

Doing Well vs. Feeling Well: Understanding Family Dynamics and the Psychological Adjustment of Chinese Immigrant Adolescents

Desirée Baolian Qin

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Abstract Despite their average high levels of educational achievement, Asian American students often report poor psychological and social adjustment, suggesting an achievement/adjustment paradox. Yet, the reasons for this paradox remain unclear. Drawing on 5-year longitudinal qualitative interview data, this paper compares the family dynamics of two groups of adolescents from Chinese immigrant families: non-distressed adolescents ($n = 20$) who have high levels of academic achievement *and* high levels of psychological well-being; and distressed adolescents ($n = 18$) who have high levels of academic achievement but low levels of psychological well-being. Findings suggest that the two groups of families differed in parenting approaches after migration, parent–child communication, parental expectations, and parent–child relations. Implications for Asian American adolescent and youth development are discussed.

Keywords Asian American adolescents · Psychological adjustment · Immigrant family · Parent–child communication · Parent–child relations

Introduction

The image of the “model minority” dominates scholarly and public discourse on Asian American children and adolescents (Lee and Zhou 2004), a rapidly growing sector of the U.S. child population. Empirical and theoretical

research on Asian American children has focused predominantly on their educational achievement (e.g., Kao and Thompson 2003; Louie 2004; Sue and Okazaki 1990). This emphasis, however, ignores their psychological and social well-being. Recent research has shown that despite their high levels of educational achievement, Asian American students report poor psychological and social adjustment (e.g., Choi et al. 2006; Greene et al. 2006; National Council for Health Statistics 1995, 1997; Qin et al. *in press*; Rhee et al. 2003; Yeh 2003), suggesting an achievement/adjustment paradox. Yet, the reasons for poor psychological and social adjustment in the context of educational achievement remain unclear. Using the ecological model of child development, this paper attempts to understand why this paradox may exist by focusing on one ecological context, the family. More specifically, it compares the family dynamics of two groups of high-performing Chinese immigrant adolescents: non-distressed adolescents ($n = 20$) who do well in school and adjust well psychologically, and distressed adolescents ($n = 18$) who do well in school but struggle in their psychological adjustment.

The role families play in Asian American children’s education has been well established in the literature. However, little research focuses on how family dynamics influence the psychosocial development of Asian American children and adolescents. Through thematic analyses of longitudinal, qualitative data, this study highlights the divergent family processes that unfold over time in Chinese immigrant families and the implications of these differing processes for parent–child relations and children’s psychosocial adjustment. This study contributes to our understanding of *how* immigrant family dynamics may affect Asian American children’s development beyond the educational realm. By focusing on high-performing

D. B. Qin (✉)
Department of Family and Child Ecology, Michigan State
University, 103E Human Ecology, East Lansing, MI 48824,
USA
e-mail: dqin@msu.edu

Chinese immigrant adolescents with varying levels of psychological well-being, this paper also challenges the model minority myth that high educational achievement reflects healthy psychological and social adjustment. This is an important but understudied issue for Asian American youth, because their psychosocial needs are often overlooked simply due to their perceived educational competence (Gee 2004; Yeh 2003).

The Psychological and Social Adjustment of Asian American Adolescents

Since the 1960s, national education data have consistently shown that Asian American students outperform students from other groups, including Whites, in educational outcomes. These data have contributed to a popular media portrayal of Asian Americans students as the “model minority” (Lee 1996). A particular detrimental effect of the “model minority” label for Asian American students is that they are often seen as problem free and well adjusted because on the most observable measure of adjustment, they indeed seem to adjust well. Compared with children from other minority groups, they are perceived as quiet, hard-working, and often invisible high-achievers. As a result, teachers and counselors often believe that Asian American students do not have any psychological or social difficulties (Gee et al. 2007; Qin et al. *in press*; Takeuchi et al. 2007; Uba 1994). The fact that they underutilize mainstream psychological services further reinforces the stereotype of them being well adjusted (Sue et al. 1995; Gee 2004).

However, doing well in school, being quiet, having few acting out behaviors and seeking little clinical help do not necessarily reflect good psychological adjustment. In fact, contrary to public belief, research suggests that Asian American youth experience tremendous psychological and social adjustment difficulties (Chun and Sue 1998; Choi et al. 2006; Rhee et al. 2003; Twenge and Crocker 2002; Yeh 2003). Studies drawing on college student samples first started in the 1970s have consistently shown that Asian American students reported higher levels of distress and emotional and social adjustment difficulties than White students (see Abe and Zane 1990 for a review). In a series of studies, Stanley Sue, Derald Sue and their colleagues found that Chinese and Japanese American students were more likely than White students to experience loneliness, isolation, nervousness, and anxiety (e.g., Sue and Sue 1973). Subsequent studies (e.g., Austin and Chorpita 2004; Choi et al. 2006; Okazaki 1997) confirmed the earlier findings.

