

Assigned characteristics for Chinese children and youth: Myth or reality?

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Introduction

In 1994, an article entitled “Asian invasion” appeared in a suburban Auckland newspaper, sparking off intense public debate about migrants from Asia. Public reaction to the recent influx of Asian migrants into New Zealand, especially in the Auckland region, was negative and many undesirable characteristics were assigned to Asian people. Unfortunately, the Chinese community was particularly strongly affected by this airing of views.

While some of the characteristics publicly assigned to Chinese students are genuine, others are mythical. Truth or myth, the effect has often been a stereotyping of the Chinese student and the Chinese family. Stereotypical attitudes filter into the school system, which can affect teachers’ and counsellors’ perceptions of Chinese students.

This article discusses some of the commonly held views about the characteristics, academic performance and parental expectations of Chinese adolescents, which can result in stereotyping students as belonging to the same homogeneous group.

The effects, which may occur if educators and school counsellors subscribe

to these beliefs, either by encouraging compliance with the stereotypes or by encouraging rebellion against them, are discussed. Finally, recommendations are made on how to approach problems that may arise for those working with Chinese students.

There are no eternal truths or myths

There is a Chinese proverb which says, “The wind blowing in a cavernous space must take origin from somewhere”. The meaning behind this proverb is that there is likely to be some truth in any myth. Therefore, one cannot assume that an assigned characteristic is *in truth* a characteristic of any group, and in a similar way one cannot dismiss an assigned characteristic of any group as *myth*, without observing individuals closely. Personal assessment is more important than consideration of group traits (Wong & Au, 1995). Over-generalising and unquestioning subscription to a particular view stereotypes both the individual and the group. Accepting stereotyped qualities as natural characteristics can lead to problems being missed completely or not recognised in time for constructive and supportive

action to be implemented. Dismissing beliefs as myth has a similar effect (Wong, 2000).

Several reasons support the above statement.

- There is no single Chinese culture or, for that matter, Asian culture; therefore traits differ (Wong & Au, 1995).
- Chinese culture is in flux. Especially where there is exposure to other cultures such as in New Zealand, Australia and the United States, dynamic changes are occurring (Lin, Tseng & Yeh, 1995).
- There is individual variation, due to differing degrees of acculturation (Sue & Sue, 1990).
- At an individual or micro level, the degree of acculturation varies in different areas of that person's life.

Common beliefs about Chinese children

Common beliefs about Chinese children are discussed under the following headings: Social background, Individual characteristics, Academic performance and Parents.

Social background

It is commonly assumed that all Chinese students are from wealthy families and are pampered by their parents. Another belief is that Chinese students gang up with each other and fail to mix with others, for reasons of language and culture (Wong, 2000). Some students are

believed to belong to triads, posing a threat to the school or, alternatively, are believed to be bullied by triad members, becoming victims of such gangs. An unquestioning acceptance of these beliefs can impact in two significant ways:

- 1 Chinese students become isolated and subject to ridicule.
- 2 An artificial divide is set up amongst Chinese students, which marginalises New Zealand-born students and those who identify with New Zealand culture.

If teachers and counsellors accept these beliefs, a consequence may be a failure to encourage integration. If they encourage students to challenge these views, they may be creating a source of pressure for the student. The optimal action would be based on an individual needs assessment, along with the necessary support and help to adjust.

Individual characteristics

Chinese students are believed to lack individual character or identity, and to be unable to think for themselves. A commonly held view is that they live according to parental or collective expectations, are dependent on their parents, and are compliant towards them. Consequently a Chinese adolescent is thought to never grow up. They have no hobbies except studying, and are often considered to be diligent, hard-working "nerds". As individuals they are

seen as loners, who dislike group activities or games, and are inept in social situations. Characteristically, Chinese students are believed to be quiet, to keep their feelings pent up, and to be unable to share their emotional problems with others. It is assumed that they are shy and unable to date, and that their marriages will be arranged for them.

There is some truth in these beliefs, but great variation will be found amongst families as the cultural environment changes. Acceptance of these beliefs may lead to stigma and curtailment of social options. If counsellors accept such beliefs, they may fail to help individuals adjust to local needs. If they routinely encourage students to conform to New Zealand norms, they may fail to take heed of the individual, internal culture of the student. Ignoring the content of these beliefs with comments such as, "You'll be right," may result in a failure to address genuine problems.

Academic performance

A further commonly held view is that all Chinese students are achievers and are academically orientated. Even extra-curricular activities such as music are assessed on achievement rather than enjoyment. They study by rote memory, have no individual thoughts about a subject, and are weak in applying practical knowledge to real-life situations (Bond, 1996). All Chinese students are thought to excel in science and maths

but are poor in social subjects. They all respect authority, never question what is taught, and fail to communicate with their teachers for fear of being punished or accused of disrespect.

