Coming to America: Asian Fathers Cross Cultures

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The United States of America has been called a "melting pot," settled first by Native Americans and later by a mixture of immigrants from many countries. To this day, each culture brings its own ideas, beliefs, and traditions, which are often misunderstood by those who came before. Yet by examining other cultures, we learn more about our own thoughts, ideals, and values. One important window for cultural understanding is found in examining the roles of parents. Even though there are many ideas and beliefs about how to raise children, most people would say that being a good parent is a universal concern.

From our own varied experiences, we thought that first-generation immigrants to the United States might be especially sensitized to the cultural differences in their approaches to parenting. In narrowing our focus, we decided to research the question, "What are the issues Asian fathers contend with when they raise a child in America?" To answer this question we conducted interviews with Asian-born fathers who had raised their children in the United States, and we also interviewed Asian-born adult children about their fathers.

Fathers and adult children from Japan, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, Korea, India, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam took part in our interviews, in the cities of Provo, Orem, and Salt Lake City, Utah. Their occupations included students, teachers, scientists, businessmen, shopkeepers, and others. All the immigrants had two things in common: they had each experienced Asian-style fathering, and they had decided to live in the United States for an extended period of time. Most had already lived in the United States for several years and about half intended to stay permanently in this country. Our interviews took place at fathers’ homes or workplaces and lasted for about an hour.

We talked with ten individuals (fathers or adult children) from each cultural group and asked their views about American fathering, their children's education and morality, and personal changes they had made after moving to the United States. Other questions were: How are Asian-born fathers different from American-born fathers? How are they similar? How has biculturalism affected your children's development? What are your hopes for your children? How are religion and morality related to fathering in Asia and in America? How do you, as an Asian-born father, express love for your child? These are the types of questions few fathers normally think about, but by asking these questions we hoped to gain a perspective on the influences of foreign cultures and traditions on fathering and becoming acculturated to American society. For comparison purposes, we also interviewed twelve American fathers and adult children.

Fathering is universal, but the techniques of good fathering in one culture may not prove worthwhile in a different culture. How can researching Asian fathers increase the understanding of other fathers in the United States? Gaining insight into other cultures always provides more knowledge about one's own culture. All parents can learn more about parenting skills when they broaden their own knowledge base. If, for example, U.S. parents learn which Asian values or methods of childrearing result in raising happy and productive children, they might incorporate these previously unknown methods into their own parenting repertoire. And so U.S. parents need to examine parents in and from other cultures, and then decide whether or not alternative parenting styles would help them to nurture their children productively into adulthood. By studying Asian immigrant groups, we hoped to widen our cultural perspective on fathering, children, and families. At the same time, we wanted to further our own multicultural perspective on what is "American" about fathers in the United States.

The Moral Dimension of Fathering
The "moral dimension" of fathering, defined by scholars in the BYU School of Family Life, is that good fathering is essential to being a good man (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). This approach, of course, is not exclusive to U.S. fathers. Many of the Asian fathers interviewed
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from home. His family had to “choose between living with me or hurting our children’s friendships and education.” As these cases illustrate, Asian fathers often sacrifice having a relationship with their children in order to provide them with financial security. The distant father-child relationship did not, however, negate the respect Asian children had for their fathers. Almost all said they respected their fathers for their hard work.

The gratitude of Asian-born children was related to the educational opportunities made possible by sacrifices of their fathers. Yet these same children expressed a desire to see their fathers more often and to have stronger relationships with them. One Japanese son described his father as being great at job-related tasks (“fixing computers”), but not so great at working with his family (“fixing problems at home”). Another Japanese son said that after he and his family had moved to America, he began to regret that his father had spent so little time with his family when the son was younger. Other Japanese children we interviewed expressed similar ideas. But would these children give up their opportunities and experiences, which were made possible by their fathers’ sacrifices at work, in order to have more time with their fathers at home? The consensus among the Asian children we interviewed was that they would rather have had their fathers at home. In most of the interviews, the children also expressed a reciprocating sense of moral duty to their fathers to study hard and succeed in behalf of the family. This duty continued on into later adulthood where children felt obligated to work hard at their own jobs and to take care of their aging parents, out of respect and “moral debt.” From the Japanese, for example, we learned the saying, “One never repays one ten-thousandth of one’s indebtedness” (Shwalb & Shwalb, 1996).

Religion and Fathering
Moral codes of conduct such as honesty, moderation, and hard work are closely tied to a Judeo-Christian religious perspective. We learned from the Asian-born fathers that their link between religion and moral values was less than clear-cut. When we asked them how religion influences the role and conduct of fathers, many replied that morality was more connected to culture than religion. One Chinese interviewee felt his father’s style of parenting

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was based on “strong Chinese tradition” rather than on religion. He felt that values of honesty and integrity were taught and learned as a part of one’s culture, regardless of religion.

