

# Parenting and Adolescents' Health in Chinese Immigrant Families: Struggling to Find an Eclectic Way

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**Abstract** -This study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese immigrant parents' parenting practices, parents' perceived strengths and challenges in raising adolescent children in the United States and how parenting may influence their adolescents' psychological and behavioral health. Ten mothers and three fathers aged 35-56 participated in four focus groups interviews and filled out a brief survey. Parents had been in the U.S. for 20 years on average. Content analysis of the interview data revealed three themes (Parenting Styles, Struggling to Find an Eclectic Way, and Adolescent Health) and seven sub-themes (high expectations, strict control and monitoring, maintaining Chinese language and cultural values, assimilating the good from the U.S. culture, not finding a balanced point, not knowing how to communicate, and my child is suffering). Our findings highlight the unique challenges Chinese immigrant parents encountered, how their parenting practices were shaped in a different sociocultural context, and how parenting influenced their adolescent children's health. Results of the study will help healthcare providers to develop linguistically and culturally tailored resources to enhance parenting skills and consequently promote psychosocial health among Chinese American adolescents.

**Keywords** - adolescence, Chinese immigrant, parenting, parent-child communication

## I. INTRODUCTION

As of 2013, approximately half of new immigrants to the United States were from Asia [1]. Psychological and mental health is an important but commonly overlooked health topic among Asian Americans [2]. While the public perception persists that Asian Americans tend to be healthier than other racial/ethnic groups, empirical evidence shows that Asian Americans adolescents and young adults experience poor mental health [3, 4]. Furthermore, they face many barriers when seeking mental health services including stigma, language challenges, and the lack of access to care and culturally/linguistically responsive providers [4, 5].

Chinese Americans are the largest subgroup in the fast growing Asian American ethnic community in the United States [6]. Chinese immigrant parents face many challenges rearing their children within a different cultural context, such as acculturation stress, cultural and generational gaps, and language barriers [2, 7]. Studies reported that parenting practices were associated with adolescent psychosocial health

[8-10] and their behaviors [11, 12] in Chinese American families.

Although research on how parenting may affect young Asian American's psychosocial health is growing, researchers usually combined several Asian American subgroups, making it difficult to understand the unique association between these two factors within each subgroup. Furthermore, research in this area often only focuses on mothers and most studies were conducted using quantitative survey methods [8, 13, 14]. There is a paucity of literature using descriptive methods to elicit the immigrant parents' perceptions of their parenting experience. To address these gaps in the current literature, we conducted a qualitative study using focus groups to obtain both Chinese immigrant fathers' and the mothers' parenting practices, and how being in a different sociocultural environment shape parenting practices, which may impact their adolescent children's psychosocial and behavioral health.

The limited research on how parenting in Chinese Immigrant families affects adolescent psychosocial and behavioral health indicated inconclusive results, perhaps due to the way in which parenting practices are conceptualized. In the following we present recent research findings regarding parenting and children's psychosocial and behavioral health based on the most commonly studied dimensions: parental warmth and parental control and monitoring.

### A. Parental warmth

A high level of parental warmth has been found to be associated with fewer psychological symptoms among Chinese and Chinese American adolescents. Chiu, Feldman and Rosenthal [15] studied parental warmth using three subscales: cohesion, harmony, and acceptance, and found that parental warmth was negatively associated with Chinese American adolescents' distress. Lim, Yeh, Liang, Lau and McCabe [8] used the Parental Bonding Instrument to measure the degree to which a parent was perceived by his/her child as warm and affectionate or the parent-child relationship was perceived as tight-knit. They found that greater perceived parental warmth was significantly related to less depression and fewer psychological symptoms in Chinese American youth.

### B. Parental control and monitoring

Researchers studied different aspects of parental control, including behavioral and psychological control, on Chinese American adolescents' psychosocial health. Chiu, Feldman

This study was funded by the Helen Fuld Health Trust Scholarship (WY).

