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Parents with High Expectations May End Up Raising More Successful Children

Study of 'dragon children' in China shows superstition-boosted parental expectations can translate into academic success



A new study finds that parents of children born in the year of the dragon 'invest more heavily in their children in terms of time and money.' PHOTO: KATHY WILLENS/ASSOCIATED PRESS



By

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A new study suggests parents who believe their children will be highly successful in life invest more effort in raising them, boosting their future prospects in the process.

The recent paper by **Louisiana State University** economists **Naci Mocan** and **Han Yu** examined the Chinese superstition that children born in years associated with the dragon zodiac sign are destined for success. They found Chinese children born in a dragon year did, in fact, score higher on school tests and were more likely to graduate

from college compared with otherwise similar children.

“We find that parents of dragon children have higher expectations for their children in comparison to other parents, and that they invest more heavily in their children in terms of time and money,” the economists wrote in the working paper, circulated in August by the **National Bureau of Economic Research**. “Even though neither the dragon children nor their families are inherently different from other children and families, the belief in the prophecy of success and the ensuing investment become self-fulfilling.”

The 12-year cycle of the Chinese zodiac assigns an animal to each year. The year of the dragon is considered especially lucky – producing children who are supposedly stronger and smarter – and some Chinese and Chinese-American families sought to time births to fall during the last dragon year in 2012 and early 2013. Indeed, a study published in 2011 found Asian immigrants to the U.S. who were born in the dragon year of 1976 were more educated than other similar immigrants.

In their research, Messrs. Mocan and Yu found so-called dragon children in China performed better than similar children who had been born during other zodiac years by several measures: middle-school test scores, scores on the national college entrance exam and likelihood of achieving a college education.

They found the parents of dragon and non-dragon children were similar in most respects, such as family income and educational attainment. Where they differed was that in surveys, parents of dragon children had “substantially higher expectations of their children regarding their children’s educational attainment and about their children’s future success in comparison to other parents,” the researchers wrote.

Despite dragon children being no different from other children, the economists wrote, their parents were more likely to enroll them in kindergarten and speak with their teachers, gave them more pocket money and shielded them from having to perform household chores – all investments that yield better academic outcomes and help fulfill the prophecy that those children would do better in school.

“In this case, parental expectations are critically important in terms of determining educational outcomes for children, and perhaps other outcomes as well,” Mr. Mocan said in an interview. But high expectations matter only “to the extent that these expectations shape and form behavioral patterns,” he said.

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