

Academic Socialization and Parenting Practices: A Comparison Among Chinese and American Preschoolers



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In the fields of cross-cultural and developmental psychology, there has long been a fascination with cultural differences among East Asian (i.e., collectivistic) and European American (i.e., individualistic) societies. Tobin and colleagues' (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) classic study was among the first to highlight that differential expectations exist within the classroom when comparing preschools in Japan, China, and the USA. Interest in cultural differences in school expectations and academic success has only increased as studies have shown East Asian students outperform American students on various measures of academic achievement and school readiness (Beaton et al., 1996; Geary, Bow-Thomas, Fan, & Siegler, 1993; Kinlaw, Kurtz-Costes, & Goldman-Fraser, 2001).

Many scholars have begun to explore why such cultural variations in school success might exist. Notably, Chua's (2011) book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* attributed such cultural differences to Chinese-style parenting, highlighting the stringent academic expectations Chinese mothers typically place on their children. It is not surprising that researchers have traced cultural differences in academic success back to parents. Although children are influenced by a variety of people from an early age (e.g., siblings, grandparents, peers), parents are commonly regarded as the primary agents of children's socialization (Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004), though peers and others play important roles as well (Edwards, 1992). In socializing their children, parents aim to instill the values and skills necessary for success within a given society (Taylor et al., 2004).

In both Chinese and US society, education is culturally valued and often determines the level of individual success (Chao, 1996). Thus, academic success is an important goal of socialization in these cultures. In many cases, parents engage in

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academic socialization when their children are quite young, aiming to prepare them for school entry. Though approaches to academic socialization may vary based on cultural beliefs and parenting practices, the ultimate goal remains the same in both China and the USA: parents are striving to help their children achieve the culturally valued outcome of academic success. This chapter aims to exemplify the inherently cultural nature of academic socialization by exploring the parental practices that lead to school readiness in young children of both Chinese and European American descent.

The Context: China and the USA

Before looking more closely at how parenting practices affect children's academic socialization, a brief examination of the cultural context is in order. Parenting cannot be understood unless it is examined in its economic, social, political, and historical context (Taylor et al., 2004). China is the world's most populous country with a population of 1.42 billion, with a median age of 37.3 years, and with 59.3% living in urban areas (worldometers.info). The USA ranks a distant third, with a population of 327 million, a median age of 37.8 years, and 83.7% living in urban areas (worldometers.info). China ranks second only to the USA in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and both play influential roles in global economic development. However, given China's large rural population, their per capita GDP lags far behind the average of the East Asia and Pacific region as well as the USA. With global development becoming increasingly dependent on technology, education has become a central requirement for success. Because of this, parents in China and the USA value educational opportunities for their children and they strive to help them be successful in educational endeavors within these differing cultural contexts (Chao, 1996).

Parents and Education in China

While parents in both countries are aware of the economic pressures their children will eventually face, these pressures are often a more central concern for Chinese parents, particularly for middle-class mainland Chinese parents (Zou, Anderson, & Tsey, 2013). Zou and colleagues found that these middle-class parents believed that the younger generation faces overwhelming pressure from fierce workforce competition. Between China's increasingly affluent urban population and difficult university entry exams for "key universities," these Chinese parents become heavily invested in their children's education. Extracurricular lessons were a must-do activity for Chinese children. In addition to helping children with homework, more than 2/3 of these parents enrolled their children in expensive training courses to improve their children's academic performance. Chinese parents considered education "crucial" for their children's lives, believing it is a way to enhance their future social status.

Tobin and colleagues (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009) have examined the changes that have occurred in the 20 years since they first looked at preschools in China (Tobin et al., 1989). In their earlier project, the first single-child cohort was just arriving at preschool and generated much public anxiety. There was concern that growing up without siblings would stunt the children emotionally and socially and would lead to their being spoiled (Tobin et al., 1989). Preschools were thought to give children “growing up without siblings the experience of living in a group” (Tobin et al., 2009, p. 38), a solution to difficulties created by the one-child policy. In spite of these concerns, the single children were active, willing to try new ideas, to demonstrate their abilities, and to have higher grades in school. Single children turned out to be independent, self-confident, creative adults, characteristics consistent with the emerging market economy. However, they were lacking in perseverance and social skills needed to care for others, characteristics that had been valued in the traditional Chinese agricultural society. Parents put pressure on preschools to provide more academic preparation so children would get an early start toward becoming economically successful adults. Tobin and colleagues (2009) found that pressure on children to excel academically begins early, leaving play and creativity out of the preschool curriculum.