It was also common for fathers to say that their families adopted useful principles from various religions, whether or not they belonged to a specific religious group. One Korean father mentioned that “concepts of Christianity make me better” more so than does membership in a particular denomination. Although his children were raised Catholic, a father from India shared this viewpoint that “all religions have similar values.” From his perspective, universal principles such as duty and love are espoused by religions worldwide, and no particular religion has a unique set of moral standards.

However, one subgroup of fathers who were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) attributed their parenting style to their religion. When asked whether religion influenced them as fathers, Asian LDS fathers said that they felt a strong influence from their religion. They described increased feelings of moral responsibility to teach, care for, and spend time with their families. Similarly, one Japanese adult child told us that LDS teachings “affected my father’s time commitment to our family and gave him better family values.” These were sentiments echoed by many of the Asian LDS fathers and children.

A Father’s Love

Our interviews showed that a father’s love for his children is expressed differently in Asian and American societies. Despite different cultural and religious backgrounds, all the fathers we interviewed made it a point to express their love for their child. As one Japanese father put it, “across culture, fathers love [their] children the same.” Another Japanese man remarked, “Japanese fathers love their children, care about their dreams, and provide support. We all love our children in the same way. But we Japanese just explain it differently.” A Chinese son commented on how children are surrounded by love in the family: “The child is the emperor of the Chinese home. Fathers really care about their children, especially about their schooling, and show their love by providing money and support.”

Financial support is one way the Asian fathers we interviewed showed their children they love them, and many fathers provide support under difficult living conditions. As one Chinese father described the situation, “Americans don’t have to worry about surviving. In China there is a lot of pressure for fathers to find security for their families and provide a future for their children.” Under these conditions, where survival and success are not taken for granted, love is equated with being a provider, and the child’s future welfare is a man’s top priority.

We noticed that even among Japanese adult children, who had no experience with poverty, there was a perception that fathers are too busy to spend time with their families because of the demands of their jobs. As a consequence of the heavy responsibilities placed on them at work, many fathers appear to serve their companies in a life-and-death financial struggle. Most have little or no choice about the matter, and for the average Japanese company worker, work-related time extends beyond “office hours.” These men do not feel they have the option of spending time at home with their children, although they are aware that some American fathers have such flexibility. According to the fathers we interviewed, long work hours are a necessity to keep their jobs, and it is also a man’s duty to give his children the opportunity to succeed in life, so they can then provide for their own families. Most adult children viewed their fathers’ dedication to work favorably. An Indian son commented that his father was absent physically because of his job, yet “he’s there for me emotionally.” A Korean son responded likewise, saying his father “worked hard and sacrificed much for my dreams.”
By combining strengths from American-style fathering with other strengths from their native cultures, many fathers thought they had become more complete as fathers and as men.

The population of the PRC is now almost 1.3 billion and the size of families has diminished dramatically under the “One Child Policy.” Consequently, many fathers think it of even greater importance that their first-born (and only child) be a son. As one Chinese father described it, in traditional culture many parents’ dream was of having a male heir whose duty it would be to care for his aged parents. The birth of a daughter, by contrast, was once called a “small happiness,” because daughters marry into the husbands’ families and care for his parents. Similarly, one father from Thailand told us that this causes fathers to pay less attention to nurturing and raising their daughters “because they will leave.”

Such traditions have lasted for centuries, but in the current information era, traditions seem to be giving way to “globalization” (Arnett, 2001). This is certainly true in Asian-born adult children, whose expectation is that they will have close relationships with both their male and female adult children. In cultures with low birth rates (Japan, China, Korea, etc.), fathers can devote equal time to sons and daughters. And while there are still differences between Asians’ and Americans’ thinking about gender, Asian fathers in the United States incorporate an egalitarian American view of parent-child relationships into their own childrearing.

Asian Fathers Change in the United States

Asian children understand their fathers’ expression of love through dedication to work, and they also recognize that it is valuable for fathers to spend time with their children. When asked if life in the United States enabled their fathers to change their parenting style, many children replied that the father could now spend more time with them. In addition, adult children indicated their fathers expressed emotions more through hugs, play, and family activities after immigrating. Fathers noticed the change, too.

As one Chinese father explained, “I now express my feelings more openly. I am not as serious. I communicate more, am more reasonable, not as strict, and I spend more time with my children than before.”

Many fathers reported that they had changed as fathers, and as they became increasingly familiar with American culture, they were able to make comparative analyses between their native cultures and American culture. Many believed their fathering practices would combine the best of both worlds—a style that both satisfied them and provided opportunities for their children within an American lifestyle. The most common change reported by fathers after living for several years in the United States was that they saw themselves as
becoming more affectionate toward their sons and daughters. They also believed that in American culture they were able to spend more time with their children.

A Vietnamese father summarized his changes this way: “I express my feelings and communicate more. I am more reasonable, not as strict or serious. I also spend more time with my kids.”

Although some aspects of fathering changed as Asian fathers adapted to life in the United States, others aspects remained the same. Men proclaimed their dedication to their children’s education, their feelings of love, and their work ethic, reflecting their lifelong values. By combining strengths from American-style fathering with other strengths from their native cultures, many fathers thought they had become more complete as fathers and as men.

