

## **“Our Child Doesn’t Talk to Us Anymore”: Alienation in Immigrant Chinese Families**

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*Drawing on ethnographic data on two Chinese immigrant families over a five-year period, I illustrate how and why growing alienation occurred in these families. My analysis shows that a host of developmental, immigration-related, and cultural factors lead to growing alienation in parent–child relations. Social class also plays an important role in shaping family relations after migration. This article complicates understandings of the Chinese American home context and provides educational anthropologists with a useful framework to understand changing dynamics in immigrant families. [immigrant families, Chinese Americans, parent-child relations, education, parallel dual frame of reference]*

I received a distressed phone call some time ago from Mrs. Liang, a Chinese mother whose son Tommy was participating in a research project I worked for. She wondered about her son’s performance at his new high school, which surprised me. Both Mrs. Liang and her husband were very involved in Tommy’s education and Tommy was always a good student. My previous home visits had left the impression of a very close family. Although Mrs. Liang was at first a bit embarrassed by the reason for her call, she finally admitted, “Things have changed in our family. Now he doesn’t talk to us anymore. He doesn’t tell us anything anymore.” She mentioned the possibility of Tommy “becoming very close” with a girl at school, and, clearly worried, she questioned the moral standing of her son: “You have worked closely with Tommy. Do you think he is a good person? I don’t know what’s happening in his life! I don’t know what’s happening in his school! I don’t know my own child anymore!”

What happened in the Liang family is not an isolated incident but rather represents the growing alienation occurring in many Chinese immigrant families. I define alienation as a process whereby parents and children grow emotionally apart. It is characterized by the absence of meaningful interactions between parents and their children and a lack of communication around academic and personal issues. Although alienation between parents and children is not uncommon in the U.S. context as a by-product of adolescent development (Fuligni 1998), it can be more pronounced in immigrant families. Tracing the evolution of parent–child relations in one middle-class family and one working-class family over a period of five years, I illustrate both *how* and *why* alienation occurred in two immigrant families that differ in socioeconomic status. The rapidly growing numbers of immigrant students in U.S. schools—one out of five children attending public schools is a child with immigrant parents—makes understanding the adaptation of immigrant families a pressing issue with widespread implications for educators, researchers, and practitioners.

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Building on notions of “dissonant acculturation” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001) and a “dual frame of reference” (Gibson 1987; Ogbu 1987; Suárez-Orozco 1989), I developed the concept of *parallel dual frame of reference*. After migration, children often learn English and the U.S. culture at a faster speed than their parents, resulting in an acculturation gap or “dissonant acculturation” at home. Anthropologists have used the concept of “dual frame of reference” to refer to immigrants’ uniquely double lens, comparing their experiences in the United States with those in their native countries. I argue that in immigrant families, because of “dissonant acculturation,” parents and children develop different, *parallel* dual frames of reference: While parents tend to compare their children’s behaviors with those of children in China or their own experiences, immigrant children tend to compare their parents with those of their friends or what they see depicted in U.S. media. My analysis also shows that although both working-class and middle-class families experience increasing alienation over time, the most important underlying factors differ. The effect of a parallel dual frame of reference appears to be more intense in middle-class families than in working-class families in which structural and linguistic barriers (e.g., lack of time together or children’s loss of native language proficiency) contribute more to alienation.

### Immigration and Parent–Child Relations

Decades of research have shown that parents play a central role in children’s education and development (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Foner 1997). Parent–child relationships and family cohesion in particular play important roles in children’s development (Olsen et al. 1983). The level of family cohesion tends to change as children enter adolescence, characterized by children’s growing desire for autonomy and independence, increasing sense of estrangement from parents, and heightened orientation toward peers (Erikson 1968; Fuligni 1998; Steinberg and Silverberg 1986).

In immigrant families, disengagement between parents and children during adolescence may be greatly intensified at a time when children often need their parents’ guidance and support most (García Coll and Magnuson 1997). Compared with their native counterparts, immigrant children face more challenges and risks in their development. Immigration, a highly stressful event in itself (Smart and Smart 1995; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001), strips children of their familiar environment and supportive network of extended family and friends (Chan and Leong 1994; Short and Johnston 1997). Many immigrant children experience trauma in the process of crossing the border or in their resettlement in the new country (Laosa 1989; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). After arriving, the need to learn a new language and culture in an unfamiliar context can create tremendous acculturation stress (Ainslie 1998; Shuval 1980; Yeh 2003). Fighting against discrimination is a constant struggle many immigrant children of color face in school and the larger society. Poverty is yet another critical risk factor. Nearly a quarter of the children of immigrants live below the poverty line, compared to 11 percent of white children (Elmelech et al. 2002). Poverty coexists with other factors that increase risks, such as residence in neighborhoods ridden with violence and gang activities as well as school environments that are segregated and overcrowded (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Qin 2006; Zhou 2003).