Parenting and Education in the USA

Parents in the USA also value education, but these parents typically emphasize the importance of social success over academic success (Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryall, & Nero, 2010). Indeed, Latino and other ethnic minority parents in the USA judge social and academic success as equally important in contrast with European American parents, who believe that their children’s social success is more important than academic success (Ryan et al., 2010). When European American parents are more involved in educational activities, their kindergarten children show improved social skills and ability to control their emotions, which have been related to better math performance (Hill & Craft, 2003). However, the picture is different for African American kindergarteners, with parent involvement improving children’s academic skills and performance, rather than their social skills. Although parental evaluation of what leads to academic success may differ in the Chinese and American cultural contexts, parental perceptions, involvement, and academic socialization practices have important consequences for children’s success.

Academic Socialization

Academic socialization refers to the parental beliefs and practices that contribute to children’s development of school-related ideals and competencies (Taylor et al., 2004). Like any type of socialization, academic socialization is rooted in the cultural

values and norms of a given society. Parents form ethnotheories, or beliefs about appropriate parenting practices, based on a variety of factors, including cultural values, societal norms, family traditions, and personal experiences (Super & Harkness, 1986). In both the USA and China, academic achievement and appropriate classroom behavior are valued by the majority of parents. Parents want to see their children succeed, and academic achievement is often essential for success in both of these cultures. Thus, the culturally valued outcome of academic success becomes integrated into parents' ethnotheories. These ethnotheories then influence parents' expectations of and interactions with their children. For example, parents work to equip their children with early academic skills (e.g., counting, reciting the alphabet) and appropriate school behaviors (e.g., taking turns, sitting quietly) as they approach school age. As such, the culturally valued goals of academic socialization are reflected in both parents' beliefs and practices. In this way, academic socialization cannot be separated from culture.

School readiness encompasses the skills preschool-aged children must acquire prior to kindergarten or formal school entry. Such skills include children's early academic competencies, like counting and recognizing letters, as well as their ability to regulate behavior, cooperate with others, and act appropriately in the classroom (Fitzpatrick & Pagani, 2012). The preschool years are an interesting time in which to examine academic socialization. In both the USA and China, preschool is typically the first educational group setting in which children are placed (Ren & Edwards, 2016).

For American children, a multiplicity of family types has grown over the years, from two-parent nuclear families to one-parent families, cohabiting couples, gay and lesbian families, and extended families (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). This diversity in family life has led to variations in childcare, with the family having a lesser role in the "nurturant socialization" of children (Fine, 1992). American families have become more dependent upon mothers' incomes, and there are more opportunities for women in the workplace (Teachman et al., 2000). As a result, many families turn to out-of-home, non-parental childcare prior to preschool (e.g., childcare centers, family care homes, relative care; Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). Indeed, preschool for 5-year-olds has become a common American experience, and preschool for 4-year-olds is moving in that direction.

In contrast, Chinese children are usually cared for by parents or family members prior to preschool (Ren & Edwards, 2016). Indeed, Chinese grandmothers play an especially important role in childcare and are sometimes seen as overly protective (Chen, 2004). However, childcare centers are developing as a result of economic demands on families, and some families hire an *ayi* ("auntie"), or nanny, to provide care. In these newly developing childcare centers, discipline is highly valued, more than creative expression, and they may seem harsh by Western standards (InterNations, 2019). Thus, for both Chinese and American children, preschool is a time in which they most likely encounter novel academic and social experiences. The new challenges of the preschool classroom, combined with the developing cognitive abilities of the preschool-aged child, may cause parents to give more attention

to academic socialization goals. In both China and the USA, school readiness becomes an important objective of academic socialization during this time.

Cultural Values and Parental Ethnotheories in China

In order to fully understand academic socialization, one must first understand the cultural values underlying academic socialization goals. The importance of benevolence, filial piety (i.e., respect for parents and elders), loyalty, harmony, dignity, hard work, useful skills, thrift, justice, and perseverance are among the virtues of Confucianism (Shek, Yu, & Fu, 2013). Within Chinese culture, there is also a strong emphasis on education. The cultural value of education dates back to ancient times and persists in modern Chinese society (Ren & Edwards, 2017). For many Chinese individuals, academic success secures a career and provides an opportunity for upward social mobility (Ren & Edwards, 2017). Given the historical and modern benefits of education, it is not surprising that generations of Chinese parents have emphasized academic preparation and success (Ren & Edwards, 2017).

