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Published online: 20 Aug 2014.

To cite this article: Karen Guo (2014) For a Better Life: The Aspirations of Chinese Immigrants in Parenting, Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 12:3, 293-310, DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2013.843047

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2013.843047
For a Better Life: The Aspirations of Chinese Immigrants in Parenting

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This article discusses the parenting aspirations of Chinese immigrants, looking in detail at a study in New Zealand. My discussion of the topic centers on the aspirations of educated Chinese immigrants for their preschool children, and their ways of parenting. The “Tiger Mother” practice described in Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, and other research on immigrant parenting, directed my attention to this subject. It is argued that in times of change from one context to another, parenting style is an attempt by Chinese immigrants to realize their immigration aspirations for a better life for themselves and their children.

KEYWORDS Chinese immigrant, parenting aspirations, culture, context, Tiger Mother, early childhood education

This article explores the parenting aspirations of ethnically Chinese immigrants with tertiary education qualifications. In writing the article, I also aim to respond to the ideas about Chinese parenting presented in Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother by Amy Chua (2011), a Chinese American professor at Yale University. In this autobiography, Chua described her strong urge to produce children’s academic achievement in a Chinese way and demonstrated the effectiveness of this Chinese parenting in helping children achieve. This book became a focus of public debate and left many people wondering whether children’s academic achievements are the only aspirations of educated Chinese immigrant parents.

Particular reference is made also to studies on parenting aspirations of immigrants of other cultures and those without tertiary education qualifications. It is acknowledged in the article that although parenting education...
is important in shaping and influencing childrearing values and practices, it would be somewhat arbitrary to limit discussion to a single group of people.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Goal pursuit is the central focus of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The current article extrapolates from this orientation. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), aspirations are achieved through meeting people's psychological needs and through them undertaking a process of behavior regulation. The idea offered in SDT for considering both the motives that regulate human behaviors and the external contexts can be applied directly to my understanding of the parental aspirations and practices of Chinese immigrants (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). The most distinctive feature of SDT is the "ought-based behaviours" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 248) in that perceptions of locus of causality—namely, the understanding of cause of success or failure, form the basis of people's pursuit of aspirations.

The idea of culture-context influence on human behaviors offered by Barbara Rogoff (20003) can also be applied to the current study. Rogoff explains human beliefs and practices in terms of two complementary influences: a specific cultural community and the wider contexts. Studies with Chinese immigrants also illustrate their development of "forms of community and identity connecting places of residence and family ancestry in novel combinations" (Parker & Song, 2007, p. 1045). The current article takes this view. At the heart of the work lies the idea that Chinese immigrant parenting has a function by virtue of its original cultural existence but every aspect of this function is integrated with the contexts in which parents find themselves in their host environments.

Thus, the lens through which I explore the aspirations of Chinese immigrant parents is one that privileges their motive, behavior, culture, and context. The notions of motive, behavior, and context all serve to emphasize an adaptable framework within which immigrant parenting takes place. If parenting aspirations are oriented toward the pursuit of valued ends in the host countries (Parker & Song, 2007), there would be similar motives and behaviors between educated Chinese immigrants and other immigrants.

ASPIRING FOR A BETTER LIFE: THE MOTIVE BEHIND CHINESE IMMIGRANT PARENTING

For many Chinese, immigration is an experience of resettling that is driven by an important motive: aspiring to a better life, or hoping for an improved existence (Song, 2003; Urdan & Munoz, 2012). From a culture-context paradigm,
three factors could explain the implication of a better life for Chinese immigrant parents. The first is the Chinese cultural orientation. The second factor is the immigration experience of Chinese immigrants. The third factor is the host environment (Guo, 2006; Li, 2004; Song, 2003). According to Urdan and Monoz (2012), “The act of immigrating itself can be considered a hopeful act as immigrants sacrifice relationships and familiarity with the culture in the native country for greater opportunities in the new country” (p. 248). It follows from this point that an essential goal of immigrants is a better life in the host country.