While most of these studies compared Asian American students with White students, some recent studies

document that Asian American students also have higher levels of distress when compared to non-White students. Two National Health Statistics reports in the mid-1990s found that Asian American women ages 15–24 had higher rates of depressive symptoms and suicide than did Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics in the same age group (National Council for Health Statistics 1995, 1997). Similarly, the Commonwealth Fund Survey (1998) of adolescent girls showed that 30% of Asian American girls in grade five through twelve reported depressive symptoms compared to non-Hispanic White (22%), African American (17%), and Hispanic (27%) girls. A number of regional studies on Asian American boys also indicated concerns about psychological health. For example, Niobe Way and her colleagues’ research with adolescent boys from diverse ethnic backgrounds in New York found that compared with African American and Latino boys, Asian American boys reported the lowest level of psychological functioning measured by levels of depression and self-esteem (Way and Chen 2000; Way and Pahl 2001). Other studies also found that Asian American students tend to have higher level of anxiety (Chun and Sue 1998) and lower level of self-esteem compared to their Caucasian, Black, and Latino peers (Greene et al. 2006; Rhee et al. 2003; Twenge and Crocker 2002). The psychological well-being of adolescents and youth is increasingly becoming an important issue in Asian American communities as stories of high-achieving, “well functioning” students committing suicide have surfaced. In fact, a National Health Statistics report (2001) showed that suicide is the third leading cause of death among all young people aged 15 to 24, but second among young Asian Americans (unintentional injuries rank first).

Taken together, extant research shows that, despite their high level of educational achievement, Asian American students experience higher risks in their psychological and social development than expected. On the aggregate level, there seems to be a paradoxical disconnect between academic and psychological outcomes. This pattern of disconnect has been documented by other researchers working with Asian American youth. In their study of foreign-born Asian American college students, for example, psychologists Sue and Zane (1985) cautioned that, “academic performance should not be used as an indicator of psychological well-being or adjustment for newly arrived Chinese college students” (p. 578). In examining the assimilation pattern of Filipino American youth, Rumbaut (1994) also found that they had high levels of education and professional success, but low levels of psychological functioning measured by self esteem and depression. A key question that arises is, what are the factors that may lead to this achievement/adjustment paradox?

Immigrant Family and Child Development

Ecological models of development indicate that the child exists within multiple intersecting and overlapping contexts (e.g., peers, family, and school) and these ecological systems determine the course of child development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Research has documented the important roles played by family (Fuligni 1998; Olson et al. 1983; Smetana et al. 2004), peer (e.g., La Greca and Harrison 2005; Greene et al. 2006; Qin et al. *in press*) and school (e.g., Roeser and Eccles 1998; Way and Robinson 2003) in the psychological and social adjustment of children and adolescents. Few studies, however, have explored the ecological contexts of Asian American children and how these contexts may shape their psychosocial development. In this paper, I focus on family dynamics. Research has shown that family dynamics, particularly parent–child relations, are among the most robust predictors of child adjustment (Parke and Buriel 2006; Steinberg 2001). Positive parent–child relations, characterized by high warmth and acceptance, and positive, open parent–child communication have been found to correlate with a wide range of positive adolescent outcomes, including lower internalizing, externalizing, and substance use problems, and higher psychosocial competence (see Steinberg 2001 for a review).

More specifically, I focus on immigrant family dynamics because the majority of Asian American children live in families where one or both parents are immigrants (Zhou and Gatewood 2000). Understanding the family dynamics in immigrant families can provide important insight into the factors related to Asian American children's psychological adjustment (Fuligni 1998). Past research has shown that migration often brings unique challenges, such as parental adaptation difficulty, lack of time together with their children, language barriers, and an acculturation gap that tend to destabilize parent–child relations over time (García Coll and Magnuson 1997; Qin 2006). Immigration is one of the most stressful events a person can go through (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). After migration, most parents, both middle- and working-class, experience downward social mobility due to language barriers and a lack of social network. Many struggle to find jobs and adjust to the new social milieu which is not always friendly to them. This often limits their time, energy, and ability to parent effectively. Among working-class families, parents often have to work long hours on labor-intensive jobs, further limiting the time they can spend with their children (Qin 2006). It is not uncommon for parents and children to seldom see one another in some families. Furthermore, language barriers can become a prominent issue over time as children gain more proficiency in English while slowly losing grasp of their native language. This can be quite

frustrating for both parents and children who feel at a loss in communicating with each other. Finally, one of the most salient issues in immigrant families is the acculturation gap between parents and children (e.g., Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Children often pick up English and absorb the new culture sooner than their parents because at school they have regular contact with teachers and peers. Parents are often more removed from the American culture, particularly if they work with co-ethnics—a typical case for many new immigrants (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2006). This acculturation gap often leads to increasing parent–child conflicts in immigrant families and adaptation challenges for children (e.g., 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 the mainstream American value of individualism (Buki et al. 2003).

Empirical and theoretical research on Asian immigrant families has focused predominantly on the great contribution Asian parents have made to their children's educational success (e.g., Louie 2001; Sue and Okazaki 1990). Much less research has been devoted to understanding the psychological realm of parent–child relations (Yau and Smetana 1996). Existing literature on family dynamics tends to focus on intergenerational conflicts due to acculturation gap between parents and children in immigrant families (e.g., Lin and Liu 1993; Leung 1997). However, few studies have examined other aspects of the parent–child dynamics in Asian American families, such as how different parenting strategies may influence parent–child communication and parent–child relations in immigrant families.

The purpose of this paper is to understand how family dynamics may contribute to the high achievement/low adjustment paradoxical pattern of development observed in some Asian American youth. To achieve this goal, the paper examines the experiences of students from one ethnic group, the Chinese, who have been documented to fit this paradox (Sue and Zane 1985). More specifically, it illustrates how two groups of high-performing Chinese adolescents may differ on several dimensions of family dynamics (e.g., parenting after migration, parent–child communication, and parent–child relations) that may contribute to their drastically different levels of psychological adjustment.

