

Socialization and Socioemotional Development in Chinese Children 1

One cannot herd with birds and beasts. If I am not to be among other men, then what am I to be?

— Confucius, *Analects*, xviii.vi

1 Introduction

Considerable individual differences in temperamental characteristics emerge among children in the early years (Kagan, 1998; Rothbart, 2011). In unfamiliar or challenging situations, for example, some children are relaxed and spontaneous, whereas others tend to be anxious and distressed, displaying vigilant and wary behaviors. Children also vary in their abilities to regulate or control their emotional and behavioral reactions according to circumstances and social demands: whereas some children can initiate, maintain, or inhibit particular actions to achieve certain goals, others have difficulties controlling their behaviors and, at the same time, exhibit negative emotions, such as frustration and anger, in response to barriers and requirements. These kinds of early characteristics may have a pervasive and enduring impact on the later development of social and cognitive functions (e.g., Rothbart, 2011). Indeed, temperamental reactivity, self-control, and other characteristics in infancy and toddlerhood are associated with adaptive as well as maladaptive developmental outcomes, including educational attainment, delinquency, and psychopathological symptoms, in the later years (Chen & Schmidt, 2015).

Despite their dispositional nature, socioemotional characteristics and behaviors develop in social and cultural contexts (Bornstein & Esposito, 2020; Bornstein & Lansford, 2019; Chen & French, 2008; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Social and cultural factors may be involved in development through facilitating or suppressing specific behaviors. Social norms and cultural values may also affect the meanings of behaviors and shape their developmental patterns and outcomes (Bornstein, 1995). The role of social and cultural contexts may be reflected in the influence of general socialization conditions, such as childrearing goals and practices, as well as adults' and peers' attitudes and responses toward children's behaviors in social interaction on developmental processes.

This Element focuses on socialization and socioemotional development in the Chinese context. The Element first briefly describes Chinese cultural background for child development, followed by a discussion of socialization cognitions and practices. Then, the Element discusses socioemotional characteristics in the early years, focusing on temperamental reactivity and self-control, mainly in terms of their cultural meanings and developmental significance. Next, the Element reviews research on children's and adolescents' social behaviors, including prosocial behavior, aggression, and shyness. Given the massive social changes that have been occurring since the early 1990s in China, their implications for socialization and

socioemotional development are discussed in these sections. The Element concludes with suggestions for future research directions. A number of studies have been conducted on socialization and socioemotional development with Chinese children in Western countries. Thus, the Element reviews and discusses the relevant literature and research on Chinese children in China as well as other countries.

2 Cultural Background for Child Development in Chinese Society

As a country with one of the most sophisticated and ancient civilizations in the world, China experienced various waves of population migration, amalgamation, and development over thousands of years, which generated distinctive cultural systems. Among the fifty-six ethnic groups in the country, Han Chinese represent about 91 percent of the population (The World Factbook, 2022). Although the cultures of minority nationalities, such as Zhuang, Hui, Uygur, and Tibetan, exert significant influence on social activities and individual behaviors, particularly in the Western regions of the country, Chinese society of Han nationality is relatively homogenous in its cultural background, with Confucianism serving as a predominant ideological guideline that emphasizes the importance of the family and social relationships. The research that is reviewed in this Element has been conducted mostly with Han children and families.

Traditional Confucian culture was rooted in agricultural life (e.g., rice farming, especially in South China), which relies highly on interpersonal cooperation and values rule-abiding and responsible behaviors (Greenfield, 2009; LeVine, 1988). Relative to other major ancient belief systems in China, such as Daoism and Buddhism, that concentrate on the spiritual aspects of human life, Confucianism is more interested in how people handle issues with others and, thus, is more relevant in directing individual behaviors in the family and other social settings. The primary concern of Confucianism is to maintain order and harmony in the society. To achieve this goal, people are encouraged to learn and engage in responsible behaviors that are conducive to the well-being of the group. A strategy to maintain social harmony is to establish a set of moral standards and rules for social activities and to require individuals to fulfill their roles in society by following those standards and rules (Luo, 1996). The doctrine of filial piety (孝), for example, stipulates that children must show absolute obedience to their parents and honor the elders in the family, whereas parents are responsible for teaching and disciplining their children. The effort of children to succeed is viewed as a filial duty for the family, and parents have an obligation to ensure that children receive adequate training to achieve success (Ho, 1986). Behaviors that threaten the harmony or the hierarchical structure of the family are strictly prohibited. In this context, the expression of individual

