

Chapter 12

Family Literacy in China

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12.1 Introduction

Children develop language and literacy skills gradually through meaning making within the context of school, home, and community (Chow and McBride-Chang 2003; Clay 1991; Halliday 1975; Perez 1998). Although we often assume the responsibility for teaching literacy skills falls on classroom teachers, family background and home environment, including socioeconomic status, parent–child literacy-related activities, a literacy-rich environment, and parental education and occupation, play a significant role in children’s literacy development (e.g., Frijters et al. 2000; Heath 1983; Snow 1991; Taylor 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988; Teale 1978). Parent support is also associated with literacy achievement in school-age children, and home literacy practices may be as important as formal reading instruction in promoting literacy skills (Hewison and Tizard 1980; Snow et al. 1991).

Most research studies on family literacy have focused on young children learning English or other alphabetic languages. Few studies have been conducted on family literacy among children learning Chinese. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies have shown Chinese parents hold different beliefs about their children’s literacy learning at home compared to their Western counterparts (Stevenson and Lee 1996). For example, Chinese parents pay more attention to their children’s academic achievement (e.g., Ho 1994; Stevenson and Lee 1996; Tseng and Wu 1985). Moreover, the orthographic nature of Chinese characters may make parents’ teaching of reading and writing more valuable for children learning Chinese than for children learning English and other alphabetic languages with letter-sound correspondence (Li et al. 2008). Yet the review of literature suggests Chinese parents may not fully

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understand the extent of the impact the home literacy environment and practices can have on their children's reading and writing development.

The most recent Chinese language and literacy curriculum standards for grades 1–9, *Yuwen Curriculum Standards for Full-Day Compulsory Education* (Chinese Ministry of Education 2011), set high standards for reading and writing Chinese. Extensive after school reading was mandated by the standards document. Children in first and second grade are expected to read 50,000 Chinese characters per year in after school reading, children in third and fourth grade should read 400,000 characters, and fifth and sixth graders no fewer than 1,000,000 Chinese characters per year in after school reading. The standards call for a more communicative approach to teaching writing than in the past. Students are expected to experiment with language they encounter in everyday life, to write letters, and to enjoy communicating with writing. Parent involvement with their children in home literacy practices can help children meet the new standards. Many parents are eager to learn how to help their children become successful readers and writers. Yet they may not know the best strategies to help their children in their literacy development.

This chapter reviews research studies on family literacy practices among families in China. While few studies to date have been carried out on family literacy in China, the findings can shed light on ways parents can assist their children in learning the complex Chinese writing system. Given the new Chinese language and literacy standards, a chapter on family literacy in China is timely and shows the importance of carrying out further studies on the most effective home literacy practices and strategies to help children master literacy skills while at the same time develop an appreciation for the Chinese language.

Family literacy research carried out in different cultures has identified aspects of the home environment that influence children's reading development: (a) types of literacy activities and quality of interpersonal interactions of family members centering around literacy events, (b) the home literacy environment, including types and number of print materials available in the home, (c) motivation provided by parents and other family members for children to practice literacy skills and engage in out-of-school and in-school reading and literacy activities, and (d) parent characteristics, such as socioeconomic status and education level (Leichter 1984; Shu et al. 2002a; Snow et al. 1998). In this chapter, we review studies of research on these aspects of the home environment of Chinese families conducive to Chinese literacy development. This review can be a starting place for future researchers, parents, teachers, and policy makers who plan to further explore ways the literacy learning of Chinese youth can be enhanced through out-of-school family and community literacy-related activities. We also make recommendations for future research in this area.

12.2 Parent–Child Shared and Dialogic Reading

Parent–child reading provides an ideal context for children to interact with their parents orally while reading the same book. During the process, children learn concepts of print, letters/characters, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies in

reading (Chow and McBride-Chang 2003). Joint picture book reading by an adult and child is one of the most frequently recommended practices for English-speaking preschool children to build vocabulary and emergent literacy competencies (Snow et al. 1998). This recommendation is supported by a number of research studies that have shown preschool children learn words incidentally, without direct instruction, from listening to books read aloud by parents and child care providers (e.g. Hargrave and Sénéchal 2000; Leung 2008; Sénéchal and Cornell 1993; Whitehurst et al. 1988). Parents' specific behaviors and practices while reading, such as asking questions at different levels (e.g., factual, inference) and providing positive feedback, lead to enhanced oral language development (Flood 1977; Ninio and Bruner 1978; Roser and Martinez 1985). When children are provided ample opportunities to experiment with language and make meaning of texts, they show greater language gains than when they are simply read to by their parents (Whitehurst et al. 1988).

