

Applying Baumrind's Theory to Chinese International Students

Yiqiu Zhou^{1, *}

¹Stevenson School, Pebble Beach, CA, 93953, USA

* Corresponding author. Email: azhou22@stevensonschool.org

ABSTRACT

Baumrind's theory had been used to describe families in the US since the 1960s, and schools have been utilizing its conclusions to make important decisions, such as disciplinary consequences and teaching styles. Because an increasing number of Chinese students are studying abroad, this paper investigated their experiences in western classrooms. This paper found that the longer they stay in their host country, the higher their chances of getting depression due to the disciplinary style utilized by schools. It is argued that Baumrind's theory cannot be applied to Chinese international student families, as language barriers, studying abroad, filial piety, and habits differences can create a cultural mismatch in the western perspective.

Keywords: *Baumrind's theory, Chinese international student families, cultural mismatch.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Parental methods have a pronounced influence on children's lives. Evidence suggests positive correlations between parenting style and children's future behavioral problems and success [1-3]. Psychologist Diana Baumrind, an internationally-recognized pioneer in parenting, has identified four parenting styles: Authoritarian, Authoritative, Permissive, and Uninvolved based on different levels of parental control, which refers to the level to which parents manage their children's behavior, and parental warmth, which refers to the level of parental acceptance and responsiveness regarding their children's behavior. Although Baumrind's theory has been widely accepted by scholars and utilized by schools, it is not adequate in describing the relationship between Chinese international students studying in European American cultures and their parents.

Chinese international students are a unique group, a point which will be explained later. They are extremely different from typical American families - the focus of Baumrind's theory - which therefore contradicts itself when applied to Chinese international students. American families are built on individual-oriented culture[4], whereas Chinese families follow Confucianism. In other words, while Americans believe in individualism, Chinese value conformity -- two

antithetical ideas. With more Chinese students studying abroad, it is crucial to check the applicability of Baumrind's theory since major decisions such as schools' teaching styles[5] and disciplinary consequences[6] are made based on Baumrind's findings. Additionally, acculturative stress, maladaptive perfectionism, and time spent in America positively correlate with predicted depression among Chinese international students[7]. Research done in 2017 suggested that depression symptoms are associated with the school's disciplinary style[5], which urges us to investigate the effectiveness of Baumrind's theory when applied to a culturally specific group. This study will explore how language barriers, studying abroad, filial piety, and habitus differences are factors that lead to mismatches between parenting style and children's behavior within the Chinese international student families.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chinese International Students

Before discussing the relationship between Baumrind's theory and Chinese international student families, we need to first understand our targeted population. Chinese international students are children who study abroad with or without parental presence starting from 12 years old. They study abroad mainly because "[one] a 'Preservation factor,' the goals of

avoiding disadvantageous conditions in the home country, and [two] a 'Self-development factor,' the goal of pursuing good education and better career opportunities abroad"[8]. Though they came at a young age, experiencing foreign influences, Chinese international students never leave their culture behind because they sustain a strong cultural connection with China[9]. Chinatowns and Chinese restaurants across the world are strong evidence of Chinese culture abroad. Here, we see an intriguing and unique situation where one comes to seek better opportunities, ideas, and lifestyles abroad but refuses to assimilate into the surrounding environment. At the same time, there is a low returnability rate after one graduate from college[10]. This urges us to investigate how Chinese students place themselves in foreign society affects their interactions with their families.

2.2 Parenting Styles

Continuing the discussion of Baumrind's theory, authoritarian parents insist on controlling their children. They think that since they are the parents, they are always right, and adolescents should never question their authority. Children under this type of parenting tend to be good at following rules and do not demonstrate much independence, and are sometimes good liars. Authoritative parents encourage children to be somewhat independent while setting limits on their actions. Though they do not always consider or use the children's ideas, they engage in discussions with the adolescents. Kids under authoritative parenting tend to be more socially competent, responsible, and autonomous. Permissive parents, also referred to as the overindulged parents, believe that children grow the best when they are free, so not much parenting occurs in this type. As a result, the children are often low in self-control and academic achievement while being rebellious and aimless. Uninvolved parents are unresponsive and unavailable to their children, often because they are overwhelmed or restricted by their circumstances or self-centered. In this case, children often seek inappropriate role models to substitute for the absence of their parents.