Methods

This study is embedded in the 5-year Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study co-directed by Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco. The LISA study, started in 1997, was designed to understand recently

arrived immigrant children's academic engagement and psychosocial adaptation over time. The sample consists of 411 immigrant students from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico attending public schools in the Boston and San Francisco areas.

Sample

The sample for this study, a subset of the whole LISA Chinese sample ($n = 72$), consists of 38 Chinese immigrant students. The 38 students, all high-performing (defined as above average GPA), were divided into two groups according to differences in psychological adjustment: (1) non-distressed adolescents ($n = 20$) who reported above average mental health scores; and (2) distressed adolescents ($n = 18$) who reported below average mental health scores. GPA was calculated by averaging the grades for math, science, language arts, and social studies over the 5-year period. The average of the whole Chinese sample (3.76) was used as the cutoff point and only those students with above the mean GPA were selected ($n = 38$). Psychological adjustment was measured by a 26-item self-report measure developed by the cross-cultural research team, informed by the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association 1994) and the SCL-90 questionnaire (Derogatis 1977). The measure ($\alpha = .82$) included questions determined by our interdisciplinary research team to be developmentally appropriate and cross-culturally relevant. Each item was scored on a five-point scale. Higher values indicate worse psychological adjustment. The measure was administered twice, once in Year 1 and once in Year 5. For this study, the cutoff was established by averaging the Year 1 and Year 5 raw scores of the whole Chinese sample ($n = 72$). The two groups of students differed significantly in the psychological adjustment, with group 2 reporting significantly lower levels of psychological functioning than group 1 students in Year 1 ($t = -4.30, p < .001$), Year 5 ($t = -6.07, p < .001$) and the average of Years 1 and 5 ($t = -8.13, p < .001$). It is particularly worth noting that the gap between the two groups of students in psychological adjustment widened over time (see Table 1 for sample characteristics).

There were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of age, gender, or length of residence in the U.S. The average age of the students was 15–16 in the final year of the study. Girls slightly outnumbered boys in both groups. Students had spent an average of 7 years in the U.S. by the time of the final year interviews. The two groups did differ, however, in the socioeconomic background of the families. Families in the study were coded as middle class or working class based on parents' levels of education, jobs held in China, jobs held in the U.S., and

family income. In the middle-class families, parents had at least a college education, worked in professional jobs before migration (e.g., doctor, university professor, or manager) and after migration (e.g., engineer, acupuncturist, or researcher). The family income was more than 40,000 per year. In the working-class families, parents had less than a college education, worked in service and manufacturing jobs before migration (e.g., factory worker or construction worker) and after migration (e.g., Chinese restaurants, laundry store, or odd jobs). The family income was between \$10,000 and \$35,000 per year. In the non-distressed group, 9 families were coded as middle class and 11 families were coded as working class. In the Distressed group, 4 families were coded as middle-class while 14 families were coded as working-class.

Procedure

The data were collected during a 5-year period from school year 1997–1998 to 2001–2002, using a variety of methods including structured student and parent interviews, ethnographic observations, reviews of school records, and teacher interviews. Data for this study come from the first-, second-, and final-year student interviews and first- and final-year parent interviews. In both student and parent interviews, respondents were asked questions regarding family immigration history, socioeconomic background, family relations, including changes of parent–child relations after immigration, parent–child communication, parental expectations, conflicts and resolution of conflicts at home. A team of trained researchers, including the author, conducted the interviews. In all the interviews, the participants chose the language in which they wished to be interviewed. Nearly all the parent interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese). Student interviews were in English, Mandarin, or Cantonese.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by grounded theory, “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p. 24). In particular, this approach pays attention to the complexities of the participants' lived experiences embedded in unique social contexts (Fassinger 2005). This method fits the purpose of this study. After all the responses to open-ended questions related to family dynamics were transcribed, they were indexed into two master word documents, one for each group of students. Each was organized by questions, marked by student and

Table 1 Sample characteristics: age, length of residence, GPA, mental health, and family SES of the non-distressed group and the distressed group

	Non-distressed group (<i>n</i> = 20)	Distressed group (<i>n</i> = 18)
Average age at Year 5	15.25 (1.55)	16.17 (1.50)
Range of age at Year 5	13–18	14–18
Gender		
Male	8	6
Female	12	12
Length of residence in the U.S. (at Year 5)	7 (1.59)	6.78 (1.26)
GPA	4.59 (.32)	4.39 (.38)
Mental health (Year 1)	10.80 (3.91)	18.17 (6.47)
Mental health (Year 5)	10.15 (5.88)	22.39 (6.56)
Mental health (Average of Year 1 and 5)	10.48 (2.96)	20.28 (4.40)
Family SES	11 Working class 9 Middle class	14 Working class 4 Middle class