DOI: 10.5176/2345-718X\_5.1.183

and Rosenthal [15] assessed adolescent's perceptions of parental behavioral control based on rules set by parents, how order was kept in the household, and how family decisions were made. They did not find association between parental control and distress in Chinese American and Chinese Australian adolescents. Lim, Yeh, Liang, Lau and McCabe [8] conceptualized parental psychological control as overprotection. They found that increased parental psychological control was related to higher levels of depression and more psychological symptoms among Chinese American adolescents. Further, Juang, Syed and Takagi [13] found that greater parent-adolescent discrepancies in perceptions of parental control were related to higher depressive symptoms among Chinese American adolescents.

The inconsistent findings in the literature regarding the relationship between parental control and Chinese American adolescents' psychosocial health may result from different meanings of parental control operating in different cultures. In Western culture, parental control is viewed as the parents' desire to dominate their children's lives and, as a result, adolescents may interpret it as rejection and hostility [16]. Thus, parental control is seen as a negative aspect of parenting for mainstream European Americans [17, 18]. In Chinese Immigrant families, parental control is often interpreted as a sign of parental warmth, caring, and involvement, and therefore considered positive for children's development [16].

Parenting monitoring has shown protective effect on adolescent health. Liu, Lau, Chen, Dinh and Kim [11] conducted a longitudinal study with 444 Chinese American/immigrant families and found that higher levels of maternal monitoring was related to lower levels of adolescents' conduct problems. Research also suggests that inadequate parental control and monitoring may increase parent-child conflicts and consequently, increase adolescent distress and depression [13, 19]

Although prior research in this field has generated important findings regarding Chinese American parenting practices (primarily in mothers) and the impact of parenting practices on Chinese American adolescents' psychosocial and behavioral health, the use of different conceptual models and operational measurements across studies creates challenges in comparing study findings. Lim and Lim [10] called for more qualitative research in which data could be interpreted more meaningfully in conceptualizing parenting practices within this population. Our qualitative study aimed to understand Chinese immigrant parents' parenting practices and factors that enhanced or hindered their parenting practices in the United States, and whether their parenting may influence their adolescent children's psychosocial and behavioral health. The findings will enhance our understanding of the parents' and their adolescents' needs and struggles and inform the development of linguistically and culturally tailored programs for this population.

## II. METHODS

### A. Sample and Sampling

We used a purposive sampling strategy [20] to recruit Chinese immigrant parents from a Chinese church and a Chinese Sunday school in Arizona based on the following criteria: (1) self-identifies as Chinese, Taiwanese, Chinese American, or Taiwanese American, and (2) has at least one child between 12-19 years old. We chose these two sites for sample recruitment given different characters (e.g., country of origin, spoken and written languages etc.) of their members that reflected the diverse background of Chinese immigrant parents in the United States. Thirteen parents (10 mothers and 3 fathers) were enrolled in the study.

### B. Procedure

Institutional Review Board approval and participants' consents were obtained before conducting the research. Two bilingual (Chinese/English) investigators conducted three focus groups for mothers (two groups from the Sunday school and one group from the church;  $n = 4, 3,$  and  $3,$  respectively) and one focus group for fathers from the church ( $n=3$ ) at a private location convenient to the participants. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and was audio recorded with permission. Based on the language preferences of participants, we conducted three focus groups in Mandarin Chinese and one in English. Participants also filled out a brief demographic questionnaire and received a gift card for his/her time and effort.

To protect participants' confidentiality, we used a pre-assigned code for each one without collecting personal identifiers. All data was secured in one password-protected computer and a locked cabinet to which only investigators had access. We also provided a list of local mental health resources to participants to ensure they knew where to seek help if they encountered emotional issues resulting from their participation. No adverse results were reported.

### C. Measures

To accommodate participants' linguistic needs, we used rigorous translation and back-translation procedures to prepare the English version and two Chinese written versions (traditional and simplified) of the questionnaires and interview questions. The questionnaire included questions about age, biological sex, education level, occupation, and immigration history of both the participants and their children, and which language participants preferred to use when talking to their children.

A 20-item Vancouver Index of Acculturation (VIA) was included to assess cultural orientation [21]. The VIA comprises two subscales: 10 items regarding Chinese orientation (e.g., "I often follow Chinese culture traditions") and 10 items regarding American orientation (e.g., "I often follow mainstream American culture traditions"). The parents indicated their agreement with these items on a scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Cultural orientation scores were calculated with the sum of the 10-item scores. Psychometric properties of the VIA demonstrated satisfactory validity and reliability in prior research [22].