There is some truth here. However, these matters are changing, and they vary between individuals. Again, there are dangers for teachers in accepting these beliefs without question. Such an acceptance may mean failure to help students adjust to New Zealand requirements, while ignoring these realities could mean overlooking genuine problems, such as failing to address parental and individual concern about achievement.

An optimal approach would take heed of students as individuals with individual needs. In particular, teachers should neither be too casual, with the potential to destroy respect, nor overly authoritarian, which may increase fear in students.

Parents

Popular belief has it that Chinese parents have unreasonably high expectations of their children, are over-anxious about academic performance, and give priority to academic achievement (Bond, 1996). Chinese parents are thought to put failure to perform down to laziness rather than lack of ability (see Appendix). Chinese parents are authoritarian, preferring criticism to praise for fear of over-pampering their children, and are overly controlling for fear that their children might get into the wrong crowds. They

use punishment and discipline rather than reward systems. Chinese parents believe in keeping problems within the family, for fear of family shame (Bond, 1996). For reasons like these, there is less communication between parents and teachers than desirable. For many Chinese parents, contact with teachers equates with problems. It is commonly believed that Chinese parents have fears around the acculturation of their children, including the fear that westernisation will drive their children away from them. Any action that a school takes to aid the adjustment of children to New Zealand life can be seen as a threat to the family.

A common view is that Chinese parents interact minimally with their children, leaving them instead to their own devices or in the care of servants and grandparents, while the parents go about the business of earning money. It is also commonly believed that in the hierarchical family system, the mother is the passive partner in a marriage and the father is the dominant, patriarchal figure.

There is generally some truth in these beliefs, but one cannot say simply that the Chinese family is patriarchal, given the individual variation amongst Chinese families. The term “patriarchy” is better applied to Chinese society rather than family where the mother is often the master.

Teachers and counsellors can be at risk

of either failing to help students with the process of adjustment or overlooking genuine family transitional and adaptation issues, because the situation appears to be stereotypical of Chinese students and their families. A significant error can be made in unduly pressuring Chinese students to conform to New Zealand cultural patterns in matters of adolescent independence. This may well be seen as driving children away from their family, even as “abduction”.

An optimal response would seek compromise, and an attempt to rebalance issues of cultural polarisation between parents and adolescents. Cultural mediation may have a role here.

General comments on the above beliefs

1. Unquestioning acceptance of these matters as cultural norms is likely to mean ignoring the difficulties individual students have in coping with two environments and two sets of demands, as well as glossing over the unique strengths and needs of each student.
2. Encouraging students to reject traditional beliefs in favour of accepting New Zealand ways is likely to result in stigmatising and putting pressure on individuals while alienating their families.
3. Ignoring these matters by regarding them as myths to be dispelled means

ignoring or failing to address real problems.

Guidelines for an optimal approach

1. Assess individuals in the light of the above and examine how much these are true individually.
2. Be open to recognising both differences and similarities between Chinese students and New Zealand students.
3. Explore problems in the light of the student's individual needs, characteristics and beliefs. Assess the external environmental demands, both the family's own culture and New Zealand society's demands, to see if these are in conflict.
4. Help students to adjust and bridge any gaps through balancing individual choices with family integrity. Avoid encouraging adolescents to fight against their family's culture or the New Zealand culture, or to accept both these without question.

References

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Appendix

The Ten Commandments to Chinese children from their parents: a humorous way of looking at expectations (from the *Newsletter of the Auckland Chinese Medical Association*, 1997).

How to be a perfect Chinese kid

1. Score 480 in University Bursary.
2. Play the piano and violin to concert performer standard.
3. Apply to 27 universities and be accepted by 27 universities.
4. Have three hobbies: studying, studying harder and studying very hard indeed.
5. Go to a top Ivy League university and win enough scholarships to pay for it.
6. Love classical music.
7. Detest talking on the telephone.
8. Aspire to be a brain surgeon.
9. Marry a Chinese doctor and have perfect, successful children, who also go to medical school.
10. Love to hear stories about your parents' childhood, especially the one about walking seven miles to school without shoes.

To Chinese parents from their children: a humorous way of looking at expectations

How to be a perfect Chinese parent

1. Be a little more lenient on the 7pm curfew.
2. Don't ask where the other point went when your child scores 99%.
3. Don't "ai-yoh" loudly at your kid's habits.
4. Don't blatantly hint about the merits of Ivy League universities.
5. Don't reveal all the intimate details of your kid's life to the entire Chinese community.
6. Don't ask your child "what are you going to do with your life?" if they major in a non-science field.
7. Don't give your son a bowl haircut or your daughter two acres of bangs.
8. Don't try to set your kid up on a date in anticipation of their poor taste or inept social skills.
9. Incorporate phrases other than "done your study yet?" into daily conversation with your children.
10. Don't give dirty looks when you find your child's friend has a boy or girl friend already.