Socialization and Socioemotional Development in Chinese Children 3

desires and the pursuit of personal interests are discouraged, especially when they are in discord with group functioning. Confucian principles concerning social relationships and behaviors have been endorsed in Chinese and some other East Asian societies, such as Korea and Japan, and have exerted an extensive influence on child education and development.

Although the influence of Confucian and other traditional Chinese values has weakened since the beginning of the last century, the core of the cultural system, such as group orientation, is robust during social changes and continues to impact socialization goals and practices in the contemporary Chinese society (Chen, 2010). Group-oriented cultural values, as represented by Chinese collectivism, emphasize individuals as a part of a group, in which members are linked to each other but differ on within-group status, and encourage obedience to the authority and the sacrifice of personal interests for collective well-being (Oyserman et al., 2002). In the family, group orientation is represented by the common goal to enhance family reputation and emotional and financial interdependence of family members. Maintaining parental authority, particularly in childrearing, is believed to be essential to achieve the common goal and the success of the family (Chao, 1995; Ho, 1986). The organization of Chinese schools is also based on collectivistic principles. For example, students are required to participate in regular group activities that are organized by the school. These activities are believed to help students develop positive attitudes toward the group and learn cooperative skills and behaviors that promote group welfare. Indeed, group-oriented values (e.g., “It is important to do what the group decides,” “I would give up something important for me if it is good for the group I am in”) are highly endorsed by students in Chinese schools (e.g., $M = 4.01$ on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *not at all agree* to 5 = *always agree* in a urban sample; Liu, Fu, et al., 2018). Students who endorse more group-oriented values tend to obtain higher social status and achievement (Liu, Fu, et al., 2018), suggesting that these values function to help students behave according to prevailing social standards in China.

3 Family Socialization

In both traditional and contemporary Chinese societies, socialization agents, particularly parents, are expected to provide guidance, support, and training for children to develop group-oriented attitudes and behaviors. Researchers have attempted to identify the features of socialization beliefs and practices of Chinese parents and understand their role in childrearing and development. Compared with Western parents, Chinese parents pay greater attention to children’s learning social standards and acquiring achievement in school

settings (Chen, Fu, et al., 2019; Ng & Wang, 2019). Chinese parents tend to be highly involved in children's social and school activities, expecting children to comply with their directions and demands (Cheah et al., 2015). To ensure child compliance, parental involvement is often expressed in forms of high behavioral control, such as monitoring and restricting the child's activities, and psychological control, such as making the child feel bad when he/she disobeys (Chao & Aque, 2009; Chen et al., 1998; Fung & Lau, 2012; Jose et al., 2000).

Jose et al. (2000), for example, found in observations of family interactions that, compared with European American parents, Chinese parents displayed higher directiveness (e.g., parents made the decisions and children followed without question; parents quickly corrected children's errors). Similarly, Chao and Aque (2009) and Louie et al. (2013) reported that Chinese children rated their parents as stricter and more controlling (e.g., "Insist that I do exactly as I'm told") than Western children. Moreover, Jose et al. (2000) and Kho et al. (2019) found that Chinese parents are likely to yell and shout when children misbehave and to use punitive strategies such as restricting children's activities with little or no justification. Ng et al. (2007) also noted in observing parent-child interactions in learning settings that Chinese parents are less likely than US parents to praise children for success and concentrate on their mistakes. Chinese parents are more likely than US parents to point out when children fail on tasks and to stress the serious consequences. In addition, in communicating with children, relative to US parents, Chinese parents show less positive emotions and use more harsh parenting practices such as criticism.