Three main open-ended questions were developed to guide the focused group interviews: (1) How do you describe your parenting style? (2) What are the strengths of raising an adolescent child in the U.S.? (3) What are the challenges of raising an adolescent child in the U.S.?

#### D. Analysis

We conducted descriptive statistics to describe sample demographic characteristics and cultural orientation scores in IBM SPSS 21.0 (IBM Corp., 2012). For the focus groups interviews, one bilingual investigator transcribed the interview data from audiotapes and translated the Chinese transcripts into English. All participant identifiers (i.e., names if mentioned in the discussion) were removed from the transcripts. The other investigator read and validated the transcriptions and translation done by the first investigator. Transcripts were then downloaded into Atlas.ti Version 7 for analysis. First, the research aims served as themes that organized the data. Then, data were analyzed based on Downe-Wamboldt's [23] inductive content analysis method. Units of analysis were identified using the complete ideas. We reviewed each unit of analysis and organized them into sub-themes based on common elements. Sub-themes were defined, refined, and examined to ensure exhaustiveness and exclusivity. No unit of data appeared under more than one sub-theme. Sub-themes were named using words that characterized the content. To enhance the trustworthiness of the results, the other investigator served a peer debriefer and reviewed the analysis. Disagreements on analysis were resolved through discussion, and the coding decisions were based on 100% consensus between the two investigators.

### III. RESULTS

The participating parents aged from 35 to 56 years. The majority (92%) had college degree or higher. Parents reported higher Chinese orientation scores ( $M = 30.0$ ,  $SD = 4.9$ ) than American orientation scores ( $M = 25.1$ ,  $SD = 3.7$ ). Table 1 contains the demographic characteristics of the sample.

The theme of Parenting Styles described the parenting practices in Chinese immigrant families with two sub-themes. The theme of "Struggling to Find an Eclectic Way" organized the findings of the parents' perceived strengths and challenges of raising an adolescent child the U.S. with 4 sub-themes. The theme of Adolescent Health has one sub-theme. Table 2 contains the summary of the themes and sub-themes.

#### A. Parenting Styles

Most parents described their parenting styles as very strict. Parents had high expectations on academic performance, moral development, and future career options. Parents also had strict control and monitoring over their adolescent children, particularly on peer selection and social activities.

(1) *High parental expectations*: Some parents admitted that they had strong emphasis on academic performance while others said they cared more about whether their children had tried their best rather than the actual grades. However, parents

who did not express high expectation on academic performance shared similar thought such as, "honestly speaking, for Chinese children, as long as they study conscientiously, they will get very good grades anyway." Several parents also noticed that they had strong emphasis on academic performance in the past, but found their children become increasingly conscientious and put pressure on themselves. When discussing possible reasons about this, parents shared that they found their children experienced heavy pressure from other Asian peers:

My son was taking a questionnaire at school, and he answered "yes" to... "feeling under pressure in school..." I felt strange about that since I never gave him pressure. Then he told me that the pressure was from his Asian classmates... I told him not to take too many AP classes that made him so tired. He listened and did not take many AP classes that year. However, his friends were all taking the difficult AP classes, and he could not be with them. He was not happy that all his friends left him.

TABLE 1. Demographic Information ( $n = 13$ )

Variable	Mean (SD)	n (%)
Age	48.0 (5.8)	
Time in U.S. (years)	20.2 (8.1)	
Birth Place		
Mainland China		2 (15.4)
Taiwan		6 (46.2)
Vietnam		2 (15.4)
Malaysia		2 (15.4)
U.S.		1 (7.7)
Education Level		
Did not graduate from high school		1 (7.7)
Graduated from college		8 (61.5)
Post – graduate degree		4 (30.8)
Career		
Housewife		3 (23.1)
Engineer		3 (23.1)
Accountant		2 (15.4)
Teacher		2 (15.4)
Others		3 (23.1)
Language When Speaking to Child		
Chinese		10 (76.9)
English		2 (15.4)
Both		1 (7.7)
Vancouver Index of Acculturation		
Chinese Orientation	30.0 (4.9)	
American Orientation	25.1 (3.7)	
Higher Chinese Orientation		12 (92.3)
Higher American Orientation		1 (7.7)

Parents from all groups expressed high standards regarding the moral development of their children, such as being responsible and persistent, and having good self-control. Additionally, all mothers from the church group emphasized the need for “Christian” standard of living, such as “Because I grew up in a Christian family, parents were stricter regarding moral education. So I have pretty high standards for my kids as well.”

