RAISING CHILDREN IN CHINESE IMMIGRANT FAMILIES: Evidence from the research literature

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Children of Chinese culture are raised differently from children of other cultural groups. There is research evidence which contends that, regardless of where they live, the child-rearing practices within Chinese immigrant families are still influenced by Chinese traditional culture. Some studies also point out that Chinese immigrant parents modify the traditional way of raising children in accordance with the new way of life. This article explores the literature on the parental beliefs and practices of Chinese new immigrant parents and discusses the factors which help Chinese parents raise their children in the countries to which they migrate. In line with the literature, Chinese immigrant parents referred to in this study are those who have moved from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan to non-Asian countries within the past 10 years.

Introduction

In recent years, interest in studying Asian children, particularly Chinese children, seems to have flourished in many immigrant countries, such as the US, England, Australia and Canada (Chen, 2001; Gorman, 1998; Huntsinger, Huntsinger, Ching & Lee, 2000; Li, 2001; Vigil, 2002). This increased interest is mostly owing to the academic achievement of these children and their dutiful natures. That is, in particular, these children’s strong desire to show respect for the wishes and demands of parents, teachers and the societies in which they live. Feng (1994) contends that the success of many Asian children in the US has created an image of them as 'whiz kids'. This has led to a great deal of curiosity as to how these children are raised at home. Studies in these countries over the past years have portrayed the parental beliefs and practices of Chinese immigrant families raising school-age children. Published studies specifically on infants and young children, however, are quite scarce. In light of this, literature on Chinese school-age children is included in this article. However, key attention is given to the raising of preschool children. Although Chinese immigrant parents raise children in dissimilar ways according to the ages of their children, certain studies have implied that the boundaries which were once so clearly set for each stage of a child’s upbringing are no longer clear within these families (Huntsinger et al., 2000; Li, 2004). Young Chinese children are raised in preparation for future schooling; therefore there is overlap on parenting practices with preschool children and children at school. Thus a review of studies on school children to illustrate the beliefs and practices of Chinese immigrant parents is required.

This literature study provides a brief look at some of the discussion relating to Chinese immigrant children and their parents. This discussion includes a focus on the traditional cultural orientation of child-rearing and the maintenance and alteration of cultural beliefs and practices among Chinese immigrant parents.

Traditional Chinese cultural orientation of child-rearing

Recent studies show that Chinese parents retain many traditional aspects of parenting values and practices, even when living in a place not of their origin (Chen, 2001; Huntsinger et al., 2000; Lin & Fu, 1990; Zhang, Kohnstamm, Slotboom, Elphick & Cheung, 2002). In a study conducted among American, Chinese—American and Chinese families, comparing parents' attitudes and expectations regarding science education, Chen concluded that 'no significant differences were found between the Chinese and Chinese—American groups' (2001, p. 310).

In terms of educating and rearing children, a long list of studies shows that the Confucian ideology plays a guiding role (Li, 2004; Lin & Fu, 1990; Shek & Chan, 1999). The principles of Confucianism on the purpose of living determine the orientation, approach and aim of child-rearing and education in Chinese culture.
Proper characters lead to purposeful living

In Confucian terms, the highest purpose of living is self-perfection (Lin & Wang, 2004) and learning aims to cultivate inner character. An ideal person, by Confucian standards, shows self-restraint, controls feelings and emotions, maintains harmonious relationships with others, and pursues knowledge to the best of one’s ability with a goal of developing an obedient and compliant character (Tang, 1992, cited in Shek & Chan, 1999). Restrained, obedient and compliant characters are the precursors of any harmonious relationships, and the development of such characteristics not only leads one into a purposeful life but also helps him/her play the role of an obligated family member. This is in tune with the emphasis of ‘serving others through benevolence, sharing and caring; children achieve for their family’ (Huntsinger et al., 2000, p. 8). Researchers contend that family is a concept that can never be overlooked when talking about human development in Chinese culture (Lin & Fu, 1990; Shek & Chan, 1999), and Chinese people believe that it is necessary ‘to regulate the family before one can rule the state’ (Shek, 1996, p. 86). The word ‘family’ in Confucian thought generally revolves around two notions, the collectivist tradition and the ethic of filial piety. The former stresses the need of being interdependent in groups; the latter highlights the importance of obeying and honouring parents (Ho, 1994, cited in Huntsinger et al., 2000).