Salient forms of psychological control among Chinese parents are shaming (e.g., tell children that they should be ashamed when they misbehave; tell children parents get embarrassed when they do not meet expectations) and guilt induction (e.g., tell children, "If you really care for me, you would not do things that cause me to worry"; Chao & Aque, 2009; Cheah et al., 2019; Fung, 2006; Louie et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2002). According to Fung (1999), shaming strategies include (1) verbal markers, such as social comparisons, (2) vocal cues, such as sighs and making disapproving sounds, and (3) nonverbal techniques, such as staring and frowning. Chinese parents often regard shaming and guilt induction favorably (Fung, 1999). Fung and Lau (2012) argued that Chinese parents use shaming and guilt induction to regulate children's misbehavior by highlighting the harmful effects such behaviors have on social relationships, which may promote children's attunement to the needs and feelings of others. Unlike European American parents, Chinese parents do not seem to be concerned that using these parenting strategies may have harmful effects on children's development of autonomy and self-worth. Chinese parents believe that shaming, guilt induction, and other power-assertive strategies can

Socialization and Socioemotional Development in Chinese Children 5

be used to teach children right from wrong and help them learn social responsibility and self-control (Chen, Fu et al., 2019; Fung, 1999; Ng et al., 2014).

3.1 Care-Based Power-Assertive Parenting

The power-assertive parenting style displayed by Chinese parents appears to fit into Baumrind's (1971) authoritarian category, which focuses on strict control, firm enforcement of rules, and child obedience. It is important to note that authoritarian parenting in Baumrind's theory is represented by parental high control as well as negative affect, such as low warmth, rejection, and hostility. Accordingly, the measures of authoritarian parenting typically include items that indicate, to a varying extent, negative parental emotional and behavioral reactions (e.g., "I explode in anger toward my child," "I use threats as punishment with little or no justification"; Lee et al., 2013) in addition to items assessing high control. Given the detrimental effects of parental rejection or unresponsiveness (e.g., Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1997; Rohner & Lansford, 2017), it is not surprising that authoritarian parenting assessed using these measures is associated with low competence and adjustment problems in Chinese children, which are similar to consequences for children from European American families (e.g., Chen, Dong, & Zhou, 1997; Dornbusch et al., 1987; Shen et al., 2018). The relatively high level of "authoritarian" parenting among Chinese parents and its associations with children's maladjustment seem to suggest that, as an outcome of this parenting style, Chinese children would generally display more social, behavioral, and academic problems than European American children, which is clearly inconsistent with the research findings (e.g., Chen & Tse, 2008; Dornbusch et al., 1987; Fuligni et al., 2005).

To address the discrepancy or so-called paradox, Chao (1994) argued that the parenting style that Chinese parents display should not be viewed as authoritarian because the power assertion that they use in childrearing is associated with care and concern, rather than unresponsiveness, coldness, or hostility. Chao (1994) used *guan* to characterize the mixture of directiveness, discipline, care, and concern in Chinese parenting. The word *guan*, which means "looking after" or "taking care of" in Chinese, was used earlier by Tobin et al. (1989, p. 93) to describe the attempt of Chinese teachers and parents to monitor and correct the impulsive and undercontrolled behaviors of "only" children who might be spoiled in the family due to the one-child-per-family policy that was implemented in China in the 1970s. The term typically refers to supervision and control over individuals, especially those who display problem behaviors, but Chao (1994) argued that it has positive connotations because they imply training, love, and governing. The conceptual ambiguity is illustrated in the

measures of *guan*. The items in the measures (e.g., “Begin training child as soon as ready,” “When child continues to disobey you, he/she deserves a spanking,” “Allow child to sleep in parents’ bed,” “Emphasize neatness and organization,” “Parents help child with studies”; Chao, 1994; Gao et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2002) do not seem to reflect a coherent construct, as they tap a variety of beliefs and acts that are not necessarily connected with each other in a straightforward way. Moreover, studies of *guan* often arrived at inconsistent and confusing results (e.g., parents in Pakistan had higher scores than parents in the United States, who, in turn, had higher scores than parents in Hong Kong on *guan*; Stewart et al., 1998, 2002).