Immigrant families can play a positive role in children’s adaptation by providing a buffer against these external threats (Athey and Ahearn 1991). A dominant theme

in current immigration research suggests that preserving parental culture, language, and ties to the ethnic community can facilitate upward social mobility in immigrant children (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998). In their review of research on immigrant children from diverse ethnic backgrounds, Kurtz-Costes and Pungello conclude that “children are more likely to adjust well to a new culture when they are not isolated from their culture of origin . . . such social contact provides a secure base for these children from which they can break into a culture that is—at first—alien to them” (2000:123). The closest link for immigrant children to their culture of origin is their parents. Children become much more vulnerable to risk factors in their adaptation and adjustment when they lose this base and buffer.

Immigration often brings changes to family roles and tends to destabilize family relations over time (Foner 1997; Garcia Coll and Magnuson 1997; Sluzki 1979). One of the most salient issues is the acculturation gap between parents and children (Laosa 1989; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). Portes and Rumbaut describe this as dissonant acculturation—“when children’s learning of English and American ways and simultaneous loss of the immigrant culture outstrip their parents” (2001: 53–54). After migration, children often pick up English and absorb the new culture sooner at school through contact with teachers and peers rather than their parents, who may be more removed from the “larger American culture,” particularly if they work with co-ethnics—a typical case for many new immigrants (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Qin 2006). Dissonant acculturation often leads to increasing parent–child conflicts in immigrant families and adaptation challenges for children (Chan and Leong 1994; Uba 1994; Ying 1999). Immigrant parent–child conflicts may become particularly acute during adolescence, when an adolescent’s yearning for independence is combined with acculturation into mainstream values of individualism (Buki et al. 2003).

Although research on immigrant families has noted issues of the acculturation gap and increasing parent–child conflicts, few studies have examined the quality of parent–child relations in recently arrived families, and how and why the quality of these relations may change over time. In particular, few studies have examined these issues using in-depth, ethnographic, and longitudinal data. Furthermore, few studies have considered how social class may impact the acculturation process and parent–child relations. Social class is important because post-1965 immigrants are overrepresented in both the working-class low-paying service workforce as well as in middle-class professional high-technology fields (Portes and Zhou 1993; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). Different contexts and social classes may lead to very different parent–child dynamics at home.

In this article, I address the following questions:

1. Does the quality of parent–child relations change over time in recently arrived Chinese immigrant families?
2. If so, how and why does it change?
3. Are there differences in the experiences of middle-class and working-class families?

Although the acculturation gap and intergenerational conflicts have been noted in previous research on Asian immigrant families (e.g., Chan and Leong 1994; Uba 1994; Ying 1999), the “model minority” myth perpetuates the notion that Asian American

families and children face few challenges in acculturation and adaptation. In this article, I give voice to the silent struggles Chinese parents and children experience behind the “model minority,” problem-free family façade and complicate understandings of the family context for Asian American children’s education and development.

## **Method**

The data analyzed and presented in this article are based on the five-year Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study begun in 1997 to examine immigrant children’s academic engagement and psychosocial adjustment. A variety of methods were used, including ethnographic observations and interviews. The sample consists of approximately 400 recently arrived immigrant students attending public schools in Boston and San Francisco. As part of a team of bilingual researchers, I conducted interviews with the students every year and with the parents in the first and final years of the study. Both student and parent interviews included questions exploring family relations, including changes in parent–child relations after immigration, the amount of time parents and children spent together, parent–child communication, conflicts and resolutions at home, parents’ perception of raising children in the United States, and children’s perceptions of parenting style. In the fall of 2000, a “network of relations” interview was conducted with each student, asking students to name the important people in their lives and those they would turn to when they encounter specific problems. All interviews were conducted at locations of the students’ choice, mostly at school, at home, or in public libraries. All interviews were audio-taped, translated (if not conducted in English), and coded.

From September 2000 to June 2001, as part of the larger study, 17 Chinese children were selected for further study of the school-level, home-level, and peer-level factors that contribute to different patterns of academic engagement. In this part of the research, we conducted monthly ethnographic observations at home and at schools, writing detailed field notes for each visit. We then integrated these data with interview data collected on each student and compiled in-depth case studies on each student’s educational and psychological adaptation over time, including family dynamics.

The issue of emotional distancing and alienation between parents and children first struck me when I was conducting the final-year parent interviews in early 2002. Again and again I heard the same story in the interviews: Parents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds communicated less with their children and their family was no longer as close as when they first immigrated to the United States. I subsequently coded all 17 case studies, focusing on potential changes in parent–child relations in terms of time spent together, parent–child communication, conflicts, and emotional closeness. In this process, I found that 12 out of 17 Chinese case study families demonstrated signs of alienation at the time of the final-year student interview, characterized by decreasing communication, increasing conflicts, and increasing emotional distance between parents and children.