The 2001 *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education* reformed early childhood education in China, introducing the notions of rights and respect for children and emphasizing learning through play (Tobin et al., 2009). Some believed the *Guidelines* were too Westernized and have pushed to restore Confucian culture and classic Chinese children's texts into the education system (Tobin et al., 2009). Many parents enroll their children in traditional schools where pedagogy includes classic texts and traditional procedures for learning. The Chinese government has implemented the Three-Year Pre-School Education Action Plan, which is designed to universalize preschool education (ages 3 through 5) by 2020 (OECD, 2016). In 2014, the enrollment rate in the three-year program reached 70% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2015). The composition of these programs will certainly be important for Chinese children in the future.

Cultural Values and Parental Ethnotheories in the USA

While the USA has a less extensive history of academic achievement with weak early childhood education compared with many other countries (OECD, 2000), several common American values promote education and academic success. Many have come to America in search of the "American Dream," first described in 1931 by James Truslow Adams. He defined the dream as a place where life would be better for everyone, where each could attain the fullest of all capabilities, not just wealth, regardless of one's birth or position in life. This notion has certainly changed over time (Library of Congress, 2019), but many often think that education can be used to pull oneself out of poverty and difficult circumstances (Wadsworth & Ahlkvist, 2015).

Certainly, academic achievement is important for success in modern American society. As American universities become more selective and the job market becomes increasingly competitive, academic achievement is emphasized by many parents (Kadvany, 2019). American colleges report receiving record numbers of applications and acceptance rates are as low as 4–6% at the most competitive schools (e.g., Stanford, Harvard, Yale; Hartocollis, 2016). As a result, parents pressure their children to achieve, fearing downward mobility because it is becoming more difficult for younger generations to move up economically as their parents did (Kadvany, 2019).

Parental Expectations

Cultural values and societal norms clearly influence parents' beliefs about education. However, parents also draw on their own school experiences and memories when shaping their attitudes, beliefs, and values about school for their children (Taylor et al., 2004). For example, Barnett and Taylor (2009) found that parents who had positive recollections about their own parents' involvement in school-related activities were more involved in getting their children ready for school experiences and were also more engaged in their children's school activities.

Parents' expectations may affect children's school success in several ways (Gorad, See, & Davies, 2012). First, parents' expectations may influence the resources, such as time and money, they devote to their children's education. Second, parents' expectations may shape their children's own expectations about school success. Third, parents' expectations may shape the way parents respond to opportunities, problems, and staff at their children's school. Neuenschwander, Vida, Garrett, and Eccles (2007) have demonstrated the importance of parents' expectations on children's academic outcomes as well as their children's ability self-concepts in adolescence. Parents' educational expectations predicted students' standardized achievements in both math and language, even after controlling for prior performance in each subject area. Parent expectations were related directly to student achievement and also indirectly through students' ability self-concepts. It would be surprising if similar influences were not seen at earlier ages.

Parents' expectations of their children greatly influence academic socialization. Parental expectations shape parents' beliefs about their children's competencies and guide parent-child interactions (Ren & Edwards, 2017). For example, there is both cultural and individual variation when parents expect children to develop certain skills. This variation is captured by developmental timetables or parental beliefs about the timing of skill and behavior development in their children (Ren & Edwards, 2017). The purpose of developmental timetables is not to determine whether parents have an accurate understanding of developmental progression but rather to understand parental expectations (Ren & Edwards, 2017).

There is considerable variation in Chinese and American mothers' developmental timetables. Chinese mothers tend to expect academic skills and filial piety from

their children at a relatively young age (Ren & Edwards, 2017). Conversely, American mothers tend to expect improvements in social-emotional development during early childhood (Ren & Edwards, 2017). American mothers typically expect children to acquire social skills related to peers and to be verbally forthcoming around 3 ½ years of age (Hess, Kashigawi, Azuma, Price, & Dickson, 1980; Ren & Edwards, 2017). These early maternal expectations are associated with improved social competence in preschoolers (Ren & Edwards, 2017).