Parents also have high expectations on career choices. Parents stated the importance of the ability to support a family. “I want them to know that there’s a direct correlation between the profession you choose and the ability to maintain the lifestyle you wish to have. We talk about the fact that they need to be responsible and able to take care of the family.”

TABLE 2. Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Parenting Styles	High parental expectations Strict parental control and monitoring
Struggling to Find an Eclectic Way	Maintaining Chinese language and cultural values Assimilating the good from the U.S. culture Not finding a balanced point Not knowing how to communicate
Adolescent Health	My child is suffering

2) *Strict parental control and monitoring:*

Parents stated the importance of monitoring their adolescent children, particularly on peer selection and social activities. Most parents would not allow their adolescent children to go to overnight parties. Some parents would allow sleepovers only if they knew the family very well. Parents felt it was necessary to first know the family before allowing their child to hang out with the friend. All parents agreed that they did not allow their children to have romantic relationships until college. A mother shared her family’s rules about dating:

We’ve been telling them those things since they were little, such as no pre-marital sex, no dating until graduation from high school. If you want to go out, you should go out together as good friends. This is more fun, because high school sweethearts usually breakup after graduation. So I don’t want them to waste their time on this.

B. *Struggling to Finding an Eclectic Way*

Parents shared that every cultural has its own strengths. “If there’s something good in the Chinese culture, we want to teach them [adolescent children]; if there’s something good in the U.S. culture, we want to teach them as well.” Some parents liked the fact that they could pick the best from two cultures without the limitation of one. However, most parents struggle to find a balanced point. It was difficult for them to learn the U.S. ways of parenting and adjusting their own parenting practices based on the mainstream culture. This theme

included four sub-themes: maintaining Chinese language and cultural values, assimilating the good from the U.S. culture, not finding a balanced point, and not knowing how to communicate.

1) *Maintaining Chinese language and cultural values:*

Parents emphasized the importance of learning Chinese language. Conflicts arose between parents and their adolescents when they had different expectations. For example, a mother shared, “I think learning Chinese is very important. However, it is very difficult to motivate my son to learn Hakka [a Chinese dialogue]. He is very frustrated about that.” One father echoed this sentiment: “We push them to attend the Chinese school, and they hated it!”

Parents also emphasized the importance of maintaining Chinese traditional values, including filial piety and being respectful to the elderly and authorities, many of which their children could not understand. “My kids had cultural shock when we visited family in Taiwan. They had trouble understanding why they could not sit down if elders or seniors were standing. They did not know “zhǎng yòu yǒu xù” [respect for seniority, a traditional Chinese cultural value].” Parents thought that there was a lack of education on respecting parents and the elderly in the U.S. education.

2) *Assimilating the good from the U.S. culture:* Parents shared that they were willing to take in some aspects of parenting practices from the U.S. culture that they thought were “good,” including the emphasis on building confidence, promoting independence and freedom, and being well-balanced. For example, one parent said, “the U.S. culture has a lot of strengths. For example, their [U.S. parents’] encouragement, trust, and acceptance towards their children; these are all what Chinese parents need to learn from.” Parents thought that the education environment here was very relaxed without the high pressure of getting into good schools. Their children did not only focus on academic performance and their education was well-rounded.

3) *Not finding a balanced point:* On one hand, parents wanted to adapt their parenting to the mainstream culture. On the other hand, some parents thought that their children were too confident that they did not think they needed to work as hard; their children were too independent and free that they would often challenge the parents; and their children had too many extra-curricular activities that they did not learn as much as they would learn in China. Parents struggle to find a balanced point. For example, one father shared:

I feel like when I grew up in my country, we always try our best, work as hard as we can, but here, sometimes you’ll say the kid is good enough, they are already among the top, why do they need to work harder. I am kind of worried about that because I think they should work as hard as they can.