parent ID numbers as well as the year when the interview was conducted. I first read through all the transcribed data and wrote memos on the main themes noted. Next, data were uploaded onto Atlas-Ti, a qualitative data analysis software and a process of “open coding” (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was used to generate themes from the data. The purpose of coding is to “fracture” (Strauss and Corbin 1990) the data to rearrange it into categories that facilitate the comparison of data within and between these categories and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts (Maxwell 1996). The codes were developed primarily inductively from existing theories and by the researcher during the analysis (e.g., “Lack of Conflict Resolution,” “Confucian Value around Education,” and “Parent Downward Social Mobility”) (Maxwell 1996). Next, “axial coding,” was conducted, i.e., grouping the codes and concepts into higher-level conceptual categories, which deepens the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990). For example, codes such as “Parent Downward Social Mobility,” “Parents’ Experiences of Discrimination,” and “Parents’ Missing Home” were grouped into the category of “Parental Adaptation Difficulty.” Next, selected categories, codes and linked quotations were indexed into a number of matrices arranged by theme (e.g., “Parent–Child Communication” “Parent–Child Relational Change after Migration” “Parental Adaptation Difficulty After Migration”). This served the dual function of data reduction and displaying the analyses in a format that allowed each theme to be grasped (Miles and Huberman 1994). To understand the contextual factors around parental adaptation and parent–child relations, I also considered the history of migration and family socioeconomic backgrounds before and after migration in each family and constructed mini-case studies (Maxwell 1996) of families whose experiences are representative of many other families from similar backgrounds.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the standards that should be met in order to ensure the quality and accuracy of the data (Marrow 2005). In this study, trustworthiness was strengthened by prolonged engagement with and triangulation of data collection with the adolescents and their parents. Three interviews related to family dynamics were conducted with the students and two interviews were conducted with the parents over the course of 5 years. This approach allowed for a deep and complex understanding of family dynamics from different perspectives in these families over time. To monitor researcher bias and check for reliability of the codes and categories, a trained qualitative researcher coded about 50% of the data from each group of adolescents and their families using Atlas-Ti. The reports of codes and categories were cross-checked against those developed by the author. High levels of consistency were reached. Discrepancies were discussed in a separate meeting, which helped refine the categories (see Appendix 1 for coding categories).

Results

While both groups of students were high performing, they differed significantly in their psychological adjustment. Students in the distressed group reported higher levels of sadness, anxiety, self-consciousness, and worry than the non-distressed students in both Year 1 and Year 5. The distressed students also reported worse psychological adjustment in Year 5 than in Year 1. In the next section, I present findings documenting how parenting strategies differed for the two groups of students during the 5-year period of our study, and how these different parenting strategies may have influenced parent–child relations,

which in turn may have contributed to students' overall psychological adjustment.

Parenting Challenges after Migration

Analyses of the first year parent interview data showed that for both groups of families, parenting became more challenging after migration in a new cultural context. In the interviews, parents talked at length about the difficulty of assimilating into the U.S. society because of language barriers and perceived discrimination. As previous research has documented (Sluzki 1979), the great majority of parents in the sample experienced downward social mobility which was more marked for those who had stable, middle-class jobs back home. A well-respected doctor in China, Ms. Liu struggled to put together a small acupuncture practice. A vice president of a company in Hong Kong, Mr. Tang worked in a bakery after migration. The stress and constant worry stemming from perceived economic insecurity were present in both working-class and middle-class families. Parents frequently mentioned “pressure” and “worry” related to their new living situation, including those who held professional jobs. It was not uncommon for parents to bring their pressure back home to the children. In order to survive in the new land, parents tended to work longer hours than back in their country of origin. In both parent and student interviews during the first 2 years, lack of time together was a strong theme, particularly for working-class families where parents worked for long hours in service-type jobs like those in Chinese restaurants. In many families, parents and children seldom ate dinner together except on weekends.

The gap between parents and children also grew in many families after migration. Children tended to learn English and the cultural values of the American society much faster than their parents. Language barriers, the acculturation gap, and parent–child conflicts became salient issues over time in many families. The majority of the students interviewed mentioned that discipline was one of the most common issues that caused conflicts at home. Nearly all believed that their parents were stricter and more controlling than American parents. Parents and children also reported having frequent conflicts around daily life issues like dating, appearance (especially for girls), and spending money, particularly as children entered adolescence.

While families from both groups struggled with parental adaptation difficulties, lack of time together, and bicultural conflicts after migration, the two groups differed drastically in their depiction of parent–child relations in Year 5 interviews. Students in the distressed

group and their parents reported much emotional alienation and distancing between them by the end of our study. The majority of the parents and children in this group indicated that their relations had gotten worse after migration. Students in the non-distressed group, however, mostly reported feeling “close” to their parents even by the end of our study when most students had reached mid to late adolescence. Why did the differences occur between these two groups of students? My analyses show that these two groups of families differed in how parents approached parenting and negotiated their relations with their children in the new cultural context, particularly around parental control, academic expectations and parent–child communications.

Family Dynamics: The Distressed Students

Parenting after Migration

Parents in this group acknowledged in the first year interviews that parenting became much harder after migration and many practices they had used in China no longer worked here in the U.S. For example, they couldn't use physical discipline any more. By the time of the final year interview, parents in the group still reported having a difficult time making adjustments, particularly in terms of letting go of some control. In most families, parents tried very hard to hold on to their parental status after migration by continuing to demand that their children follow their requests, even as children entered mid-adolescence at the time of final year interviews. For example, Ms. Fong, a garment factory worker mentioned that when her children raised some different ideas about curfew, “I say that they are wrong or say ‘no’ to their requests, they remain silent and won't do what I don't allow them to do.”