In the next section, I use two of these case studies to illustrate this process of growing alienation. These families are chosen because they represent two types of Chinese immigrant families in the study. The Lai family (all names are pseudonyms) represents middle-class families—both parents work as professionals and have high levels

of education; they came to the United States to pursue educational and professional opportunities; and their children attend schools in the suburbs with mainly white students. The Zhen family represents working-class families—both parents work in service jobs and have limited education; they came to the United States through a family reunion visa; and their children attend urban schools with co-ethnic immigrant students. Although both families experienced growing alienation over time in parent-child relationships, the most important contributing factors were different. In the middle-class Lai family, the acculturation gap and the development of a parallel dual frame of reference, combined with high parental academic pressure, led to alienating parent-child relations. In the working-class Zhen family, in which parents and children also developed an acculturation gap and a parallel dual frame of reference, alienation was primarily due to structural and linguistic barriers induced by immigration.

I found it easier to work with the Lai family, who came from northern China (as do I) and spoke Mandarin (as do I). Moreover, both parents worked in universities; I was better able to relate to their experiences and they to mine. With the Zhen family, I sometimes had trouble understanding the father, whose native language was Fukenesese (he spoke Mandarin with some accent), and I could not communicate with the mother, who did not speak any Mandarin. This limited my opportunities to examine the mother's perspectives on family relations.

### **The Lai Family**

The Lai family came to the United States from Beijing. Mrs. Lai was a doctor in China; in 1993, she came to the United States to conduct university-based biomedical research. Mr. Lai arrived a few months later with Li, their only son, and assumed a faculty position in the East Asian Department of a prestigious university. The family lived in their own house in a middle-class, mostly white neighborhood.

When I met him, Li was a tall, thin, 13-year-old with short hair and sincere, attentive eyes. He spoke fluent Mandarin and spoke English with little accent. Li finished third grade in China before coming to America. After immigration, his parents hoped he would be accepted into an elite university. In the first few years, they did everything they could to support his education: They bought Li many books and magazines and often assigned difficult math questions for him at home, which they reviewed with him after he had tried to solve them. Whenever he needed help with his schoolwork, his mother would help him in math while his father would help him in history and science. It was clear in my interviews with both Li and his father that Li's education was the most important thing for everyone in the family.

Immediately after immigration, Li had a very close relationship with his parents. In the first few years, when I contacted Li for an interview, he usually asked me to talk to his parents, because they knew his schedule better than he did. He reported in the first-year interview that he shared most of his concerns and troubles with his parents. He also said that he wanted to be like them in the future, not only because they had good jobs and financial stability but also because of "their moral character," the most important thing he thought he could learn from them. When asked how he wished his parents could change in the first-year interview, Li said, "I wish they could be younger, because I want to stay with them as long as possible. . . . I want them to care for themselves more, not always think of me."

Li enrolled in a highly competitive high school, which his parents learned about at a social gathering. Li continued to thrive in his new school. Not only was he the top student in his class academically, he was captain of the tennis team, a violinist in the school string ensemble, an editor of the school newspaper, and a tutor in an after-school program. During his summer vacations in high school, he volunteered at the Red Cross, worked for a dental research institute, and interned at the governor's office.

Li's parents wanted him to major in natural sciences in college, preferably in medicine, because they considered these fields more financially stable. The first few times I interviewed Li, he agreed with the professional aspirations his parents held for him. He talked of being an optometrist. However, after a summer's internship in the governor's office during his junior year, Li became increasingly interested in politics. Talking with his friends at school also sparked his interest in journalism. Increasingly it became a problem in his family that his parents wanted him to major in the physical sciences while he wanted to study the social sciences. His parents' dream that he would become a medical doctor seemed less and less appealing to him.

Things also started to change at home. Although Li continued to excel in school, he felt very pressured by his parents. When he got a "bad grade" (i.e., below A-), his parents would "feel sad and not talk" to him. When asked in the second-year interview what he thought a good family was like, Li described a family in which "the parents don't have to force the children to study or do other things." Li communicated less and less with his parents as he became more involved in activities in and out of school. He spent much less time at home and his parents knew less about his whereabouts or his life in general. When I called his parents to schedule an interview with Li in the final year of our study, Mr. Lai told me to try e-mailing Li directly, because they no longer knew his schedule. "Every day, he just comes home, has some food, and goes into his room." He and his wife seldom entered their son's room, because Li did not want them to touch his things. During the final-year parent interview, Mr. Lai said every day he and his wife asked Li about his day at school, but he typically avoided the subject. Each time they asked a question, he gave them simple "yes" or "no" answers. Mr. Lai lamented,

Now he doesn't want to communicate with us—many important or deep things, like values, how a person should live his life, etc.—he doesn't want to talk to us about [that]. I think with friends he probably talks about them. He used to be little and that was fine, but now there is just not that much we can discuss, even like things and people in school, he doesn't want to talk and we do not know.

