Understanding Coparenting and Family Systems Among East and Southeast Asian-Heritage Families

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The geographical world regions known as Eastern and Southeastern Asia comprise 18 countries or economies: seven in East Asia and 11 in South-Eastern Asia (UN 2012). The seven East Asian territories are: China, DPR Korea, Hong Kong (SAR), Japan, Macao (SAR), Mongolia, Republic of Korea. The ten Southeast Asian countries are: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Burma, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. The countries in the region vary widely in terms of their cultural geography, socio-cultural beliefs, levels of development, demographic profiles and political systems (Rao and Sun 2010). Further, while diverse family structures and dynamics have long existed in various regions of Asia, twenty-first century forces of globalization, urbanization, increased migration, and changes in demographic trends have had significant impacts on family forms and systems. Trends such as increased physical and social mobility among family members within and across generations, migration and relocation, international marriage, demographic transformation characterized by aging, declining fertility and delayed marriage and childbearing, cultural shifts in values and attitudes about gender roles, marriage, parenting, and children's socio-emotional needs, increased women's labor force participation, and increases in divorce rates and single parenthood have all triggered important shifts in family structures and roles. Families are continually evolving and re-defining their own status in society through everyday life arrangements, adjustments, and longer term plans and ideals (Gubhaju and Eng 2011).

The ever-increasing diversity and complexity in marriage and family formation patterns and family life have bred new stresses and challenges. The press and

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intensity of these challenges vary by country and by regions within countries (with change occurring more rapidly in urban than in rural areas) and in response to different contexts of economic and social change. Socialist-oriented capitalism, government family planning policies, modernization, and emerging individualism have posed major challenges to the traditional family, and consequently require accommodation. In some countries, families have adopted new institutional structures such as neo-local family residences, while in others traditional systems of extended residence have persisted or been adapted to cope with rising costs of housing and childcare (Chen 2005; Hirschman and Minh 2002; Morgan and Hirosima 1983). Amidst the variability, some general trends and shifts in traditional family structure and process can be identified, and will be one thrust of this chapter. Due to the limited focus in the literature on fathering in Asian families, another thrust is our emphasis on the role and changing gender role of fathers within the traditional family and societal contexts of mothers as the primary caregivers. Because detailed figures on population characteristics and census data are published only irregularly for many of these countries (Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, Cambodia, DPR Korea, Lao PDR, and Burma), we will limit our overview more generally to widespread trends and shifts in family functioning among East and Southeast nations rather than attempting an exhaustive comparative analysis.

Values

Countries in East and Southeast Asia constitute different ethnic groups that vary in language, wartime and migration experiences, and certain cultural practices. However, there are some common cultural values, particularly pertaining to the family, that have been established (Uba 1994). First, South and Southeast Asian cultures have been greatly influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. These religions or philosophies have shaped cultural traditions and values that dictate family structure, hierarchy and roles, and one's place in society (Min 1995). Traditional two-parent heterosexual married families in South and Southeast Asia are characterized by a patriarchal and patrilineal structure, sex, age and birth order determining roles and authority within the family. Grandparents, especially grandfathers, are revered, husbands possess more power than wives, sons have more privileges than daughters, and the eldest son is the family's most important child. The immediate family is not just the mother, father and children, but also includes the husband's parents and the son's wives and children. A large proportion of newly married couples do not leave their parental home immediately after marriage, and with most couples still desiring to have a first baby as soon as possible, three-generation family households are normative.

The family as a whole and its social status take precedence over the identity and needs of individual family members. The extended family also includes close relatives who share the family name and ancestors who live in the same community. Ties with the extended family generally remain very close, so that in some cultures even aunts and uncles are part of a family collective that shares roles

in caregiving, socialization and coparenting of children (Kurrien and Vo 2004). This ethic is exemplified by a Vietnamese proverb: "If the father or mother lacks or fails, children are always taken care of by an aunt or uncle".