Most parents continued to maintain strict control and monitoring over their children in daily life. For example, Ms. Qing, who worked as a laundry store cashier, described an interaction with her 15-year-old daughter:

Sometimes some of her male friends called. After she hung up the phone I often asked her, ‘Who is he?’ She then answered, ‘My male classmates.’ I asked her, ‘Why is he calling you every night?’ then she said I was overpowering her and even intruding into her privacy. I said ‘I'm just asking. Is there any problem?’ I asked her, ‘Are you dating? He does not have to call and ask you about homework every night, does he?’ She then said, ‘We are just chatting.’ I said, ‘If you guys are having casual conversations, does he have to call her every night?’ Since then, her male friends dared not call her.

While on the surface, the mother maintained her authority as the parent and effectively stopped her daughter's friends from calling, her daughter felt quite resentful.

In other families, children expressed similar resentment toward strict parental control. In the Jin family, for example, the mother worked as a grocer and the father as an electrician. When asked if there were bicultural conflicts at home, their son Feng responded in Year 5 interview:

It does happen. But this is America! I would tell them like this, that we are in fact living in America....When they see things they don't like they would speak to me, and I would just talk back to them this way... American parents are much more relaxed, and most of the time they let their children make their own decisions. Chinese parents on the other hand, already made all the decisions for you and you are just supposed to follow.

Parent–Child Communication

An area that was particularly challenging for parents and children in the distressed group was communication. In interviews, parents and children expressed very different expectations for communication. Parents mostly hung onto old ways of communication, dictated by the hierarchical relations and roles between them and their children. They expected their children to listen to them without talking back or challenging them, just as they used to obey their own parents growing up in China. As one parent said, “my parents never said ‘I’m sorry’ to me.” For most parents, whose main reference point was how children in China behaved or how they behaved when they were children, being challenged by their children was very difficult. For example, Karen’s mother Ms. Xu, a teller at a local bank, complained about her children in the final year interview, “In Hong Kong, kids must listen to and obey parents and teachers...according to Chinese tradition, ways of speaking to elders, they are sometimes impolite. They’ll immediately tell you if you are wrong; they’re not subtle about it.”

Children, on the other hand, felt frustrated that they must obey their parents and could not communicate openly or share their thoughts with their parents. Feng, for example, expressed his frustration in communicating with his father in Year 5 interview, “Like sometimes when my father in fact knows that he’s wrong, he still has to insist that he’s right...though he knows for sure that he’s wrong. Usually I just won’t say anything; it’s no use explaining to him.” Children in this group complained that their parents would only lecture them without providing emotional support. They wished that their parents could understand them more and give them more warmth at home. They

often compared their parents with American parents depicted on TV or with the parents of their American friends, who tended to be more affectionate and friendly with children. This was particularly the case in the final year interviews when students were more acculturated into the U.S. society than when they had first arrived. Li, for example, complained about his parents, a medical researcher and a college professor, “Chinese parents have strict guidelines, especially socially, more academic and behavioral expectations...whereas American parents try to be friends of their children.” Not surprisingly, the majority of the participants reported that they would not share their trouble with their parents, nor would they tell their parents about “bad grades” or that they were dating. For example, Lilian, whose parents are designers, said, “I can’t tell them... for example I would not tell them when I date or get poor grades at school. If they know I would have to sit down and talk to them. In other words, they would lecture me.”

Parental strictness often led to increased conflicts in these families, particularly as children entered adolescence and yearned for more freedom. An additional challenge students and parents reported was ineffective conflict resolution at home. In Year 5 interviews, parents and children reported that when conflicts or disagreements occurred at home, they were most likely to “yell at each other,” “throw a temper tantrum,” or “ignore the issue” and stop discussing all together. For example, Ling reported that when there were conflicts or disagreements in her home, “Sometimes I ignore them [my parents]. They continue to talk. I pretend that they are not there. They still continue to speak. Sometimes I yell back at them, especially when I hate what they say and when I cannot take them any more.” In another family, Mrs. Lin reflected on her relationship with her daughter in the Year 5 interview:

There are changes [in our relationship]. I am emotionally stirred by these changes. She always talks back at me. You can say that we now fail to communicate with each other. You can say that we, as parents, are too restrictive. As her parents, we often try to talk to her and teach her, yet we always end up yelling at each other. We talk back and yell at each other back and forth without knowing why we have to do this.

Deep down, parents in this group perceived negotiations of differences with their children as a power struggle and experienced letting go of control as losing. For example, as Mrs. Lin gradually recognized that “yelling at each other” would not work, she tried to be “more liberal.” She found that her daughter became much more talkative: “I have to stop talking. In other words, I am giving in to her.”

Parental Expectations

Another theme that emerged from the analyses was that parents in this group put a lot of pressure on their children about education and paid little attention to other aspects of their development. Many parents indicated that they stayed here, despite all the hardships and struggles, for only one reason: their children's education. As Mr. Luo, a cook, said in Year 5 interview, "We as parents, put all our hopes on our children." Similarly, Ms. Tong, a medical researcher mentioned in the Year 5 interviews that her children complained to her that "You only have three sentences to say to us, 'Is your homework done? Any exams? How did you do in exams?'" While research has shown the benefit of high parental expectations on children's educational outcomes (Kao 1995), I argue that excessively high parental expectations can put tremendous pressure on children and can also blind parents to the social and emotional needs of their children.

