

Traditional Chinese culture

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Introduction

Changes to New Zealand's immigration policy over the years, alongside worldwide political and economic changes, have led to an increasingly diverse flow of ethnic groups into New Zealand. Chinese immigration to New Zealand from countries such as the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia has been particularly on the rise. At the time of the 1996 Census, there were 81,309 Chinese people living in New Zealand, which constitutes 1.94% of the population. The majority of Chinese reside in Auckland (40,509). These migrants come for various reasons. Some come as business immigrants with investment links in New Zealand. Others come for a more peaceful lifestyle and to escape political conflict, alongside seeking better educational opportunities for their children.

Articles throughout this Special Issue, however, suggest that migration is a challenging and stressful experience. For example, there are the losses of a country, of a way of life, of family members and friends, of social status, of cultural and religious acceptance and belonging as well as adjusting to the stresses of resettling in a new country. Many migrants

arrive with high hopes but soon become disillusioned because of the dearth of economic opportunities and the difficulty in feeling a sense of belonging in the new country. This is heightened by a loss of identity, cultural familiarity and social status, which has contributed to higher levels of mental health problems amongst Chinese immigrants. Authors cited in other articles in this Special Issue, however, have expressed concern that Chinese immigrants, particularly students, are viewed incorrectly as having positive mental health on the misguided premise that they seldom seek psychological assistance.

This article is written for school counsellors and any teaching professionals who are involved in working with Chinese students. The focus of this article is to look more specifically at an understanding of Chinese culture in order to help bridge some of the cultural barriers. Although a complete understanding of Chinese culture is not possible, providing a brief overview of Chinese beliefs will hopefully assist teaching professionals to better understand the behaviour of their students and to establish culturally appropriate and supportive interventions. A more culturally

inclusive approach will naturally help Chinese students to integrate better into New Zealand culture without losing their own individual and cultural identity in the process.

What is culture?

Culture can be defined as the body of shared attitudes, values and habits that are conveyed by a society to its members (Kluckhohn, 1962). Culture serves many functions – it guides behaviour, provides explanations for behaviour, and assists society’s members in coping with life and change. Understanding Chinese people is not an easy task as it involves knowing about Chinese history, and comprehending the old Chinese language, which is difficult. However, it is important to emphasise that there is no single, unique Chinese culture. So-called “Chinese culture” varies according to geographical locations and is practised differently amongst different social classes. The lower social class population appears to be more “traditional” in its approach (Yang, 1986). When we discuss “traditional” Chinese culture we mean the “old” values and belief system developed before the 18th century, when immigration was not prevalent and China was relatively immune to outside influence. Chinese values began to be influenced by Western culture from the 19th century. Ho (1996) states that towards the 20th century, Christianity had modified some of the Confucian beliefs.

Traditional Chinese philosophy

Although the majority of the Chinese traditional values are rooted in Confucianism, the original Confucianism has undergone great changes during the past 2,000 years. “Neo-Confucianism” is an outgrowth of Confucianism as a result of Chinese people being affected by other schools of thought. Of these, the most influential are Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and the Yin Yang schools. Most books tend to put the first three schools as the most influential philosophies to Chinese people, while Yin Yang beliefs are placed in a subsidiary role. Currently, it is difficult to retrace which philosophy is the primary contributor to Chinese tradition. However, it is clear that for most Chinese people, their values and beliefs are chosen from at least one or a combination of these thoughts. It will be helpful for the reader to give a brief overview of these four schools.

1 **Confucianism:** This is the predominant Chinese philosophy, which originated in China. It is more of a philosophical belief than a religion. Confucianism is based on the belief that the way to live a better life is to live your life in accordance with five principle virtues: kindness, sobriety, righteousness, wisdom and trustworthiness. Woven into these virtues is the guiding principle of showing loyalty and courtesy to other people at all times. There are, nevertheless, prescribed rules for role performance,

based on a hierarchy of age and gender. A vertical hierarchy of social ranks is well maintained and authorities are respected. This extends to the family and family values. Children are taught to respect their parents and elders and to be obedient. A good family is based on filial piety. Ho (1996) states that for centuries filial piety has served as a guiding principle, governing general patterns of Chinese socialisation, as well as specific rules of intergenerational conduct. These are applicable throughout the length of one's life span. Integrated within this guiding principle is the honouring of a family's ancestors, who are worshipped at altars in the family home and in temples.

Education is also deemed a powerful value in Confucianism. A well-educated person will be respected for his or her moral superiority. In turn the individual is expected to establish in his or her own character and the character of others the qualities of conscientiousness, forgiveness and altruism – qualities which help to create harmony between the individual and society.