It seems that parents value and have early expectations for developmental skills that are important in their society (Chao, 1994). Chao found that Chinese American mothers fit the Chinese model of so-called good parenting with more authoritarian styles and an emphasis on training (“Mothers primarily express love by helping [their children] succeed, especially in school”, “Mothers must train [their children] to work very hard and be disciplined,” p. 1116). They believe academic success is due to effort, not innate ability, so children are encouraged to work hard. In contrast, authoritative parenting styles are more common and more effective with American children, and parents believe effort is not as critical as ability (Okagaki and Frensch 1998). An intervention study with low-income parents in the USA found that increases in parents’ academic expectations (e.g., enhanced value of education, belief that their children would succeed in the school context) contributed to and mediated gains in their children’s literacy skills (assessed directly) and gains in self-directed learning (as rated by kindergarten teachers; Loughlin-Presnal & Bierman, 2017). These findings suggest a specific impact of parent expectations on children’s academic progress rather than a more global impact on general aspects of children’s development.

Interestingly, East Asian mothers’ academic expectations tend to emphasize effort, while those of European American mothers often emphasize ability (Kinlaw et al., 2001). These varying conceptualizations of academic ability are associated with parents’ own educational experiences. More highly educated European American parents tend to view ability as independent of social skills and motivation to achieve (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). In a study of Finnish families, Rätty and colleagues (2012) found that highly educated parents’ expectations were based on their children’s competence in literacy and problem-solving skills. In contrast, vocationally trained parents’ expectations focused on their children’s creativity and social skills. Such variability in how parents conceptualize their children’s competencies and school performance certainly influences parents’ expectations, involvement, and support of their children’s academic efforts.

Parental Transition Practices

In order to foster school readiness in young children, parents engage in transition practices. Parental transition practices are parent-child interactions aimed at preparing children for school (Puccioni, 2015; Taylor et al., 2004). For example, parents may read to their children, teach them to recite the alphabet, or practice counting

together (Puccioni, 2015). The model of academic socialization proposed by Taylor et al. (2004) asserts that parents' attitudes toward and beliefs about schooling shape their parental transition practices and ultimately foster (or hinder) children's school readiness. Puccioni (2015) finds support for this model in a longitudinal study conducted with a US sample. Results showed that parents who valued school readiness as highly important had children with higher average achievement scores at the beginning of kindergarten. These parents also reported engaging in more transition practices when compared to parents who placed less importance on school readiness. This model of academic socialization has not been directly tested in Chinese samples. However, Chinese culture historically places high value in education and knowledge. Chinese parents typically adopt these values and engage in transition practices, such as homework help and enrollment in rigorous preschool programs (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song, 2013). Taken together, it seems that both Chinese and American parents' values about school influence their use of parental transition practices, which in turn shape their children's school readiness.

Looking more specifically at parents' beliefs and academically oriented activities, Meagher and colleagues (Meagher, Arnold, Doctoroff, & Baker, 2008) found that US mothers who placed more importance on shared reading as an opportunity to learn provided more scaffolding during reading with their children, tailoring the learning opportunity to the level of the child. Indeed, mothers who believed it was important to have fun during shared reading were more likely to praise their children during the shared reading activity (Meagher et al., 2008). Thus, it appears that parental beliefs shape transition practices, while also influencing the ways that parents socialize their child in preparation for school.

Parents also engage in transition practices to encourage appropriate school behaviors. A recent study of Chinese parents and preschool teachers found that both groups stressed the importance of children being able to separate from their caregivers without anxiety or distress as well as the value of having group experience prior to entering preschool (Xie & Li, 2018). Being independent from adults and being able to care for themselves were considered important parts of readiness for preschool in China. Teachers emphasized emotional maturity, social competence, language development, and communication skills and de-emphasized basic knowledge such as knowing colors and shapes. Many Chinese parents were concerned that their children would not "fit in" a group environment because they had not had opportunities to play with same-age children prior to preschool.

When Hong Kong Chinese parents were asked about their expectations for the transition to kindergarten, Ip and colleagues (2016) found that parent socioeconomic level was an important factor. In their parent-child interactions, mothers from higher-SES families read, played, and cognitively stimulated their children more than lower-SES mothers. When mothers were warm, responsive, and sensitive during their interactions with their children from infancy to preschool, their children were higher on all social and cognitive domains of school readiness. These findings were similar to those of Chan (2012) who looked at the transition from preschool to first grade. These studies exemplify the important role that parental transition practices play in children's academic readiness and school transitions.

