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6-2019

## Cultural-Developmental Perspective: Chinese Immigrant Students' Academic Achievement Motivation as an Illustrative Example

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### Recommended Citation

Chen, J. J. (2019). Cultural-Developmental Perspective: Chinese Immigrant Students' Academic Achievement Motivation as an Illustrative Example. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1153>

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## Cultural-Developmental Perspective: Chinese Immigrant Students' Academic Achievement Motivation as an Illustrative Example

### Abstract

In this article, I present research evidence corroborating that students of Chinese descent are a high-achieving clique compared to other ethnic and cultural groups. A prominent explanation invokes cultural values highly emphasized in Chinese societies, especially those focusing on filial piety and educational achievement. However, for Chinese immigrant adolescents exposed to another cultural model and undergoing developmental changes, the motivation mechanisms underlying their academic achievement are more complex. I posit that this complexity can be understood and unraveled by contextual theories of acculturation and human development. Moreover, expanding on the cultural-developmental perspective as advocated by others, I explicate specifically how acculturative and developmental processes are intertwined to guide the individual's internalization of cultural imperatives. To illustrate this framework, I draw insights from interviewing three Chinese immigrant adolescents in the United States. The theoretical and empirical underpinnings discussed in this paper aim to contribute knowledge to the literature by demonstrating the role of acculturation and development in Chinese immigrant students' psychological processing of parental message concerning academic success which, in turn, contributes to their academic achievement motivation.

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## Introduction

As academic achievement is highly valued in Chinese culture, students of Chinese ancestry, as a whole, have been reportedly outperforming those from other ethnic and cultural groups in the academic arena. However, for Chinese immigrant adolescents exposed to a different cultural model and undergoing developmental changes, their academic achievement motivation is potentially compounded by both acculturative and developmental processes. To situate this phenomenon in context, I review theoretical and empirical evidence especially in the areas of acculturation (Berry, 2005; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006), human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and the interplay between acculturation and development (Sam & Oppedal, 2003; Schachner, van de Vijver, & Noack, 2017).

Furthermore, expanding on the cultural-developmental perspective (e.g., Sam & Oppedal, 2003; Schachner et al., 2017; Super & Harkness, 1986, 1997), I emphasize that the immigrant students' internalization of cultural knowledge as transmitted by their parents is affected by their acculturative and developmental experiences. To illustrate this viewpoint, I draw preliminary insights from interviewing three Chinese immigrant adolescents in the United States. The focus on Chinese immigrant students is imperative, especially considering the prevalence of the Chinese immigrant population in the United States.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Asian population grew about 44% (from 10.2 million to 14.7 million) between 2000 and 2010, which was more than four times the growth rate of the total U.S. population (9.7%, from 281.4 million to 308.7 million), making Asians the fastest growing racial group in the United States (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). More specifically, within the Asian population in 2010, Chinese immigrants from China (including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan) were the largest, totaling 2.2 million (and representing approximately 19 percent of the foreign born from Asia and 5% of the entire foreign-born population; Grieco et al., 2012). These statistics suggest that there has been an increasingly large number of students of Chinese descent attending schools in the United States. These students conceivably face a host of challenges and changes, including adjusting to a new education system and learning a different culture and language (Chen, 2016). Meanwhile, many Chinese immigrant students are also motivated to attain academic success, which is highly valued in Chinese culture (Chen, 2007b). To understand academic achievement motivation among Chinese immigrant students in the United States, it is necessary to situate this phenomenon within the broader context of educational achievement among students of Chinese heritage.

Academic achievement is presumably a universal pursuit among students. Yet, students of Chinese heritage have demonstrated particularly greater academic prowess than those of other cultural groups. For example, in a series of cross-cultural longitudinal studies by Stevenson and his colleagues, researchers documented that Chinese students in Taiwan outperformed their American counterparts in mathematics, not only in elementary schools in 1980 (Stevenson, Lee, & Stigler, 1986), but also ten years later in secondary schools in 1990 (Stevenson, Chen, & Lee, 1993). Furthermore, large-scale internationally recognized studies—especially the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)—have consistently reported that students in Chinese societies academically surpass their counterparts in the United States. The most recent results from the TIMSS

conducted in 2015 have indicated that of all participating countries, five East Asian countries—Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan), and Japan—were among the highest achieving in mathematics for both fourth and eighth grades (see tables illustrating international performance comparisons at <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss2015/international-results/timss2015/wp-content/uploads/2016/T15-20-years-of-TIMSS.pdf>; Mullis, Martin, & Loveless, 2016). Similarly, significant results were documented by the PISA conducted in 2015, which revealed that Chinese societies (Taipei, Hong Kong, Macau, and mainland China) were among the top performers in science, mathematics, and reading; and scored higher, on average, than the United States (see a list of tables and figures illustrating international performance comparisons at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017048.pdf>; Kastberg, Chan, & Murray, 2016; OECD, 2016).