In the Guo family from rural Fujian province, for example, both parents worked long hours in a Chinese restaurant. During interviews, the father complained bitterly about his life after migration, "Everyday we work 12 hours before we come back home... I don't like working in the restaurant. It's too much. I feel tired to death." However, Mr. Guo would still choose to come to the U.S. because of the educational opportunities for his children. He explained that his own education was curtailed by the Cultural Revolution, which further intensified his high hopes for his children's education: "This has been my lifelong regret. Certainly I would advise my children to study well and hard. I tell them, 'If you want to succeed, if you want to enter this society, you must study.'" Mr. Guo's high educational expectations were keenly felt by his children. Yue, their only son, knew the sacrifice his parents had made coming to the U.S. and strove to do well in school. However, he increasingly felt annoyed by their sole emphasis on education at home, "I don't see my parents that often, and every time they come home, they ask only about two things 'Have you eaten?' and 'How's your study?' They ask only about these two things. It's really annoying! Asking this all the time every day. Very annoying. I just give them really simple answers." While from the parents' perspective, they were toiling everyday to make it possible for their children to study, from the children's perspective, not only did they infrequently see their parents, each time they saw each other, the parents only cared about their basic needs like food and schooling. They often paid little attention to anything else. Nevertheless, students in this group tended to internalize parental expectations and develop a very intense need to achieve. For example, Lina, whose parents demanded that she got

all As, said about exams at school, "The most difficult thing in school is exams. I am too nervous although I know the answer to the questions. My whole body sweats every time after the exams."

Family Dynamics: The Non-Distressed Students

Parenting after Migration

Compared with the parents in the distressed group, parents in the non-distressed group were more keenly aware of the challenges they faced in parenting after migration. During interviews, many parents mentioned developmental changes as a major factor influencing their relationship with their children—as children grew older toward the end of the study, they shifted their focus outside the family more and grew more distant from parents than when the study first started. Mrs. Chang, an engineer, for example, noted in Year 5 interviews that her relationship with her only daughter Eileen had changed: "After she is 13, she doesn't listen to us much, especially our suggestions about things. She becomes closer to her friends at school." Mrs. Chang also acknowledged that there was a "generation gap" in the family: "We belong to two different generations and we do think of things a bit differently. We usually try to think of every aspect of things, but she always tells us not to worry about things too much." Thus while Mrs. Chang felt sad about the distance and differences that started to emerge in her relationship with her daughter, she attributed this to generation gap and developmental reasons—Eileen had become a "typical teenager."

Parents in this group were more tuned into the new realities after migration and were more flexible in making adjustments in their parenting strategies in the new cultural context than parents in the distressed group. During interviews, they pointed out that many old parenting strategies simply did not work any more. For example, in the area of parental control, parents realized that after migration, as children acculturated into the U.S. cultural context over time, they were likely to rebel against strict parental control, a salient characteristic of Chinese parenting. As Mrs. Xu, a data analyst put it in Year 5 interview, "The traditional parent control, in China she didn't complain, but here now she complains. Now we have to improve the way we parent and try to be more democratic." Thus, as Mrs. Xu mentioned, parents realized the need to let go of certain control and decision making power. They acknowledged the individuality of the children and respected their choices as they grew older and acculturated to the values of the new culture. Similarly, in the Liu family, the mother who worked in a pencil factory noted, "Because Karen has grown up, she

has her own way of thinking and style of dealing with things. There are many things that she decides by herself. We cannot make decisions for her on many things.” Instead of trying to hold on to their parental authority as parents in the distressed group did, parents like Mrs. Liu let the children take care of some of their own business as they grew older. This significantly reduced the possible conflicts that could occur at home.

Parents in this group also articulated the need to communicate with their children in a different manner after immigration. As Mr. Leung, a line worker in a factory, commented in the first year,

There are many differences [between here and China]. On communication between you and your child there are a lot of rules. You can't really loudly yell at him.... the communication with child is more difficult than it is back in China. Kids here are more influenced by society subtly and gradually. They think they are quite capable, even more capable than you, because there's at least one thing: his English is better than yours.

Parents like Mr. Leung acknowledged that an acculturation gap often necessitated new ways of communication with their children.

Because they observed and understood the developmental and acculturation challenges that occurred after migration, parents in this group grew more tuned into the emotional needs, not just the physical needs, of their children as they grew older. They paid closer attention to communication with their children over time. As Mrs. Lin, a secretary in a medical center, reflected in the Year 5 interview,

The way I raise my children now is different from the way I used to raise them before. In the past when they were still little, raising them meant taking care of them physically like washing and dressing them. Now raising them means spending more time with them, talking to them and listening to what they want to say.

As a result, she felt she and her teenager daughter had become closer at the time of the Year 5 interview because they could communicate in ways that were not possible before.

Most of these parents were also tuned into the emotional and social challenges children faced after migration. For example, Mr. Leung became very compassionate in his approach to parenting after he observed his son's struggles:

Understanding where he's coming from and offering some help when he needs it. I feel that understanding

each other is very important. Actually coming here isn't so easy for the kids either. I remember when we first came here he was in elementary school and had no English. Everyone else seemed to be playing well with each other but he stood on the side by himself. His English cannot be compared with others...I'm sure since elementary school up to this moment, there must have been a lot of embarrassing moments with his English. He has his difficulties, so you have to have empathy for him and only this way allows you to communicate with him. If you always complain, 'Why do you always get Bs?' then it's over. Then you can't have good relations with him.

The father poignantly pointed out the need to understand children's social and emotional worlds, an area often ignored in families where parents tried to push their children to achieve at all costs.