The applicability of Baumrind to Chinese international students.

A crucial factor in the invalidation of Baumrind's theory when applied to our targeted population is the East Asian concept of filial piety. Filial piety ("xiào" in Chinese) is the cornerstone of Chinese social structure[11]. It is a value derived from strict principles of hierarchy, obligation, and obedience. There are many interpretations of filial piety: 1) younger generations should support the old, 2) the old can oppress and burden the young, and 3) one is obligated to continue the family line[12]. Confucian principles back filial piety. Confucius believed that failure to practice filial piety is the greatest crime[11], and one will be morally punished

if he or she does not fulfill it. [13] This value also explains the high expectations from Chinese parents as the concept of the Reciprocal Bargain is found in Chinese families where the parents take care of their children when they are young. The children would later be expected to give back to their parents when they are old[14]. As a result, practices such as attending a high-ranked university and having a high-paying job became measurements of the reciprocal bargain. Though centuries have passed since Confucius, the idea of filial piety has passed down through generations and continues to live in every Chinese family.

A continuation of filial piety, face ("miànzi" in Chinese) is "the positive social value a person effectively claims for him [or her]self by the line others assume he [or she] has taken during a particular contact. The face is an image of self delineated in terms of approval social attributes"[15]. Since there is a strong emphasis on collectivism in the Chinese culture[16], having a face is "protecting the family's reputation and honor in Chinese culture"[17]. Thus, the face is a measurement of an individual and his or her family's dignity, honor, and social standing. To better understand the relationship between parents and children in a Chinese international student family, it is important to recognize how face plays a factor in the decision-making and daily practices of a Chinese family.

Cultural mismatch resulting from different habitus.

Schools often misinterpret Chinese parents due to the cultural differences between the western and the eastern hemispheres. Sociologist Bourdieu, who theorized the link between education and culture, developed his theory of cultural capital. The theory comprises three parts: 1) habitus, human instinct, 2) field, the social arena where the habitus is performed, 3) cultural capital, the positive or negative response from the field to the habitus. Thus, when a good habit is carried out in the wrong field, it results in negative feedback, which leads to further misunderstanding. We must recognize that habitus could be performed in the wrong field to better understand Chinese parents.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1 Language barriers made parents pass their authority to the children.

Wikipedia claims that less than 1% of the Chinese population speaks English. In a more recent study, a survey conducted under the approval of the Chinese government that can be generalized to the entire Chinese population suggests only 1.8% of the population can "act as interpreters on formal occasions" and 3.53% have the ability "to converse quite fluently"[18]. From this, one can conclude that not many Chinese people can speak English fluently, and the same can be applied to the

parents of Chinese international students. This is where Language Brokering comes into play — it is when the adolescent translates and interprets documents and conversations for the family while helping the family to navigate in the new culture[19]. In other words, the parents are relying on their children. With this position, they are in “contact with materials that are beyond the scope of their age-mates’ experience” [18] such as bills, contracts, and insurances, and such involvement has been termed parentification, which gives adolescents a higher status in the family. Parentification is when adolescents assume roles normally reserved for adults, and such action “undermines the traditional power relationship between parent and children and increases parental dependence on their children” [20]. Since the majority of the parents of our targeted population need to rely on their children when communicating with the western world, they are forced to pass down their authority to their children no matter their parenting styles in China.

Quotes from the passages:

Parents with poor host language skills are likely to rely on their children to translate or interpret inside and outside the homes[21].

language brokering has important connections with family dynamics

children and adolescents mostly begin to be language brokers to help their less-aculturated parents to cope with the demands of daily life in a new cultural setting.