Furthermore, smaller-scale cross-cultural studies have produced evidence suggesting that, starting as early as kindergarten, Chinese children demonstrate much higher mathematics performance than their American counterparts (e.g., Geary, Bow-Thomas, Fan, & Siegler, 1993; Siegler & Mu, 2008). Additionally, comparative research focusing on ethnic groups within the United States has reported that, across grade levels, students of Chinese descent outperform their American counterparts on a host of indicators of academic success. Such indicators include results of assessments in mathematics, vocabulary, and reading administered during the early primary years of education (Huntsinger, Jose, Larson, Krieg, & Shaligram, 2000), reading and math test scores in eighth grade (Kao, 1995), and high college graduation rates and low dropout rates (Hsia, 1988). These various comparative studies have yielded evidence that substantiates the stellar educational performance among students of Chinese heritage.

From a cultural perspective, these comparative results suggest an important implication of the role of culture in academic achievement. Specifically, it seems that students of Chinese descent are more likely to excel academically than those from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Although Chinese culture is conceivably not the only culture that values educational success and thus produces high-achieving students, it is likely that some unique elements of Chinese culture contribute to Chinese students' motivation to excel academically.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### **The Cultural Perspective**

Culture is generally defined as a set of common values, beliefs, and ideas collectively shared by a community of people (e.g., Hofstede, 1991; Schein, 1992). Furthermore, it is viewed that individuals learn and acquire these culturally specific elements through socialization in the culture. In traditional Chinese culture—which is influenced by Confucianism—core virtues include interpersonal harmony and unity, which can be achieved by members fulfilling the functions of their respective roles (Chen, 2007a). For instance, because the parent-child relationship is hierarchically structured in Chinese culture, to achieve interpersonal harmony, parents are expected to care for their child in young age. In return, the child is expected to demonstrate filial piety by obeying and respecting his/her parents, in addition to caring for them in their old age (Chen, 2007a). The fundamental concept of filial piety has been shown to serve as a motivation

mechanism for Chinese children to attain the academic success so highly promoted in Chinese culture (e.g., Chow & Chu, 2007; Chua, 2002).

Because culture is learned through socialization, Chinese parents can serve as powerful conduits of cultural knowledge for their children. It is not surprising then, to find that Chinese families continue to maintain and transmit Chinese cultural imperatives to their children after immigrating to the United States (Chua, 2002; Louie, 2001). Chua (2002) reported that by abiding by culturally prescribed reciprocal roles between parents and children, Chinese immigrant parents consciously made sacrifices (e.g., working long hours, enduring vicissitudes in hopes of a better future for their children). In turn, their children were found to have internalized and reciprocated such sacrifices by studying diligently in an effort to succeed in school.

However, it is important to note that while sharing a unique cultural heritage—especially its valuation of academic success—students in Chinese societies and Chinese-immigrant students in the United States are characteristically different in other ways. Notably, as they are primarily enculturated with Chinese-typical cultural values, students in Chinese societies are likely to be culturally homogenous, whereas Chinese immigrants in the United States are more likely to be culturally heterogeneous. This heterogeneity in Chinese immigrants is due to the varying extents with which Chinese immigrants embrace Chinese-typical and American-typical cultural values (Chen, Chen, & Zheng, 2012; Chua, 2002; Louie, 2001). Why might this be so? We may conjecture that when children are socialized in a Chinese society, it is more natural for them to be enculturated with ideologies native to their culture. In contrast, it can be much more challenging for Chinese immigrant adolescents to internalize and uphold virtues that are typical of their native Chinese culture as they experience acculturative changes within a developmental context. From the developmental perspective, adolescence has been characterized as a critical yet complex process compounded by a multitude of developmental changes (Erikson, 1968). To understand Chinese immigrant adolescents' acculturation process and outcome, it is important that we situate it within a developmental framework.