Better Life in the Chinese Tradition

The key to understanding the notion of a better life in Chinese terms lies in the work of Confucius, a leading Chinese cultural theorist. Confucius’s ideas about self-cultivation, improvement, and achievement have proved particularly influential in accounting for Chinese beliefs (Chan, 2004). According to Lim and Lim (2003), Chinese traditions aim to establish the scope and methods of human existence, to show its worth by the explanation of achievement, and to associate closely with some important human attributes such as self-cultivation and self-improvement.

In the Chinese tradition, education is given great importance and this is rooted in the Chinese pursuit of improvement and achievement (Zhou & Li, 2003). It is believed that one cannot have a proper life without a good education (Chao, 1994). Ochocka and Janzen (2008) have shown that the cultural significance of education has influenced Chinese immigrant families whereby attempts are made to use education as the main means to develop and secure a better life.

Chinese immigrants who are educated themselves have a particular affinity with this cultural tradition. As Li (2001) discusses in the Canadian context: “Given their [Chinese immigrants’] educational and professional qualifications, it is not surprising that these immigrant parents wanted their children to secure a good life through education” (p. 491). Markose (2007) identifies a similar finding from her study with Chinese immigrants in Australia.

Better Life From Parents’ Immigration Experiences

Research indicates that immigration is a series of stressful experiences, characterized by “determination and hesitation, expectations and apprehensions, and dreams and worries” (Li, 2001, p. 489). When immigrants adapt to a new and culturally unfamiliar environment they face a high level of uncertainty (Souto-Manning, 2007). Many barriers arise in their moves toward settling in another country. These include, for example, being excluded from the
mainstream living opportunities or having difficulty finding jobs because their qualifications are not recognized (Bhatia, 2003; Parker & Song, 2007).

Despite the difficulties, Chinese immigrants hold hopes for the future in their belief that efforts lead to achievements (Wu, 2009). For Wu, hard work, although a traditional approach to living, is also an adaptive response of Chinese immigrants to their struggles in a different context. Under the difficult conditions of immigration, Chinese immigrants have stronger beliefs in the importance of hard work to bring them a better life (Chan & Seet, 2003).

The difficulties that Chinese immigrant parents experience in their host countries play potential roles in their reliance on their children to work hard (Li, 2001). A further reason is that “newcomer parents often have a different slate of values and possess a drive for their children to bear the fruits of their own sacrifices upon migrating to another country” (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008, p. 88). If the parents cannot see themselves fulfilling their own hopes for a better life, the efforts they make to create an improved existence for their children can be the long-term assets for the realization of the parents’ own immigration aspirations. The point here is that Chinese immigrant parents expect to obtain a better life for themselves through their efforts to improve their children’s lives.

Zhou and Li (2003) reported tremendous pressures from Chinese immigrant parents on their children and themselves to have an improved standard of living through hard work. For this reason, immigration for Chinese should be viewed in the light of the family obligations of both parents and children. This is what Li (2001) sees as the most significant characteristic of Chinese immigration: Parents’ motives are strongly incorporated into children’s lives in the belief that “the demanding nature of Chinese parenting would ultimately produce positive outcomes” (p. 484).

It can be argued that in a culture in which family is highly valued, the behaviors of family members are always influenced by their perception of what other members expect of them (Walsh, 2012). The notion of family also permeates much of the research on Chinese immigrant parenting. For example, in their study with Chinese immigrants in Singapore, Chan and Seet (2003) claim that “better life” is a promise of migration for every family member in Chinese immigrant families. They reported that “the Chinese migrants in Singapore spend most of their time reproducing the ‘reality’ of ‘family togetherness’” and “the idea of a family is powerful, and becomes more so when the family must stick together as a cohesive unit, as when faced with ... strange conditions in the host country” (p. 194).