The Home Learning Environment

Another way in which parents prepare their children for school is via the home learning environment. In the home learning environment, parents ideally provide children with stimulation, support, and guidance while also meeting their physical and nutritional needs (Taylor et al., 2004). Many features of the home environment influence children's school readiness. For example, the quality of verbal stimulation and literacy-promoting behaviors (e.g., reading books to children) increases young children's vocabularies and is related to later reading achievement (Taylor et al., 2004). Additionally, American parents who recognize the importance of play for learning and who provide play materials in the home tend to have children who are more creative, curious, and independent in the classroom setting (Taylor et al., 2004)

Looking at American children's experiences from birth to 54 months of age, Downer and Pianta (2006) replicated the many studies (e.g., Bradley & Caldwell, 1984) that show maternal sensitivity, warmth, and responsiveness, along with a stimulating home learning environment, to be strong predictors of academic and cognitive achievement in the first grade. Indeed, more educated US parents engage in more reading and cognitively stimulating play with their children.

The classic studies by Stevenson et al. (1990) found differences between the support and activities that American and Taiwan Chinese parents provide for their children. When asked to describe their first-grade child's after-school activities, Taiwanese mothers described academic pursuits (e.g., reading studying, playing academically related games such as puzzles and chess), and their children indicated they liked these activities. American mothers described non-academic activities such as social interactions with friends and family, television, sports, and extracurricular activities (music and dance classes, Boy and Girl Scouts). Interestingly, about a third of the American mothers said their children had chores to do after school, but only 6% of the Taiwanese mothers mentioned chores, indicating that chores would take time away from school work. It is apparent that academic success is central for Taiwanese mothers, as it is reflected in their routines and home environments that emphasize academic rather than social and creative activities that are important for American mothers.

Parental Involvement in Formal Education

Parental involvement in children's formal academic lives is another important mechanism through which academic socialization occurs (Taylor et al., 2004). There are many ways in which parents may become involved in their children's schooling. For example, parents may volunteer in the classroom, frequently communicate with teachers, or help with homework outside of school. Taylor et al.'s (2004) review of the literature consistently showed that parental involvement in school is related to children's school readiness and achievement (Taylor et al.,

2004). Of course, a variety of factors influence the degree to which parents may become involved in education. A school climate in which parents feel welcome may contribute to more parental involvement (Taylor et al., 2004). However, parental involvement is also largely based on parents' attitudes toward school (Taylor et al., 2004). Parents who have more positive feelings toward school or who had positive experiences during their own schooling may be more likely to become involved in their children's education (Taylor et al., 2004).

One study found that East Asian mothers report spending more time helping their children with homework as compared to mothers in the USA (Kinlaw et al., 2001). In a series of cross-national studies, Stevenson and colleagues (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1996; Stevenson et al., 1990) developed a cultural-motivational theory of academic achievement. They found that in a setting, such as Taiwan, where cultural beliefs emphasized education and the importance of effort in achievement, rather than innate ability, parents were more involved in their children's school activities. Parents from Taipei, Taiwan read to their child regularly; taught their children the alphabet, words, phrases, and sentences; and read newspapers with them daily. Mothers, fathers, and older siblings helped with homework. Going to school and doing well were considered Taiwan Chinese children's two main responsibilities. As such, they enthusiastically enjoyed school and did not demonstrate the stereotyped expectations of stress and lack of creativity.

Conversely, American parents were more likely to equate achievement with innate ability, were more satisfied with their children's performance, and were less involved with school work. Homework help came mainly from mothers in the American sample. As children grew older, mothers abdicated much of the responsibility for school achievement to teachers and believed their children's motivation decreased over time. Taken together, these results show that a variety of cultural values and beliefs influence parents' tendencies to become involved in their children's education.

Conclusion

Researchers cannot ignore cultural differences in academic achievement nor can these differences be explained away by variation in intellectual ability. Thus, we must ask why Chinese students often outperform American students in their academic pursuits. Although the research highlights numerous factors that influence children's school readiness and academic achievement, the findings all point to the importance of cultural beliefs surrounding education.

Parents are the primary agents of children's socialization, meaning that they instill cultural values in their offspring so that the children will become successful adults within their cultural context. In this way, parenting and culture are intertwined. Parenting in both China and the USA involves varying degrees of academic socialization, as academic success is culturally valued and economically important in both societies. Thus, Chinese and American parents share the socialization goals

of school readiness and academic achievement for their children. While their goals are the same, the approaches they take to attain them are often quite different. These differences appear in parental expectations, transition practices, and involvement in their children's education. By examining this cultural variation, the disparity between Chinese and American academic success becomes less mysterious. It seems clear that the cultural values reflected in Chinese and American parenting practices shape children's school experiences and academic achievement.

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