



**“The Impact of East Asian Cultural Values on Familial Interactions”**

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## The Impact of East Asian Cultural Values on Familial Interactions

### **Introduction**

In 1967, the developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind formed her Pillar theory, now referred to as “parenting styles,” through her research piece “Childcare practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior.” She found relationships between a parent’s child-rearing methods and the child’s behavior, condensing them into the authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles. These four styles are differentiated by their amounts of support and control, or a parent’s warmth and monitoring of their children (Van Campen & Russell 1). The authoritative parenting style, characterized by explicit displays of verbal and physical affection, is lauded as the best style among European-Americans. It is believed that a parent’s provision of warmth, emotional intimacy, and freedom is the optimal way to raise a happy, successful child. In contrast, Asian parents, typically adults of East Asian descent, are characterized by the authoritarian parenting style. These parents are perceived as cold, harsh and strict with high expectations that can never be fulfilled. They are disciplinarians who endlessly pressure, criticize, and demand much from their child, a stereotype put into words by the term “tiger mom.” While Americans prioritize the emotional wellbeing of the child, Asian parents are more achievement-oriented. However, is this an accurate representation of Asian parenting, or do Eurocentric standards affect American perception? Is the Asian way of child-rearing truly more detrimental than the American way?

To answer how cultural values have led to the divide in the discussion of child-rearing, this paper will focus on narratives from descendants of China, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This information will provide a more accurate portrayal of Asian experiences to foster understanding between American and Asian families. The selected articles “Why Chinese Mothers are Superior” by poster tiger mother Amy Chua, and “A Scholarly Response to ‘Tiger Mom’: Happiness Matters, Too” by Didi Kirsten Tatlow are personal narratives that reveal the reasoning behind each side in this polarizing debate. Finding how Asian cultural values affect the individual and the collective will answer the question: how have cultural beliefs led to common behaviors and socialization goals in East Asian parenting styles?

The origin of the Asian authoritarian style was found by exploring East Asian societies’ incorporation of Confucianism and Taoism philosophies into the social structure. Specifically, the concepts of *xiao*, *ren*, *li*, and *yin-yang* affect the interactions within families. The philosophies’ influence on modern beliefs was discovered in Lauren Dundes’ study titled “The Duty to Succeed: Honor versus Happiness in College and Career Choices of East Asian Students in the United States”, which details how heritage influences a student’s mindset towards choosing a college and career path. In Helen Sung’s study “The Influence of Culture on Parenting Practices of East Asian Families and Emotional Intelligence of Older Adolescents”, the success of the authoritarian style was quantified through measurements of Asian children’s logical and emotional intelligence, as well as their receptiveness towards the methods used in their upbringing. Alyssa Fu and Hazel Markus similarly assess the success of the authoritarian parent in their piece titled “My Mother and Me: Why Tiger Mothers Motivate Asian Americans But Not European Americans.” Through analysis of these texts, it is determined that neither the

American authoritative or Asian authoritarian style of parenting can be assessed as superior. Rather, the combination of behaviors used in both methods will create the optimal style for child development.

### **Asian Cultural Values and Societal Structures**

While European Americans view Asian parenting practices as cold and harsh, Asian child-rearing practices are validated by the cultural values that shape their context. Confucian philosophy shapes most of East Asian society, emphasizing social harmony more than Western cultures do. Influenced by this value of social harmony, Asian societies have developed to become collectivist and hierarchical with a set of moral codes regulating these social relationships. Three values were found to be most integral to Confucian teachings: *xiao*, or filial piety, *ren*, or benevolence and humaneness, and *li*, or ritual (de Bary). *Ren* is the most important value, but it can only begin with *xiao* and be reinforced by *li*. These virtues of Confucianism influence the work parents do to aid in their child's development of their social and academic lives.