### **The Developmental Perspective**

By definition, development is a process involving changes (e.g., psychosocial, physiological) that occur throughout one's lifetime (Sam & Oppedal, 2003). According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological theory, human development does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is nested within and affected by three primary contexts: the innermost microsystems (e.g., family, school), the mesosystem (which links two microsystems), and the outermost macrosystems (e.g., culture, society). Being the most immediate and direct agents of interaction for the individual, the innermost microsystems are considered to provide the most powerful influence on his or her development.

In theory, as part of this innermost microsystem, parents may exert the strongest influence on their child's development. In reality, however, the levels of parental influence actually vary between younger and older children due to their experience at different stages of development. By nature of being more reliant on their parents, younger children tend to be more susceptible to parental influences; whereas older children (especially those in the developmental period of adolescence) tend to seek psychological and physical independence from their parents (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, as children advance from one stage of development to the next, it is not

unusual that the contextual influence on their development varies across socioecological milieus (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The shifting influence is especially salient among adolescents undergoing dramatic psychosocial and physiological changes and making ecological transitions from one context to another. For instance, with increasing independence from their parents, parental influence is likely to decrease as contexts which present themselves outside of the home (e.g., school, community, culture, society) assume a more prominent role in the child's development. Similarly, with increasing exposure to the host culture during the process of acculturation, the influence of the immigrant child's native culture may also gradually diminish. However, to better understand the immigrant adolescent's development, it is imperative that we consider the relationship between culture and development.

### **The Cultural-Developmental Perspective**

The influence of culture on human development has been variously theorized in the developmental-psychological field. One notable theoretical framework is Super and Harkness's (1986, 1997) "developmental niche," which appropriately captures the idea that the individual's developmental outcomes are influenced by his/her own culture. Applying this perspective, the predominant cultural model is assumed to create for the individual a specific developmental niche for socialization.

Trommsdorff's (2009, 2012) "cultural model of agency" theory further postulates that there are two distinct cultural models of agency with contrasting value orientations which affect socialization conditions for human development in different cultures: independent (individually-oriented) and interdependent (socially-oriented). Specifically, the independent cultural model of agency suggests that human behavior is influenced by one's own needs and goals, while the interdependent cultural model of agency proposes that human behavior is guided by the needs and expectations of others. Inherent in this binary distinction is the assumption that there exists a preferred cultural model of agency shared by members of a particular culture, and that the particular cultural emphasis on individual needs or collective goals does create respective socialization conditions, which in turn guide one's development of culturally appropriate behavior (Trommsdorff, 2012).

Applying Trommsdorff's criteria for distinguishing the two cultural models of agency, we may consider Chinese culture as operating under a predominantly interdependent cultural model. In particular, unique to Chinese culture are Confucian-inspired virtues notably conformation to collective goals, familial expectations, and filial piety (Chen, 2007a). It is, thus, not surprising that the development of academic achievement motivation for Chinese students is viewed as orchestrating around morals that are acceptable to the collective whole (e.g., adjusting one's academic behavior to fit the achievement ideals of the parents and the larger Chinese society).

In fact, intra- and cross-cultural studies (e.g., Chow & Chu, 2007; Hui, Sun, Chow, & Chu, 2011; Huntsinger et al., 2000; Schneider & Lee, 1990) have confirmed that cultural factors have contributed to academic achievement motivation among students in Chinese societies. For instance, Chow and Chu (2007) found that academic achievement motivation among Hong Kong Chinese secondary students ( $N = 299$ ) was related to the Chinese cultural imperative of filial piety. However, unlike their peers in Chinese societies, Chinese immigrant students' academic

achievement motivation may be influenced by their acculturative experience. Furthermore, the process of acculturation is likely to create for these immigrant students a new developmental niche for socialization, especially as they shift psychologically from one cultural model of agency to another or integrate both models of agency.

### **The Relationship between Acculturation and Human Development**

For many families, in their efforts to adapt to new life demands and changes, the process of immigration and settling into a different country entails navigating and negotiating between a host of complex, multifaceted terrains. This complexity involves the inevitable process of acculturation, as a result of intercultural interaction with others in the new sociocultural milieu; and this process in turn, necessitates both cultural and psychological changes (Berry, 2003, 2005). Cultural changes include shifts in language and norms, while psychological changes entail shifts in the individual's attitudes about the new culture and/or his or her self-identity (Phinney, 2003).