Parenting Practices

Adults' parenting practices are shaped by Confucian and Tao doctrines which advocate a balance between natural, human, and spiritual entities and de-emphasize individuality and self-assertion (Munro 1985; Ryan 1985). Specifically, Taoism emphasizes self-control and interpersonal harmony, and Confucianism the fulfillment of social obligations, establishment of interrelationships with others, conforming to norms, respecting parents and elders, and attainment of family reputation through individual achievement (Fung 1983; King and Bond 1985). Wang and Chang (2010) propose that the Western model of authoritarian and authoritative parenting (Baumrind 1971), which addresses differences among families in warmth and control with children, may have limited applicability in understanding Chinese-heritage parenting. For example, Chinese parents rate themselves significantly higher than European-heritage families on "training" ideologies, and on socialization goals for filial piety (Chao 1994, 2000). Chinese values of collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control and humility were associated with authoritarian parenting by mothers, with collectivism and conformity to norms also correlated with authoritative parenting (Xu et al. 2005). These data reflect a parenting emphasis on not only child obedience to rules and adult authority, but also subtle expression of warmth, acceptance and responsiveness through sensitivity to children's needs (Chao 1994). Specifically, the Chinese notion of *guan* (管), which means "to govern", "to care for", and "to love", cannot be categorized as either authoritative or authoritarian parenting (Chao 1994) because parental care, concern, and involvement are synonymous with firm control and governance of the child. This gives guan a very positive meaning. Parents' *chiao shun* (training) (教訓), or the continuous monitoring and correction of children's behavior to assure that children do not fall short of societal standards, is also an endemic feature of Chinese parenting (Chao 1994). Filial piety (*hieuthao*) is also considered to be among the most essential virtues in Vietnamese society. Children are acculturated to be thankful to parents for the debt of their birth, upbringing and education; to always think of their parents and family first; to sacrifice for them; and to love and care for parents in their elder years. Vietnamese individuals who neglect this responsibility face ostracism by both their family and the community.

Mother and Father Roles and Involvement

Historically, research studies examining parenting practices in Asian families have gathered data principally from mothers, with few empirical studies having solicited kindred data from fathers (Kashiwagi 1993; Makino 1995). There is hence little

systematic, empirically based data concerning what fathers actually do for their children of different ages, and how they experience fatherhood in various Asia-Pacific regions. Much needed is valid, large-scale information gathering from Asian fathers across cultural and subcultural groupings concerning how they view their contributions to their child's survival, health and development; what they enjoy and believe they do well with their children; and what they do not enjoy or fear about caring for infants and young children.

The most widely held and conventional view of Asian men's family responsibilities includes ensuring sufficient income for the household and serving as teacher, disciplinarian, and support for mothers. However, this parochial view obscures within-culture variability in men's roles and changing gender roles in general. While Asian women, like women everywhere, do still tend to be the main providers of care at home (even as they assume greater work responsibilities outside their homes), there have been smatterings of evidence indicating that many Asian men have taken on increasingly greater new responsibilities related to children, including in the realms of caregiving and of providing support for children's development and education. Most evidence suggests that these changes have been tentative, subtle and slow to take hold. However, in certain parts of Asia shifts in father involvement have slowly shadowed similar shifts in Western fathers' involvement over the last half century, although this is not to say that the process of change for the latter is moving any faster than the former.

Among the recently studied fatherhood trends, particularly in several urban areas of East Asia, is whether evidence supports men's showing greater involvement in nurturing their children's development. Data have been equivocal, but where documented one explanation for change toward greater father participation in child care is that kin caregiving is less accessible to contemporary families than in the past. Dual-income urban parents now frequently tend to live in households with nuclear rather than extended family structures. Japanese men's involvement in housework was slightly higher when their wives were employed full time or more educated, as opposed to non-employed or less educated (Nagai 2004). Similarly, Makino (1995) found that men and women shared more child care activities when wives had either full-time or part-time jobs, as opposed to being homemakers (see also Ishii-Kuntz et al. 2004). These studies suggest that an increase in financial resources contributed by women may encourage men to share child care activities with their wives. On the other hand, as has been documented in many Western cultures, domestic violence, fathers' over-zealous discipline and other problems stand as factors leading many mothers to serve as 'gate-keepers' and discourage more father involvement.