The cultivation of appropriate characters

For the development of proper characters, ‘self-cultivation’ is the most favourable approach (Shek & Chan, 1999). Self-cultivation is made possible by learning about shame and avoiding being ashamed. This finding echoes a comment by Fung (1999, p. 27): ‘Chinese culture is rather a “shame-socialized culture” in which individuals are strongly socialized to be aware of what others think of them, and are encouraged to act so as to maximize the positive esteem they are granted from others, while trying to avoid incurring their disapproval’. Chu (1972, cited in Fung, 1999) found that more than one-tenth of the Confucian analects talked about the value of shame. Shame sets a boundary for right and wrong and is used to judge one’s conduct and behaviour. Closely related to shame is the emphasis on face, self-criticism and self-evaluation. Learning and development are largely devoted to these aspects. In developing proper morality, Chinese learners also seek respect, status and practical ends (Li & Wang, 2004).

Hard work and academic achievement

‘Confucian thought, too, strongly emphasizes individual intellectual development, skill acquisition and love for learning’ (Li & Wang, 2004, p. 415). Academic achievement is the eventual goal. For Chinese, academic achievement provides the fuel for upward social mobility and reflects a person’s success. In line with academic achievement, Chinese culture stresses the importance of hard work (Li, 2004; Shek & Chan, 1999). Chinese consider that hereditary factors are not as important as social environment and ‘believe that one can go beyond what nature has given’ (Li & Wang, 2004, p. 419). The largest dimension of seeking knowledge is the concept of “haoxuexin”, meaning having a heart of learning ... Learning engagement and outcome have not only academic meanings but social and moral implications. If a person is perceived as refusing to learn, he or she may be regarded as socially irresponsible (for parents and family), and worse yet, immoral (not wanting to strive to be good)’ (Li, 2004, p. 126).

Cultural change of immigrant Chinese families

Research shows that immigration results in an alteration of traditional beliefs and values. In an analysis of the cultural evolution of immigrants, Goldman (1993, cited in Roer-Strier & Rosenthal, 2001) uses the term ‘cultural lag’ to describe the fact that, although resistance to change in some cultural values happens, changes inevitably occur. Marfo (1993, cited in Roer-Strier et al., 2001) provides a more in-depth look at these cultural values and ‘distinguished between “pragmatic values” which are likely to change in contexts of social and cultural transition and central “core values” which resist such changes’ (p. 220). The pragmatic and core values are subject to immigrants’ perceptions of the host and the original culture and their life experiences in the two contexts. In their examination of the adjustment process of immigrants, Sharlin and Moin (2001) point out that immigrants’ beliefs and attitudes towards life in the host culture are established through a comparison between their life before and after immigration. Similar findings are reported in other studies (Jambunathan, Burts & Pierce, 2000; Li, 2001) and immigration is portrayed as a dynamic and struggling process (Kibria, 1993, cited in Foner, 1997) in which immigrants not only challenge certain aspects of traditional beliefs but also endeavour to retain others to strategically form a satisfactory personal life in new societies.
There is similarly increasing support in the literature for the possible change of traditional Chinese cultural beliefs among Chinese immigrants. In view of the inevitable exposure to different cultural values and life realities in the new environments, researchers believe it is not surprising that Chinese immigrant families change their beliefs and practices. Zhang et al. (2002) give evidence that Chinese people everywhere possess some common traits that are grounded in the Chinese culture but develop some additional attributes nurtured by their respective new environments. Lin and Fu (1990), in comparing the child-rearing beliefs and practices among Chinese and immigrant Chinese in the US, also observed the adaptability of the Chinese immigrants to US conditions of life and social structures. The same finding was borne out in Li's (2001) study of Canadian-Chinese immigrants which revealed that the expectations of Chinese new immigrants were contingent on the Canadian sociocultural context. As a consequence, Chinese immigrant parents saw themselves shifting from being dictators to responders to their children's needs. This observation is consistent with the finding of Gorman (1998) that the Chinese immigrant mothers in her study conveyed their instructions to children in indirect ways rather than giving them as orders. The parents were also more flexible about what and how the children should learn.