The effects of reading aloud books to young children have been studied extensively by literacy researchers in English-speaking countries. Meta-analyses have been conducted on the findings from numerous studies in this area. For example, Marulis and Neuman (2010) carried out a meta-analysis of vocabulary learning of young children from various interventions, including modifications to ways books were read aloud to children. In the United States, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) was convened in 2002 to summarize empirical evidence on children's early literacy development and home and family influences. Studies included effects of reading aloud picture books to children on their development of various early literacy skills, such as oral vocabulary development and phonemic awareness. Their report, *Developing Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (NELP 2008), provides a model and examples for future studies of home and family literacy influences on Chinese reading and writing development and early literacy skills of young children in China. Such research with Chinese children from different regions of the country and from different socioeconomic groups is in its infancy.

Several studies of family literacy activities have included Chinese families, as well as families of other cultural backgrounds, engaged in family literacy events. These international comparative studies offer information on family shared reading activities in China. Wang, Bernas, and Eberhard (2002) examined mothers' oral support for early literacy development during interactive reading sessions. Included in their study of Chinese and American Indian mother-child dyads were mothers of twenty 4-year-old Chinese children in an industrial area of Nanjing, China, where residents worked at a factory that manufactured vehicles. Wang and colleagues observed and videotaped the manner in which mothers interacted with their children in literacy-related activities over a period of 4 weeks, for a total of 345 h of video-recorded data. They found three types of maternal literacy support: explicit and implicit support, contextual and text-explicit support, and elaboration. Chinese mothers in the study tended to emphasize print-based literacy activities, as in the example of an explicit support that follows.

When opening a letter, a Chinese mother asked her child whether she knew the character *receiving* (shou) on the letter cover. After getting no answer from the child, the mother told the child that the character meant “Shou” (receiving). Then she traced her right index finger in the air as if she was writing it. (p. 15)

Chinese mothers also used event-specific support. For example, when a child saw a girl in the shared reading book holding a piece of sugar-coated preserved fruit, he related the reading to his own experience, telling his mother his father had bought him some a long time ago. Then the mother asked him some follow-up questions focused on the topic of fruit candy, such as “Was yours sugar-coated? Can you point out the Chinese characters for sugar-coated hawthorn fruit in the book?” In another situation, a mother used elaborative support when her child saw a rabbit in the picture of a book and said, “It’s a rabbit.” His mother asked him to elaborate on the statement saying, “Can you show me the word *rabbit* in the book? How many strokes does the word rabbit have?” By asking follow-up questions, the mother helped her child deepen his understanding of the reading and relate the text to his life experiences. (Examples are all from page 15.)

Whitehurst and colleagues (e.g., Whitehurst et al. 1988) developed a style of storybook reading they called dialogic reading. This method of adult-child shared reading was the focus of several intervention studies where parents and/or child care providers were asked to read aloud to preschool children in a dialogic style. The adult first read aloud to the child and asked *wh*- questions, praised and encouraged the child to verbally respond, repeated what the child said, and made corrections. Books were never read verbatim to the child. As the child became more verbal during the read-alouds, the adult encouraged the child to take over more and more of the responsibility of telling the story, so that eventually the child was providing most of the verbal text of the storybook. A number of studies (Arnold et al. 1994; Hargrave and Sénéchal 2000; Valdez-Menchaca and Whitehurst 1992; Whitehurst et al. 1994) showed dialogic reading could be carried out successfully in home and preschool settings and resulted in higher scores on standardized vocabulary assessments of young children in the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

Chow and McBride-Chang (2003) investigated the effectiveness of dialogic reading as a parent-child reading technique intended to facilitate children’s learning of Chinese language and literacy skills. Although the subjects of their study were Hong Kong children and their parents, and not mainland Chinese families, their methodology and findings can potentially be applied to future research with different Chinese populations. Eighty-six third year kindergarten children, 4.8–5.9 years old, and their parents participated in the study. Children in the intervention group were given eight books each with guidelines for parents to dialogically read with their children. Hints for prompt questions and recall prompts were provided to parents, along with pictures related to story questions, a dialogic reading guideline, and a calendar checklist to remind parents when to read. One book was given to the families each week. Parents read the book twice a week for 15 min each time with their children. Two other groups of children and parents were compared to the dialogic reading group: a group that received all eight books and read them together in their typical way but following the same schedule as the

dialogic reading group, and a control group that followed their usual home literacy activities during the treatment period, then received the books after the other two groups completed their readings and assessments.

