, 2022), so that Chinese mothers might not view race as a typical subject for discussion with their children. Combining the current method with other tasks, such as the "Guess Who" game—a social categorization game that reflects how often and how quickly parents mention skin color with their children (de Bruijn et al., 2024; Norton et al., 2006)—is recommended to further study whether Chinese mothers are color evasive or not.

**Table 2**

*Results of K-Means Cluster Analysis About Three Types of Color Consciousness and Social Dominance Orientation*

| Variable | Cluster 1 (N = 79) | Cluster 2 (N = 22) | Cluster 3 (N = 41) | F-test[a] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Maternal racial appearance statements about | | | | |
|   Light-skinned Chinese | −.55 | .20 | .94 | 52.48*** |
|   Tan-skinned Chinese | −.56 | .43 | .88 | 51.45*** |
|   White | −.56 | .44 | .84 | 47.46*** |
| Maternal cultural background statements about | | | | |
|   Light-skinned Chinese | −.55 | .41 | .93 | 52.84*** |
|   Tan-skinned Chinese | −.54 | .36 | .92 | 49.68*** |
|   White | −.55 | .48 | .90 | 54.33*** |
| Maternal grouping statements about | | | | |
|   Light-skinned Chinese | −.39 | 1.71 | −.22 | 85.04*** |
|   Tan-skinned Chinese | −.37 | 1.97 | −.30 | 149.14*** |
|   White | −.38 | 1.82 | −.21 | 99.40*** |
| Maternal social dominance orientation | −.12 | .86 | −.27 | 11.80*** |

*Note.* Numbers represent *z* values for cluster centers. Lower number reflects lower color consciousness.
[a] Significance of the variable's contribution to the clustering.
*** $p < .001$.

The study also identified a small third subpopulation (Cluster 3) of Chinese mothers who demonstrated color consciousness on racial appearance and cultural background, but not on grouping, with low levels of social dominance orientation. The existence of this cluster highlights the heterogeneity among Chinese mothers' social dominance orientation and color consciousness, particularly in terms of racial appearance and cultural background statements. That is, some individuals with low social dominance orientation tended to mention racial appearance and cultural background (Cluster 3), while some were less likely to acknowledge such differences (Cluster 1). This finding seems to reconcile inconsistencies found in previous variable-centered research on the relation between color consciousness and social dominance orientation and highlights the importance of considering individual differences in levels of social dominance orientation underlying color-conscious practices.

Our results showed that Chinese mothers tended to make more statements about cultural background than racial appearance, supporting our notion that color consciousness needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed in the Chinese context. One possible explanation is that Chinese mothers may intend to emphasize and transmit Chinese traditional cultural heritage to their children. Indeed, our results showed that Chinese mothers made more cultural background statements about both Chinese groups than the White group. We speculated that being more vocal about Chinese culture while being more silent about Western culture is an implicit way of stressing their own culture. Additional research is recommended to explore the nuances between these two subtypes of color consciousness in Western samples.

It is interesting to note that Chinese mothers exhibited a relatively low prevalence of statements on grouping, as opposed to cultural background and racial appearance. This indicated that they tended to avoid grouping characters based on race and/or skin tone in interactions with their children. Avoiding grouping statements was consistently clustered with low levels of social dominance orientation, suggesting that Chinese mothers' focus on the functional aspects of racial differences (i.e., making grouping statements) may be associated with negative connotations, such as group-based hierarchy, rather than egalitarianism (Ho & Kteily, 2020; I.-C. Lee et al., 2011). Indeed, while emphasizing group membership can be related to identifying systemic racial disparities and support for diversity, grouping with hierarchy-enhancing ideologies aligns with the concept of social dominance orientation (Okuyan & Vollhardt, 2022). This seems to support our earlier speculation that Chinese mothers' acknowledgment of racial differences may differ from the Western-based concept of color consciousness, which is a positive force in promoting racial equity and justice.

When Chinese mothers made more statements about tan-skinned Chinese' appearance, children showed stronger rejection of this group. However, when mothers made more statements about the cultural background of tan-skinned Chinese, the rejection of the group was less strong. Apparently, emphasizing shared cultural background rather than physical appearance can help promote children's positive attitudes toward certain groups. On the one hand, due to the prevalence of colorism in China, emphasizing tan-skinned Chinese' physical appearance, such as skin tone, might trigger children's negative stereotypes (Adams et al., 2016), potentially related to low social status (Mandalaywala et al., 2020). On the other hand, talking about shared cultural background can shift the focus away from superficial characteristics and highlight the rich traditions and heritages of the Chinese group. Due to sharing the same Chinese cultural background, children may feel a stronger connection to tan-skinned Chinese, which can help reduce negative stereotypes and prejudices associated with physical appearance.

Our study has some limitations. First, our findings may have been influenced by social desirability bias, as mothers may attempt to avoid displaying prejudice in front of the camera (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). This may result in only neutral statements during picture book reading, as shown by our data. To avoid this, a more implicit approach would be beneficial. Second, we did not examine mothers' attitudes toward the three target groups. Prior research has shown that mothers' racial attitudes can be linked to their color-conscious practices and can impact children's racial attitudes (e.g., Wang et al., 2023). To gain a better understanding of how maternal socialization relates to children's racial attitudes, future studies could include this information. Third, we only investigated mothers. Future research should also include fathers and other socializing agents such as teachers. Fourth, while our research team carefully selected the pictures used in the social preference task to ensure noticeable skin-tone differences between tan- and light-skinned photos, future studies are recommended to conduct a standardized pilot to assess whether participants perceive these differences in the photos. Additionally, a causal link between mothers' racial socialization practices and children's racial attitudes cannot be concluded from the present study. Future studies are recommended to include a control group (i.e., mother–child dyads who did not participate in race-related storytelling) and to measure children's racial attitudes at baseline (Haber et al., 2024). An intervention study may be warranted to further examine the effects of Chinese mothers' racial socialization practices on children's racial attitudes. Finally, while this study touched upon the ideology underlying Chinese mothers' color-conscious practices, a mixed-methods approach including both qualitative and quantitate methods could further investigate the beliefs and attitudes that inform Chinese mothers' (absence of) discussions about racial differences (Vittrup, 2018).

In conclusion, the different prevalence rates and implications of maternal color-conscious statements about racial appearance, cultural background, and grouping underscore the need to conceptualize color consciousness in a more nuanced way, particularly in the Chinese context, but potentially in all contexts. By considering the individual differences in ideologies underlying color-conscious practices, this study better resolves seemingly contradictory findings in the literature. This study also provides valuable empirical insights into the relations between racial socialization practices of Chinese mothers and children's racial attitudes. The acknowledgment of cultural background appears to be a positive driver of Chinese children's attitudes toward their racial ingroup with darker skin tone, suggesting that emphasis on shared cultures could potentially reduce colorism.

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