COMING TO
AMERICA
Asian Fathers Cross Cultures

By David Shwalb, Robert Bubb, Amber Daveline, Catherine Humpherys, Kristin Evans, Melissa Erickson, Aliah Hall, Tamera Hunter, Paula Kilgore, Nathaniel Lemon, Russell MacKay, Rebecca Mathews, Joe Ostenson, Brett A. Wilkey

This article was prepared by the undergraduate students of Professor David Shwalb during the Winter 2003 semester at Brigham Young University. The research for this article was funded and supported by the BYU Department of Psychology. Professor Shwalb taught for the Psychology and Marriage, Family and Human Development departments at BYU from 2001-2003, and is now on the faculty at Southeastern Louisiana University. He can be contacted at dstwalb@selu.edu.
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
shared an identical view that fathering is moral in nature. One Chinese father summed up the view when he explained that "a good father equals a good person."

Most Asian fathers take their fathering roles and its responsibilities seriously, but show they are good men in a variety of ways. The majority of fathers saw the moral dimension of fathering in two similar perspectives. First, morality is connected with sacrifice, giving up something of their own for the sake of their child or children. Others related morality to duty, equating moral responsibility with financial responsibility to their offspring. Additionally, as good fathers they stressed the importance of teaching moral principles and values to their children.

The obligations of duty and sacrifice to their children last well beyond childhood and adolescence for most Asian fathers. They revealed a strong obligation to provide for their children's education and welfare, even as the children grew into adulthood. Typical of the men we interviewed, one Taiwanese father said it is his duty to support his family and "pay for all my children’s tuition." Indeed, Asian fathers will sacrifice almost anything to finance their children's education and transition to adult life. A Vietnamese son told us, "Fathers in Vietnam pay for everything for their child so the child can concentrate on education. Children also stay in the family home longer than American children, usually until they get married."

Participants from various cultures explained to us the same basic method which was used to instill morals in their children: fathers set an example in their own lives through self-discipline. This, in the words of one father, is "the right way." In most of the Asian cultures we studied, parents were, by tradition, the children's moral teachers, and childrearing was mainly the job of the mother. On the other hand, most men demonstrated good character to their children through their hard work outside the home. One Japanese father told us that whenever he traveled away from home, his wife reminded their children to respect him for his authority and sacrifice. In this way, the wife ensured that the father had a strong presence at home even when he was absent.

Many of the Asian fathers acknowledged that their jobs had taken priority over their time at home when they were living in Asia. This has often been observed by scholars who study Asian fathers (see Shwalb, Nakazawa, Yamamoto, & Hyun, 2004, for a review of scholarly research on East Asian fathers). Asian fathers stated almost unanimously that their main purpose in life was to provide for the family's needs while their wives raised the children. Before coming to America, many fathers had formal and distant relationships with their children because they were so focused on work. For example, one father, a 50-year-old scientist, said that "In Korea I never saw my kids except on the weekends." A 55-year-old Japanese businessman from Hiroshima told a story of how he lived for several years in another city, because his company transferred him away.
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...
to fathers from their own countries.

The perception of family-centeredness was not limited to father-child relations, but also extended to Asian fathers' perceptions of the American husband-wife relationships. For instance, one Vietnamese son observed that "American husbands show a lot of respect for their wives" and share in family responsibilities such as chores and managing finances. According to our Asian interviewees, one way American families "stay close" is by sharing family activities and responsibilities, even though fathers are often away from home.

This result may surprise some American wives, who might wish that their husbands would help more around the house. However, from the view of someone raised in a society where help around the house is considered unthinkable for men, fathers may be impressed with the domestic contributions of American men, even if all they do is take out the trash.

Finally according to our interviews, American fathers, in contrast with Asian-born fathers, raise their children with the specific goals of independence and individuality. They emphasize these goals even when children are very young, by letting children make their own choices. Surprising to many Asian fathers and children, American children seem to be free to choose their own educational and career paths.

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
Reviews

References


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