

Confucianism and Chinese Families: Values and Practices in Education

Grace Hui-Chen Huang, Ph. D.

Associate Professor
Department of Teacher Education
Cleveland State University
United States of America

Mary Gove, Ph. D.

Associate Professor
Department of Teacher Education
Cleveland State University
United States of America

Abstract

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to examine Confucianism's influence on Chinese families in the United States, specifically in educational practice and family relationships. The authors describe how Confucianism is embedded in Chinese culture and places value on education at societal, familial, and individual level. Additionally, the meaning of educational success and the efforts involved in the educational process associated with Confucianism are discussed. The authors also examine the hierarchical relationship in Chinese educational system and within the family's educational practices. Educational implications are provided to inform professional practices.

Keywords: Confucianism, Chinese family, education, parental involvement

Introduction

For nearly 2,000 years, Confucianism has shaped the social, ethical and political aspect of Chinese cultures. Confucianism, developed by the greatest Chinese philosopher, Confucius, is a philosophy which focuses on the conduct and practices of people in daily life. It is a complex set of ethical and moral rules that dictate how a person relates to others. It plays a key role in forming the norms of social morality which influence the culture in personal, familial, and social relationships. Confucianism has a significant influence on education. In this paper, the authors will examine how Confucian philosophy and principles impact Chinese families' educational practices in the United States.

The term "Chinese cultures" – plural – is used in this paper. It is a reminder that "Chinese cultures" embrace a wide range of diversity. Yet, the diverse "Chinese cultures" share a relatively homogenous cultural heritage as well.

1. Education in Societal Level

1.1 Education and social class

Education is associated with a person's social class. In old Chinese society (770 BC to 1910's), success is defined by your class, not necessary by a person's wealth (Lien, 2006). Social class is associated with occupations as well as the moral character related to the occupation. According to Confucius, there are four social strata based on occupation: scholars (*Shi*), farmers (*nong*), workers (*gong*), and businessmen (*Shang*) (Park & Chesla, 2007). The highest class, scholars did "mental labor," and usually made decisions that influenced the whole society. The second level, farmers gained respect as they provided sustenance to the whole society. The third level, workers, relied on their individual labor and skills to survive. The lowest class, businessmen, primarily focused on self-interest to function (Park & Chesla, 2007). Sometimes, their wealth would bring them status (Hsu, 1965; Wortzel, 1987). Confucius stated, "The superior man thinks of virtue; the small man thinks of comfort. The superior man thinks of sanctions of law; the small man thinks of favors which he may receive" (Tu, 1998, P.16). Based on Confucianism, leaders needed to be intelligent, have high standards of ethics, and learn scholarly work. Therefore scholarship was associated with high social class, leadership, and high moral character.

Today, Chinese society in the United States still retains the idea that scholars belong to higher social class. And education provides a route to reach the “scholarly” status. Well and highly educated people will become leaders and contribute to society. This value of education and social class influences the everyday life of Chinese families. It is believed that educational success leads to a better life, including higher social status, getting a good job, or a better marriage and relationships (Cheon, 2006; Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines, 2008; Louie, 2004; Lien, 2006). Therefore, education is central to most Chinese families. For example, in the United States, Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines (2008) indicated that Asian Americans have become the largest ethnic minority group in many career fields and at many elite colleges. In 2003, 51 percent of Asian American males and 44 percent of females age 25 and older had a bachelor’s degree or higher compared with 32 percent of non-Hispanic white males and 27 percent of non-Hispanic white females. In 1980, Asian Americans comprised only 1.5 percent of the population but Asian Americans consisted of 5 percent of all engineers and 8 percent of all doctors in the United States. Among Asian Americans, Chinese American is the largest group in the U.S (Louie, 2004). Through these statistics, it is evident that Chinese American places an emphasis on education.

1.2 Hierarchical educational system

In old China, one needed to attend and pass a centralized national examination to become successful in education and reach high social status. As one passed the exam, he (women were not allowed) would be awarded a special “scholarly” hat and received an official position (Lien, 2006). The educational system was clearly structured and well-established in the old time. Today, the system continues to be hierarchical in many Chinese societies, such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The educational achievement is visible and measurable. It is clearly defined by one’s test performance, school entered, and degree received. It is believed that earning higher grades, attending higher ranking schools, and receiving higher degrees are indisputable routes to success in the society. The system is hierarchical. Since the educational ladder is well structured, it is unnecessary to design one’s own educational course. The “successful” educational path is already laid out for the person. Placing a high value on education and academic success continues to exist in Chinese American culture in general as well.