The cultural maintenance and change of Chinese immigrants further support the idea that their parents' values and practices will be of interest to educators, as neither their traditional culture nor the Western educational ideology can be referred to as solidly reliable bases from which to understand Chinese immigrant parents. The search for this answer sets the point of exploration for the subsequent sections of the article.

**Parenting styles and practices of Chinese immigrant parents**

A strong point emerging from the empirical studies on Chinese immigrant parents suggests that these parents play a very active role in their children's upbringing (Chen, 2001; Gorman, 1998; Huntsinger et al., 2000; Lin & Fu, 1990; Shek, 1997). They teach children what is morally and socially right as well as making children active participants in many aspects of learning (Johnston & Wong, 2002). Although Chinese parental style is traditionally believed to be that of parental control (Ji, Jiao & Jing, 1993; Lin & Fu, 1990), modern researchers, represented by Chao (1994), claim that 'Chinese child-rearing items involve the concept of training' (p. 1111). Such a statement is gaining popularity in recent studies of Chinese parents (Chen & Luster, 2002; Gorman, 1998).

**Training style**

The style of training is rooted in parental control, but involves parental concern, devotion, involvement and sacrifice (Chao, 1994). The concept of training to depict Chinese parenting style is initially coined by Wu (1985), who believes parental control by Chinese parents is premised on an intention of keeping the family running smoothly. Chinese parents aim to teach children but not to dominate children.

According to Chao, a close parent-and-child relationship characterises training style. To understand the relationship between training and the supportive parent-child relationship, scholars also point out a need to understand the notions of 'guan' and 'chiao shun', two widely-used indigenous words to describe Chinese parents that embody the connotation of training (Chao, 1994; Chen & Luster, 2002; Lin & Fu, 1990). Chen and Luster state that the training concept in Mandarin is "chiao shun" or "guan" (p. 415).

The word 'guan' means 'govern' in English, but in the Chinese language it implies govern, care and love. In Chao's words, 'parental care, concern and involvement are synonymous with firm control and governance of the child' (p. 1112). 'Guan' makes Chinese parents not simply control but pass on to their children their love and care.

'Chiao shun' means teaching and education, with 'chiao' specifically referring to nurturing proper characters and 'shun' to disciplined teaching (Chen & Luster, 2002). 'Chiao shun', as pointed out by Chao, aligns parental nurture with a set standard of parenting control. He indicates that in Chinese families teaching and education are incorporated into parental strictness, nurturing and involvement.

**Training practice**

In her study of immigrant Chinese mothers, Gorman (1998) illustrates the training practice. She notes that the parents are involved in their children's daily activities with constant attention to their watchful duties and disciplinary measures. This finding is supported by the conclusions of many other researchers (Chen, 2001; Li, 2001; Portes & MacLeod, 1999). However, coupled with this is a hypothesis that training may be exercised only
with children from school age onwards. A review of literature on training practices seems to also indicate a difference in the way Chinese parents treat children before and after school age.