One further basis for the conception of a better life for Chinese immigrant parents is the discriminative structure of the host country to ethnic minorities. Siu (1992) found that in response to discrimination in the host country, Chinese immigrant parents motivated their children to work harder
Aspirations of Chinese Immigrants in Parenting

so they could compete against the dominant groups and overcome the dis-advantaged positions of ethnic minorities.

Hard work is also an important concept for many other immigrants. Bhatia (2003) reported in a study with Canadian immigrants of a range of ethnic groups whose participants believed that “working hard can lead to success” (p. 192). There was also a clear recognition from Latino immigrants in the United States that hard work and social and economic advancement were closely related (Worthy & Rodriguez-Galindo, 2006).

Better Life From the Host Environment

The forward-looking approach to a better life is a powerful force by which Chinese immigrants actively and tactically improve their living conditions in immigrant countries. Holding a belief that host countries will provide them with the opportunities for a better life (Li & Koblinsky, 2009; Urdan & Monoz, 2012), Chinese immigrant parents are positive about their children’s future.

Strategically responding to the changing contexts is a very distinctive feature of immigrant parenting, simultaneously revealing and extending parents’ capacities for child rearing, their exploration of useful techniques, and their reconstruction of realistic and achievable goals in parenting (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008; Wu, 2009). A study of immigrant parents from 12 cultural communities in Canada “reveals the role of a new host society in shaping the parenting orientation and styles of immigrants” (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008, p. 88–89). Each immigrant parent brings a distinctive background to parenting, but Ochocka and Janzen (2008) found of particular importance is his or her eventual conforming “to a typical ‘Western’ style over time” (p. 88). Chinese immigrant parents are similar to other immigrants in terms of adapting themselves to the host environment by embracing many cultural aspects of the new countries (Guo, 2006; Wu, 2009).

Another argument in support of a broader notion of better life concerns the variation of immigrant parents’ own backgrounds and experiences. While immigrant parents hold hopes for a successful settlement of their children, the notion of “success” varies among them because “parents view their children’s future through the lens of their own lives” (Worthy & Rodriguez-Galindo, 2006, p. 586). Such an idea opens space for defining the differences between immigrant parents in terms of both cultures and individuals.

Variations in parenting interpretations of children’s success are also important phenomena in Chinese immigrant groups. The conception of individualized teaching, yin cai shi jiao (Lin, 2007) is a principle that guides Chinese immigrant parenting, especially with children who do not “succeed” academically. The point here is to recognize individual diversities. It is by no means that all Chinese immigrant parents expect their children to excel.
in studies. The focus on individuals draws attention to differences based on many factors such as the children’s own academic abilities, family backgrounds, or parental education. There are examples in which parents make extreme demands for academic excellence possibly because they perceive their children as capable and the parents know that they have time, strategies, and resources to support the children. Given the vast variability in children and parents, there are naturally some Chinese immigrant parents who only expect their children to have a living condition better than what the parents currently have (Ma & Yeh, 2010).

**RESEARCH AIMS**

The notion of a better life is of central interest in the present research. More specifically, the aim is to explore, from the perspective of educated Chinese immigrant parents, their aspirations for a better life for their preschool children. The ideas of academic excellence and hard work have been discussed widely in literature about the aspirations of Chinese immigrant parents. The reason why parents of preschool children were chosen for this research is that in many Western countries, young children do not have academic obligations before school, and learning and development are mainly play oriented (Chan, 2006). Research has indicated that Chinese immigrant parents face the challenges of contrasting cultural beliefs in children’s learning and development (Guo, 2006; Wu, 2009). For this reason, the expectations of Chinese immigrant parents with young children should be an area of research interest. In view of the large amount of information about Chinese immigrant parenting with school-aged children, it might be helpful to attempt a study with the parents of preschoolers.