2. Education in Family Level

2.1 Educational practice: The role of the family

Chinese cultures value the collectivist ideology which affects family functions and behaviors (Lu and Shih, 1997). Based on Confucianism, There are five basic relationships for humans: father-son, emperor-subject, husband-wife, elder-younger, friend-friend. Three out of five bases of these relations occur in the family (Chang & Holt, 1991). Chinese cultures advocate that one should strive to expand the prosperity and vitality of one’s family. (Lu & Shih, 1997; Miller & Yang, 1997). It is clear that family is in the center of an individual’s life and everyday existence, including educational practice.

2.2 Education: A family business

Education is considered a family business, an interdependent process for many Chinese families. Though children are responsible for their own educational success, Chinese parents believe that their children’s educational achievement is greatly influenced by their parenting practices as well. They believe that they have the obligations and responsibilities to help build their children’s success in education. When parents have a difficult time exerting influence over their children’s academic success, they may regard themselves as a failure as a parent. They take their children’s academic failure as their own responsibility because they feel that they did not do their best to work with their children. Pressures can be high on both parents and children. When Chinese children do not achieve, parents feel disappointed, anxious, and embarrassed (Kim, 2006).

It brings shame and embarrassment to the family. Children are impacted by parents’ emotions and expectations. On the other hand, if the child succeeds in academics, it represents the triumph of the entire family. It is considered a family achievement. In Confucianism, humility and modesty are highly valued. As Leung (2002) translated Confucius’ saying, “Contentedness leads to loss, humility leads to gain.” It is important for the family to continue reflecting on their work and find room for improvement even when the child is successful in academics. Chinese parents are concerned that too much praise may have a negative effect on their children’s achievement. Therefore, parents usually provide lower amounts of praise to their children for academic success (Leung, 2002).

2.3 Educational influence: Family hierarchy and harmony

Chinese cultures value family hierarchy and harmony which are also central concepts in Confucianism. These virtues have an impact on an individual's decision making in education. Based on Confucianism, not only the educational system has a clear and highly structured hierarchy, but also does the family system. Confucius' doctrine distinctly stated the order: "Let the prince be a prince, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son (Kao, 2006)." Each individual's role and responsibilities are clearly defined.

For example, one of the virtues of family hierarchy, filial piety, portrays the relationship between parent and child. It is an expression of respect from the child toward parent and elderly. In Confucianism, this virtue is associated with a person's citizenships and leaderships in the society. It is believed that children who respect their parents will become good citizens and leaders (Terry, 2005). Therefore, filial piety is highly valued. In daily life, filial piety is reflected in children's respect and obedience on parental demands and authority. In most cases, children do not have many choices but to comply with parents' expectations. Rebellion against parents' authority is unacceptable and will result in harsh consequences. Being "unfilial" was considered a crime in the traditional Chinese society in China. As Terry (2005) indicated, it could result in death as a punishment. The virtue, filial piety, is interwoven with family's educational practice on a daily basis. Today, parent's authority can be observed in educational decision-making and behaviors in homework, exams, school selections, career choices, and so on. Often, children respect and conform to parent's guidance and proposition.

Confucianism promotes social harmony in human relationships, including family relationships (Chang & Holt, 1991). To reach harmony within the context of family, it often relies on considering parent's authority, conformity, and role and responsibilities of each individual (Lu & Shih, 1997; Miller & Yang, 1997). Thus, the decisions children make regarding education are associated with family harmony as well. Moneta (2004) stated that Chinese children learn more behavioral rules than Westerner children do. Chinese children are comfortable following instructions. Additionally, Chinese children tend to maintain harmony by avoiding conflicts which is the quickest way to retain harmony.

2.4 Educational practice: Religious practice

Influenced by Confucianism, parents possess passion and zeal for their children's education and education in general (Lien, 2006). To many Chinese families, education is an intensive process. It is almost like a religious practice which affects the whole family's daily interaction and routines. Primary daily activities and conversations surrounded the topic of education. For example, parents may converse with their children regarding the topic of educational practice, such as homework and test result as soon as children coming home from school. However, each family has its own educational ritual, routine, and parenting style. These phenomenon can be traced back to Confucianism as to how the education and scholarship being emphasized.

3. Implications

Confucianism is an inseparable foundation for Chinese families' beliefs and functions in education. For this reason, we returned to this philosophy to explore its meanings and influences on Chinese in a modern context. This conceptual paper strives to enhance our understanding and add new insights toward the phenomena of Confucian influences on Chinese families' educational practices.