Mr. Lai also said that when the family was together, Li disagreed with them about almost everything—from what to have for dinner to where to go for summer vacation. Mr. Lai and his wife struggled to understand their only son as he grew older. The father said he wanted to raise his son in the Chinese way and it obviously had not been easy, since there was nothing he could do to change Li when he did not follow their advice. Mr. Lai felt his son might be following American customs learned from school, peers, and the media, but the father did not really understand American customs. Although both he and his wife worked in American institutions and were both highly educated, their social circle remained predominately Chinese. Li complained in the interview that his parents did not understand what it was like for him to grow up in another country. At the end of our study, Li began dating a white girl.

As with many other things in his life, he did not tell his parents. He was admitted to two Ivy League universities and later enrolled in one of them. Although his university was quite close to home and his parents hoped he would stay at home, Li decided to live in a dorm on campus.

### **The Zhen Family**

The Zhen family is quite different from the Lai family. They came to the United States from the rural area in Fu Jian province, through a family reunification visa. Mr. Zhen arrived first, in 1988, and it was not until 1996 that Mrs. Zhen came to the United States with their three daughters, Ling, Xue, and Hong. In China, Mr. Zhen had finished elementary school and worked as a construction worker. Mrs. Zhen went to school for only one or two years in her village. After the family was reunited, both parents worked in the same Chinese restaurant, Mr. Zhen as a cook and Mrs. Zhen washing dishes.

Ling looked smaller than most girls her age; she was very slender, with somewhat cautious eyes set in a pretty face with delicate features. She was a sixth grader in an urban middle school when she began participating in our study. The family lived in a bare and dark two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a four-story apartment building on the edge of Boston's Chinatown. Ling did not spend much time with her parents. She was usually asleep when her parents returned from work (around eleven o'clock at night), and when her parents were up in the morning (around nine or ten), Ling had already finished second or third period at school. She had dinner with her parents about once a week.

In the first-year interview, Ling described her home life as "harmonious" with very few conflicts. She considered her relationship with her mother, who "pampered [her] most," a good one. She was bothered by her mother having to work so hard in America, which made her "short and old," compared to when they were in China, when her mother was "young and beautiful" in Ling's mind.

Ling had been separated from her father for eight years and was very happy when they were reunited. The father believed that he had a good relationship with his children but commented that "they seldom talk about their troubles with me." He had high hopes for his three daughters. However, he and his wife were completely at a loss about how to help their children with their schoolwork. "If things were in Chinese, we could help a little bit, but English, there is nothing we can do. There is nothing we can do. We don't know any English," Mr. Zhen said again and again in the interviews. As a result, he viewed his role as a parent as "mainly [to] teach them not to throw their temper, not to play too much." Education, as he viewed it, was "mainly provided by the schools." He would read the report cards his daughters brought back but could not do anything when they were unsatisfactory.

Over time, Ling became less engaged in school and her performance declined. She also communicated less and less with her parents. She simply could not share her challenges, such as being bullied by other students at school, the occasional arguments she had with her girlfriends, or her worries that her English would not be good enough for high school:

I want to communicate with [my parents] and share my feelings, but I can't. It's difficult to say, because of language issues. If [there was] no language barrier I would. I can't really communicate with my mom because she only speaks Fuknese and many words about emotions

I don't know how to say in Fuknese. My dad speaks Mandarin but I'm not used to talking to him.

Ling picked up Cantonese in the school's bilingual program on her way to learning English, and her two best friends both spoke Mandarin. Therefore, she spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, and English better than her native tongue, Fuknese. She felt that she was in a double bind: Although she was emotionally closer to her mother, she could not communicate with her because of language barriers. Although there was little language barrier with her father, she was not close to him and did not want to communicate with him. Ling had two close girlfriends at school, Ting and Jie, whom she called sisters. When they were together, they talked about many things that Ling could not share with her parents.

When asked to name the most important people in her life, Ling included her two sisters, five of her close friends at school, seven of her teachers, and her grandmother. Her parents were not on her list. When asked to identify the people who made her feel loved and accepted, who were proud of her, who talked to her about future plans, who helped her when she really needed it, who knew where she was, or to whom she told her problems, Ling never mentioned her parents.

Ling's parents continued to work very long hours in the restaurant over the course of the study. Ling spent six or seven hours every day watching videotapes rented from a Chinatown store. When I interviewed the parents, Mr. Zhen talked about the challenges as a parent:

As parents, we work hard and are not at home most of the time. They go to school and sometimes . . . do part-time work during the weekends. I don't think they spend that much time on their schoolwork; they play on the computer a lot and watch TV a lot. When I told them to study, they said they studied. And we did not know any English so we can't really check. Our relationship is not that good. Their ideas and values are different from Chinese children in China and different from us. Things they want to tell you they tell you; otherwise they don't.