Researchers have noted that, based on their ages, Chinese children are grouped into two categories: the age of not understanding and the age of understanding (Bond, 1986; Chen & Luster, 2002; Johnston & Wong, 2002). The boundary is not set at a particular age. In some old literature, it is approximately six years, but in recent studies this age is put back to three years (Chen & Luster, 2002). Adding to this are Chinese parents’ different practices with children at different ages. Ho (1986, p. 35, cited in Fung, 1999, p. 185) observes that ‘Chinese parents tend to be highly lenient or even indulgent in their attitudes toward the infant and young child, in sharp contrast to the strict discipline they impose on older children.’ This phenomenon is similarly noted by other researchers (Huntsinger et al., 2000; Liem, 1994).

There are some typical examples given to illustrate Chinese parents’, especially mothers’, parental attitudes towards infants and young children. Huntsinger et al. (2000) give evidence that the birth of a baby generates a change in the relationship between husbands and wives. ‘The child is in constant care of the mother’ (Chao, 1994, p. 1115) and is the mother’s sole interest and concern. Children commonly sleep with parents until the age of five or six years. Chinese babies are held a lot and taken everywhere the parents go (Huntsinger et al., 2000).

Despite these examples, certain studies suggest that Chinese parents’ attention to and nurturing attitudes towards young children are the precursors of training practice. Vigil’s (2002) comparative study of Chinese immigrant mothers’ and British local mothers’ interactions with their infants reveals that the former include strategies (e.g. demanding, punishing) and two-way explanations are all put into practice. However, in response to children’s rebellious behaviours, parents can also impose verbal and physical punishment. To manage children’s inappropriate behaviours, consistent approaches are adopted by mothers and fathers. They can be either aligned with each other or they divide their roles so that one is disciplinary and another benign (Fung, 1999).

Closely related to training of self-control is teaching through criticism. As noted by Huntsinger et al. (2000, p. 11), Chinese–American parents believe that ‘a child needs to learn to take criticism’, as they learn from criticism. Taking criticism is learned through the awareness of shame. Fung (1999) found in her study that Chinese children were familiar with the concept of shame by age two-and-a-half. Chinese parents believed that making children aware of shame and getting them to accept criticism prepared them to enter the adult world.

The most typical approach that Chinese parents adopt in training children to control themselves is in the form of ‘opportunity education’ (Fung, 1999, p. 190). Parents use storytelling to impart moral and social standards and take every opportunity to model appropriate behaviours. Li and Wang (2004, p. 419) say that ‘Chinese children are encouraged to view those who achieve better as models to emulate while watching out not to repeat the same shortcoming of those who do not do things well’. In the case of misconduct, children are made to confess and repent.

In Lin’s study (1999, cited in Chen, 2002, p. 426) of Chinese parenting, she points out that ‘one-way discipline strategies (e.g. demanding, punishing) and two-way strategies (e.g. discussing) may both be adopted and share the same meaning in Chinese culture’. Rules, restrictions and explanations are all put into practice. However, in response to children’s rebellious behaviours, parents can also impose verbal and physical punishment. To manage children’s inappropriate behaviours, consistent approaches are adopted by mothers and fathers. They can be either aligned with each other or they divide their roles so that one is disciplinary and another benign (Fung, 1999).
Training is inevitably embedded in children’s academic studies in Chinese families. It starts with preschoolers. Laying a foundation for children’s later success in school underpins this practice. It is a common picture, as portrayed by Huntsinger et al. (2000), that ‘in Chinese American families, children often do their homework in the presence of family, all seated around a table’ (p. 11). Children routinely practise the violin, piano, writing or drawing. Parents take an active part in teaching their children these skills. A similar finding was made by Johnston and Wong (2002). They noted that Chinese mothers used picture books and flash cards to teach their young child new words. Huntsinger et al. (2000) state that Chinese parents do not expect children to do housework, but want them to pay undisturbed attention to academic studies.

Immigration-related parental styles and practices

Roer-Stier et al. (2001) claim that a search for the determinants of parents’ beliefs and practices should be contextualised within the ecology of the family, society and culture. To study immigrant parents, consideration also needs to be made to the ‘changes in the ecological and cultural contexts as a result of immigration, historical or ideological changes and their effect on the goals of socialization’ (p. 216).