Results showed the dialogic reading intervention had significant gains in the kindergarten children's Chinese literacy skills, particularly in character identification, visual and auditory discrimination, and receptive vocabulary (words understood when you hear them spoken but you do not necessarily use them when speaking) compared to the control group and typical reading group. Chinese skills were measured by the *Preschool and Primary Chinese Literacy Scale* (PPCLS, Li 1999), and receptive vocabulary was measured by the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test III* (PPVT-III, Dunn and Dunn 1997, translated into Cantonese for this study). The typical reading group had significant gains in their receptive vocabulary from the 8-week intervention compared to the control group, but not in their Chinese literacy skills. The findings suggest parent-child dialogic reading can lead to skill development in reading Chinese and in receptive vocabulary development. Typical reading styles that do not involve interaction and discussion between parent and child may result in vocabulary growth but not development of Chinese reading skills.

Dialogic reading also has the potential to increase young Chinese children's interest in reading. Parent responses on a follow-up questionnaire given to parents in the dialogic reading group indicated the majority of parents thought their children's interest in reading Chinese increased over the 8-week period of the intervention: 75.9% thought reading interest had increased, 20.7% thought interest remained the same, and 3.4% thought interest decreased.

12.3 Role of Parent Characteristics and Home Literacy Environment

A few studies of home literacy in Chinese families have explored the relationship of parent characteristics, the home literacy environment, and parent-child out-of-school and home literacy activities on children's Chinese literacy development (e.g. Meng et al. 2002; Shu et al. 2002a, b; Wang and Hu 2007). These studies collected data about family literacy through parent questionnaires, and children's literacy skills were assessed through standardized tests or researcher-created tests focused on particular literacy skills. Overall, findings from the studies indicate the following factors may be positively related to children's learning to read and write Chinese: number and type of books owned by the family, parents' reading attitude, parents' reading habits and time spent reading daily at home, frequency of taking children to libraries and bookstores, parental educational level, parent-child reading activities, child's age when parents began home instruction in Chinese character reading and writing, and children's out-of-school independent reading activities.

Shu et al. (2002b) examined family-related factors in relation to children's Chinese reading achievement among 574 first- and fourth-grade children in the West-district of Beijing. Half the children were from working class families and half from middle class families. Family-related factors were assessed by parent questionnaires and included four areas: amount of reading material in the home for both adults and children, such as magazines, newspapers, books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias; interactions and literacy activities between children and parents, such as parents' time spent reading daily, frequency of parents' taking their children to bookstores and libraries, age of the child when parents started to read to their children and teach reading Chinese characters; child's independent activities related to literacy, such as frequency of child's independent reading at home, duration of watching TV daily; and parents' educational level. Chinese reading achievement was represented by three components for first graders (Chinese alphabet reading, simple sentence reading, and vocabulary test) and five components for fourth graders (paragraph reading, sentence reading comprehension, cloze test, sentence correction, and vocabulary test).

Correlations among the four areas of the home literacy environment significantly related to children's Chinese literacy development, but children's independent literacy-related activities outside of school were not significantly related to reading proficiency for first graders. All the areas, however, were interrelated to each other for children in both grades. The first graders were not yet proficient readers, so time spent working independently out of school may not have influenced their literacy learning to the extent it did for fourth graders. Path analysis for the first graders found parent-child literacy activities directly contributed to children's beginning reading knowledge. Parent's education level and literacy resources in the home contributed to parent-child literacy activities. For fourth graders, both parent-child literacy activities and children's independent after-school literacy activities contributed directly to Chinese language achievement, and literacy resources in the home contributed directly to parent-child literacy activities. This study shows the importance of parent involvement in their children's literacy development and the importance of children's independent reading and writing practice to develop proficiency in Chinese written language.