Parents thought that what their children learned in school conflicted with what they were educated about at home. One mother shared:

With this [conflicting education] happening over time for ten to twenty years, the results are that their [adolescent children's] moral aspects are very Chinese, but their thinking and behaviors are very westernized. They challenge you and tell you when they are not satisfied with you. The way they communicate with you is not appropriate from a traditional Chinese viewpoint. We call it rebellious but they think they do that because they respect you.

Parents also expressed their dilemmas in setting expectations for their children's future careers. For example, one mother shared:

The pure Chinese side of me, like traditional Chinese, we want them to be professionals. For my girls, they need to put their family first. So I want them to understand that being a professional won't be easy on top of their family obligations...But the other side of me thought that they should have their own choices.

Seven parents shared the challenges of parenting due to different values held by them and their children. We compared these 7 parents' acculturation index (difference between the Chinese and American orientation scores) to the other parents. Parents who experienced challenges of different parent-child values had a higher discrepancy between the two cultural orientation scores ( $M = 12.6$ ,  $SD = 7.8$ ) compared to parents who did not ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 5.0$ ; See Table 3).

4) *Not knowing how to communicate:* Parents did not know how to effectively communicate with their adolescent children. In general, Chinese parents are not outwardly expressive. A mother said that she would rather find and use a book to educate her son rather than directly talking to him. Their children did not understand the traditional values and challenged the parents a lot, and even told their parents that they were "weird". Parents had a hard time explaining to their adolescent children when their children compared themselves to their American friends. Further, mothers experienced more challenges in communicating with their children than fathers. One mother said, "My kids always ask, 'why can they [American friends] do this, but we can't do it in our family?' To me, it's more of a challenge [to raise a kid in the U.S.]. I don't know how to tell them what might not be good in the U.S. culture, nor do I know how to tell them what is good in the Chinese culture."

#### C. *Adolescent Health: My Child is Suffering*

Parents felt that their children suffered from the high standards raised by the parents, and the different cultural values between parents and children. For example, one mother shared:

Sometimes my son would say to me, "I feel that you've never appreciated me or liked what I do." I said, "Yes I do. What you did just now was pretty good." But I guess we don't do that very often. He would say something like "you rarely appraise what I do." So he has a lot of feelings on that. We struggled a lot. It's very different [to be in a different culture].

Parents also found that as their children growing up, they lost their American friends. "One thing that was very sad was that at about fourth or fifth grade, all their good [American] friends left them. My children were the ones who were dumped... They felt heartbroken." One parent asked their child about this, and the child told the parent:

The American way of parenting is very open. They are very active, they go swimming and skiing, but we Chinese don't do any of that...We don't have anything exciting to share. Plus we don't do sleepover, dating, putting on make-ups or ear-piecing. They think we are boring. Good friends share common topics to talk about. They find friends who can talk about their boyfriends and those fun things... So we don't play together anymore.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Raising adolescent children in a different sociocultural context poses great challenges for Chinese immigrant parents in the United States [7]. Our findings add to the literature by describing in detail about Chinese immigrant parents' parenting, how being in a different sociocultural environment shape parenting practices, and how may parenting may influence their adolescent children's psychosocial and behavioral health. Our findings also highlight the discrepancies in cultural values between Chinese immigrant parents and their adolescent children, and how the discrepancies complicate communication between them.

Prior research has consistently shown that Chinese immigrant parents hold high educational expectations, regardless of their homelands or socioeconomic backgrounds [24-26]. They expected their children to get A's as education is an important channel to socioeconomic success [24]. Adolescent children in Chinese immigrant families perceive high educational expectations from parents even parents do not express them verbally [27]. Researchers hypothesized that perhaps this is part of a strategy to overcome racial discrimination and achieve upward mobility [28]. Our findings suggest that many, but not all, Chinese immigrant parents had high expectations on children's academic performance. Both parents from the Sunday school and the church groups believed that good moral quality (e.g., being a good person, being respectful) was equally or more important than academic success. This finding may suggest that, nowadays, Chinese immigrant parents do not regard academic performance as a sole indicator of success.

