



Review

Chinese parents' goals and practices in early childhood

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ABSTRACT

We review the literature on Chinese parents' views and practices through the lens of Confucianism. Confucianism advances seven developmental goals for children – knowledge, social norms, modesty, shame, self-restraint, filial piety, and harmonious relationships – and unique beliefs about parents' role in children's development (Guan). We examine how these goals and beliefs are reflected in parents' socialization of their young children, and how they play out in associations between parenting and children's development. We close with a contextualized, dynamic approach to the study of parenting goals and practices by describing historical shifts in China's economy, policies, and the global context that have led to marked changes in Chinese parenting.

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Children develop through everyday interactions with their primary caregivers, most notably parents. Parents are particularly influential during the first years of children's lives, when children experience rapid development in language, cognitive, emotional, and social domains (Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 2010). Early

parent–child interactions not only facilitate children's emerging skills, but also convey important cultural lessons that prepare children for smooth integration into the broader cultural community (Bornstein & Landsford, 2010). Consequently, much research has been dedicated to understanding the ways in which parental beliefs and practices shape children's early developmental trajectories.

Although the majority of research on parenting has focused on European American populations (Arnett, 2008), the past decades have witnessed unprecedented growth in studies on parent–child

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interactions in a global context (Keller, 2007; Rogoff, 2003). In particular, many such studies have focused on parenting in Chinese families. The Chinese population, including Chinese immigrants across the globe, comprises approximately 20% of the world's population, and is unique in its customs, values, and social, economic, and political contexts (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013).

The focus on Chinese parenting has both theoretical and practical implications for understanding early childhood development in a global context. Theoretically, China is deeply influenced by Confucianism, which consists of cultural norms and values that differ from those of Western cultures (Park & Chesla, 2007). Therefore, comparisons of Chinese parenting to that of other cultures allow a deeper understanding of how culture shapes specific aspects of parenting and moderates associations between parenting and children's development. Moreover, China is undergoing rapid social, economic, and political changes, which provide opportunities to document the ways in which broader historical contexts (the "macrosystem;" Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) come to be reflected in the microsystem of parenting. At a practical level, the large number of Chinese immigrants requires attention to the early education and assimilation of Chinese children and families in the Western world.

In this review, we describe the views and practices that uniquely characterize Chinese parenting during children's early years, and contrast parent-child associations in China and other cultures. First, we provide an overview of Confucian principles that guide and underlie Chinese parents' views and practices. Second, we review research on Chinese parents' cognitive/academic socialization, socio-emotional socialization, and styles of socialization (i.e., warmth and control, authoritative and authoritarian styles). For each aspect, we describe characteristics of Chinese parenting and associations between parenting and children's development within the framework of Confucianism. Finally, we discuss how historical shifts in China's economy, policies, and globalization have affected parents' goals and practices.

The articles in this review were published through June, 2013 and generated through a search using the keywords of China, Chinese, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mandarin combined with parent, mother, father, or caregiver. Articles were included if they met the following criteria: (1) Chinese caregivers were the participants (including mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chinese immigrants from elsewhere); (2) new quantitative data were reported; (3) a direct measure of Chinese parenting, such as beliefs or practices, was included; (4) parenting was assessed between infancy and school entry (typically under age 6 years). Articles that focused on caregivers or children with disabilities (e.g., autistic children), traumatic experiences or unusual circumstances (e.g., abused children) and articles on specialized topics (e.g., sleep disturbance) or therapies and interventions were excluded. A final set of 105 articles was generated based on these criteria. In this review, we adopt the terms "European American," "American," and "U.S." parents or children to align with the terms used by paper authors. The term European American refers to European American in the United States. The terms Taiwanese parents and Hong Kong parents refer to Chinese parents living in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

1. Confucian principles and parenting

Confucianism represents a complex system of moral, social, political and philosophical rules and thoughts put forth by the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–491 B.C.) and his followers (Park & Chesla, 2007). Confucianism continues to deeply influence contemporary Chinese society, and affects parenting through its emphasis on parents' role in the developmental process (Chao, 1994; Shenghong & Dan, 2004). Regarding human development, the ultimate goal of Confucianism is for an individual to achieve

overall perfection, which is reflected in five core virtues of benevolence (Rén), righteousness (Yì), propriety (Lǐ), wisdom (Zhì), and sincerity (Xìn). Benevolence requires one to "love the people" by considering the well-being of others (Billington, 1997; Cua, 2000). Righteousness refers to displaying virtuous actions and intentions (Cua, 2000). Propriety refers to the boundaries of proper behaviors and a broader concept of "ritual propriety, social order, effective modes of action, modes of education, and self-cultivation" (Park & Chesla, 2007p. 301; Ni, 2002). Wisdom refers to the acquisition of knowledge and differentiation between good and bad (Zhang, 2002). Finally, sincerity refers to honesty and trustworthiness without deception (Zhang, 2002). Notably, these virtues are not mutually exclusive, but rather synergistically codependent (Park & Chesla, 2007).

Achieving these core virtues requires a prolonged process of "cultivation." Consequently, parents do not expect children to acquire wisdom or righteousness at a young age, but instead must set in place the early building blocks for these ultimate virtues. What are the seeds for these five core virtues in early childhood and how do they play out in parenting? In the following section, we introduce seven developmental goals that are fundamentals to the five virtues, and discuss the way that parents are expected to support these developmental goals through the process of "Guan."

1.1. Knowledge (Zhī, 知)

Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and a frequent review? Analects of Confucius, 1-1 (Legge, trans. 1971)

In the book of "Great Learning", a classic writing of Confucianism, acquiring knowledge is considered to be the first step toward perfection (Great Learning, Chapter 1; Legge, trans. 1971). However, Confucius did not merely emphasize the end-point of knowledge, but rather spoke about the essential roles of motivation and effort in the learning process. As such, knowledge is acquired through diligence and persistence. Confucius believed that people could acquire new knowledge by cherishing and building upon what was previously learned, and that people should work diligently to pursue erudition (2–11, 7–20, Analects of Confucius; Li, 2005).

The goal of pursuing knowledge continues to be endorsed by Chinese parents today. Accordingly, diligence is the most frequently mentioned moral theme taught by Mainland Chinese mothers in daily interaction with preschool children (Wang, Bernas, & Eberhard, 2012). Moreover, Chinese American mothers of 4-year-olds viewed effort as a more (and the most) important predictor of success in reading and math than did their European American counterparts (Kinlaw, Kurtz-Costes, & Goldman-Fraser, 2001), in line with the Confucian emphasis on diligence and persistence in the acquisition of knowledge. Qualitative studies also suggest that Chinese parents and preschoolers view the pursuit of knowledge as a moral virtue, and highly value diligence, persistence, and concentration in the learning process (Li, 2005; Yang, 2007).

The emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge is also reflected in Chinese parents' emphasis on children's academic achievement. As one example, Hong Kong kindergarten parents rated children's pre-academic skills as the most important ability for the transition to primary school (Chan, 2012). In another study, Chinese mothers in Taiwan rated their 3- to 4-year-olds' academic achievement as more important than did U.S. parents (Wang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2003). Similar results emerged when comparing Chinese mothers in Hong Kong with British mothers in the United Kingdom (Pearson & Rao, 2003). Notably, the focus on academic achievement might be due to contextual factors such as scarce educational opportunity and employment pressure, rather than Confucian beliefs. For example, Chinese immigrant parents' high educational expectations for

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