My interest in undertaking this research was also influenced by the realization that the Tiger Mother’s story, as illustrated in Amy Chua’s (2011) autobiography, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, has become a recent focus of public discourse (Paul, 2011). The Tiger Mother’s harsh parental practices derived from her so-called Chinese upbringing have made Amy Chua, a second generation American Chinese, the center of attention. Central features for “tiger parenting” were the series of rules that she consistently imposed on her daughters and Chua’s extreme demands for excellence from her daughters in their academic performance. It is Chua’s concepts of Chinese harsh practice, and her demands for academic achievements from her children that have given rise to current controversies and issues (Bates, 2011; Hoerr, 2011; Lum, 2011). Chua confessed that she was determined to bring up her daughters the “Chinese way” she had experienced. She wrote: “I was the one that in a very overconfident immigrant way thought I knew exactly how to raise my kids” and, “A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder how Chinese parents produce
so many math whizzes and music prodigies, what it’s like inside the family, and whether they could do it too. Well, I can tell them, because I’ve done it” (p. 1). According to Lum (2011), the heated discourses on tiger parenting have obscured people’s perceptions about Chinese immigrant parenting. It is more important now than ever before that we take a new look at Chinese immigrant parenting. If we know that Chua’s high academic demands on her daughters were imposed on them ever since her daughters were very young, we can see the significance of conducting research with Chinese immigrant parents of preschool children, especially because very limited research has been conducted with this group.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research involved 10 Chinese immigrant parents who resided in New Zealand and had children (three- to five-year-olds) attending preschools. Of the participants, eight were mothers and two were fathers. They ranged from age 31 to 43 years. The parents had migrated to New Zealand from China or Taiwan within the previous 10 years at the time of the research. They all held academic degrees and were either working or studying when the research was conducted. For details, see Table 1.

The current study followed another study that investigated Chinese immigrant children’s experiences in preschools. I observed eight children daily in their preschools over a period of 5 weeks each, as the children participated in the learning activities. At the end of my study with the children, I invited their parents to participate in interviews. The parent interviews, which were used as supporting data in my study with the Chinese immigrant children, were the data source for the current article.

It is recognized that the study could not find “pure” and “typical” samples of Chinese immigrant parents. It would be better to regard the participants as “suitable” types for this study only because they were likely to help accomplish the research aims.

There were two reasons why educated parents were chosen for this study. The first reason was that in recent decades, New Zealand has undergone a major population transformation due to significant changes in immigration policies about recruiting overseas skills into the country. This has led to a large influx of educated immigrants, many of whom are people of Chinese ethnicity (Department of Labour, New Zealand, 2009). Since the parents were educated, I was interested to see whether their own educational experiences influenced their parenting values, as suggested in the literature. Another reason was that given that the research was partly a response to the parenting experiences of Amy Chua, who was well educated, it was important that people of similar backgrounds were chosen.
**TABLE 1** Information About the Participating Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age of Parent</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Age of Preschool Child</th>
<th>Length of Residence in NZ</th>
<th>Current Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>4 years, 4 months</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Part-time accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>4 years, 1 month</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Full-time homemaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Full-time accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming (Hong’s husband)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YanWei</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>3 years, 3 months</td>
<td>4.5 years</td>
<td>Full-time doctoral student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>4 years, 9 months</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>English-language teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>3 years, 5 months</td>
<td>4.5 years</td>
<td>Full-time student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen (Amy’s husband)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>3 years, 5 months</td>
<td>4.5 years</td>
<td>Piano teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>3 years, 8 months</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Full-time bank clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ping</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>3 years, 2 months</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Real-estate agent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms.
A 1-hour, semi-structured individual interview was conducted with each of the parents. The parents were asked open-ended questions and I tried to limit my influence on them. The attempt was to understand the parents' personal and immigration experiences, their aspirations for children's learning and development, beliefs about a better life, and the practice they undertook to raise young children in New Zealand. All interviews were audiotaped.

Based on the parents' accounts, the aim was to develop a grassroots theory of better life within Chinese immigrant parenting practice. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed immediately after they were conducted. I was engaged in a process of “constant comparative analysis” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 102) by constantly comparing across the data so that variation in them was understood. Specific steps of analysis involved reading repetitively, dividing data into broad categories, and then coding. Codes were compared to find consistencies in order to identify themes. Through the constant comparison of categories and codes, themes were further refined.

