

# Parenting and family life in Hong Kong: Traditional perspective, contemporary research, and intervention

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## Introduction

Family is the cornerstone of the society. With specific reference to Hong Kong, there are several sources of the influence which affect family development. Primarily, as a Chinese society, Hong Kong families are under the influence of traditional Chinese cultural beliefs, although the related impact has gradually weakened. In the traditional Chinese culture, families showed several characteristics. First, male members generally held a superior position whereas females typically occupied a submissive role. Second, under the strong influence of Confucianism, filial piety was strongly upheld with a central focus on the father-son relationship. Third, because of the importance of maintaining harmony in the family, the collective interest (i.e., family interest) was placed above individual interest.

Because of the above attributes of traditional families, there are several characteristics of traditional Chinese parenting. First, gender-specific parenting was strongly upheld in traditional Chinese societies. For example, girls were socialized to be submissive to boys as reflected in the cultural belief of “san cong si de” (obeying the father before marriage, obeying the husband after marriage, and obeying the son when getting old). Second, fathers were expected to teach their children because of their superior role in the family. This is reflected in the traditional Chinese saying of “yang bu jiao, fu zhi guo” (it is the father's fault to only feed his son, but not teach him). Finally, children were taught to regard family interests over their own interests, such as bringing honor to the family name. These expectations can be clearly reflected in the traditional writings guiding the behaviors of children, such as “San Zi Jing” (*Three*

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*character classic*) and “Di Zi Gui” (*Standards for being a good student and child*). In short, parenting in traditional Chinese culture can be regarded as “parent-centered” (1, 2).

As Hong Kong has been under the British rule for almost 150 years, families in Hong Kong have also been influenced by the Western cultural influences which are characterized by gender equality, respecting the interests of children, and emphasis of children rights. In terms of socialization, there are several characteristics of the related parenting characteristics. Fundamentally, children are not regarded as “property” of parents. Hence, their characteristics and interests are respected. Second, as the rights of children are emphasized, boys and girls are treated equally, such as having the equal right for getting formal education. Third, instead of focusing on suppressing one’s needs (because of the need to maintain harmony), children are encouraged to express themselves and demonstrate their talents and competence. In short, parenting under the Western influence can be regarded as “child-centered” (1, 2).

With reference to contemporary Hong Kong, families are under the influence of traditional Chinese cultural beliefs and Western ideologies. Besides, there are several social factors which also shape parenting in Hong Kong. First, with the highest housing price and cost of living in the world, both parents usually have to work to provide a sound financial foundation for the family. In fact, some parents take up more than one job in order to meet the expenses of the family. Obviously, this would adversely affect parenting quality because the related stress would have negative impact on individual and marital well-being of the couple. Second, several studies show that Hong Kong people had the longest working hours. Again, this would adversely affect parenting quality as the availability of “quality time” of the parents may be limited. Third, poverty is a growing problem in Hong Kong. Roughly speaking, one out of four children experience economic disadvantage. Existing research findings show that poverty would adversely affect parenting quality in families experiencing economic disadvantages (3-4). Finally, divorce and re-marriage have grown in the past two decades. As there would be adjustment in divorced and re-married families, parenting would also be affected.

In view of the above-mentioned influences, it would be both theoretically and practically important to understand the parenting phenomena in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, compared to research in the Western context, parenting research in Hong Kong are comparatively fewer. Hence, we have put together several papers on Chinese parenting and parent-child relationship in this special issue. The first four papers are based on a large-scale study supported by the Research Grants Council of the University Grants Committee in Hong Kong. In the first paper, we examined the profiles of parental expectations in a sample of Chinese parents in Hong Kong. While Chinese parents showed conventional and high expectations on most aspects of their children’s future, they showed diverse attitudes in some areas, such as involvement in politics. In the second paper, we examined Chinese parents’ expectations towards sons and daughters where we found that there were different expectations about sons and daughters in contemporary Hong Kong. In the third paper, division of labor in parenting was examined in the same sample where parental differences in division of labor were shown. In the final paper, findings revealing profiles of Chinese parents’ beliefs about parental roles and responsibilities in Chinese parents were reported. In these four papers, besides normative profiles of responses, we also found that there were demographic correlates of parental beliefs and parenting practices amongst Chinese parents in contemporary Hong Kong.

As traditional Chinese cultural beliefs are influential for parental behaviors, we attempted to analyze a classic document on how children should be taught. In the fifth paper, we analyzed “Di Zi Gui” (*Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*). From the analyses, we found that some of the principles of “modern” parenting based on scientific studies are in fact reflected in Di Zi Gui, although some of the values and emphases on parenting are different in traditional Chinese and contemporary parenting. In the next paper, we attempted to review parenting in Hong Kong which provides interesting leads for theory development and future research. For example, it would be helpful to understand differences in parental influences (i.e., fathers versus mothers) on adolescent development. In the final paper, we examined how family life could be

promoted via structured adolescent development programs. We argued that through positive youth development programs as exemplified by the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong (5-8), adolescents could be helped to develop competence which would eventually promote the quality of family life.

It is our sincere hope that through this special issue, we can appreciate more the traditional and contemporary influences of parenting and family life in Hong Kong. With these papers, we can attempt to conduct more theoretical integration and consider ways that can help to promote the family life of adolescents.

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