Shu et al. (2002a) computed correlations between individual items on the parent questionnaire and children's reading scores. For first and fourth graders, the number of adult reading materials in the home related strongly to children's reading development. Visits to bookstores and libraries related highly to parent-child literacy activities, and the age parents began reading to children and teaching them Chinese characters related strongly to children's reading proficiency. However, availability of children's magazines and newspapers at home related strongly to fourth graders' reading proficiency, and not first graders, most likely because the older children were reading at a more advanced level, so they could take advantage of the age-appropriate reading material in the home. The age at which parents began character instruction was found to be important for children from less educated, as well as more educated, families and may be an important consideration for parents who want to enhance their children's learning of the Chinese written language.

In another study, Meng, Zhou, and Kong (2002) investigated the relationship between factors pertinent to Chinese reading and writing (literary understanding of print, basic cognitive ability, handwriting, family reading background, motion ability, oral language ability, read-aloud, dictation, and writing ability) and Chinese reading and writing achievement among 2,187 children in first, third, and fifth grades in Beijing. Basic cognitive ability (e.g., ability to distinguish the tones of Chinese characters, whether reversing Chinese character writing or number writing, ability to use the Chinese alphabet, etc.), family reading background (e.g., my father seldom reads, my mother seldom reads, at least one person among my parents and relatives is not good at Chinese, at least one person among other family members, such as parents, grandparents, uncle, aunt, and cousins, has difficulty in Chinese oral language, reading or writing, etc.), motion ability, and oral language ability were significantly and positively related to children's literacy achievement. Meng, Liu, Zhou, and Meng (2003) found similar positive relationships between family reading background and children's Chinese oral language ability, as well as character recognition.

Wang and Hu (2007) examined family reading in Chinese in relation to Chinese reading achievement among 114 third-grade students in Shanghai. The results showed the number of books owned by the family, reading activities at home, parents' attitude toward reading, parents' reading habits, and the amount of independent reading by children were strong indicators of children's Chinese reading achievement. These studies provide a strong foundation for future studies on the effects of the home literacy environment on children's Chinese literacy development. All these studies took place in large cities, Beijing and Shanghai. Future studies can explore family literacy practices and home literacy environments of families living in different geographical regions of China and families of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Li and Rao (2000) and Li, Corrie, and Wong (2008) compared home literacy practices of families in Beijing and Hong Kong with children's Chinese literacy development. Their findings for the Beijing sample were similar to findings from the other studies reported here. Hong Kong parents, however, started teaching their children to read and write Chinese characters at home at a younger age than the Beijing parents, which resulted in the Hong Kong children having a greater mastery of written Chinese by 8 years of age. The Hong Kong children began the formal study of Chinese characters in preschool, at 2 years 8 months, and their parents supported their learning of characters through home instruction. The Beijing parents, middle class from the Western District, provided children with more informal literacy activities in the home and did not teach characters until the children began formal literacy instruction in school. The researchers concluded early instruction in Chinese characters is important to children's subsequent mastery of the Chinese written language. Other findings about the Beijing parents' home literacy practices were the majority of homes had more than 30 books, the majority of children witnessed their parents reading every day, and parents paid more attention to moral education than the entertainment value of books read to children.

12.4 Home Motivational Climate for Chinese Literacy Development

Zhou and Salili (2008) explored the relationship between intrinsic motivation and home literacy of 177 preschoolers (ages 3.75–6.58) in Beijing. Persistence and voluntary engagement in reading-related activities were used as indicators of intrinsic motivation, which was measured by parent ratings on five items: voluntary reading at home, persistence in reading a whole story, paying attention when others read to the child, concentration on reading in a noisy environment, and liking to go to bookshops. The home literacy environment was measured by six indicators: number of children's books at home, how often new books were bought, how often storybooks were read to the child, how long the child was taught characters at home, how often the child freely selected books, and how often the child saw a parent model reading. Bivariate correlations showed all six indicators were positively related to intrinsic motivation in reading. After controlling for age of children, father's educational level was the most significant predictor of children's reading motivation, and three home literacy components—parental model of reading behavior, number of books in the home, and years of character teaching by parents—also predicted children's intrinsic motivation to read Chinese. Parent modeling of reading Chinese was the strongest predictor of children's intrinsic motivation.