Adolescents as language brokers come into a position with substantial responsibility for their families.

They might come into contact with materials that are beyond the scope of their age-mates’ experience, such as their parents’ medical diagnosis, insurance details, and bank contracts[22].

They may also start to take over other responsibilities related to instrumental or emotional support for their parents so that parents start to rely on their children in other family matters. Such involvement has been termed parentification and is defined as a process where adolescents are assigned or assume roles normally reserved for adults. Parentification can increase adolescent’s status in the family, which “undermines the traditional power relationship between parent and children and increases parental dependence on their children” [20].

3.2 There is no strong correlation between independence level and the type of parenting.

A theory by Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser claims that college students break away from their parents and rely more on peers, nonparental adults, or other types of influencers, looking up to role models in their immediate surroundings. As mentioned in the

Literature Review section, many Chinese international students study abroad without parental presence -- same as college students. In this case, they are essentially like college students because they are no longer influenced by their parents but rather by those around them. Depew's research in 2018 suggests there is no significant difference in independence scores among parenting groups within college students. Moreover, kids from uninvolved parenting produced the highest independence scores though there is no distinctive difference among the scores of different parenting styles. This finding contradicts the previous assumption that authoritative parenting results in the most successful children, showing that different parenting styles could result in the same quality among children and that parenting styles become ineffective when the parent is not with the children.

In addition, since international students bear familial responsibilities due to filial piety, they demonstrate maturity at an earlier stage. Research in 2004 showed that a sense of family obligation among Chinese adolescents is generally associated with higher levels of academic motivation[23], proving the strong sense of family obligation among Chinese international students. Like my brother and me, Chinese students are the language and culture brokers of the family, meaning that they take care of their parents. Part of filial piety is to take care of parents when they are old, which can also be understood as when they cannot take care of themselves. Though the parents of the international student body are not yet physically disabled, they are incapable of taking care of themselves in a foreign environment, so the children step up taking on the responsibility to look after their parents.

Being away from home means that one loses the protection of their parents. The child then matures to look after him or herself. They also involuntarily take on many parental responsibilities that train them to look at problems from an adult's perspective, making them more socially competent in their age group. However, lack of parenting is the key to achieving these qualities, thus further disqualifying Baumrind's theory.

4. SHARING GOALS WITH THEIR PARENTS, CHILDREN ARE "LEARNING MACHINES" WITHOUT PARENTAL SUPERVISION.

Rather than the traditional family dynamic one would see in a typical Chinese family, parents of Chinese international students are like partners collaborating to ensure their child's successful pursuit of education. Chinese international students indicated that the educational system is better overseas[3]. There are limited spaces available for them to attend prestigious universities as there are only two top 100 universities around the world in China. Their parents also support them since studying abroad would bring the face to the family compared to attending a non-prestigious

university in China. Here, both the children and the parents think that studying abroad would be beneficial for the family, so they work together towards the same goal. It is also believed among Chinese international students that pursuing credentials and prestigious jobs enable them to fulfill their filial piety duties. Competitive (and highly respected) jobs in China also prefer employees with a foreign diploma which further motivates many to study abroad. Therefore, many Chinese students choose to study abroad as it "ensures" a better future and brings face to the family. In addition, such action also qualifies the measurement of the Reciprocal Bargain. Here, with the help of filial piety, the goal of children is in line with their parent's beliefs, so not much parental guidance is needed for the children to be academically successful. Here, uninvolved parenting can produce the same outcome of authoritative parenting, showing that Chinese cultures can distort Baumrind's theory.

5. CHINESE PARENTS TEND TO BE HIGH INTEREST BUT LOW ACTION WITH REGARD TO INVOLVEMENT.

As mentioned in the previous section, the idea of preserving face is heavily valued in Chinese culture. Thus, Chinese parents ground their expectations for their children in Chinese Tradition, where, eventually, they want their children to graduate from selective universities and work in a high-paying job. However, how western society understands them, and their behavior often makes them seem like uninvolved parents.