Parent–Child Communication

In homes where parents attempted to understand their children's world, valued communication, and paid attention to their children's social and emotional needs after migration, very different dynamics in parent–child communication were evident. While the generation gap, language barriers, and the acculturation gap were certainly present in these families and sometimes created conflicts, parents and children in this group mostly managed to overcome the barriers through open communication based on mutual understanding and trust.

Open communication was instrumental in resolving conflicts and disagreements. Unlike families in the distressed group, parents and children in this group mostly made clear efforts to listen to each other and discuss issues together. For example, Xiao mentioned in the Year 5 interview that when disagreements occurred, “the four of us would sit down together and discuss. We would express our own opinions.” Similarly, in the Chang family, when disagreements with her engineer parents occurred, Lily mentioned that she would “discuss” with them, “We are reasonable with one another and listen to the one who is right...I tell them that I don't think it's good to do that. I tell them why. If they listen to me then that's good, because I've made my point; if they don't listen to me, I listen to their side if we can't decide.” Parents in this group were also patient in reasoning and analyzing the pros and cons with their children in different situations. For example, Mrs. Li who worked in an elder care center said, “I will analyze with my son the possible consequence... He then makes the decision himself.” Even when parents and children were upset with each other, they still tried to calm

down and then talked about it. Mrs. Cai who worked in a clothing factory said, “I will teach them patiently. My children analyze the situation themselves. However, they typically respect our opinions. There are times when we get mad at each other; then we will try to quiet down and start discussing it again.” Thus, parents in this group, from both working-class and middle-class backgrounds, emphasized reasoning and communicating with their children. They presented their perspectives; more importantly, they respected their children’s ideas without forcing them to agree. As a result, children felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with their parents, even after they entered adolescence.

Parental Expectations

Interestingly, while students in the non-distressed group also had high educational achievement, their parents’ attitudes toward education were quite different from those of parents in the distressed group. While education was clearly important for parents in the non-distressed group, it was far from the only focus or the most important one in the majority of the families. During interviews, most parents sounded very Confucian when discussing their expectations for their children. They mentioned “self-cultivation,” a very Confucian concept, dictating the importance of a broad sense of education and morality. They expect their children to “get a good education,” “have basic knowledge, to cultivate themselves,” or “make progress in study, have high morality and become noble people.” They univocally emphasized the importance of morality—they expected their children to “have a purpose in life,” “be a good person,” a “good citizen,” and “contribute to the society,” not just “achieving for achievement’s sake.” For example, Mrs. Lin mentioned that she wanted her two children to be able to “contribute to the society. It’s kind of abstract. Don’t be a threat to the society. Can handle one’s own life; your life is not a mess....In terms of one’s future—take the right path—respect the law, be a good citizen.” Overall parents in this group tended to exert less pressure on their children to achieve. Very few parents in this group expressed specific demands for their children in terms of their academic achievement or future careers. Most students in the group said during the interviews that they “can choose” what they want to do in the future. They tended to feel more relaxed about schooling and have fewer conflicts with parents around education-related issues.

In sum, while both groups of parents experienced challenges, parents of the two groups adopted very different modes of parenting after migration. Parents of the distressed adolescents, mostly working-class but some

middle-class, tended to adhere to a static parenting modality, strictly and rigidly following traditional Chinese parenting tenets without making too many adaptations in the new cultural context. This approach resulted in high levels of parent–child conflict, ineffective communication, and estranged parent–child relations in these families. Parents of the non-distressed adolescents, about half middle-class and half working-class, on the other hand, tended to adopt the flexible and adaptive parenting modality, which considers both the developmental needs of children and the changing cultural context after migration. Their parenting strategies were characterized by parental adjustments in terms of letting go of some parental control, tuning into the emotional worlds of their children, communicating more with their children, and maintaining a moral Confucian discourse at home. These strategies allowed parents and children to remain connected emotionally after migration, which in turn provided a healthy context for adolescents’ psychosocial adjustment. Findings also suggest that while socioeconomic status played an important role in structuring parenting challenges in families after migration, it was the family dynamics that mattered most.

Discussion

Overall, my analyses highlight the importance of the parenting strategies used by immigrant Chinese families for parent–child relations and children’s psychological adjustment. In some ways, both groups of parents continued to use the Confucian tenets in parenting, e.g., emphasizing the importance of education and parental control (Li 2002). Parents of the distressed adolescents, however, adhered strictly to the importance of education and the hierarchical parental role at home, emphasizing the superficial, performative level of traditional Chinese parenting. Parents of the non-distressed adolescents, on the other hand, adapted the broader, general principals and tenets of Chinese parenting (e.g., importance of respect, education, and self-cultivation) into the new cultural context in light of the developmental and cultural changes that had taken place.

This paper contributes to current research on family and Asian American adolescent development in three ways. First, it highlights the parenting challenges in immigrant families. Parenting is a difficult task. When it must be carried out in a totally different context, it can be challenging for both parents and children. In particular, parental adaptation difficulty related to job pressure and loss of social status in the context of unfamiliar changes can drive parents to maintain stricter control over their children. It is important for developmental psychologists to

develop measures to capture these dynamics. Second, the paper illustrates how different parenting styles after migration may contribute to different parent–child dynamics at home, which in turn may contribute to different levels of psychological adjustment in children. The experiences of distressed adolescents at home, in contrast to their non-distressed counterparts, provide an initial understanding of why some Chinese American adolescents may have high levels of academic achievement but low levels of psychological adjustment. Third, the paper illustrates that while socioeconomic status may play a role in structuring parenting challenges in families after migration, it does not account for all the differences. Compared with their middle-class counterparts, parents from a working-class background are likely to face additional barriers in building relations with their children after migration, such as lack of time together with their children due to long hours of working in service-type jobs (e.g., Qin 2006; Sayer et al. 2004). Parents in middle-class families are likely to have time and resources to be more involved in their children's lives (Lareau 2002) both before and after migration. The adaptation may be easier for middle-class parents who can devote more time to be thoughtful in their relations with their children. However, as some of the families illustrated, parents from working-class backgrounds can maintain positive communication and relations with their children through adopting the flexible, adaptive parenting modality. On the other hand, parents from middle-class families can negatively affect their relationship with their children when they exert too much pressure on their children for educational achievement at the cost of their development (see Qin 2006).