Chinese immigrant parents in the study were open to their children's career choices. For first-generation immigrant parents who do not have extended family support in the United States, "being a professional" not only indicates high social status, it also means financial security. This finding is consistent with Goyette and Xie [28] that Chinese parents pressure their children to pursue careers that will ensure family unity and economic survival.

The pace of individual acculturation varies in immigrant families, with children usually adapting to the new culture more rapidly than parents [9, 29]. The variance of acculturation within the family introduces conflicts between traditional values held by parents and the new values embraced by their children [30]. Mothers who perceived a larger acculturation gap with their children reported challenges in parent-child communication [30] and increased parent-child conflicts and consequently increased child's emotional distress and/or behavioral issues [11, 27]. We further demonstrated this in the current study. The parents in our study reported parent-child communication challenging due to different cultural values held by Chinese immigrant parents and by their adolescent children (e.g., ways of showing respect to elders or seniors in traditional Chinese culture). Parents who expressed challenges raised by different parent-child cultural values also had a higher mean discrepancy between their Chinese and American orientation scores measured by the acculturation scale. This further triangulated with our qualitative data that difference of cultural values between parent and child can introduce conflicts and communication problems.

Consistent with prior research, Chinese immigrant parents in our study reported close behavioral control and monitoring over their adolescent children. Evidence suggest that parent behavior which is too controlling but not warm is associated with worse child outcomes; however, the concept and interpretation of parental control in Chinese culture can be very different from that in other cultures [15, 31, 32]. Chinese parents show their love by setting strict limits for children and carefully selecting peers to prevent their children from engaging in risky behaviors [32]. We found that parent-child conflicts occurred if children did not understand and appreciate their parents' intent behind these controlling behaviors, especially when parents did not explain the rationale of their behaviors. Parent-child conflicts in Chinese immigrant families might be relieved or resolved if parents clearly communicate with their adolescent children, respond to children's thoughts and concerns, and explain the reasons behind these behaviors to children. It will also be helpful if Chinese immigrant parents and their children brainstorm acceptable solutions together before those situations (e.g., disagreement on sleeping overnight at a friend's house) occur.

Our study is unique that it included data from both fathers and mothers. We found that mothers experienced more challenges in communicating with their children than fathers. This finding can result from the multiple roles and responsibilities that Chinese immigrant mothers carry in the U.S. society. The stress associated with child rearing for

Chinese immigrant mothers in the United States can be higher than Chinese mothers living in their home countries due to multiple barriers (e.g., language, culture, sociopolitical) and limited family and social support [33, 34]. These inherent challenges make parenting difficult for immigrant mothers, and in turn, may contribute to more controlling parenting styles when raising their children within a different sociocultural environment.

There are several limitations in this study. Most of our sample came from upper-middle and middle-class families, and more than half of the parents were recruited from a Christian church. The study findings may not be generalized to other Chinese immigrant families with different socioeconomic and religious profiles. Further, we could not further explore the direct relationship between parenting and adolescents' psychosocial and behavioral health as adolescents' data was not available. Future research that examines the longitudinal relationships between parenting style, acculturation, and adolescent psychosocial and behavioral health outcomes among Chinese Immigrant families will inform the theories and development of culturally congruent interventions to address their unique needs.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our findings provide important insights about the parenting practices of Chinese immigrant parents, the challenges they face when parenting children within a different sociocultural context, and factors that may enhance or hinder their parenting practices in the United States. Our participants appreciated the opportunity to share, discuss and express their concerns about parenting and learn from each other. They advocated for regular group meetings to support one another and for education programs tailored to meet their unique needs as Chinese immigrant parents.

As society becomes increasingly diverse, it is important for nurses who work with immigrant families at different levels (e.g., individual, family, school, community) to be aware of the unique parenting challenges these families experience and why these challenges occur. With greater understanding nurses can not only provide emotional support to Chinese immigrant parents but also promote psychological and behavioral health of their children by enhancing culturally congruent and effective parenting skills.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are grateful to all the parents who participated in this study, and to the workers and volunteers at the Sunday school and the Chinese church who made this study possible.

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