Men's education may also play a role; some studies find that educated fathers in urban areas have grown more involved in actively supporting their children's development. For example, according to the Management and Coordination Agency (1986), 57 % of college-educated fathers, as opposed to 44 and 38 % of fathers who are high school and junior high school graduates, respectively, reported actively participating in talking and playing with school-aged children. However, women's increased involvement in the workforce does not inevitably prompt greater father involvement, for there are also other adaptations Asian families have made

commensurate with women's increased involvement in the workforce. In one analysis, Roberts (2011) maintains that the contemporary Japanese family has actually begun moving away from a traditional male breadwinner model, but that it is through support from women's families of origin rather than their husbands and children's fathers that makes a work–life balance for full-time Japanese career women possible [See Holloway and Nagase's chapter in this book for an interesting view on tradition in Japan].

In many rural settings, adults behave in accordance with beliefs that transgressing traditional male roles (such as fathers taking care of children in public) is never appropriate. Even if both parents hold jobs outside the home to support family income, sole responsibility for the wellbeing of the children falls to the mother. Sometimes, circumstances in the privacy of the family home are different with fathers contributing to direct child care. Certainly after the infant and toddler years, father involvement in outdoor activities, play and some domestic activities (going on outdoor visits, eating with the family, putting children to sleep, reciting rhymes, singing to children, other play-related activities) does tend to increase. Even so however, when fathers do interact with their older preschool children, it is most often to engage in physical play. Father participation in direct child care tasks such as bathing, feeding, diapering, oral health, and dressing remains rare. Moreover, when fathers participate in child care, they view their participation as temporary and only for when the mother is unavailable.

Culturally, it is important to recognize that maternal reputation and competency can also sometimes be at stake in rural areas. During infancy and toddlerhood, rural fathers view it as the mother's responsibility to be the primary child caregivers, and see it as a violation of tradition to play a central role in raising very young children. Both rural men and women are quite cognizant of culturally-prescribed roles and often adhere rigidly to these. Unfortunately, it is the narrow definition of parenthood as caregiving tasks, roles and responsibilities that has had the effect of delimiting men's accessibility to participate in the joyful experiences of mutual bonding during the baby's formative years. So endemic are the role prescriptions that even traditional nursery rhymes reinforce strict cultural roles, celebrating mothers for their love and care to the sons and daughters and fathers for their guidance, provider role and protection of child and family safety. Children themselves learn cultural mores for gender specificity in roles of fathers and mothers from very early in life.

Examining within-culture variability in patterns of paternal participation in a rural area of Vietnam, Tran (2006) documented fathering differences in the lives of 547 children under the age of 3 years old. Fathers who were involved early in the child's life were about 1.9 times more likely to be involved in sleeping with children and about 3 times more likely to bring the child to medical facilities for immunizations. Children whose fathers did not bring them to the medical facilities for immunizations were about 1.7 times more likely to be malnourished. Children who did not sleep with their fathers are about 1.5 times more likely to be categorized as having suspected developmental delay. Even within rural areas variability can be found; in a context that does not discourage early father investment, greater engagement by men appears to have positive consequences for infant health and mental health.

Variability, Challenge, and Adaptation

There is certainly a pressing need to probe further to understand both cross-cultural and within-culture variability among families in the exercise of parenting values, beliefs and behavior, but the common historical roots and traditions described above serve as an important backdrop for understanding contemporary challenges and changes. Understanding longstanding traditions and mores also helps shed light on the even greater variability and strain attendant to rural to urban migration within a country or family migration from East or Southeast Asia to Western nations.

East Asia is rapidly becoming urban with 42 % of its population residing in urban areas. China's urban population is increasing at a rate of 1 % per annum (Engle et al. 2013). According to official figures, there are 22 million "left-behind" children in rural areas, though other reports estimate that the number may be as high as 58 million. These children have one or both parents working away from home and are taken care of by grandparents or other relatives in rural areas. There are concerns that the psychological needs of these children may be neglected and that mothers may be left to manage large families on their own.

