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Raising Happy Children Who Succeed in School: Lessons From China and the United States

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ABSTRACT—*Chinese children outperform their American counterparts in the academic arena. Although many aspects of Chinese and American children's environments likely contribute to this achievement gap, a key aspect may be learning-related parenting (e.g., assisting children with homework and responding to children's performance). In this article, we review differences in Chinese and American learning-related parenting, with attention to the trade-offs of each culture's style for children's academic and emotional functioning. We consider an integrated style of parenting combining the strengths of the Chinese and American styles to facilitate children's academic and emotional functioning.*

KEYWORDS—*achievement; culture; China; motivation parent involvement; parenting*

Chinese children outperform their American counterparts academically, particularly in math (e.g., Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012) but also in other areas such as science (e.g., Martin, Mullis, Foy, & Stanco, 2012). The Chinese edge has been documented as early as age 5 in math (e.g., Siegler & Mu, 2008) and continues into adolescence in this area as well as

others (Program for International Student Assessment, 2013). Moreover, given the array of Chinese children's skills—for example, they have an edge in both content and process skills in math (Program for International Student Assessment, 2013)—the gap is unlikely to be superficial. It is likely that motivational differences between Chinese and American children are responsible for Chinese children's edge (for a review, see Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2008). Chinese children are more motivated than American children as reflected in their investment (e.g., school is more personally important and mastery is more of a priority) and engagement (e.g., more time is spent on homework and self-regulated learning strategies are used more often) in school, which predicts enhanced achievement over time among children (e.g., Wang & Pomerantz, 2009).

Efforts to elucidate what underlies the gap between Chinese and American children's academic functioning have focused on how learning environments in China differ from those in the United States (e.g., Stigler & Hiebert, 1999), with attention to learning-related parenting (e.g., assisting children with homework and responding to children's performance; e.g., Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Hess, Chang, & McDevitt, 1987). In this article, we describe the research on how such parenting differs in China and in the United States. We address the critical question of whether the Chinese style of learning-related parenting fosters children's academic functioning, thereby contributing to the Chinese edge in achievement. However, we diverge from the perspective that Americans should adopt the Chinese style (e.g., Huntsinger, Jose, & Larson, 1998; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992): Given dampened feelings of worth and happiness among Chinese (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1999; Stigler, Smith, & Mao, 1985), we point to the costs of the Chinese style for children's emotional functioning. We end by considering the viability of an approach to learning-related parenting that integrates aspects of the Chinese and American styles.

Because our concern is with how learning-related parenting differs in China and in the United States, we concentrate on

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parenting used differently by Chinese and American parents on average. In taking this approach, we are guided by the idea that parents, regardless of their ethnic heritage, socioeconomic status, or other attributes (e.g., political views), are exposed to their country's mainstream cultural values via the media as well as other avenues (e.g., Sperber, 1996). However, within China and the United States, variability in the extent to which parents adopt such values leads to variability in their learning-related parenting. The assumption is that the variability is nested within distributions of parenting in the two countries. Notably, the distributions not only overlap but are also distinct (for an example, see Figure 1). Although within-country variation is important in that it creates differences in children's functioning within China and the United States, our focus here is on differences between the two countries in parenting to understand what underlies differences in Chinese and American children's academic and emotional functioning.

HOW DOES CHINESE AND AMERICAN PARENTING DIFFER?

One of the most striking differences in Chinese and American learning-related parenting is in the sheer quantity of such parenting: Whether they reside in China or the United States, Chinese parents are more involved in children's learning than American parents, beginning as early as preschool and continuing into adolescence (for a review, see Pomerantz et al., 2008). Chinese mothers report spending more time assisting children with homework than American mothers (Chen & Stevenson, 1989). This could reflect more homework among Chinese children, but such differences exist for other forms of parents' involvement in children's learning (e.g., asking children about what happened at school and providing additional school-related materials; e.g., Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011). Moreover, based on observations of mothers and children in a laboratory setting,

Chinese mothers spend more time than American mothers working on learning-related activities with their children (Ng, Pomerantz, & Lam, 2007, Study 2).

We also see differences in the quality of learning-related parenting. For example, in a study of Chinese American families, parents used formal teaching methods, such as extending homework one step further (e.g., showing children how to do more complex addition than that assigned), that are less common among European Americans (e.g., Huntsinger, Jose, Larson, Krieg, & Shaligram, 2000). Chinese American parents are sometimes more directive in their teaching as well, focusing on the correctness of children's work (e.g., Huntsinger, Jose, Liaw, & Ching, 1997; Huntsinger et al., 2000). In fact, Chinese parents tend to be more controlling in general in that they pressure children, such that they regulate their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors more than American parents (for a review, see Ng, Pomerantz, & Deng, 2014). Moreover, the more involved Chinese parents are in their children's learning, the more they use control—a pattern not evident among American parents, whose involvement is accompanied more by heightened support of children's autonomy (i.e., allowing choice and initiative; Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011).