#### *Xiao, ren, li*

The collectivist nature of Asian societies is derived from Confucius' theory of society that "man is a social being always interacting with other human beings," (de Bary, "Man is a Social Being") thus, humans have moral obligations to each other and public service. The reciprocity and maintenance of social relationships such as "parent and child, husband and wife, older and younger brother" govern social interaction. Family relationships are placed at the center of life and society; the parent-child bond is considered the most fundamental human bond (de Bary, "Filial Piety (Xiao)"). The parent follows concepts of *chiao shun* and *guan*, or

practices to train, govern, and love the children (Van Campen & Russell 2). To respect familial relationships, children engage in *xiao* by having respect for authority, devotion to parents, and emotional restraint. Social stability rests on *xiao*, as one can only learn to be humane by respecting the beings that create and nurture their existence. A child's care, duty, and obligation for their elders are considered the root of morality and *ren*.

To cultivate *xiao*, a person must partake in the appropriate rituals, referred to as *li*. Confucian viewed self-improvement much like "polishing or grinding a piece of jade" (Wong, "The centrality of *li* or ritual"), an activity that necessitates one to much time and effort into, learn how to perform properly, and have the right attitudes of respect for the object. *Li* refers to a broad range of rituals essential to the cultivation of character, all of which include "courteous and respectful behavior of many different kinds" (Wong). A child who engages in rituals to show devotion to elders is one who listens carefully and is deferential and obedient, sometimes even fearful of their parents (Dundes et. al 148). Fear is important in curbing rebellious behavior and ensuring the children are kept on the right track. Children must also engage in emotional restraint. One "saves face," or protects their image and dignity through the maintenance of their composure. In Confucian societies, an individual's image is extended to the family as a whole. As representatives of the whole family, children must save their own face first in order to save the family's face. Social harmony and a favorable reputation for the family are only made possible by an individual's conformity and dedication to tradition.

Parents who instill the importance of academic education in their children are influenced by the value of *ren*, or the belief that humans are teachable and improvable through personal and communal endeavors. Education is considered "the means to wisdom and competence" (Dundes

136). Academic education is moral education: individuals are taught about their role in the social structure and moral responsibilities to their peers. Through learning and listening, an individual can be transformed into the ideal citizen: one who is respectful, civil, and benevolent, thus fulfilling their obligation to public service. Education attainment is even more significant in an American context. For Asian-Americans, achieving high levels of education becomes a “conscious strategy to overcome” (Dundes et al. 146) social barriers such as racial discrimination and lack of English proficiency. Academic success is seen as the sole means to achieve social mobility, a definite way to overcome societal limitations that are out of one’s control. Controlling the child’s academic and career opportunities enables the parent to live through the child and to attain prestige for the entire family. Academic success benefits not only the individual but the collective as well.

### *Communicative Practices*

Confucianism and Taoism shape the communicative practices that distinguish the East from the West. In the chapter “The Devil’s Advocate and the Reluctant Speaker,” Li details how the Eastern approach differs from the Western approach. Li proposes four maxims of conversation for East Asians: paucity, ambiguity, indirectness, and listenership. Communication must be done in such a way to avoid violating social boundaries or social harmony. Thus, people who are deserving of respect are those who speak rarely, indeterminately and amicably, and listen carefully. Refraining from speaking allows one to avoid “inappropriate, insensitive behavior and unnecessary promises” (Li 308). While the common Western assumption would perceive a quiet speaker as uninvolved, insensitive, or verbally inept, Easterners interpret this such a speaker as sensitive, attentive, attuned to providing the best outcome for all parties.

Speaking ambiguously shows that the speaker is in acknowledgment of the world constantly changing and the limitations of their own knowledge, an act that stems from the Taoist perception of all things as fluid and holistic, which is a tenement represented by yin and yang. In order for an individual to benefit from education, they must engage in active, careful listenership. In accordance with these practices, when parents scold or advise their children, children are expected to stay silent. The Western interpretation would see this as the parent not allowing the child to defend themselves (316), when in fact, this is the Asian child showing respect to the parent's wisdom and authority, allowing them to effectively receive and absorb the information. In contrast to the West, which prioritizes public speaking skills, talkativeness marks an unintelligent and superficial person in Asian societies. So, a child must first listen carefully to show acknowledgment of the advice and determine the right moment to interject, which shows the parent that they do in fact possess humility, open-mindedness, "great sensitivity, sensibility, and skill" (318). In Asian culture, communication is ruled by the belief that actions are regarded as more important than words, that listening and not speaking is the mark of an educated person.