Families that emigrate to other countries are forced to confront new cultural challenges, which in turn influence changes in family formation and dynamics across the life cycle. Among the changes that are especially common and stressful for family members are shifts in family hierarchy, in family relationships and in the specific roles of family members.

Roles and Support Systems

Dramatic changes in immigrant men's social, occupational, and economic status undermine traditional male authority, especially the authority of the father or husband, while women's independence and identity separate from the prescribed traditional female roles often increase with occupational and educational opportunities. The nature of family migration events also can have a major impact on the very size and make-up of families when traditional multi-generational patterns of kinship are disrupted, and the traditional system of family support is interrupted (Dinh and Nemon 2007). Under such circumstances, an adaptive coping response adopted by many families includes incorporation of more distant extended relatives into the family collective (Vo-Jutabha et al. 2009).

Even so, Southeast Asian men have sometimes felt threatened by the changes in their wives' status and their own erosion of authority. This has led to tension and conflict in various instances and sometimes also to domestic violence (Kibria 1993; Tran and DesJardins 2000). For instance, although divorce is still highly stigmatized within Southeast Asian communities, increased tension in marital relationships may be partly responsible for heightened divorce rates among Southeast Asians living outside Asia (Chan 2004; Rutledge 1992). The divorce rate in Vietnam, for example,

is about 2 % (Nguyen 2011) while the comparable rate for Vietnamese men and women living in North America is 6 % (2010 ACS).

In another realm, the context of aging in Asian cultures is also transforming in subtle but noticeable ways. Historically aging confers increasing reverence within and outside the family, with elders surrounded and cared for by multigenerational family members. However, in North America adult children, especially sons, of Southeast Asian parents tend to move out to establish independent households, sometimes at significant distances from the family-of-origin unit. Increasing rates of interracial marriages among younger generations are also rendering extended family networks less readily accessible to immigrant elderly parents or members. But such changes are not just restricted to immigrant families; demographic and economic changes in China, Thailand, Singapore, and Japan are also having effects on the nature of intergenerational relationships and elderly care (Zhou 2001). For example, in post-reform China the family support network of aging rural peasants in a small village in Jiangsu Province is at variance with that of their parents' generation (who had worked and aged in a centrally-planned economy), and from their children who work and will age in a market-oriented economy. Zhou argues that the traditional Confucian support networks of the elderly are declining, and that daughters have begun playing an increasingly important role in support networks of the elderly even as sons continue to be important.

Moriki's (2011) study of living arrangements of the elderly in Bangkok explores how Thai families with fewer numbers of children, some of whom may not marry to form traditional extended families, face the challenge of caring for elderly persons. She documents a new type of co-residence that has emerged in this context—a continuing nuclear family of elderly parent(s) living with unmarried children—distinct from the traditional extended family where parent(s) live with married children. Contrary to convention, most adult Thai children move out of their parental home after marriage and hence co-residence with an unmarried child is now more common in urban Thailand where men and women never marrying is disproportionately increasing. In the urban contexts of Singapore and Japan where family sizes are also shrinking, Thang and colleagues (2011) document strain experienced by elders from contradictory coparenting roles—the expected grandparental role in transmitting cultural values to the younger generation and the norm of non-interference with childrearing on the other.

Coparenting

Children are affected not just by the individual childcare labor efforts of each parent operating individually, but also by the degree of harmony, collaboration and esprit de corps within the broader family system as a collective socialization unit. Yet somewhat surprisingly, the concept of coparenting in Asian cultures has only recently become a focus of study. In studies of Western families, numerous studies have linked the quality of coparenting between mothers and fathers to children's

socioemotional and academic adjustment. Supportive and harmonious coparenting relationships are tied to young children's social (McHale et al. 1996, 1999; Schoppe et al. 2001) and academic competence (McHale et al. 2000). Among older children, supportive coparenting has also been linked to well-developed self-regulatory abilities (Abidin and Brunner 1995; Brody et al. 1998). By contrast, unsupportive or discordant coparenting has been associated with adjustment difficulties in children. For example, competitive and conflictual coparenting is linked with poor self-regulation and disinhibition among toddlers (Belsky et al. 1996), and with acting out and internalizing behavior among both preschoolers (McHale and Rasmussen 1998) and school-age boys (McConnell and Kerig 2002).