3.1 Factors involved in shaping Confucian influence

While considering Confucianism's impact on Chinese families, it is important to note that Chinese cultures have a wide range of diversity as mentioned in the beginning of the paper. Culture is multidimensional. The impact may vary due to the complex factors involved which may shape the Confucian influence, such as an acculturation factor. The family may have to adapt and learn a new mainstream culture and decide what part of the traditional educational values and practices are to be retained or sacrificed (Coll & Pachter, 2002). Therefore, commonalities and diversity need to be considered at the same time while working with Chinese families and students. Generational factor may play a role in the degree of the Confucian influence on Chinese families. However, based on Lu and Shih's research (1997), certain Confucian values are slow to change. For instance, the importance of family, value of education, and interpersonal relationships (family harmony) are not affected by age in a significant way. Moreover, sociopolitical factor may impact Confucian influence. For example, China has undergone changes in the past few decades as a result of socioeconomic developments.

Among them, one-child-per-family policy has impacted family dynamics (Anqi, Xiaolin, Wenli, Yah, & Dalin, 2007) and educational practices. Thus, further exploration is needed regarding how the societal changes interface with the Confucian influence. Little is known concerning how these policies may influence Chinese families who come from mainland China to the United States. In the United States Western cultural influence is a factor as well. Through globalization, western culture's impact may weaken Confucian influence. However, Confucianism's influence on education and parent-child relationship are still rooted in the family (Shenghong & Dan, 2004). For example, Confucianism values interdependence among parent-child relationship while western culture in general strives for independence (Lu & Shih, 1997; Moneta, 2004). According to Moneta, the impact of Confucianism may be lessened, but autonomy is still less significant in Chinese family culture. A Chinese mother may be heavily involved in her young child's homework practice. A Chinese father may actively intervene in his high school child's decision making regarding college choices. Based on a perspective from a Western culture, we might be concerned that the involvement may hinder the child's autonomy or independence. While working with students regarding decision-making and choices, it is important to think about the bicultural conflict between independence and interdependence the child may encounter. We may encourage the student to make decision independently without considering the family factor based on our mainstream value of independence. It may escalate the complexity of the issue the child faces. Therefore, we need to carefully evaluate the situation and be sensitive regarding potentially imposing our mainstream culture on those who struggle between Western and traditional Chinese cultures. Additionally, Chinese immigrants, though they gradually acculturate into the

United States environment, may be influenced by different cultural values while retaining some traditional Chinese values. Miller and Yang (1997) indicated that Chinese immigrants still place an emphasis on education, parent's authority, clearly defined role and responsibilities, and family hierarchy. However, they may encounter the bicultural conflict (Western and traditional Chinese). According to Miller and Yang, a person of Chinese cultural descent may be passive, have internal shame, and feel isolated due to bicultural conflict. One of the major challenges Chinese Americans face is to seek counseling help concerning the person's life decisions and parents' expectations (family hierarchy), particularly in educational and career choices. The person may experience a pull between what is best for him or her and what may contribute to the family harmony. Additionally, Chinese family and students may put lots of pressure and set high expectations for educational achievement (Chen, Miller, Wang, & Mark, 1996). While working with Chinese, it is critical for professionals to understand and consider the potential bicultural factor and recognize conflicts that may occur regarding acculturation process.

3.2 Structured educational system

As discussed, the Chinese educational system is highly structured and the perceived successful path is well defined. This impacts family educational perspectives and practices at home. The Chinese perceptions of the educational system are built in a way that there is little room for differences. Educational success is clearly defined. Alternative paths are less recognized. For example, achievement in areas other than traditional academic subjects, such as the arts and sports, is not as valued as the achievement in academic performance. This is a disadvantage for those children who have multiple talents and interests. Because of the high emphasis on academics, their talents and interests can be easily neglected and not developed.

3.3 Filial piety

Influenced by Confucianism, filial piety is a very significant virtue in Chinese families. It has existed over 2000 years in Chinese history. Parents play an important role in their children's education in all aspects. As an educator, it is important to note that working with the Chinese family is as critical as working with the child. Learning their essential family values will aid educators to be able to work effectively with the whole family. Additionally, it is important to examine educator's own value system while working with these families. Sometimes, our value system may be a hindrance to being able to support Chinese children in their education.

In conclusion, this paper informs professionals who work with Chinese children and families. It brings insights regarding Confucian influence on Chinese students' educational achievement, parental involvement in children's education, parent-child relationship, and factors involved in decision-making on a daily basis. It is also important to keep in mind the diversity among Chinese cultures. Each Chinese student or family we work with should also be considered as an individual case. Each family may bring its own experiences which will shape their practices in education while continued influenced by Confucianism.

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