To ensure that quality measures were met for this study, I adopted the approach of participant validation suggested by Bryman (2004). I returned to the parents with the tentative results of my data analysis and then refined the results according to their feedback. Triangulation was achieved in this study through comparison of the parents’ perspectives with the observational data collected from their children. This allowed a degree of cross-checking of the data gathered. A colleague also coded a section of the transcripts as a means of providing critical feedback on my work.

**FINDINGS**

Thematic analysis of the data suggested that the parents' perspectives were similar to the findings in many previous studies: Chinese immigrant parents aspired to academic achievements for their children, and they believed academic achievements could lead to a better life (Li, 2001; Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). Nevertheless, there was also evidence that achievement was interpreted broadly by them, including learning and development in a holistic way. The parents were explicit on the idea that although academic achievement was important, it was only one of the overall achievements. In addition, all the parents took the view that developing their children's awareness of the host country’s cultural knowledge and experiences was of particular importance in the preschool years.

**A Better Life Comes From Strong Academic Foundations in the Preschool Years**

In their response to the question, “What do you wish for in your aspirations for your children’s preschool education?” the participants produced phrases
including learning before school, foundational years for school, and school preparations. In this respect, one might say that they were inclining toward an education-oriented interpretation of preschool education.

Typically, the parents perceived preschool education as a stage at which children started accumulating academic knowledge. An important statement by all the parents was that preschool children needed to learn words, numbers, drawing, or piano. They said that they taught children these things at home. The parents included statements such as, “I teach my child words and numbers. She learns Chinese and English.”

The parents reported several reasons why young children should have academic learning experiences. Firstly, all the parents believed that academic knowledge is crucial for children’s development. Ming said that learning must take place now; otherwise it would be too late: “You know the beginning decides the end. It is important that a young child takes life seriously or it will be too late.” All parents stated that they went through rigorous academic training ever since they were young and that helped them a lot in their pursuit of an improved living.

Secondly, all the parents said that although academic learning was important in the preschool years, this did not seem to be happening in the preschools that their children attended. Their idea was, “My child has not learned any academic things in the preschool.” All the participating parents had university qualifications, and for the parents, developing into an educated person was not a big goal for their child but more of a natural outcome. Lucy said, “In my family, everyone has a good education. My child cannot be brought up in another way.”

Thirdly, the parents stated the importance of Chinese culture in guiding their work with children on academic things. For them, Chinese culture placed a great emphasis on academic learning, which was good. Amy said, “The academic emphasis in Chinese culture benefits children. Academic achievements provide a good life.”

For some parents, it was important that their children were not behind their peers in China because they might return to live there. Linda told me: “my child is going back to live in China before she starts school. I want her to learn as much as she can so that she will not be too unhappy because she is not as good as the peers there.” Two parents highlighted the “starting line” approach to guide their practice with children. For Lucy, children should begin their academic learning when they were very young so that they could achieve from the beginning of their lives.

These findings tended to suggest that Chinese immigrant parents’ aspirations for academic achievement by their children related to conceptions of Chinese culture, their own academic experiences, and competition, in which there was a clear idea about the importance of academic learning in preschool years. As they moved further through the interviews, preschool education was defined by the parents in terms of overall experiences of
children. These ideas and the implications associated with the findings are discussed further.

A Better Life Comes From Overall Achievements

Most parents admitted that a strong start in academic study might not necessarily lead to a better life and that relationships between school achievement and life achievement could be nonlinear. Ming said, “We need the children to be academically strong but not just be academically strong. Academic ability is important but it is only one of the many abilities that children should have.” The parents felt they needed to have the big picture of children’s learning and development. According to YanWei, her children needed to do well in many things but not just school-related tasks. She went on to give an example about her nephew, who was outstanding academically but failed in living independently after growing up because he did not experience many other things when he was young. For YanWei, it was inappropriate to focus only on the academic learning of children.