Qualitative differences in Chinese and American parents' learning-related parenting are evident as well in how they respond to children's performance (e.g., Hess et al., 1987). As shown in Figure 1, based on children's reports, Chinese parents place less emphasis on children's success (e.g., by praising children less) than American parents, concentrating instead on children's mistakes (Ng et al., 2007, Study 1). In contrast, when children fail, Chinese parents emphasize it (e.g., by talking about children's lack of ability or effort) more than American parents, who minimize it (e.g., by attending to what children did right). In an observational study in which children's performance was manipulated (Ng et al., 2007, Study 2), Chinese mothers used fewer positive (e.g., "You are so smart!") and more



Figure 1. Distribution of response values for Chinese and American children's reports of parents' emphasis of children's success. Response values are the average of children's ratings made on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*). Data are from Study 1 of Ng, Pomerantz, and Lam (2007).

negative (e.g., “You only got 6 out of 12?”) statements in communicating with children than American mothers, with negative statements particularly common among Chinese mothers when children failed. Chinese mothers’ responses are not necessarily hostile; they did not show more negative affect in interacting with children than American mothers.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN PARENTING FOR CHILDREN?

Does Chinese and American learning-related parenting differ in how effectively it facilitates children’s functioning? This question has been debated in the popular press with the publication of Amy Chua’s (2011a) *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and her accompanying *Wall Street Journal* article on why Chinese parenting is superior (Chua, 2011b). In her article, Chua described the Chinese style of parenting—perhaps taken to the extreme—along with its success as reflected in her daughters’ achievement, particularly in music. Investigators have promoted the idea that American children would make academic gains if they were socialized via Chinese learning-related parenting (e.g., Huntsinger et al., 1998; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). However, the academic benefits may be accompanied by emotional costs—for example, dampened happiness. These benefits and costs are in line with Chinese cultural values in which academic functioning is significant both morally and practically (e.g., Li, 2005), giving such functioning priority as a marker of optimal development. In the United States, although academic functioning is valued, so are other types of functioning, with parents emphasizing the well-rounded child (e.g., Chao, 1996). Moreover, reflecting the American individualistic orientation, children’s feelings of worth are often considered particularly important (e.g., Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997).

In line with the idea that Chinese learning-related parenting has academic benefits, parents’ involvement in children’s learning is said to highlight the value of academics to children, which cultivates children’s investment and engagement in school, thereby enhancing their achievement (e.g., Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Although not entirely consistent, the research suggests that the more American parents are involved, the better their children’s subsequent achievement above and beyond prior achievement (for a review, see Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Notably, such a facilitating effect is also evident in China (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011): Although Chinese parents’ involvement is accompanied by heightened control, it foreshadows enhanced investment, engagement, and achievement in school among children to the same extent as American parents’ involvement, which is accompanied by more support for children’s autonomy. Hence, regardless of its quality, parents’ involvement in children’s learning can convey the value of school to children.

Chinese parents’ emphasis of children’s failure apparently yields academic benefits as well. When parents respond to chil-

dren’s performance by focusing on what went wrong instead of right, they may attune children to the importance of attending to their mistakes while also helping them learn from them, thereby fostering children’s achievement. The Chinese pattern of responding to children’s performance (i.e., concentrating on what children got wrong) predicts enhanced achievement among children (Ng et al., 2007, Study 2). However, this pattern may also highlight children’s inadequacies, which may undermine children’s feelings of worth, thereby dampening their emotional functioning. Indeed, the more children say parents emphasize their failures, the more upset children say they would be if they failed (Ng et al., 2007, Study 1). Conversely, the American style of emphasizing children’s success is associated with emotional benefits—that is, children saying they would be particularly happy if they succeeded.

These costs for Chinese children’s emotional functioning may be intensified by Chinese parents’ heightened control. Controlling parenting undermines the fundamental need to feel autonomous, which interferes with children’s psychological functioning (e.g., Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997; Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). Some investigators maintain that parents’ control is not detrimental in China because it is interpreted in a relatively positive light due to cultural forces (e.g., Chao, 1994; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), but the negative effects of parents’ control are similar in China and in the United States (for a review, see Pomerantz & Wang, 2009). Hence, Chinese parents’ heightened control in the context of their learning-related parenting may lead to dampened emotional functioning among Chinese children. It may also undermine the benefits of some aspects of their learning-related parenting. Indeed, due to the heightened control that accompanies it, parents’ involvement does not predict enhanced emotional functioning over time among Chinese children to the extent it does among American children (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011).

It is paradoxical in some ways that Chinese children outperform their American counterparts academically given that Chinese parents are more controlling. Just as in the United States, when parents are controlling, children’s academic functioning suffers in China (for a review, see Pomerantz & Wang, 2009). However, this may be largely overridden by the facilitating effect of other aspects of Chinese parenting that do not necessarily confer benefits through feelings of autonomy. For example, parents’ involvement in children’s learning may enhance children’s academic functioning mainly by highlighting the value of school. Indeed, taking into account parents’ control does little to change the facilitating effect of parents’ involvement on children’s investment, engagement, and achievement in school; however, it does substantially reduce the facilitating effect of parents’ involvement on children’s emotional functioning (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011). Chinese parents’ heightened control may work together with their learning-related parenting as part of a holistic style leading children to feel pressured to give their full attention to academic pursuits. Chinese children may

be concerned with doing well in school to please parents, which fosters their engagement in school, even if they are not autonomously motivated (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Although this may enhance children's achievement, it may also take an emotional toll over time.