To capture and understand the distinct features of socialization in Chinese society and facilitate research in this area, based on Chao’s and others’ works (e.g., Chao, 1994; Cheah et al., 2019; Chen, Fu, et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2002; Tobin et al., 1989), this section discusses a perspective of care-based power-assertive parenting (CBPAP) that deliberately and explicitly highlights two inherently connected aspects of parenting used by Chinese parents: care and power assertion. Care-based power-assertive parenting refers to parental expressions of care in power-assertive behavior or parental use of power assertion with care in childrearing. This parenting style may largely serve to help children develop socially valued behaviors and acquire achievement in group-oriented societies. It differs from authoritative parenting based on the combination of parental warmth and “child-centered” control, which is believed to mainly promote children’s independence and autonomy in Western societies (Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

As a key element of CBPAP, parental care indicates attentiveness and concern of parents arising from a sense of heightened responsibility and associated anxiety to socialize children to succeed in the society. Unlike parental warmth in the Western literature, which is often manifested by outward and direct demonstrations and communications of positive emotions to enhance children’s feelings of security, positive self-regard, and confidence to explore the environment (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), Chinese parents’ care is typically expressed in terms of guidance and instrumental support (e.g., “I help and guide the child to develop good habits and be polite”; Cheah et al., 2015). The display of supportive behaviors is an indispensable component of parental care, which makes CBPAP different from “tough love” parenting – the use of stern, harsh, rigid, and perhaps unresponsive strategies with the intention claimed to help children in the long run. Chinese parents also tend to exhibit their care in forms of high involvement, sacrifice, investment, and worry about the child’s failure to achieve social goals, which may lead to the use of power assertion.

Socialization and Socioemotional Development in Chinese Children 7

The cultural values of individual freedom and autonomy in Western societies encourage parents to use power assertion with caution (Keller, 2020; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In Chinese society, parental power assertion, including behavioral control and psychological control, is viewed as necessary; parents who do not exert adequate power assertion with children are regarded as irresponsible and incompetent (Chao, 1995; Chen, Fu, et al., 2019). However, the use of power assertion that is encouraged in Chinese families should be derived from parental care and directed to helping children learn social standards and appropriate behaviors, with the goal to maintain the harmony and well-being of the family and other groups. In other words, power assertion in CBPAP should not result from parental anger, hostility, coldness, or neglect. Thus, parental care-based power assertion is expected to facilitate children's development of competence, which is different from authoritarian parenting that weakens it (e.g., Baumrind, 1971). In short, parental care and associated concern may motivate Chinese parents to use power-assertive practices in interacting with children. At the same time, care-based parenting efforts are directed by group-oriented socialization goals and likely promote child development in socially relevant domains.

Cultural values of parental care-based power assertion also appear in children's perceptions of and reactions to parenting behaviors. Chinese children show less negative reactions to parental use of power assertion than their European American counterparts (Chao, 1995; Ho, 1986). Chao and Aque (2009), for example, found that Chinese adolescents reported lower levels of feeling angry with parental strictness and psychological control than European American adolescents did. Cheah et al. (2019) found that Chinese children and adolescents were likely to interpret parental use of high-power strategies in a positive manner (e.g., "For my own good"). Yu et al. (2019) also found that parental power assertion, in the forms of behavioral or psychological control (e.g., shaming, guilt induction), was associated with fewer problems or more positive outcomes in social and school performance in Chinese children, especially from families that highly endorse group-oriented values, than in European American children. Children's understanding and appreciation of parental care may allow them to benefit from the guiding function of CBPAP and, at the same time, reduce its potentially undesirable influence.