According to many parents, a good life was characterized by happiness, confidence, competitiveness, and adaptability. They hoped that their children’s lives could have these features. Six parents spent at least 1 hour a day playing or talking with their children. May told me that “I mean real play, play for fun, but not for learning anything in particular.” All the parents had organized play days for their children with peers of a similar age to be together and socialize. For Linda, children’s abilities to do well in extracurricular activities should be emphasized. Social and psychological outcomes such as higher confidence and self-esteem and effective communications needed to be linked to children’s learning experiences.

Seven out of ten parents had attended workshops in New Zealand on childrearing and education. Ming emphasized the importance of such workshops in theorizing about immigrants’ parents’ childrearing and education: “I attended a small workshop. The speaker . . . showed many photos and video clips about children’s learning . . . I was so impressed by the engagement of children in creating their own projects and the enjoyment they had. . . . They were so capable and happy.”

Ming continued to say that in today’s world, children need to be capable of many things to survive in the global competition. They needed to be happy. He stated: “Children should be provided with many different experiences to achieve in future competitions.”

Obviously, it is in a wider context than their own cultural backgrounds that the Chinese immigrant parents found the clue to understanding a better life for children. It is interesting to see that the parents provided an extended interpretation of learning and development in children and that they expected a correspondingly extended experience for children.
A Better Life Comes From Mainstream Education

All the parents sent their children to preschools in the hope that the children could learn to function in mainstream ways in New Zealand, as this set the children’s initial steps toward becoming productive and successful members in the host country. The parents indicated their desire to embrace the learning routines and programs of the preschools. Linda commented, “My child must learn the mainstream culture of the preschool. I cannot help with that. If he does not know about the New Zealand culture, he will not have a good life.” Allen said: “It is important that my child knows how to function in a ‘Kiwi’ environment.”

Another reason that the parents gave for embracing the mainstream culture in children’s education was the difficulty that the parents went through as immigrants living in New Zealand because they did not know much about the mainstream culture and could not relate to people of the mainstream cultural group. Hong stated: “What I went through could have been remedied if I knew more about the host cultural protocols and could fluently communicate with English language speakers.”

Therefore, for the parents, if their children were well equipped with regard to the mainstream culture, they would not encounter the same stressful experiences that their parents had.

The parents also told me that they did not get involved much in children’s preschools and this further contributed to the parents’ reliance on their children to embrace the culture of the preschools. The parents explained their reticence to become involved in the preschools as: language barriers; time pressures; their perceived attitudes of the teachers toward them; their lack of knowledge as parents about mainstream education; and their perceptions of their minority status. Lily explained:

The teachers do not talk to me or invite to a talk. I do not think they like to listen to me. We are different cultural people. It is important that we do not offer our opinions as we do not know much about the learning of children in the centres. I trust that teachers could do a good job.

It is thus evident that the parents wanted their children to be experiencing lives in the mainstream way of living through their own explorations and learning in the preschools. Some explanation of the parents’ reliance on children’s self-exploration in the mainstream culture was also found in the parents’ perceptions and experiences as members of a minority ethnic group. The parents did not mind being invisible in the children’s preschools. They hoped that the teachers could do a good job and that their children could embrace the mainstream culture of the preschools. A point associated with this finding is that the parents set a division between their responsibilities within the families and teachers’ and children’s responsibilities in the preschools.
Here we can also see the compromises of the parents. They stayed away from the children’s education in the preschools in order to avoid possible conflicts or making unnecessary interventions in their children’s learning and development.

**DISCUSSION**

There are three points to be made from listening to and understanding New Zealand Chinese immigrants’ perspectives of a better life, achievement, and preschool education. Firstly, the parents upheld traditional Chinese culture in guiding their practice with children toward a better life. The emphasis on academic achievement in Chinese culture constituted the parents’ aspirations for their children’s education (Zhou & Li, 2003). In their preschool years, Chinese immigrant children experienced academic learning activities. This research, once coupled with previous studies on Chinese immigrant parenting, makes it possible to see much more clearly the way in which the academic performance of children plays an important part in their parents’ aspirations for children both in preschool and school years. The Chinese cultural underpinning to parents’ aspirations for children’s academic performances did not differ so widely, and all the Chinese immigrant parents attached importance to the academic development of children as an element determining their future achievements.