A study on 29 low-income Chinese immigrant families showed that parents hold high academic expectations while only half were aware of their children's behavior at school[24]. Though current Chinese international students are mainly from middle-class families or economically able families, their parents share many characteristics with low-income immigrant families. Instead of being occupied by work, parents of international students are physically blocked from their children as they live thousands of miles apart. Assuming that immigrant parents are unable to speak English -- so do many international students' parents. Even worse, those parents living in China have no exposure to western culture and language, making it harder for them to understand the life their children experience abroad. These circumstances limit parental involvement in the life of Chinese international students. From Baumrind's theory, these parents are considered low-involvement, but her theory neglects the difference within Chinese international student families.

Above is an example of habitus and field mismatch. In China, the parent only talks to the teacher when their children get into trouble. It is also believed that consistently reaching out to teachers is troublesome. Growing up, people would find tutors rather than seeking my teacher for help as my family supposes this will add

unnecessary work to the teacher. My story also reflects the Confucian idea of respecting teachers, reinforcing how Confucianism is at the heart of Chinese families. However, in the US, it is encouraged to engage with teachers. Here, due to the cultural differences, the Chinese parents are regarded as uninvolved. Instead, they are trying to help their children since not talking to the teacher is not adding work to the teacher that the teacher appreciates, and, in return, the teacher will like their children.

Lim points out that low levels of expressed warmth may not indicate a lack of love and care as the Chinese are not raised to express love aloud. Research in 2013 further confirms the concept that Chinese are more reticent in expressing love than Americans as the action is also a statement of one's autonomy[25]. Chinese children hardly can hear the phrase "I love you" from their parents, but taking an example, they would turn off the television when their kids are doing homework and stock the fridge with delicious chocolate ice cream. Again, Baumrind's theory only applies to families with western cultural backgrounds since its Chinese family measurement would conclude all Chinese parents as uninvolved. In contrast, a study in 2005 suggests that most parents in China adhere to authoritative and authoritarian parenting[26].

6. CONCLUSION

Though Baumrind's theory allows people to understand different parenting styles, it is not a successful tool in determining the outcome of each type of parenting, especially among international Chinese families. Baumrind's theory does not consider cultural differences and habitus mismatch, making it not applicable to families adhering to eastern beliefs. Additionally, with unrecognized responsibility and differences between international students and average children in America, Baumrind's theory does not efficiently conclude the results of parenting styles.

Schools in America should consider updating their current system as it clearly shows that the theory backing the system does not apply to a significant group of the student body. Schools should modify their expectations of Chinese parents as well as their approach to Chinese students. Schools should consider hiring therapists who share a common background and understand the struggles specific to Chinese international students. In addition, schools should reach out to Chinese parents through surveys and questionnaires and hire Chinese parent liaisons to keep active communications between parents and the school throughout the school year. Some would argue that the current system works just fine since there is no reporting of Chinese students feeling uncomfortable or unsuited in the American school current system. This argument again neglects the cultural difference. The Chinese are good at accommodating as

they believe group interests outweigh individual benefits, and filial piety implies that they should be thankful and respectful in receiving any education at all. Instead, American schools should more deeply explore their past opinions about Chinese international student groups as they could be based on a purely western view.