While the process of acculturation involves cultural and psychological changes, it is also a developmental experience for immigrant students. Sam and Oppedal (2003) advocated that a developmental-contextual perspective is critical for understanding acculturation because qualitative differences in the acculturative process for immigrants are contextually embedded in a developmental nature. For instance, during the period of adolescence, adolescents are challenged with a multitude of developmental changes, especially in the psychosocial (e.g., identity formation, peer relationships) and physiological areas (e.g., puberty-related) (Erickson, 1968). This period is doubly complex and challenging for adolescents of immigrant backgrounds, whom are not only shouldered with developmental demands, but also the necessity to successfully navigate the process of acculturation (Schachner et al., 2017). Although serving as two separate processes, developmental and acculturative tasks can potentially overlap in areas such as identity formation and peer relationship. When accomplished, both of these tasks can promote successful psychosocial adaptation in the immigrant adolescent (Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chrysochoou, Sam, & Phinney, 2012). Yet, the accomplishment of both the acculturative and developmental tasks among immigrant students is not straightforward; it is influenced by individual and contextual conditions.

### **Individual Conditions**

It has been reported that individual factors, such as the age at arrival and the length of residence in the United States, play a developmental role in psychosocial adaptation during the acculturation process (García-Coll & Magnuson, 1997; Hirschman, 1994; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000). These individual factors are likely to affect the immigrant's level of exposure to the host society and identification with the dominant culture. For instance, Tsai et al. (2000) found that Chinese children who immigrated to the United States at a younger age (before the age of 12) and also resided in the United States longer, tended to be more susceptible to embracing an American identity than other Chinese immigrant children. According to these researchers, this susceptibility is plausible as these children may have been too young to have formed a Chinese identity prior to immigration.

## **Contextual Conditions**

As child development is affected by contextual influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it is imperative that we consider not only individual factors, but also contextual conditions (i.e., acculturation strategies, cultural identity) as playing a vital role in the immigrant student's acculturative and developmental experiences.

## ***Acculturation Strategies***

Berry's (2005) conceptual framework, as well as other research (e.g., Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005) suggest that the extent to which the acculturating individual identifies with one's culture of origin and/or the host culture is a multi-faceted and complex process of navigation and negotiation. Nonetheless, in navigating and negotiating between their heritage and host cultures, the acculturating individual is presented with the opportunity to solidify his or her cultural preference. During this solidification of preference, individuals may adopt one of the four distinct acculturation strategies characterized by Berry (2005): (1) assimilation (strong identification mostly with the host culture), integration (strong identification with both the native and host cultures), separation (strong identification mostly with the native culture), or marginalization (low identification with both the native and host cultures). In their study of more than 5000 immigrant youths across 13 countries, Berry et al. (2006) found that the largest number of these youth preferred an integration strategy (as evident in their developing positive ethnic and national identities, as well as using both their native and host languages). Of all four acculturation strategies, integration is viewed as the most optimal, as those who adopt this strategy are generally the most adaptive psychologically and socio-culturally (Berry, 2005). Furthermore, the essential characteristics of the integration strategy are also similar to those describing other acculturation-related developmental outcomes, especially bicultural identity.

## ***Bicultural Identity***

Bicultural identity involves the individual's ability to identify him/herself strongly with two cultures in such a way that he/she develops a new cultural repertoire while maintaining his/her ancestral cultural repertoire (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Buriel, 1993; Hutnick, 1986). Bicultural identity is characterized as demonstrating a strategy of "cultural frame switching" (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). That is, the bicultural individual has the ability to shift between two cultural systems and to appropriate one's behavior to suit the demands of a particular social realm or cultural cue. Research evidence has demonstrated some of the positive psychological and sociocultural benefits of a bicultural identity, including facilitating one's academic success and intercultural competence (e.g., Buriel, Perez, DeMent, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). For instance, it has been reported that biculturalism is positively related to intercultural sensitivity and cognitive flexibility, including one's ability to be sensitive, flexible, and adaptable to differences among cultures (Christmas & Barker, 2014).