There is a good deal of justification for the focus on children’s academic development in Chinese immigrant parenting. Chinese immigrants, regardless of where they are, all attempt to raise academically successful children, generally on the basis of their own cultural traditions, and they are profoundly affected, in a great variety of ways, by their own struggling experiences in the host countries (Zhou & Li, 2003.). Chan’s (2004) research with Australian Chinese indicates that in order to develop a better life, Chinese immigrants try to be more Chinese than the Chinese in China and they aim to raise academically successful children.

Such aspirations for children’s academic development might not be connected with immigrant parents of other ethnicities. In the case of Mexican immigrant parents, for example, maternal education was seen to have provided an important basis of parents’ expectations for children’s academic achievements. Mexican immigrant parents who did not pursue their own high schooling did not have a strong motivation for their children’s academic success (Corsnoe & Kalil, 2010). According to Urdan and Munoz (2012), generally speaking, “the academic motivation of the children of immigrant parents depends on a number of factors, [including] the educational and income level of parents, attitudes of the host society and institutions like school toward the immigrant group” (p. 249).
Secondly, a real achievement in life was realized when children performed well in many learning areas but not only the academic domain. Being happy and enjoying life were also important for the Chinese immigrant parents in this study. A major goal of parenting was to provide children with a range of experiences that equipped them for an enjoyably successful life. The parents’ motive for a playful and enjoyable childhood led them to stress the importance of play for young children.

This view of children’s holistic development has become fashionable among the first-generation of Chinese immigrant parents. Many, especially of the parents under age 40 in the United States, asserted the need for children’s overall learning and deplored the extent to which better life was tied solely to children’s academic achievements (Cheah, Leung, & Zhou, 2013). In their critical and realistic reflection on the host situations, and as a result of a deliberate cultural adaptation, Chinese immigrant parents today have differed greatly from those in the past in terms of their aspirations for children’s learning (Lieber, Nihira, & Mink, 2004).

The current research found that all parents attributed importance to the mainstream culture of preschools as a vehicle for a better life for children in New Zealand society. The parents’ aspirations were grounded in a motive to live a new life. The parents’ perception about their own minority status and teachers’ attitudes, and the language and cultural barriers, were also related to their reticence in the preschools. The parents seemed to have set a boundary line between their responsibilities in their families and the responsibilities of children to embrace the mainstream cultural knowledge. Apparently, the parents’ own experiences as immigrants were attached to their ideas about the power of the mainstream culture and of people in the mainstream cultural groups. The parents’ experiences and backgrounds served to legitimize the importance of mainstream culture as a lever for improving children’s immigration positions and their immigrant status.

Among immigrants of many if not all ethnic communities, the expectations for children's development of the host culture are not different. After studying Asian American children, Adler (2001) concluded that these parents were willing to have children obtain American culture. Parents’ embracing of the mainstream culture was similarly reported by Ulich and Oberhuemer (1997) in their study of Turkish children’s experiences in German kindergartens, where those parents treated the kindergartens as “a ticket that is being bought in advance to give the child a chance in mainstream German education” (p. 68). What is particularly noticeable about the parents in this study is that they placed high value on the ways of being in their new society and that preschools were seen to be contexts for their children to develop appropriate cultural knowledge for a better life in the future.