### **Common Familial Behaviors Inspired By Confucian Values**

The control aspect of the Asian parent's authoritarian style is explained by the Confucian emphasis on education and self-improvement. A child's educational success is a tangible way to display the accomplishment and prestige of the family. To ensure a positive reputation through high academic achievement, many Asian parents will closely monitor their child's activities. Amy Chua, a Yale professor and self-proclaimed "tiger mother," never allowed her daughters to "attend a sleepover, have a playdate, watch TV or play computer games, choose their own extracurricular activities, not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama, not

play the piano or violin.” Controlling the child is necessary because children will not choose activities that are beneficial to their moral development, instead, they will waste time on TV and games. Parents know which skills are most beneficial for the child’s resume, namely being a perfect student with perfect scores who excels in playing piano or violin. Children’s social interaction must be monitored too, for it is seen as a distraction to academic achievement; playdates with friends and excelling in sports are useless in improving a student’s intellect or grades. Being the best in school requires time and effort invested in studying, and parents ensure their children’s success by enforcing such limitations on the child. Control is necessary to maintain the child’s and in turn the family’s face and success.

The lack of explicitly expressed affection in Asian families can be explained by the social hierarchy, respect for education, and common communicative practices. Emotional restraint is practiced by parents in “fear that affection would... diminish the fear children have of parents.” This emotional distance ensures the child’s obedience and deference towards the parent, maintaining the proper relationship as mandated by the social structure. Cultivating fear in children leads them to heed the parent’s word carefully, regarding the provision of information more seriously and heavily. This lack of support also prevents the “spoiling of the child” which could result in a child becoming “so satisfied with his or her accomplishments that he/she loses motivation for improvement”. In order to encourage the child’s pursuit of knowledge and learning, Asian parents often criticize, compare the child to others that are more successful, and “more so than American mothers, draw attention to the mistakes their children made” (Fu & Markus 746). A child cannot stay complacent with their place and progress in society but must always be striving for more, surpassing all those around them. Parents constantly encourage



competition and point out mistakes to remind the child of the progress that has yet to be made, reinforcing the significance of genuine self-improvement. The restraint and control of the parent teach children to maintain their own composure in a society rife with intense educational competition and complex social relationships. Parental lack of support serves to socially educate the child into acquiring the necessary behaviors to conform and thrive in a hierarchical society.

This is not to say that Asian parents are as cold and loveless as they are made out to be, however. The deficit in emotional and physical support is made up for by instrumental support, which are actions that are tangibly beneficial, acts of assistance specifically for the child (Van Campen & Russell 3). In other words, parental love and support are shown through sacrifice. Examples of sacrifice include “moving to a good school district, asking children to do extra homework problems from workbooks bought outside of school, paying for private tutors and categorical financial support for academic expenses...sometimes mothers seek a job simply because they want to fund their child’s private, after-school education” (Dundes et al. 146), or even taking time off work to personally assist the child in understanding homework problems. Asian parents frequently remind the children of these life-changing major decisions of relocating to a whole new country, allocating a significant amount of funds to acquiring extra educational material, turning down hours of pay, all to improve the child’s opportunities for success. Even mothers, who are expected to be housewives and by their children’s sides at all times, go against societal norms in order to provide their children with financial and educational stability. Parents prioritize their children and disregard their comfort in their homelands, financial situations, or established gender roles. Asian parents are heavily involved in guiding and teaching their children, tangibly showing their concern for the future of the child. Through these parental

sacrifices, parents hope that children can come to value learning more, which will then lead them to perform better (Tatlow). Eastern communicative practices, which view meaningful action as more effective than empty words and promises, can also explain the emphasis on instrumental support. Love and support are interpreted differently in Asian contexts, where tangibly beneficial acts of service take precedence over verbal and physical warmth.