The most identifiable variables that contribute to immigrants’ life changes include degrees of immigrant stress, immigrants’ acculturative attitudes and adaptive responses (Jain & Belsky, 1997; Li, 2001; Sharlin & Moin, 2001), which influence the ways that immigrant parents raise children.

Immigrant stress

Immigration is a stressful event (Jambunathan, Burts & Pierce, 2000). As immigrants adapt to the new and culturally unfamiliar environment they face a high level of uncertainty (Sharlin & Moin, 2001). In Sharlin and Moin’s study of new immigrants’ perceptions of family life in origin and host countries, the participants indicated that immigration generated serious hardships, increased tension in families, contributed to more child-rearing problems, and intensified conflicts in relations between different generations. Li (2001, p. 489) asserts that immigration is characterised by ‘determination and hesitation, expectations and apprehensions, and dreams and worries’. Salaff (2004) believes that, in their hopes of seeking better opportunities in the host countries, new immigrants tend to be disappointed. Schnittker (2002) implies that certain stress comes from the mismatch between the immigrants’ practices and those of others in the host country. These practices, as indicated in a number of studies, include the use of language, implementation of values, roles and norms of family and social interactions, cultural participation and the socialisation process parents use with their children (Foner, 1997; Jambunathan, Burts & Pierce, 2000; Portes & MacLeod, 1999).

Coping strategies of Chinese immigrant parents: Acculturative attitudes and adaptive responses

Just as happens with other immigrants, stress affects the lives of Chinese immigrant families. In view of the high proportion of skilled Chinese immigrants who are highly qualified and educated in their host countries, Salaff (2004) proposes that the stress is derived from the fact that ‘new Chinese immigrants, who are the elite in their countries of origin, find their qualifications unrecognized in the host countries’ (p. 1). From another perspective, Shek’s (1996, p. 85) description of the experiences of Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong is that ‘economic strain, time and energy demands, role overload and conflict, and limitation of personal and social choices’ take their toll on the family life and wellbeing of these people.

Even so, as some studies suggest, immigration for many Chinese parents is decided on for two purposes: to enhance their own life and to enhance the life of their children (Florsheim, 1997; Gorman, 1998; Salaff, 2004). Chinese immigrants work very hard to adapt themselves to new lives (Li, 2001).

In dealing with the stress and the pressures of changed circumstances, Chinese immigrant parents continue to draw on previous experiences, skills, knowledge and sociocultural resources while carving out new lives for themselves and their families (Foner, 1997). They are observed to have adopted a number of strategies such as participating in the labour force, engaging in new and old sociocultural exercises, learning the new languages, updating their own education and forming new community and social networks (Chen, 2001; Gorman, 1998; Lin & Fu, 1990).

As parents, Chinese immigrants work equally hard to motivate their children to improve their lives. Previous studies suggest there are two fundamental ways Chinese immigrant parents motivate their children: by utilising their own accumulated skills and strategies and by informing their children of the disadvantages they would face as part of a minority group (Gorman, 1998; Li, 2001; Portes & MacLeod, 1999).
As mentioned above, the skill-based immigration system, which many countries adopt, generates an influx of well-educated Chinese immigrants. According to Li, most recent Chinese immigrants, unlike earlier ones, are highly educated urban professionals. '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' (2001, p. 491). Thus, Chinese immigrant parents help their children improve their lives through providing them with education and making them succeed in education. Li (2001), as well as Dyson (2001), find that because parents’ expectations are largely derived from their life experiences, the Chinese immigrant parents’ previous experiences significantly influence the expectations they hold for their children. Portes and MacLeod (1999) further support this idea, saying that successful adaptation of Asian immigrant children reflects the education of their parents. However, because of the difficulties these professionals encounter in settling into the new country, Chinese immigrants show their children how to deal with the disadvantage of belonging to a minority group (Li, 2001). The parents remind their children that 'to create a chance for success, minority members must do better than the white majority' (p. 487). 'Chinese immigrant parents encouraged their children to be better prepared, and guided their children towards certain paths to earn respect, to maximise the chance of success, and to minimise damaging outcomes' (p. 491). Specifically, parents help their children select areas of study or profession in recognition of the labour demands of the new countries.