Overall, aspirations of the Chinese immigrant parents in this study were not unexpected. Earlier researchers have noted the influence of immigration experience on Chinese immigrant parenting, suggesting that values and
practices of Chinese immigrant parents were grounded in the integration of individual, educational, cultural, and contextual aspects of parents’ lives (Lim & Lim, 2003; Wu, 2009). Many factors affect Chinese immigrant parents’ ideas about a better life. For Chinese immigrants, parenting is complex partially because the immigration experience widens horizons beyond parents’ cultural traditions and introduces them and their children to a range of possible other choices. The present research described how the parents combined their own traditions and the influences of the host culture in response to the task of raising children in a different cultural context.

The specific features of parenting that were described in Amy Chua’s book, however, did not include American influences on her parenting. She claimed that her style was aligned only with Chinese traditions. There were reasons for Chua’s parenting behaviors. For one thing, unlike many other Chinese parents, who were first-generation immigrants, Chua herself was second generation. She immigrated to America from the Philippines as a young child. Chua’s understanding of Chinese might still rest within the old traditional paradigm because she did not live in the country of origin as others did. She might have learned that from her parents who only knew the traditional style. The second reason was that Chua’s husband was American Jewish and their daughters had many opportunities to experience American culture. Behind Chua’s Chinese parenting was a motive to help children establish a sense of Chinese identity and to retain the value of Chinese traditions. Chua’s parenting approach could therefore be a condition of her response to her daughters’ limited Chinese experience. While Chua found herself needing to enforce Chinese practices, many Chinese immigrants found ways of balancing the Chinese culture and the culture of the host countries for their children. This is because many other Chinese immigrant children were not in the same situation as Chua’s daughters.

CONCLUSION

Although there are various ways Chinese immigrant parents settle in the host countries and raise children, as I have endeavored to show in the present article, and an important reason why Chinese immigrate is that they hold aspirations for a better life both for themselves and their children.

Better life has been conceived by Chinese immigrant parents as providing the motivation for family obligations and hard work, academic achievement, biculturalism, and holistic development of children. The notion of a better life also has great value to immigrants of other ethnicities. It sets in perspective the goals of development in a new environment and enables immigrants to try hard in their process of settlement in the new country. There are many motivations behind Chinese immigrant parenting but the most important is their desire for a better life.
Two elements have played an important part in achieving parents’ aspirations for a better life in this study: first, Chinese tradition and, second, the host environment. The influence of Chinese tradition was apparent in the parents’ perspectives of hard work, family obligations, and children’s academic performance. The parents’ exposure and experience in the host environment seemed to have given rise to a new interpretation of “better life,” which played an important part in their expectation for children’s overall development and the development of host cultural knowledge.

The concept of better life has great relevance to Amy’s Chua’s tiger parenting. In Chua’s parenting expectations, one element had a preeminent place: the retention of Chinese culture. She was clear in her accounts that Chinese culture was valuable in raising successful and competitive children. Chua’s accounts brought into existence an example of parental aspirations that focused too much on the value of Chinese traditions and overlooked the influence of the contexts. Similar to other Chinese immigrants, Chua expected her children to have a better life characterized by their achievements in academic studies, but her parental aspiration was worked out in a way that was very different from the practices of many other Chinese immigrants.

Chinese immigrants vary. I therefore do not see this study as providing a general account of the aspirations of Chinese immigrant parents. Further studies could investigate the various types of Chinese immigrant parents, what they believe, and what their parental behaviors are. It is in this recognition of variation that I acknowledge the limitations of this study. The participating parents in New Zealand were all well educated. If consideration had been taken of the very different experiences and trajectories in different Chinese heritage samples, richer findings might have been generated for this article. In addition, the focus of the study was on the parents of preschool children. It is possible that Chinese immigrant parents’ aspirations for school-aged children are different from their aspirations for children in the early childhood years.

While I cannot generalize from the findings of this study, it nevertheless provides a basis for discussion. At this point in my research, the purpose has been to make a start toward posing questions concerning what constitutes Chinese immigrant parenting. I intend to use this study to generate further investigations. It is expected that the discussions and arguments stimulated by this study could contribute to the ongoing scholarship in the area of Chinese immigrant parenting.

REFERENCES


Aspirations of Chinese Immigrants in Parenting