REFERENCES

- [1] Caldwell-Harris, C., Kronrod, A., & Yang, J. (2013). Do more, say less: Saying "I love you" in Chinese and American cultures. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 10(1), 41-69.
- [2] Cebolla-Boado, H., Hu, Y., & Soysal, Y. N. (2018). Why study abroad? Sorting of Chinese students across British universities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(3), 365-380.
- [3] Chao, C. N., Hegarty, N., Angelidis, J., & Lu, V. F. (2019). Chinese students' motivations for studying in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 7(2), 257-269
- [4] Lizhi, S. H. I. (2015). Differences Between Chinese and American Family Values in Pushing Hands. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 11(5), 50-53.
- [5] Pellerin, L. A. (2005). Applying Baumrind's parenting typology to high schools: toward a middle-range theory of authoritative socialization. *Social Science Research*, 34(2), 283-303.
- [6] Chen, W. W., & Wong, Y. L. (2014). What my parents make me believe in learning: The role of filial piety in Hong Kong students' motivation and academic achievement. *International journal of psychology*, 49(4), 249-256.
- [7]. Wei, M., Heppner, P. P., Mallen, M. J., Ku, T. Y., Liao, K. Y. H., & Wu, T. F. (2007). Acculturative stress, perfectionism, years in the United States, and depression among Chinese international students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(4), 385.
- [8]. Chirkov, V., Vansteenkiste, M., Tao, R., & Lynch, M. (2007). The role of self-determined motivation and goals for study abroad in the adaptation of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 31(2), 199-222.
- [9] Depew, M. (2018). The Relationship Between Perceived Parenting Styles and College Sophomores' Independence (Doctoral dissertation, University of Dayton).
- [10] Cheung, A. C. K., & Xu, L. (2015). To return or not to return: Examining the return intentions of mainland Chinese students studying at elite universities in the United States. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(9), 1605-1624.
- [11] Xu, Y., Farver, J. A., Zhang, Z., Zeng, Q., Yu, L., & Cai, B. (2005). Mainland Chinese parenting styles and parent-child interaction. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 29(6), 524-531.
- [12] Ikels, Charlotte (ed). "Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia." Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- [13] Ji, C. S., & Koblinsky, S. A. (2009). Parent involvement in children's education: An exploratory study of urban, Chinese immigrant families. *Urban Education*, 44(6), 687-709.
- [14] Kopko, K. (2007). Parenting styles and adolescents. Retrieved Nov, 20, 2011.
- [15] Teon, A. (2021, May 27). Filial Piety (孝) in Chinese Culture. *The Greater China Journal* <https://china-journal.org/2016/03/14/filial-piety-in-chinese-culture/>.
- [16] Lim, S. L., & Lim, B. K. (2004). Parenting style and child outcomes in Chinese and immigrant Chinese families-current findings and cross-cultural considerations in conceptualization and research. *Marriage & Family Review*, 35(3-4), 21-43.
- [17] Li, J. (2004). Parental expectations of Chinese immigrants: A folk theory about children's school achievement. *Race Ethnicity and education*, 7(2), 167-183.
- [18] Weisskirch, R. S. (2017). Language brokering in immigrant families: Theories and contexts. Routledge.
- [19] Pellerin, L. A. (2005). Applying Baumrind's parenting typology to high schools: toward a middle-range theory of authoritative socialization. *Social Science Research*, 34(2), 283-303.
- [20] Qin, D. B. (2009). Gendered processes of adaptation: Understanding parent-child relations in Chinese immigrant families. *Sex Roles*, 60(7), 467-481.
- [21] Sorkhabi, N., & Mandara, J. (2013). Are the effects of Baumrind's parenting styles culturally specific or culturally equivalent?.
- [22] Mori, S. C. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of counseling & development*, 78(2), 137-144.
- [23] Fuligni, A. J., & Zhang, W. (2004). Attitudes toward family obligation among adolescents in contemporary urban and rural China. *Child development*, 75(1), 180-192.
- [24]. Ho, E. S. (2002). Multi-Local Residence, Transnational Networks: Chinese 'Astronaut'

Families in New Zealand. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 11(1), 145–164.

- [25] Cowan, P.A., Cowan, C. P., Weinstein, R., & Owens, E. (2020). Diana B Baumrind. <https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/in-memorial/files/diana-baumrind.html>.
- [26] Xu, Y., Farver, J. A., Zhang, Z., Zeng, Q., Yu, L., & Cai, B. (2005). Mainland Chinese parenting styles and parent-child interaction. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 29(6), 524-531.