2 **Taoism:** While Confucianism emphasises social order and living an active life, Taoism concentrates on the individual life and tranquillity. It involves living in harmony with the underlying spiritual force of the universe, in order to liberate one's own soul. Tao is based

on a system of moral truth promoting tolerance toward others, obeying elders, and living a simple and tranquil life through a process of respecting, following and non-interference with nature. Unpredictability in life is considered a fact, so any sudden changes need to be accepted. As a guide to following these principles Taoism has developed five life rules. These rules forbid telling lies, stealing, committing adultery, drinking alcohol and murder.

3 **Buddhism:** This is both a religion and a philosophical way of life. Buddhism developed from the idea that people were never satisfied with what they had and always wanted more, so new ways of thinking and behaving needed to be integrated into daily life. Buddhism considers that the cause of human suffering is greed but that there is an end to suffering if one is to follow the middle way. The middle way is about finding a harmonious balance between decadence and poverty. As a guide to this middle way there are eight steps to follow. These are:

- Understanding the Buddha's teachings
- Having a positive attitude toward life
- Speaking well and not telling lies
- Helping others
- Doing the right sort of work
- Putting effort into doing good things
- Having mindfulness before you think or act and meditating as a way of developing a calm and content mind.

4 *The Yin and Yang Philosophy*: Although the Yin and Yang philosophy has become influential in Chinese culture, it is seldom described as an individual philosophy, but is known more for its influence on the above three schools. It espouses that all things and events in nature are the products of two elements, forces or principles. Yin is the negative force, passive, weak and destructive, while Yang is the positive force, which is strong and constructive. The principle and law of operation is both dynamic and static, emphasising the balance of forces. When applied to human behaviour, it suggests moderation of behaviour, stressing the internal harmony of life, while acknowledging that there are ups and downs in life. When applied to sickness, most illnesses are attributed to the imbalance between the forces of Yin and Yang.

from traditional beliefs. This model was developed by Ho (1996). He emphasised (p.155) that filial piety makes stringent demands. These demands are to:

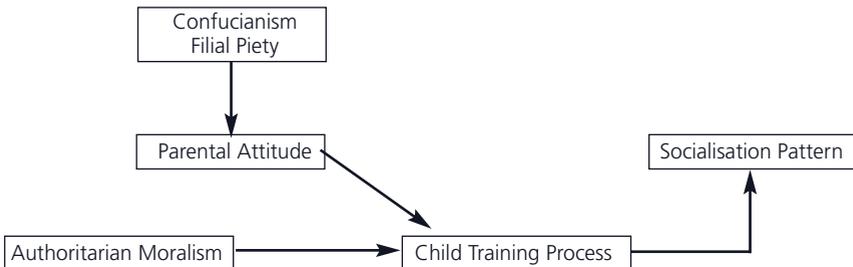
- Provide for the material and mental well-being of one’s aged parents
- Perform ceremonial duties of ancestral worship
- Take care to preserve one’s body
- Ensure continuity of the family line
- Conduct oneself so as to bring honour and avoid disgrace to the family.

These demands determine the parents’ moral attitude and become part of their socialisation pattern. The demands also serve as moral rules which children are expected to follow into adulthood. These “inherited” socialisation patterns become a general standard expectation for Chinese behaviour.

Ho emphasises that Chinese parents hold the belief that one of the fundamental goals of education is to aid moral development and to ensure that a child’s conduct meets external moral criteria – one which is guided by filial piety. He believes that authoritarian moralism is

The diagram below is a model of the development of socialisation patterns

The traditional concept of bringing up children



the central characteristic of Chinese patterns of socialisation. Ho states that from the parents' viewpoint, Chinese students "are to be transformed into adults who exercise impulse control, behave properly, and fulfill their obligations – above all filial obligations" (1996, p.161). This is somewhat different from the Western education belief, which places importance on a child's internal needs, feelings and aspirations. Western teachers therefore need to be careful when teaching Chinese students, as too much emphasis on their psychological development may create conflicts and tension within the family. This also explains the difference in learning behaviour in the classroom between the Chinese students and their Western counterparts. Chinese parents tend to expect their children to be obedient and indebted to parents; not self-focused, impulsive, or self-expressive, but morally correct and psychologically sensitive.

Considerations for educational intervention

It is the writer's suggestion that for teachers and counsellors to be able to work effectively with Chinese students the following points must be taken into consideration:

- It is important that immigrant students should not automatically be

treated in the same way. An assessment of their cultural profile is critical.

- One's country of origin has a strong influence on cultural values.
- The degree of acculturation needs to be assessed alongside an assessment of resettlement issues.
- Understanding the family situation can shed light on the reasons for some students' behaviour.
- It is important to increase liaison between families and schools, possibly through a parent-school forum. Independence and individualism may not be applicable to all Chinese students. Therefore encouraging independence may create extra tension within the family.

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