### **Effects of Cultural Practices on Child Development**

As propagated by American beliefs, common behaviors of East Asian parenting can and do negatively impact the socioemotional development of the child, but these practices have the potential to improve parent-adolescent closeness and the chances of children's success. Thus, it is not easily determinable to assess Asian authoritarianism as better or worse than American authoritativeness. A parent's excessive control and lack of warmth can negatively influence a child's emotional wellbeing and perception of their upbringing. Sung found that Asian-American adolescents tended to score the lowest in the independence aspect of EQ (208). These children felt they were not living for themselves; for example, they chose colleges and career pathways that boosted their parent's status and happiness, instead of fulfilling their individual needs (Dundes et al. 152). The children with the lowest EQs had parents who communicated in a directive way, using shame, anger, guilt to control and silence their children (Sung 205-206), resulting in the adolescents feeling hopeless and helpless, bound by traditional values stemming from a country they could never relate to. They were resentful that they were being controlled and pushed too much, held to impossibly high standards of being the perfect student and child, and wished for their parents to be more demonstrative, loving, and supportive in acknowledging their efforts. The focus on academic success led these students to base their worth on their

achievement, undergoing intense psychological distress in the face of failure (Dundes et al. 149). Due to the emotional unavailability of the family, the children were unable to healthily regulate their emotions. Issues went undiscussed and kept to the family due to the Asian belief that counseling would threaten familial privacy and prestige. With no guidance, emotional support, or independence, these children often ended up denouncing their heritage's cultural values. On the other hand, Asian parental practices can form closer familial bonds, confidence, and resilience within the child. To illustrate, Chua recalls an instance in which she pressured and forced her daughter Lulu to master a piano piece while sitting and working alongside Lulu (par. 19-34). By sacrificing time to become personally involved in her child's successes and failures, Chua built focus, drive, and motivation in Lulu. She did not allow Lulu to shoulder the struggle on her own or to give up, teaching Lulu to persist in the face of failure, reinforcing the idea that that self-improvement is possible with time, effort, and help. Through the Asian parent's control and involvement, a child believes they have a set goal and purpose to keep working towards that is achievable. Control and instrumental support improves interdependence between parent and child, causing a child to develop gratitude and trust within the parent's abilities.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural values have formed the rift between American and Asian perceptions of parenting. Confucian and Taoist philosophies are the basis of many common behaviors in Asian families as they are the foundation of East Asian societies. Asian parents are drawn towards the authoritarian parenting style, using control and emotional distance in order to train the children to attain high academic attainment and career success, respect societal relationships, and survive in a rigid social hierarchy. Warmth is indirectly shown through instrumental support,

encouraging children to respect education and self-improvement in order to show gratitude to the collective's role in ensuring their prosperous future. These methods can yield positive or negative results in the child's development. Practices can encourage a child's resilience and self-confidence in their ability, improve their closeness to the parent, and teach them to respect their moral obligation to the community. On the other hand, these behaviors can be stifling and burdensome to the child, causing them to struggle with emotional control, societal interactions, and independence. The information in each study teaches us the importance of our environment's influence on our perceptions. It is important to note that that control and warmth are defined differently across cultures, thus, each parenting style will also be received differently in each context too. By the Eurocentric parenting culture, Asian parents appear as cold and strict, focusing only on educational achievement. By Eastern parenting standards, Western parents are too lenient and indulgent, making no attempt to help set their children up for success. In an ideal situation, a combination of both styles would yield an approach most effective for child development, otherwise meaning "less control in [the East] and more involvement in [the West]" (Tatlow). Parents should strive to be involved in children's learning to develop resilience and close familial relationships, while creating an environment that encourages autonomy and mutual communication to develop a child's independence and socio-emotional capabilities.

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