He mentioned that boys telephoned quite often for his daughters and he was worried that this would distract them from their studies, but in the end, he chose not to worry too much about it, because there was not much he could do. "Everyone is different. It depends on their luck. They are growing older every day. They have to deal with these things themselves."

Ling wished that her parents would spend more time with her and care more about her. Ling even wished that her parents would impose a curfew and demand that she get home at a certain time after school: "They never really care about anything like that. I wish they would." She once talked about a man on a motorcycle chasing her near her neighborhood. She was quite frightened, but her parents never knew about it. At the end of our study, Ling had failed the entrance exam to go to a magnet high school and would attend an urban high school. Emotionally she also felt further alienated from her parents.

### **Alienation: Understanding the Contributing Factors**

The Lai and Zhen families differ significantly in socioeconomic backgrounds and their ensuing adaptation experiences after migration. The Laies were a middle-class family with a son who went on to an Ivy League school. The Zhens were a working-class family with three daughters struggling to get into college. What was similar in

the two families, however, was that by the end of our study, parents and children had become much more alienated. In both families, children and parents spent less time together and had fewer interactions over time. Parents and children increasingly led separate lives. While Li became more reluctant to communicate with his parents, Ling felt intensely that her parents did not care about her. In both families, parents and children communicated less and less. Why did this happen? What led to growing alienation in these two families?

### *Developmental Perspective*

In both families, parents perceived their children growing older as an important factor contributing to their decreasing involvement in their children's lives. For example, in the final-year interview, Mr. Lai said:

There are changes [in our relationship] and the changes are related to the fact that he has grown up. Now he is becoming like an adult. He used to be a child and you had to take care of him in many ways; but now he has grown up and you do not need to take care of him anymore or rather he doesn't want you to take care of him anymore.

Although the father noted the decreasing need to take care of his son as he became older, he also acknowledged that it was the son *not wanting* to be taken care of that contributed to the increasing distance between them. In the Zhen family, the father indicated that since his children were growing older, they had to take charge of their own lives. He and his wife were both very busy and did not have much time to be involved in their lives. In both cases, children shifted their focus outside the family as they grew older. For Ling, because family life was a vacuum, she reconstructed her "family" with her two best friends at school. Li's parents became less important in his world, which was dominated by the activities in which he was involved in and out of school. This process of children separating from parents and shifting their social world to peers has been portrayed as part of the normal developmental stage as adolescents form their own identities (Erikson 1968; Fuligni 1998). This seems somewhat to fit the experiences of children in both families.

### *Immigration-Induced Factors*

Although certainly relevant, adolescent turmoil alone does not fully explain why Li and Ling grew emotionally distant from their parents. A host of immigration-related factors—parent-child separation, parents' increasing work demands outside the home, and language barriers—also exacerbated this emotional distance. This was particularly the case for the working-class Zhen family.

*Separation.* In the Zhen family, the long separation between Ling and her father contributed to the estranged relations between them. As a result, Ling never felt emotionally close enough to him to discuss her feelings. Although previous research has shown that Chinese fathers tend to be more emotionally distant than Chinese mothers at home (Wong 1988), the eight-year separation intensified Ling's feeling of being "not used to talking to him." In the Lai family, Li was separated from his mother for four months, but the short separation did not seem to have a significant impact on their relationship.

Separation occurs at very high rates in immigrant families (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2003). In some cases, when separation is short and well

managed, as in the Lai family, it may not lead to problems (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2003). However, most research has shown that extended parent-child separations have a negative impact on parent-child relations, often leading to children's detachment from parents (Bowlby 1973), which results in communication problems and conflicts between parents and children (Falicov 2004). This helps explain the difficulty Ling felt communicating with her father.

*Lack of Time Together.* The amount of time parents and children spend together often becomes an issue for many families after immigration. The problem of sharing less time together for parents and children is particularly pronounced in working-class families in which both parents may work long hours to make ends meet, frequently in Chinese restaurants or other service jobs. Immigration often increases work demands for working-class immigrant parents. Before migration, typically only one parent, most likely the father, works full-time, while the other parent stays at home and cares for the children. Housing is usually much less expensive relative to people's salaries in their countries of origin. In the case of the Zhen family, the mother never worked when she was in China because she and her children could live well and even afford their own house on the money sent by her husband. However, after migration, both parents had to work to pay the much more expensive rent and other bills.

What makes matters worse in some families is that parents often operate on a schedule that has very little overlap with their children's. In the Zhen family, the parents' restaurant work schedule allowed little time for them to be with their children. Over time, while parents work day and night to make ends meet, they and their children begin to live parallel lives in different worlds under the same roof. This greatly limits the opportunities for parents and children to communicate and limits parents' capacity to follow their children's day-to-day experiences, thus reducing opportunities for parents and children to connect emotionally.