However, unlike what is typical for children in Western societies, Chinese children's freedom to choose their own books for reading did not lead to intrinsic motivation to read Chinese. This phenomenon is supported by Iyengar and Lepper's (1999) study that found American children were more intrinsically motivated to read when they chose their own books, while Asian American children were more motivated to read when a trusted authority figure, such as a parent, selected books for them. This may be a culturally-specific response to choice.

Wang and Coddington (2010) explored the relationship between beginning Chinese readers' motivation to read and their proficiency in reading through a study of 102 first graders, ages 7 years 6 months to 7 years 10 months, from a southern suburb of Beijing. Parent background varied from working class with elementary to middle school education to middle class with college education. Motivation was measured by Chapman and Tunmer's (1995, 1999) Reading Self-Concept Scale, adapted and translated into Chinese. The scale measured children's perceptions of reading difficulty, perceptions of reading competence, and attitudes toward reading. Parents completed a survey about their attitudes toward external feedback, encouragement for challenging reading, reading materials made available in their homes, and the value they associated with different reading tasks. The Test of Basic Reading Skills (TBRS), a district level test of Chinese reading skills for first graders, was used to measure the children's reading proficiency. Correlations between parents' beliefs and students' motivation were statistically significant. Children's reading achievement was positively related to their total motivation scores and parent's encouragement, support, value of reading tasks, and

attitude towards reading, while reading achievement was negatively related to children's perceptions of reading difficulty.

An important finding from this study is Chinese children's perceptions of reading competence predict their reading performance. This is especially significant when the children are beginning readers. Another major finding is Chinese parents' attitudes towards reading predict their children's reading performance, and their attitudes, support, encouragement, and values relate to their children's sense of competence and motivation to read. This supports other findings that parents play a key role in their children's Chinese literacy development.

12.5 Implications for Chinese Literacy Practices and Policies

Findings from the limited amount of research conducted on family literacy in China provide several implications for Chinese literacy practices and policies. First, since oral language support from parents promotes children's Chinese literacy development, parents need to be encouraged to use oral language to support their children's Chinese reading at home. It is important to note that during the reading process, parents should actively engage their children in reading in an explicit and elaborative way, or a dialogic reading style, rather than just reading books aloud with no child-parent interaction. Parents can raise questions, initiate discussions, provide positive feedback, ask follow-up questions, encourage their children to elaborate on questions, and so on. Through interactive oral support, children learn to recognize Chinese characters, expand their vocabulary, and deepen their understanding of the text. In addition, parents can adopt some methods for teaching reading from their children's school teachers. For example, they can teach their children to do read-aloud activities, read intensively, skim and scan, and go back and reread. They need to provide a good model for their children to follow to be good readers and to enjoy reading. Early instruction in Chinese characters may also help children become more proficient in Chinese written language.

Second, since home literacy factors investigated in the studies reviewed here resulted in children's greater reading proficiency, parents can help their children develop Chinese reading skills by buying their children books, children's magazines, and newspapers; creating a literacy-rich environment; modeling good reading behaviors and positive reading attitudes; taking their children to libraries and bookstores frequently; setting a definite time to read with their children; and encouraging their children to read independently.

Third, parents need to know the importance of Chinese reading and writing for their children and should try to motivate them to read more outside of school. Since many parents do not know how to help their children read and write at home, they need to learn strategies to help their children improve reading, and they can spend more time reading to and with their children. One way for them to learn the strategies is for schools or communities to offer free tutoring sessions or workshops to teach parents these instructional skills.

12.6 Summary

In summary, home literacy related to the Chinese written language is an important topic for researchers, educators, and parents to explore. Family literacy is significantly related to children's literacy development. Specifically, research suggests the following factors are important: parents' oral language support, availability of home literacy resources, frequency of taking children to libraries and bookstores, parents' reading attitude and reading habit, and home literacy-related activities. Since few studies have been carried out on home literacy practices among Chinese families, more research is needed on the influence of home literacy practices on children's learning to read and write the complex Chinese written language. All of these studies involve families in urban communities. Further studies can explore family literacy in rural settings, in different regions of the country, and among minority groups in China. Further questions can be asked such as: What is the relationship between the age when parents begin teaching their children to read and write and children's subsequent literacy development? What are the best practices that parents can use at home to promote their children's Chinese literacy development? To what extent do parents influence their children's motivation to read and their reading and writing proficiency? What can be done to increase access to free books for children from lower socioeconomic families and communities? How can parents in rural areas or from minority groups best support their children's development of academic literacy?

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