This study has several limitations. First, it is not the aim of this paper to establish causal relations between parenting and students' psychological adjustments. Students in the distressed group reported more psychological adjustment difficulties in the beginning of the study than their non-distressed counterparts. This study only documents family dynamics during the 5-year period of the LISA study. The two groups were likely to differ in family dynamics before migration, but these differences were not accounted for in the current study. Furthermore, there are many other factors that may lead to psychological distress. For example recent research has shown that Chinese American youth experience high levels of peer discrimination (Gee et al. 2007; Greene et al. 2006; Noh et al. 2007; Way and Rosenbloom 2004). This is likely to have a significant impact on their psychological adjustment. School-level

factors (e.g., school violence) and identity conflicts are also likely to contribute to their psychological adjustment difficulties (Florsheim 1997).

Second, findings from this study on Chinese immigrant families cannot be generalized to all Asian American families. There is tremendous diversity within Asian Americans in family dynamics and mental health depending on ethnicity, immigration status, age of arrival, gender, and English proficiency (Takeuchi et al. 2007). While Chinese Americans are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Asian American community and the Confucian culture permeates aspects of many East and Southeast Asian cultures, the experiences of the Chinese families cannot represent the experiences of other Asian American families. Moreover, while the Asian American population is dominated by first and second generation immigrants, there are substantial proportions of non-immigrant families. The experiences and unique challenges in immigrant families, e.g., acculturation gap or parental adaptation difficulties, may not apply to these non-immigrant, native families.

Despite the limitations outlined here, this study complements findings from quantitative studies documenting the immigrant family dynamics of Asian American families and provides a first step toward understanding how family dynamics may influence students' psychological adjustment. Because Chinese and other Asian American students in general have high educational achievement, and underutilize mainstream psychological services, they tend to be stereotyped as quiet and high achieving. This stereotypical image can often lead to their needs being overlooked by researchers, educators, and counselors. In fact, Asian American youth face tremendous challenges at home and at school (see Qin et al. *in press*). In the context of this study, while both groups of students did well in school, it is important to consider the long-term implications of the pattern of high-achievement/low adjustment. I hope this paper can draw more attention to the psychological and social needs of Asian American children, particularly the challenges some Asian American adolescents face at home.

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Appendix 1: Coding Category, Definition, and Number of Families in Which Adolescents and/or Parents Addressed Specific Categories ($n = 38$)

Coding category	Definition	Non-distressed group ($n = 20$)	Distressed group ($n = 18$)
Parental adaptation difficulty	Description of parental downward social mobility, parental experiences of discrimination, and other adaptation difficulties parents go through after migration, e.g., difficulty finding a job	18	16
Parenting challenges after migration	Challenges to parenting after migration as a result of parental work pressure, lack of time together, acculturation gap, different cultural practices, language barriers, and bicultural conflicts	17	17
Strict parental control	Parents not tuned into the developmental or cultural changes after migration, maintaining strong control over their children in curfew etc; parental reluctance to make adjustment and give up control after migration	5	14
Parent–child communication problems	Parents and children having different expectations about communication and experiencing difficulty in communication; children not feeling comfortable sharing things with parents; and a lack of effective conflict resolution at home	4	15
High parental educational expectations	Referring to parents expressing high expectations for children in educational outcomes and putting a lot of pressure on children to achieve, often at the cost of children's emotional and social needs	6	15
Parent–child emotional alienation	Parents and children grew emotionally estranged toward the end of the 5-year study, characterized by a lack of communication, increasing conflicts, and an emotional chasm between them	4	13
Understanding and flexible parenting	Parents acknowledging and understanding the need to change parental practices as a result of cultural differences, developmental changes that took places and/or children's difficulties in adaptation after migration; parents' willingness to let go of some control as children enter adolescence	14	4
Positive parent–child communication	Parents and children communicating well in families, e.g., children feeling comfortable sharing their trouble with parents; parents' and children's ability to communicate and resolve conflict effectively through discussion, negotiation, and mutual trust	16	3
Parents maintaining a moral discourse at home	Parents expressing their expectations of their children beyond just educational realms, e.g., when parents want their children to be a good citizen and a moral person.	14	3
Parent–child emotional connection	Parents and children remaining emotionally connected toward the end of the 5-year study, characterized by healthy communication, mutual trust, and emotional closeness	15	3

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Author Biography

Desirée Baolian Qin received her doctoral degree from Harvard Graduate School of Education and is currently an Assistant Professor of Human Development at Michigan State University. Her research focuses on how immigration, culture, gender, and ecological contexts influence adolescent development. Her most recent publication is 'Our Child Doesn't Talk to Us Any More': Alienation in Chinese Immigrant Families. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (2006).