*Language Barriers.* Language barriers become prominent in some immigrant families as children gain more proficiency in English while slowly losing their native language. Previous research has documented the issue of native language loss in immigrant children (Gándara 2002; Luo and Wiseman 2000; Wong-Fillmore 1991). As Wong-Fillmore (2000) points out, today's immigrant children lose their native language at a faster speed compared to their predecessors, who by the second generation still managed to be bilinguals. This is largely due to the promotion of "English only" language policies (Gándara 2002) and the subtractive process of language learning at school (Valenzuela 1999). Chinese and other East Asian American students are more likely to lose their native language than their Latino/a counterparts (Luo and Wiseman 2000; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Native language loss and its impact on parent-child communication is particularly complicated when more than two languages are involved, as in the Zhen family. Although Ling wanted to talk to her mother, she lost more and more of the language her mother spoke, Fukenesese, because at school she spoke more Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. This is an increasingly important issue as more Fukenesese-speaking Chinese immigrant students enter the U.S. public school system and face multilayer language barriers in Cantonese-English dominant bilingual programs (Zai and Ye 2001).

Furthermore, when children begin losing their language, it is often the words that describe more complicated thoughts and emotions that are the first to go (Wong-

Fillmore 1991). This vocabulary conveys deeper meaning and enables intimate and effective communication between people beyond the most superficial level. Thus, while most parents and children communicate relatively well around daily life topics (e.g., "It's time for dinner"), the more meaningful and deeper personal communication becomes endangered. In relationships, it is precisely this type of communication that contributes to emotional closeness. When this type of communication is lost in families over time, alienation may occur.

*Cultural Perspectives: Parallel Dual Frame of Reference and High Academic Pressure*

Language barriers are part of a larger process in many immigrant families in which an acculturation gap develops between parents and children. In the Lai family, although both parents were highly educated, their network was still largely Chinese and their English ability and familiarity with U.S. culture fell behind that of Li, who interacted with American teachers and peers and thus acculturated much faster. During the interviews, Mr. Lai said that his son might be following American customs, but he did not understand them well enough to know.

This type of "dissonant acculturation" develops in many immigrant families. However, cultural gaps differ in terms of the compatibility of parenting styles with mainstream American parenting values and practices. Sharp differences in the values and tenets of Chinese and American parenting may increase dissonance at home, producing a parallel dual frame of reference between parents and children, as explained below.

In Confucian Chinese culture, parents play a central role in childhood education and control the direction of children's future development (Chao 1994). A fundamental Confucian tenet is "filial piety" (Ho 1996; Wong 1988), which dictates that a child honor, respect, and be obedient to parents (Ho 1996). In contrast to mainstream U.S. parenting styles, parent-child relations tend to be more hierarchical in China (Chan and Leong 1994). Chinese parents are likely to be more "control oriented" (Chiu and Ring 1998) and demand more obedience (Yang 1989). Although from the parents' perspective, control and discipline are exercised out of concern for their children's well-being (Chao 1994), children may see it quite differently.

After immigration, although parents realize that they live in a different cultural system with different values, they still tend to adhere to Chinese parenting values, comparing their children's behaviors to what is expected in China. For example, Mr. Zhen said:

How we educate children in mainland China is different from here. Adults must discipline children. . . . Children growing up in America are hard to discipline. Many children are not obedient. Here children are pampered and have bad habits. Children in Mainland China are much more obedient and better. My children, they listen to the teacher and would be upset even if we just raise our voices in speaking to them.

Mr. Zhen compared his children to children in China and concluded that children in China were better because they were more obedient.

Children, who tend to acculturate more quickly than their parents, have a very different perspective. They tend to compare their parents with those of their American peers. For example, Ling articulated the differences between her parents and American parents:

American parents don't really discipline their children. Chinese parents are much stricter. For Chinese parents, even if you are 20, you still cannot date. American parents are more open. Their children can date in their teens. American parents also allow their daughters to wear clothes that are quite revealing, but Chinese parents think that's immoral.

Thus, parents and children develop parallel dual frames of reference. In the anthropological research on immigration, the concept "dual frame of reference" refers to immigrants' "double lens," constantly comparing their experiences in the United States with those in their countries of origin (Gibson 1987; Ogbu 1987; Suárez-Orozco 1989). The research reported here suggests that in immigrant families, parents and children develop different, *parallel* "dual frames of reference": While parents tend to compare their children's behaviors with those of children in China or their own experiences growing up, immigrant children increasingly compare their parents with the American parents they see in movies or parents of their friends, who emphasize more communication and freedom, and less control in their relationship with children.