Despite the apparent benefits associated with adopting the integration strategy and relatedly a bicultural identity, not all immigrant students seek or are able to achieve such an acculturative outcome due to various individual and contextual conditions. For instance, Chen (2016) found that



despite Chinese immigrant adolescents' desire to adopt a bicultural identity, their efforts to excel academically and socially (e.g., establishing friendships with peers from the host society) were thwarted by their lack of English proficiency.

### The Internalization Process of Parental Messages

For immigrant students, academic achievement is a key indicator of a successful acculturation outcome, as it helps facilitate their effective integration into the dominant society (Vedder & Horenczyk, 2006). For Chinese immigrant students subscribing to values specific to Chinese culture, more than as an acculturation outcome, academic achievement is a culturally desirable outcome and a key demonstration of filial piety to their parents (Chen, 2007b, 2016). However, it is only to the extent that these students are able to internalize the Chinese cultural imperative concerning academic achievement as transmitted by their parents, will culture play a prominent role in their academic achievement motivation. This perspective regards the developing individual as an active agent with the capacity to make meaning of one's experience vis-à-vis the cultural system in which one is socialized (Leung & Cohen, 2011).

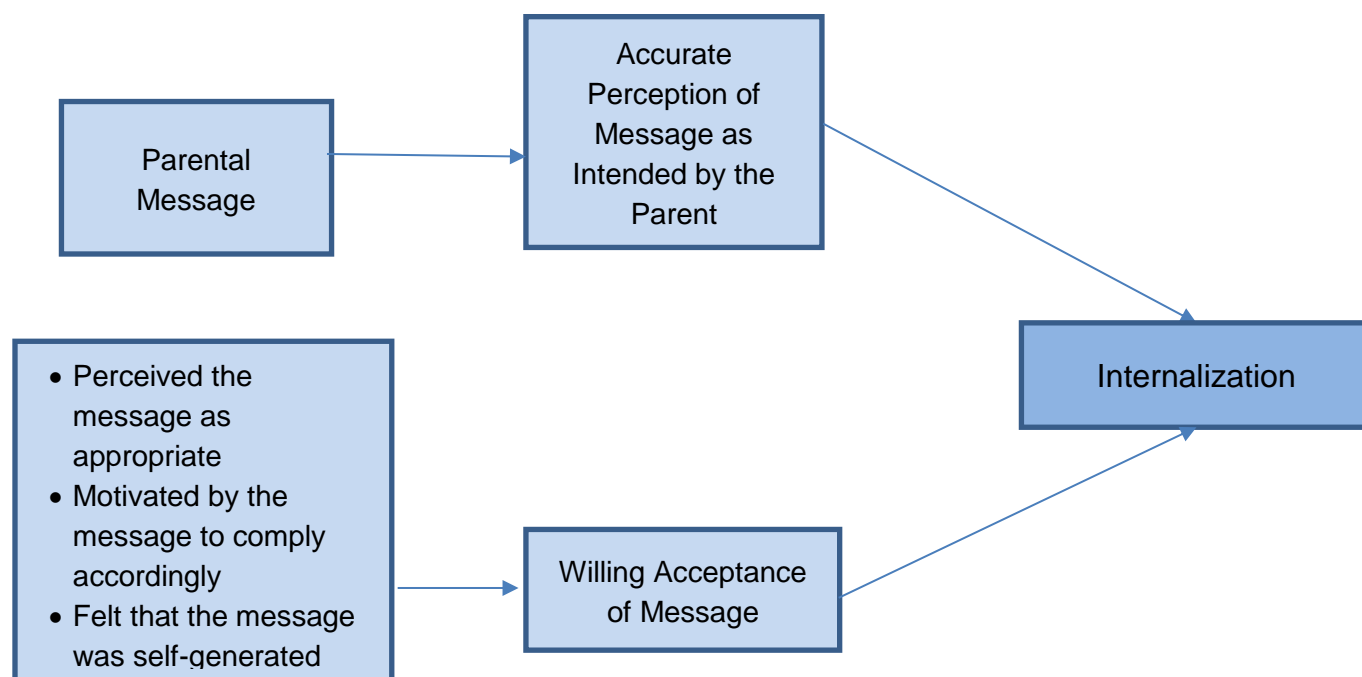


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the internalization process (adapted from Grusec & Goodnow, 1994).