IS A CULTURALLY INTEGRATED PARENTING STYLE POSSIBLE?

Both Chinese and American learning-related parenting apparently have strengths and weaknesses: The Chinese style may benefit children academically, but with emotional costs; the American style may benefit children emotionally without the academic benefits of the Chinese style. Can the best of each style be combined to optimize children's functioning? What would this look like? Parents would be highly involved in children's learning, but in an autonomy-supportive, rather than controlling, manner that facilitated children's development academically and emotionally. This would mean less control in China and more involvement in the United States. An integrated style would also include emphasizing children's successes without de-emphasizing their failures, highlighting children's strengths while drawing attention to areas in need of improvement. Indeed, when mothers give negative feedback when children succeed—a context in which mothers also commonly give positive feedback—children's achievement improves over time (Ng et al., 2007, Study 2). To ensure that children use parents' feedback effectively, parents would need to emphasize effort rather than attributes of the child (e.g., ability; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). As such, an integrated style may give children the resources (e.g., effort and skill) necessary for optimal academic functioning while facilitating children's feelings of autonomy and worth, thereby enhancing their emotional functioning.

Whether an integrated style would have such advantages needs to be studied. The synthesis of the aspects of each style that appear beneficial may optimize children's academic and emotional functioning. Moreover, Chinese parents' learning-related parenting may lead children to strive to please parents in school, which may ultimately undermine children's creativity as they focus on complying with external standards (for evidence of dampened artistic creativity among Chinese college students, see Niu & Sternberg, 2001); the autonomy-supportive component of an integrated style may address this. Similarly, highlighting children's mistakes in the context of an integrated style may ensure that the emotional functioning among children produced by American learning-related parenting is not so positive that it becomes narcissistic (for characterization of recent generations of Americans as narcissistic, see Twenge & Foster, 2008). However, each cultural style may represent a holistic system with the various aspects working synergistically. Hence, the assumption that isolated aspects of each are advantageous in the context of an integrated style may be unrealistic. For example, as noted earlier, Chinese parents' heightened control may amplify

the academic benefits of their heightened involvement, despite undermining children's emotional functioning. As such, although an integrated style may protect children emotionally, it may not raise their achievement to the same heights as the Chinese style.

The cultural backdrop against which learning-related parenting takes place must also be considered. Chinese and American learning-related parenting each reflects cultural values that permeate daily life in the home and the classroom (e.g., where Chinese and American teachers use different practices; Stigler, Lee, & Stevenson, 1987), which may influence the impact of learning-related parenting. Although this does not appear to be the case—for example, the effects of parents' responses to children's performance do not differ in China and in the United States (Ng et al., 2007)—research has examined only naturally occurring learning-related parenting. After interventions are used to push parents beyond what may be culturally normative, cultural values may come into play: Chinese and American children may interpret parenting differently so that the effects may differ not only in magnitude but also in direction (e.g., when American parents focus on failure as much as Chinese parents, American children may see it as rejecting rather than informative).

The cultural backdrop may also need to be considered in addressing how to change learning-related parenting in each country. The cultural styles used by parents stem in part from parents' beliefs and goals. For example, Chinese mothers base their worth on children's performance to a greater extent than American mothers, which contributes to their heightened use of control (Ng et al., 2014). Parents' beliefs and goals may be rooted in cultural norms and values (e.g., learning is viewed more as a moral endeavor in China than in the United States; Li, 2005) that play out against distinct educational systems (e.g., the Chinese educational system is more competitive than the American system) in the two countries (e.g., Ng et al., 2014; Pomerantz et al., 2008). Hence, efforts to create an integrated style will need to target parents' beliefs and goals as well as larger cultural and structural forces. This may be of import not only in facilitating the adoption of ideal learning-related parenting but in ensuring that such parenting does not go awry—for example, American parents pointing out only minor mistakes that may not only threaten children's feelings of worth but also may not enhance their learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Chinese parents typically are very involved in children's learning, using heightened control in this context along with emphasizing children's failure. In contrast, although not uninvolved in children's learning, American parents typically are less involved than Chinese parents, supporting children's autonomy and emphasizing their success over failure. Because the Chinese and American styles each appear to have trade-offs for children's functioning, integrating aspects of the two may

enhance children's development by supporting both their academic and emotional functioning. Undertaking such an endeavor requires consideration of whether an integrated style is effective. The aspects of each culture's style may not be modular components, but rather work together holistically, with the larger cultural backdrop being important. Despite these challenges, combining beneficial aspects of Chinese and American learning-related parenting holds promise for optimizing children's development.

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