Asian Views of American Fathers

There has been much research on the crisis of single parent homes and discussion that American families suffer because one or both parents are frequently absent (Lamb, 1990). Children’s daycare has become common in the United States where single-parent and two-parent families work outside the home (Lamb et al., 1992). Yet almost all the Asian fathers interviewed thought that American fathers did a good job of maintaining a presence in the home and spending time with their children.

Therefore, Asian-born fathers viewed American fathers as being quite involved. This may be because relative to American standards, Asian fathers spend less time at home or with their children than do the Americans. For example, one survey showed that the typical Japanese father spent only half the time with his children as does the typical American father (Ishii-Kuntz, 1994). This might contribute to the image among Asian fathers that American fathers are child-centered. American fathers were seen by our interviewees as supportive, family-oriented, and close to their wives and children, while in most cases providing for the family as breadwinners. This outsider’s view of American fathers made us reconsider what is “American” about fathers in the U.S., in that we had previously not thought about the closeness between American fathers and their children.

From the perspective of Asian-born fathers, American fathers also excel at balancing work and family time. One Japanese father told us that “American fathers have more time to talk to their children.” This amount of time is valuable in the relationship fathers and their children build together because quantity of time is a prerequisite for quality time. This family time provides the setting in which American fathers can be affectionate, close, available, and aware of their children.

One Korean son described the American father-child relationship in this way: “American fathers are closer to their children, more like friends than family.” Another child, a Chinese daughter, called American fathers “close and warm” in their relationships with their children. Korean, Chinese, and Japanese participants all depicted American fathers as being more affectionate toward their children in hugs, physical closeness, and in their words, as compared
American children are also encouraged to work as teenagers to pay for their own cars, brand-name clothing, and other luxury items. After high school, children are expected to live independently and to pay for their own college education. One Indian son described American independence this way: "Parents give more freedom here in the U.S.A. and American kids work at a younger age, but parents in India pay for us to get an undergraduate degree."

One serious concern with American fathering that several Asian fathers mentioned was about respect. One Japanese father observed, "American fathers receive less respect than Asian fathers." Similarly, a Korean father said, "In Korea, children are much more respectful of their fathers." Many of the Asian fathers and children we talked to also said that American fathers are treated like children's "friends" rather than with the respect they deserve. Several of the Asian-born fathers told us that they were trying to find a balance between being respected as a father (as in Asian families), and having a close, warm relationship with their children (as in American families). Some fathers stated that they tried to balance respect and closeness by purposefully spending more time with their children, yet trying to be more of a respected teacher than a companion. Other Asian men we talked with, however, still felt that the best way to be respected and have an important relationship with children was to strive for success at work.

Learning from Asian Fathers

Every father (and mother) at times may feel lost or confused about how to be a good parent. As Dr. Benjamin Spock (1994) taught parents, every parent should learn to trust his or her own judgment. Along these lines...
we believe that we can learn more about fathering from fathers than from anyone else. It is particularly useful, we think, to look to fathers from other cultures in order to understand more about American fathering. Men from other cultures, such as those in our survey, can look at American fathers from both inside and outside of our culture. Fathering is a universal role, and it would benefit any father to learn to share skills and practices with fathers from various cultures.

Many Asian-born fathers living in the U.S. come to appreciate a balance between having a relationship with their children and making money. In our interviews, most expressed admiration for American fathers, and some of them idealized American fathers because fathers in Asia typically have an image of being relatively detached from family life. Several told us that they now try to spend more time with their children after work, attempting to make family life a greater priority. Nevertheless, and as we expected, our interviews also showed that men were bound by strong values and morals from their native cultures. These values and morals continue to set traditional expectations for fathers.

American culture has seen the deterioration of the family unit, and a large number of American fathers no longer take responsibility for their families or children (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). It seemed ironic that some of the qualities Asian men attribute to American fathers and families actually may be on the decline in American society: family unity and family time. In every culture fathers face common daily challenges and stresses. However, one PRC father told us that “every father in this world wants the same things for his children: success and happiness.” But does every father want the same success and happiness for his children? Perhaps success and happiness mean something different, depending on one’s culture, and this could lead to difficulty when comparing cultures. Our interviews with Asian fathers opened our eyes to the fact that we must learn more about other cultures, and by doing so, we can learn more about ourselves.

The interviews showed us that willing fathers in all cultures raise and care for their children in the manner dictated by their culture and personal beliefs. We do not claim that American fathers are worse or better than fathers in other cultures—rather, they are different. For instance, there are those who urge fathers to spend “more” time with their children, yet in some cultures the amount of time is not assumed to equate with closeness (Shwalb et al., 2004). As Asian and American cultures increasingly come together in the 21st century, both through immigration and the globalization of the world media and economy, fathers from both sides of the Pacific will have the opportunity to learn from one another. If we are open to learning from people from other lands, this cross-cultural learning will benefit us as parents and it will benefit our children.

References
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