Furthermore, from a cultural-psychological perspective, human development is anchored in a culturally meaningful context, which creates specific conditions for socialization of cultural norms (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008; Super & Harkness, 1986, 1997). In turn, the individual engages in self-regulatory processes by means of internalizing their immediate social world (Valsiner, 2007). During socialization, the individual is an active interpreter rather than a passive replicator of cultural knowledge (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). As illustrated in Figure 1, Grusec and Goodnow's (1994) theoretical framework for the internalization process of parental messages highlights the active mental activities of the individual.

Grusec and Goodnow (1994) posited that the internalization process is a two-pronged formulation involving first perception, and second acceptance. First, the child must *perceive* the parental message accurately as intended. Second, the child must then be able to *accept* the message by allowing it to guide his or her behavior. Furthermore, Grusec and Goodnow asserted that acceptance would entail a three-step process. First, the child must perceive the intended parental message as appropriate. Next, the child must be motivated to translate that message into action. Finally, the child must feel that the message was autonomously generated. For example, if the child was successful at internalizing a culturally derived parental message, he or she would adopt behavioral norms that align with related cultural expectations (Tomasello, 1999). However, if the child was unsuccessful at internalizing a parental message—either during the first step through inaccurate perception, or the second step through rejection—he or she would likely not behave according to culturally prescribed standards as conveyed by his or her parents.

Grusec and Goodnow's internalization process framework is also relevant to understanding Chinese immigrant students' internalization of the cultural imperative of academic achievement as transmitted via parental socialization. Guided by this perspective, I seek to address the following research question: *How might Chinese immigrant students' acculturative and developmental experiences affect their internalization of parental messages and, in turn, their academic achievement motivation?*

### **Three Single Case Studies as Illustrations**

To address my research question, I conducted audiotaped interviews (lasting approximately an hour each) individually with three Chinese immigrant adolescents (referred to as Jim, Dan, and Sue in the study). The interviews were conducted in the language of their preference (Jim and Sue in Cantonese Chinese and Dan in English). All three interviews were transcribed and then analyzed for individual (e.g., age at arrival, length of residence in the United States) and contextual factors (e.g., acculturation strategies, cultural identity) influencing these three students' psychological internalization of cultural knowledge.

#### **Participants**

Jim and Sue were both 14-years old, but attended different public middle schools. The oldest of the three, Dan, was a 19-year old senior attending a public high school. All three adolescents shared the commonality of immigrating from mainland China, coming from a working-class familial background, and residing with their intact family in a metropolitan area of a northeastern state

within the United States. Developmentally, both Jim and Sue were in the early stages of adolescence, while Dan was in the later stages of adolescence. Because adolescence is a period compounded by developmental changes—especially in the physiological and psychosocial areas (Erikson, 1968)—the three adolescents serve as fitting subjects which work to illustrate how development can interact with acculturation to inform individuals' psychological processing of parental messages concerning academic achievement. Table 1 presents a brief summary of the three Chinese immigrant students' individual characteristics and contextual factors.

Table 1.  
*Individual and Contextual Factors.*

	Jim (14-year old in 7 <sup>th</sup> grade)	Sue (14-year old in 8 <sup>th</sup> grade)	Dan (19-year old senior in high school)
<b>Individual Factors</b>			
Immigration Condition	Immigrated with his parents and younger sister	Immigrated with her mother, younger brother, and younger sister to reunite with her father already in the U.S.	Immigrated with his parents, as the only child
Age at Arrival in the U.S.	12	11	17
Length of Residence in the U.S.	2	3	2
<b>Contextual Factors</b>			
Acculturation Strategies	Desire for Integration	Desire for Integration	Separation
Cultural Identity	Desire for Bicultural	Desire for Bicultural	Chinese

### Acculturation Strategies and Cultural Identity

An important insight which can be gleaned from the interviews is that, being the oldest of the three, Dan seemed to have adopted the separation acculturation strategy, embracing most strongly Chinese culture and a Chinese cultural identity. Dan identified himself strongly as Chinese and was proud of his Chinese culture, especially its deeply-ingrained emphasis on reciprocity in the parent-child relationship. Conforming to the Chinese valuation of filial piety, Dan endeavored to be a “filial son...by respecting and obeying [his] parents.”