Parallel dual frames of reference play an important role in alienating parents from their children. This was the case in the Lai family. Despite the fact that both parents worked as academic professionals, the acculturation gap remained very large. This was due to the different contexts of socialization and acculturation for parents and children. Mr. Lai taught Chinese; most of his colleagues and friends were Chinese. In the medical research project in which his wife worked, she also tended to socialize mostly with Chinese colleagues and friends. However, Li, who attended a highly competitive school, socialized primarily with white peers. Through summer internships and other work opportunities both in and out of school, he had much more exposure to mainstream U.S. culture than his parents. Thus, the "gap" between parents' and children's acculturation was even greater in the Lai family than in the Zhen family. Although the Zhen parents were not highly exposed to mainstream U.S. culture because they worked in a Chinese restaurant, their children were less exposed than Li, because they attended schools with a bilingual program and socialized primarily with Chinese peers.

One clear example of an acculturation gap leading to a parallel dual frame of reference in the Lai family centered on the issue of respect. Mr. Lai complained about Li's lack of respect:

When we have a relative or friend visiting, he is always like . . . I don't know if this is the American custom. I do not know the American custom very well . . . he simply says "Hi" and that's it. I feel this is not very good, because others are older and from an older generation, you should address them by "uncle" or "aunt."

For Mr. Lai, respect for elders was of great importance in Chinese interpersonal relations; in this case, the child should show respect to the parent's friends or colleagues. However, Li understood the word *respect* from a very different perspective. Mr. Lai talked about Li wanting him to "respect his privacy" by not going into his room. Li also told his parents not to touch any of his possessions. For Li, respect meant individual privacy, drawn largely from the U.S. cultural context. However, in Chinese culture, individual privacy is typically not honored, particularly between parents and children. In fact, Mr. Lai was disappointed and shocked that Li would not allow his parents into his room. Thus, parents and children may interpret the

same word from very different cultural vantage points, developing parallel dual frames of reference. Although Li's parents wanted to raise him in the Chinese way, they acknowledged the difficulty and the fact that Li was following American customs about which they had little understanding. Li believed his parents did not understand him or his world, and he increasingly shifted his world outside the home.

*High Academic Pressure.* Parental pressure for achievement also plays an important role in some Chinese immigrant families. It is well documented that Chinese parents tend to have very high expectations for their children's education (Kao and Tienda 1998). Although high expectations may contribute to children's educational achievement, they also may contribute to children's reluctance to communicate with parents and decrease emotional closeness as a form of "passive rebellion" (Louie 2004). This was the case in the Lai family, in which so much parental attention focused on Li's educational performance and aspirations. Although high parental expectations certainly motivated Li to achieve at high levels in school, they also created tension between him and his parents. He felt great pressure from his parents to achieve. When he did not do well in school, his parents would "feel sad" and not talk to him. Li's future career choice also became a point of contention. Li wished that his parents would not "force" him to study or do other things all the time. He began to tell his parents less and less about his experiences at school.

## Discussion

At the dawn of a new century, immigrant children are the fastest-growing sector in the U.S. child population. From 1990 to 1997, the number of children in immigrant families grew by 47 percent, compared with only a 7 percent increase for U.S.-born children with U.S.-born parents (Oropesa and Landale 1997). One out of five children attending public schools in the United States—approximately 14 million—are children of immigrant parents. This number is projected to grow to one out of three in 2020. Understanding the adaptation of immigrant families has become a pressing issue, with important implications for educators.

This study makes three important contributions to research on immigrant children's acculturation and adaptation. First, it demonstrates in ethnographic detail *how* parent-child relations change over time in immigrant families. Emotional detachment between parents and children occurs in many families as children enter adolescence and shift their social worlds toward their peers. This is not a new phenomenon nor unique to immigrant families. However, as the two case studies illustrate, in immigrant families, many unique factors shaped by larger social, cultural, and economic forces can intensify discord and parent-child estrangement, leading to alienation and emotional distress. Parents and children in both families grew emotionally apart, characterized by a lack of emotional affinity, decreasing communication, and decreasing parental involvement in children's academic and psychosocial lives. This led to emotional anguish for parents, who felt they had lost their children, as well as for the children, who believed their parents did not understand or care about them.

Second, this study demonstrates *why* parent-child relations in immigrant families become more alienated over time. My findings show that dissonant acculturation between parents and children combines with strong cultural clashes between Chinese and American parenting styles, leading to greater dissonance and

disengagement. Building on notions of dissonant acculturation and a dual frame of reference, I proposed the concept of a parallel dual frame of reference to illuminate this process of disengagement. Parents and children each develop a dual frame of reference: Parents continue to operate on the Chinese cultural model (often dated), comparing their children with children in China or their own experiences growing up; children, on the other hand, increasingly compare their parents' expectations and behaviors to those of American parents. This leads to parallel but different expectations for each other among parents and children. When not effectively addressed, this can lead to increasing emotional disengagement and alienation.