To date, studies substantiating associations between coparenting and child adjustment have typically involved samples of predominantly Caucasian, middle-class families. Only limited data are available on coparenting in non-Anglo cultural or ethnic groups. Nonetheless, those few studies that have engaged Asian families have suggested similar patterns of linkage between quality of coparenting and children's wellbeing. For instance, research on urban Chinese families suggests that mothers who report more collaborative coparenting rate their preschoolers as more successful academically, while conflictful coparenting is linked to problems with acting out and anxiety (McHale et al. 2000). Among Japanese families, involvement in daily child-related activities by fathers has been linked to greater child empathy (Ogata and Miyashita, 2000). While these findings are important, to advance an understanding of how coparenting in East and Southeast Asian families supports or undermines child development, researchers need to shed Western notions of mothers and fathers as the functional coparenting partners to include other caregivers such as grandparents, older children, and extended family members. Such individuals play pivotal caregiving roles in families within most Asian cultures (Kibria 1993; Roopnarine et al. 1989; Kurrien and Vo 2004).

Summary and Conclusions

East and Southeast Asian families share many cultural, religious, and spiritual histories that collectively have shaped an ethic of family unity, harmony and collective identity. Family systems and dynamics have been challenged by a number of converging forces that have prompted reconfigurations of traditional means of acculturating and raising children, but traditional family mores have shaped the natures of adaptations made. In many countries, there have been trends towards greater direct father involvement, particularly when families are nuclear, urban, more educated, and both parents are in the paid labor force. Yet even in these circumstances, there remains often great resistance to shifting conventional patterns of father involvement, especially with young infants and toddlers, and father care remains far less than mother care. Cross-nationally, men do tend to become more involved with their children's activities as they get older, but mothers continue to tend to basic care tasks such as health, hygiene, feeding, and stimulating infants and toddlers. Where it has been tenable to maintain, families have found ways to continue to honor values of filial piety and extended kin have continued to play

a role in the coparenting of children. Adaptations made within cultures vary as a function of contextual factors impinging on the family, and there have been positive as well as negative aftereffects of changing societal forces.

One area that has been slow to change has been heightening consciousness about the importance of meaningful father engagement with infants and toddlers when attachment bonds are forming. Father involvement during infancy also has the benefit of alleviating the workload of mothers. One large-scale initiative guided by this aim was a Save the Children project in Vietnam (Richardson 1995). Husbands were told that they could reduce the health-care costs for their children if their wives worked less during pregnancy and in the early postpartum. In communes which received these messages, women reported significantly more days of rest while pregnant, and commensurately, higher birthweight babies. For their part men felt more empowered to help their wives. An unanticipated benefit was on elder men, with grandfathers reportedly also interested in increasing their involvement with children (Richardson 1995). While many countries have discussed development of initiatives at policy and program levels to promote positive father involvement, there is a gap in knowledge about what kind of education, information or support fathers actually want or would respond to. Studies of effective father involvement strategies in various regions are sorely needed. Effective strategies to promote father involvement are probably not the same as typical 'parenting education and support' programs created with mothers in mind. There is a strong need for studies that ask different kinds of fathers in different kinds of circumstances what kinds of program they would want for promoting positive father involvement or coparenting.

Though progress has been slow, a newer family lens that has been guiding studies of child development for the past quarter century (McHale 2007) promises to help illuminate changes and adaptations of Asian families to ever-changing societal circumstances that will only intensify in the decades ahead. The gradual changes and continual embracing of conventional family mores indicate that change will be incremental, adaptive, and continued to focus on a family collectivist approach in the raising of healthy children. We look forward to this next generation of research.

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