Unlike Dan, who seemed to have established a strong Chinese cultural identity, Jim and Sue desired to develop a bicultural identity and become bilingual so that they could communicate effectively with both Chinese and American individuals. Furthermore, they emphasized how a bicultural identity would benefit their psychosocial adjustment in the United States, such as enabling them to befriend American peers and behave appropriately according to mainstream norms. For instance, Jim was adamant that, “I expect myself to learn English well and try my best to assimilate into the American society.” Across the three students, language emerged as a dominant theme: While lamenting variously how their limited English proficiency had been a major obstacle with regard to their academic success and integration into American society, they endeavored to work hard to overcome these obstacles by mastering the English language. Dan, for example, viewed English mastery as an essential contributor to his success in school and later life, saying that it would enable him to “go to a good college and get a good job.”

### **Internalization of Parental Messages about Academic Success**

A salient finding is that, as promoted by Chinese culture, all three Chinese immigrant students were able to internalize their parents’ high expectations for academic success. For instance, as a result of his successful internalization, Dan endeavored to be a good student by “studying very hard and earning good grades...to make [his] parents proud.” Like Dan’s parents, Jim’s parents also instilled in him the Chinese cultural valuation of academic success and its relationship to future success. Specifically, Jim’s parents impressed on him that, “if you succeeded in school, you would be able to have an easier time finding a job in the future.” Internalizing his parents’ message successfully, Jim was highly motivated to “study hard and read more English books” to improve his English. He believed that his efforts had earned him either first or second place in academic performance rankings in his class. In addition to his academic success, Jim found it important to “be obedient to [his] parents to make them happy.” Furthermore, he reciprocated his parents’ sacrifices by helping out; such as “translating for them,” “teaching them English,” and “taking care of his young sister.”

Of all three students, Sue was the least able to translate into practice her parents’ message valuing academic success. Her parents did impart on her the idea that if she succeeded in school, she would be able to obtain a better job than working in a restaurant like them. However, Sue did not think that school was important for her future success. Nonetheless, Sue’s parents would always encourage her to “finish her homework before playing” and “read more books” to learn. Unfortunately, Sue “was not interested in studying.” Consequently, she put little effort into her academic work and ended up not “earning good enough grades” for her teachers to transfer her from the bilingual program to a regular program at her school. Upon reflection, Sue decided to study harder to do better in school and meet her parents’ expectations. She also began to internalize the instrumentality of academic success just as her parents had consistently advised her: “In the United States, if you do not do well in school, you will not be able to find a good job.” Moreover, upon further reflection on her past poor academic performance as attributable to her lack of effort, Sue began to develop the motivation to attain academic success, as evidenced by her remark that, “if you study hard, you can succeed in everything. It is a matter of effort.”

## **Discussion**

As an illustration of the role of acculturation and human development in psychological internalization, I draw insights from the meaning making of academic achievement motivation among three Chinese immigrant adolescents in the United States. Although all three were able to incorporate parental messages concerning academic achievement into their own value systems, there were individual differences between Dan and the other two students with regard to acculturation strategies and cultural identity formation. While both Jim and Sue desired to adopt the integration acculturation strategy and foster a bicultural identity, Dan seemed to have adopted the separation strategy, identifying mostly with Chinese culture and embracing a Chinese identity. Qualitative differences in contextual conditions (acculturation strategies and cultural identity) between Dan and the other two students may be attributed to individual factors, especially age at arrival.

### **Illustration of the Relationship between Acculturation and Human Development**

Both Sue and Jim immigrated to the United States at an earlier age than Dan (11, 12, and 17, respectively), and were also at a different stage of development than him, with the two of them experiencing the early stage of adolescence, and Dan the later stage of adolescence. As such, it seems that Dan had already formed a strong Chinese cultural identity prior to immigration, which may have led him to identify most dominantly with Chinese culture and thus embrace its values, such as filial piety. Whereas, immigrating to the United States at a younger age, Sue and Jim seemed to have been more open to adopting the integration strategy toward acculturation and a bicultural identity by incorporating unique ethos of both their native and host cultures into their own value systems. These results are in line with the previous findings that Chinese children who immigrated before the age of 12 may have been too young to cement a Chinese cultural identity prior to immigration (Tsai et al., 2000).

As all three Chinese immigrant students had been residing in the United States for a short period of time (two to three years), they were still learning English as their second language and adjusting to the new culture. Although both Jim and Sue desired to adopt a bicultural/bilingual identity, their limited English proficiency may have led them to become less able to do so at this time. This conjecture is consistent with the findings of previous research (Chen, 2016).