In addition, Chinese immigrant parents pave a bicultural path for their children to follow in order to prepare them to adequately function in the host society (Gorman, 1998; Jambunathan, Burts & Pierce, 2000). They alter the traditional child-rearing practices to incorporate beliefs and practices in their home countries. Gorman’s study of parenting attitudes and practices of immigrant Chinese mothers reveals this. She says that, when describing parenting concerns or discussing cultural values, the mothers show an awareness of the need to adapt to their present surroundings. Gorman concluded in that study that these mothers’ parenting practices embodied a combination of traditional Chinese approaches and mainstream American ways. Many Chinese immigrant parents use similar parenting strategies to those of their Western counterparts, including modelling and reinforcement (Gorman, 1998; Jambunathan, Burts & Pierce, 2000). Li (2001) states that, with an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese and Canadian cultures, the parents hold acculturative attitudes.

The previous empirical studies do not provide a conclusive picture of particular ways in which Chinese immigrant parents prepare their children to be bicultural, but three trends emerge from these studies: maintenance of family ties, language assistance and career selection.

A body of literature highlights the importance of strong family ties between the immigrant families and the original home groups in helping Chinese immigrants preserve their traditional beliefs (Shek, 1996; Tong, 1996). Many of them keep close contact with their home countries by phone, email, or frequent visits (Salaff, 2004, p. 3). These contacts give rise to the association of Chinese immigrants with Chinese families in the host countries and help them implement ancestral worldviews (Jambunathan, Burts & Pierce, 2000). The reason for this, according to Foner (1997), is that modern transportation and communication enable family members to influence each other. Another reason is that most Chinese parents strongly believe in the effectiveness of Chinese traditional cultural orientation in helping one succeed (Li, 2001), especially in terms of self-cultivation and motivation. For example, the Chinese immigrant parents in Li’s study claim, ‘children who grow up in Chinese culture are generally motivated to pursue excellence’ (p. 42).

As to language, Gorman (1998) suggests that Chinese immigrant parents maintain the use of their first language with their children but at the same time try their best to support children in grasping new language. Huntsinger et al.’s (2000) description of how Chinese immigrant parents reinforce the Chinese language with their children at home, but hire native English-speaking children to read stories to their children in English, also illustrates this aim.

Regarding career selection, researchers (Huntsinger et al., 2000; Li, 2001) point out their Chinese immigrant parents assist their children in mathematics, technology and science from early childhood because these subjects are seen as universal subjects and lead to areas of specialisation. As a parent claimed in Li’s study, ‘as a minority member, your choice of specialization is crucial for your future employment’ (p. 486).

**Conclusion and teaching implication**

Common themes emerging from this literature review indicate the power of Confucianism in guiding Chinese immigrant parents and the inevitable influences of new cultural contexts. The implication is that children of Chinese immigrant families are raised differently from those of other cultural groups.
This study aims to provide Western teachers with some insights about the child-rearing styles and strategies of Chinese immigrant families. It is hoped that an understanding of how Chinese immigrant children are reared helps Western teachers to assess these children's learning needs and strengths. Some ideas may be applicable to teachers' work with all children.

**Further research**

To bridge the cultural gap with Chinese immigrant families, it is also essential that Western teachers are made aware of Chinese immigrant parents' attitudes towards teachers and of how they work with teachers. This aspect has not been explored in this study. An investigation in this area is recommended.

**References**