Parental emphasis on maintaining behaviors according to social standards, such as cooperation-compliance in social settings, may require constraining personal desires, which may not be readily appreciated by children, particularly at a young age. Moreover, relative to Western parents, Chinese parents tend to display lower levels of warmth and affection (e.g., smiling at the child, telling the child "I love you") in their interactions with children (Camras et al., 2008; Cheah & Li, 2010; Chen et al., 1998; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Wu & Chao, 2005).

When not appreciated by children, parental power assertion based more on care than on warmth may elicit dissatisfaction, anxiety, and other negative emotions, which may lead to relatively high levels of internalizing psychological problems in Chinese children (e.g., Zhong et al., 2013). Thus, relations between CBPAP and internalizing problems need to be examined in future research.

3.2 Strengthening in Adversity: A Chinese Belief about the Constructive Function of Adverse Experiences in Socialization

The inclination of Chinese parents to use power-assertive parenting, including shaming and guilt induction, may be related to a broad cultural belief in Chinese and some other East Asian societies about the constructive function of the experience of adversity in socialization (Leung & Shek, 2015; Li et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2013). As an elaboration of human nature, Mencius (372–289 BC), one of the most famous Confucian thinkers, taught that “When Heaven is about to place a great responsibility on a man, it always first frustrates his spirit and will, exhausts his muscles and bones, exposes him to starvation and poverty, and harasses him by troubles and setbacks so as to stimulate his mind, toughen his nature, and enhance his competence” (Mengzi, Gaozi-Part II). A similar idea is expressed in an old Chinese adage “The fragrance of plum blossoms comes from the bitter cold,” which is often used to inspire children to pursue long-term goals. From this view, the experience of adversity is beneficial for building socioemotional and cognitive strengths. Through the strengthening process, children with adverse experiences can develop better outcomes than children without such experiences. This view is similar to Friedrich Nietzsche’s phrase “what does not kill me makes me stronger,” although this phrase may not imply the experience of hardship as a necessary path to success. More importantly, the belief about the benefits of adverse experiences for child development is widely held and advocated in Chinese society and has had a widespread influence on childrearing in Chinese families, particularly those living in difficult conditions. Thus, a discussion of the socialization belief may help us better understand Chinese parenting.

The Chinese notion of strengthening in adverse circumstances differs from that of resilience in the psychopathological literature (e.g., Garmezy, 1971; Rutter, 1987), despite their overlap on improved performance of individuals who experience difficulties. Resilience generally refers to “the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability or development” (Masten, 2011, p. 494). An important feature of the resilience theory is that it considers the experience of adversity a risk factor or disturbance to normal functioning. Children in adversity are expected to develop

Socialization and Socioemotional Development in Chinese Children 9

more problems than others. A separate attribute or process of resilience serves as a buffering factor that protects individuals who are exposed to risk from developing problems (Luthar et al., 2015). Researchers have recognized such phenomena as stress inoculation, steeling, and post-traumatic growth after adversity exposure (Bonanno, 2004; Rutter, 1987). In the context of risk, stress inoculation and steeling effects are largely concerned with the protective process that helps reduce or mitigate the negative impact of adversity.