### **Illustration of the Cultural-Developmental Perspective**

Although he was the oldest adolescent of the three subjects, Dan's academic achievement motivation was guided by values specific to Chinese culture, rather than changes typical of the late stage of adolescence as expected from the developmental perspective. Psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1968) suggests that as children progress from the early to late stage of adolescent development, they tend to seek more psychological autonomy from their parents. This theory does not seem to apply to Dan. Although experiencing the late stage of adolescent development, Dan did not seem to seek psychological independence from his parents. Perhaps as a result of internalizing interpersonal harmony as a component of filial piety, Dan instead sought to maintain interdependence and closeness with them. Thus, the cultural-developmental perspective seems

more relevant to understanding his academic achievement motivation. Furthermore, this explanation suggests that Dan's beliefs and behaviors were conceivably guided by what Trommsdorff (2009, 2012) described as an interdependent cultural model of agency (that is dominant in Chinese culture). Clearly then, Dan's example provides evidence to support the power of culture in influencing human development and essentially of the cultural-developmental perspective.

### **Illustration of the Internalization Process Framework**

As articulated by the three adolescent students, all of their parents instilled in them the Chinese cultural valuation of educational success, and in turn, they were able to internalize parental messages successfully to various extents (Dan the most strongly and Sue the least strongly). Demonstrating the two-step internalization process as formulated by Grusec and Goodnow (1994), all three students first accurately perceived their culturally-derived parental message, then accepted it into their own value systems, and finally allowed it, in turn, to guide their academic behavior. Despite being socialized in a new developmental niche where they were exposed to a different set of cultural values, it seems that all three Chinese immigrant students were able to develop academic achievement motivation along with related academically-oriented strategies (e.g., studying hard, reading more English books to learn) as expected by their parents.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, against the backdrop of the prominence of the Chinese immigrant population in the United States and the phenomenon of Chinese student achievement, I attempted to explicate the complexity of three Chinese immigrant students' academic achievement motivation. The findings, as discussed earlier, make evident the dialectical interplay between acculturation and human development in these immigrant adolescents' varying psychological internalizations of parental messages concerning academic achievement. These findings may be regarded as a useful reminder that cultural attributions for any developmental outcomes are operative only to the extent that the individual is able to effectively internalize related imperatives.

However, it should be noted that while providing a useful glimpse into the role of acculturation and human development in academic achievement motivation, the three Chinese immigrant examples were founded only on interviews and were meant to serve merely as illustration. As such, interpretations of the findings should be considered cautiously. For one, the findings may not be viewed as representative of or generalizable to all Chinese immigrant students in the United States, especially those demonstrating different individual and contextual characteristics. Furthermore, while I invoked the cultural-developmental perspective in understanding the three Chinese immigrant students' academic achievement motivation, given the complexity of acculturative and developmental processes in affecting the psychological internalization of cultural imperatives, more rigorous empirical studies are needed to examine this phenomenon in greater depth. Methodologically, researchers may conduct in-depth interviews with a larger and more varied sample of immigrant students to capture more extensive knowledge concerning their meaning making of their own academic achievement motivation. Applying a mixed methods design (e.g., combining interviews with questionnaires) may also yield more

comprehensive insights. Moreover, studying a specific immigrant sample longitudinally can deepen our conceptual understanding of how academic achievement motivation may evolve and change over time.

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### Discussion Questions

1. Why should we study the Chinese immigrant population in the United States?
2. What research evidence demonstrates that students of Chinese heritage are a more educationally successful clique than those of other ethnic and cultural groups?

3. What cultural idiosyncrasies have been identified as underlying academic motivation among students of Chinese heritage? How?
4. Why is it important for us to study and understand a phenomenon from a cultural perspective? How should we do so?
5. Is human development culturally specific or universally situated? Why and how?
6. In what ways do culture and development interact to inform our understanding of human phenomena?
7. Why does the article describe human development among immigrant adolescents as “doubly complex and challenging”?
8. What is the interplay between acculturation and human development in academic motivation and achievement among immigrant students? How?
9. What does Grusec and Goodnow’s internalization process of parental message imply about culture, human development, and psychology? How?
10. How does the cultural-developmental perspective inform us about academic motivation and achievement among immigrant students?

### **Additional Reading**

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