Third, this study illustrates the role of social class in immigrant acculturation and how this may lead to different family dynamics. Although both the working-class and the middle-class family experienced increasing alienation, the important underlying factors differed. In the middle-class family, the alienating effect of a parallel dual frame of reference in parent-child relations appeared more acute than in the working-class family. Immigrant children from middle-class families tend to attend suburban schools with mostly white middle-class peers and thus have ample opportunities to be exposed to and assimilate many U.S. mainstream cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Even though middle-class parents tend to work as professionals, their exposure to the U.S. culture and language may still lag behind that of their children. In working-class families, while parents tend to have limited exposure to mainstream U.S. culture, their children's contact with the new cultural context also may be restricted because they attend schools with immigrant peers. Further, in middle-class families, parental academic pressures also play a significant role in pulling the child emotionally away from the parents. In working-class families, the effects of a parallel dual frame of reference may be eclipsed by larger social and economic forces: increasing work demands after migration, children's loss of the native language, and parent-child separation in the process of migration. These factors create both structural and linguistic barriers in connecting parents with their children, producing growing alienation over time.

These findings point to critical areas of exploration for future research. First, although alienation occurs in many immigrant families, the extent of alienation may differ across ethnic groups; the challenges noted here, for example, may be more unique to the Chinese families (e.g., the complicated Fuknese-Cantonese-Mandarin-English language challenge in the Zhen family). Immigrant communities that do not have multiple mutually unintelligible dialects may not face these additional challenges. Further, while research has shown that most immigrant parents have high academic expectations for their children, the pressure and tension resulting from high parental academic expectations may be more acute in Chinese and other East Asian families. Finally, although dissonant acculturation occurs in most immigrant families, when cultural values for parenting are not radically different within the host culture and the immigrant native culture, parents and children may not develop such strong parallel dual frames of reference or acute alienation as in the Chinese families in my study. Future research should continue to untangle the effects of immigration on developmental processes (Tseng 2004). One way of doing this is to compare those processes among immigrant families from different ethnic communities.

Second, gender issues may also explain the different family dynamics in the two families in this study. Although neither the parents nor the children mentioned gender-related issues as having contributed to alienation, research has shown that there are important differences in how immigrant girls and boys are socialized at home

(see Qin 2004 and Suárez-Orozco and Qin 2006 for a review). Such differences may impact parent–daughter and parent–son relations. Immigrant girls tend to be monitored by their parents more and spend more time at home (Espin 1999; Olsen 1997); they thus may identify more with parental cultural values, developing less of an acculturation gap or parallel dual frame of reference than boys. In the Lai family, it is also possible that higher parental academic pressure is related to gender. There is a well-known Chinese phrase: *wang zi cheng long* [expecting a son to be a dragon]. In traditional Chinese families, sons are expected to care for their parents in old age, while daughters marry out of the family. This may have contributed to Li's parents' very high expectations for him. In the Zhen family, gender issues were superseded by the structural and linguistic barriers between Ling and her parents. While Ling appeared more willing than Li to communicate with her parents, separation, lack of time together, and language barriers thwarted her efforts. Future research should continue to examine the role of gender and how it interacts with cultural factors in parent–child relations, unpacking potential variations across family and ethnic contexts. The roles of peer culture and media also need further examination.

Finally, it is important to consider the implications of alienation and disengagement on immigrant children's educational and psychological adaptation. As the Lai family demonstrates, some immigrant children may continue to do well academically despite alienating relationships with parents. This is largely due to the solid foundation their parents have already laid in their education (i.e., earlier intense parental involvement) and the generally favorable environment in which some immigrant children find themselves—with academically focused peers and friendly school environments. However, most immigrant students do not find themselves in such favorable conditions. Recent research has demonstrated the crucial role of immigrant families in their children's adaptation by providing a buffer against discrimination and harsh urban school environments. When harmonious, positive relations exist between parents and children, it is easier for parents to supervise their children, academically and otherwise. When children feel emotionally close to their parents, they identify with the parents, internalizing their expectations. This in turn motivates children academically, even when parents are not present to monitor them. However, parent–child alienation clearly decreases parents' ability to help their children stay focused and motivated in school.

Although findings from this study cannot be generalized to the Chinese immigrant community in the U.S., they do point to potential risk factors in Chinese immigrant children's adaptation in the home context. It is important for educators, researchers, and practitioners working closely with them to be aware of the family dynamics highlighted here. Professionals working with immigrant children need to reach out to parents, facilitating parent–child communication and helping bridge intergenerational gaps and parallel dual frames of reference. Schools and other social institutions working with immigrant families can also help by providing parents with more information and resources for understanding and dealing with changing dynamics at home, so that parents such as Mrs. Liang will not feel that the relationship they spent many years building with their child is simply “lost in translation.”

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