The strengthening-in-adversity (SIA) belief suggests that the experience in adverse environments is useful and necessary for enhancing children's strengths and has constructive effects on development. The experience of adversity is regarded as an integral part of the strengthening process. It should be noted that adverse experiences that are considered constructive mainly refer to the experiences of living in difficult social, economic, and health conditions that are beyond parental or child control, such as the experience of social disadvantage and family economic hardship. The experiences typically do not include childhood maltreatment, such as psychological or sexual abuse and emotional or physical neglect (Luthar et al., 2021). Although a positive response to a particular negative or traumatic event (e.g., unexpected crisis, disaster, significant failure or loss) or a "turning-point" effect (Rutter, 2012) may be considered a type of strengthening, the SIA belief emphasizes the role of regular and cumulative experiences of challenges and difficulties in facilitating the development of competence and positive qualities in a progressive manner. Therefore, strengthening and associated changes in individual social and cognitive abilities should be understood from a socialization and developmental perspective.

Among the socialization practices that may facilitate the strengthening process (e.g., setting goals, planning, having a positive attitude toward difficult circumstances), helping children in adversity develop a sense of social responsibility and maintain strenuous effort has been stressed in the Chinese literature (e.g., Leung & Shek, 2016; Li et al., 2021; Luo, 1996). Adverse circumstances, such as poverty, are often shared by individuals in the environment, for example, family members, relatives, and residents in the community. As a long-term goal, children are encouraged to make contributions to improve the conditions (e.g., resources, opportunities, support systems) for the group, community, or society. Chinese parents also tend to value effort and hard work for achieving successful outcomes (e.g., Stevenson et al., 1990). Leung and Shek (2016) found, in a sample of families experiencing economic disadvantage in Hong Kong, that parental perceived importance of effort (e.g., "When my child does well in exams, it is most likely because he/she has put in effort," "Diligence is a means by which one makes up for one's dullness") is associated with positive attitudes about the role of adversity (e.g., "Hardship increases stature," "Man is not born to greatness, but

he achieves it by strengthening himself”). Parental beliefs about effort and the role of adversity were both positively associated with expectations of children’s future success (e.g., “I expect my child to complete university”).

The belief about SIA has been discussed mostly for children from families with social and economic hardship (Leung & Shek, 2016; Li et al., 2021; Liu & Wang, 2018; Zhao et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2016). For example, a significant issue in China in the early twenty-first century is massive internal rural-to-urban migration, which affects hundreds of millions of rural families. Children who migrate with their parents to the city and children who are left behind in the rural village by their parents are likely to experience social and psychological difficulties (Wang & Mesman, 2015; Wen & Lin, 2012). It is argued that these children should take the opportunity to hone their self-improvement skills based on their experience (Li et al., 2021; Liu & Wang, 2018; Zhao et al., 2016).

In a study conducted in public elementary schools in Shanghai, China, Chen, Li, et al. (2019) compared rural-to-urban migrant children with local urban nonmigrant children on social competence and academic achievement. Under the *hukou* system, migrant families do not have a legal registration status in the city and thus do not have the same rights and benefits (e.g., medical care, old-age pensions, employment opportunities) as local nonmigrant counterparts. Children from migrant families have fewer opportunities for future occupation and upward mobility. Moreover, migrant children are likely to experience stress and difficulties related to migration and adaptation to the urban environment, including negative perceptions and attitudes such as prejudice and discrimination from local people in the city. In the sample, over 60 percent of nonmigrant urban parents had an education of professional or technical school or undergraduate or graduate school, whereas approximately 90 percent of migrant parents had a senior high school or lower education. Urban nonmigrant families (approximately 13,000 Chinese yuan or US\$2,000) had significantly higher monthly incomes than migrant families (approximately 7,600 Chinese yuan or US\$1,100). Nevertheless, compared with urban nonmigrant students, despite their adverse social and financial circumstances, rural migrant students displayed greater social competence, as indexed by leadership status, peer acceptance, and peer- and teacher-assessed social skills. Moreover, rural migrant students attained higher academic achievement and had fewer learning problems. Among the migrant students, those who made a great effort to learn from new urban culture and engaged in active social interactions with urban peers were more likely to improve their social competence. The results, in general, seem to support the belief that the experience of adversity may have potential benefits for social and school achievement of rural migrant children, although the belief was not assessed in the study.