Contemporary British Chinese Parenting: Beyond Cultural Values

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Introduction

In recent centuries, there has been an incremental movement of people out of Greater China to countries overseas. This migration has led to the development of multi-generational Chinese communities all over the world. Towards the end of the twentieth century, an estimated 33 million Chinese people were suggested to be living in other countries (Skeldon, 2004).

With regards to the United Kingdom (UK), Chinese settlement and relocation can be traced back to the 1840s. Since then, Chinese migration flows into Britain have been occurring at a steady and uninterrupted rate (Benton and Gomez, 2008). Today the Chinese population now represents the third largest ethnic community group in Britain (Baxter and Raw, 2002). Although there has been a reasonably long history of British settlement, research interest and political focus with the British Chinese community does not reflect their long-standing presence.

Within the available research, the British Chinese community is often portrayed as being culturally homogenous (Schneider et al., 2000), with traditional values and practices remaining influential (Chau and Yu, 2001). Existing literature depicts Confucian and collectivist principles as remaining strong within the British Chinese family, which inevitably affects parenting approaches (Chao, 1995), parent-child relationships (Phinney and Ong, 2002) and childhood experiences (Woodrow and Sham, 2001). In this article, PhD research findings suggest that British Chinese parents’ own childhood experiences, the valuing of the parent-child relationship and of children’s rights, as well as an awareness and acceptance of Westernisation also contributes towards their child-rearing decisions. Based on multiple semi-structured interviews with a diverse set of 12 Chinese parents living in the UK, this article
explores Chinese parenting of the past and those of the present day. This study expands on the current literature that portrays cultural norms as the main explanatory factor for British Chinese household functioning. Such insights offer a more holistic account of migrant Chinese families in comparison to the existing research.

Chinese Parenting Styles and Explanations
Confucianism has been said to be the most influential philosophy upon Chinese culture and the functioning of family life itself. Confucian ethics not only convey appropriate child-rearing expectations and effective child-rearing techniques, but also what are regarded as valuable qualities in children. The focus upon the family, the responsibility of parenthood and the duty to raise well-adjusted children is highly prioritised within this framework (Wu et al., 2002). As Confucianism is the main influential backdrop to Chinese traditions and norms it is still preserved by many Chinese immigrant communities (Wu and Singh, 2004).

When discussing the migration and settlement of Chinese families to Western nations such as Britain, Chinese culture has often been described to be in contrast to the individualist nature of Northern American and European cultures. Within Western societies, independence, individual achievement, personal growth and the rights of the individual is emphasised. The role of parents then, is to help children acquire self-sufficiency, self-direction, and decision-making abilities (Shek, 2002). In contrast, Chinese culture encompasses a collectivist approach, which prioritises the group (be it the family, society or state) as opposed to the needs, wishes and desires of the individual. In maintaining group unity and harmonious interpersonal relationships, obedience to authority, self-control and compliance seem to be expected in a more consistent and absolute manner by Chinese parents (Chao, 1995). In support, Ho (1986) found that many Chinese parents placed greater emphasis on obedience, proper conduct, moral training and the acceptance of social obligations, as opposed to the development of children’s independence, assertiveness and creativity (as seen within the majority of Western parenting styles). When immigrant Chinese parents endorse child-rearing methods that are different to, or in conflict with, the parenting values of the new country of settlement, problems may arise within the household. Specifically, if young Chinese people
prefer the norms of the dominant wider culture, whilst Chinese parents espouse the values of their country of origin, this may lead to feelings of confusion and frustration for the young people (Feldman, Mont-Reynaud and Rosenthal, 1992). The child may also feel a lack of integration to the wider society. Furthermore, differences in opinions regarding appropriate parenting methods and approaches may cause conflict between Chinese immigrant parents and their children (Phinney and Ong, 2002).

Other observations seen within Chinese child-rearing practices both in China and the Diaspora, include parents’ responsibilities and social obligations to train the child to be sensitive to moral and social rules and the complex meaningfulness of shame (Xu et al., 2005). The larger goal of this cultural child-rearing practice is to produce an adult who is sensitive to shame and hence to other people’s opinions, evaluations and judgements (Fung, 1999). Being aware and considerate to others, or to ‘give face’ is an important concept in traditional Chinese social structure, especially in a one-to-one relationship (Taylor, 1987). Reciprocal expectation has been suggested to be another key aspect of Chinese child-rearing practices. “Parents expect children to be obedient and respectful and parents are expected to be responsible and experienced instructors who pass along cultural norms, values, and life experiences” (Xu et al., 2005: 525). A most ‘abusive’ parent is one who does not discipline/train their child, “drowning the child with love” (Wu, 1985:141). In turn, Chinese children are expected to demonstrate filial piety. By being filial, children should obey and be subservient to parents (as well as to elders and those in authority). Filial piety has been suggested to be the major goal that guides the socialisation of children in the traditional Chinese family (Wang and Ollendick, 2001). The emphasis upon obedience and respect for authority figures within Chinese child-rearing methods are said to be pervasive across the school environment, public gatherings and other social contexts (Fung et al., 2003).

Chinese parents (immigrants or otherwise) appear to be more tolerant of, and active in, their use of corporal punishment. Within Chinese culture, physical child-rearing approaches are seen to encourage the integrity of the child rather than as a punishment (Siu-Ming and Tam, 2005). Harsh scolding and physical punishment also correlates with the Chinese emphasis on compliance to authority from a very
early age (Chen et al., 2003). With the general acceptance of corporal punishment amongst Chinese families, child neglect and the possible psychological abuse caused are not recognised in the same way as Western societies, which may cause problems for immigrant Chinese households living overseas (Wong, 2004). The significance of the male within the Chinese belief system has led to the father being the principle disciplinarian of the child. Seen as the superior in the family, fathers are also held responsible for the family’s welfare and decision-making within the household (Ho, 1986).

Research tends to suggest that Chinese parents who strongly adhere to Chinese values are likely to maintain a distance associated with the traditional status hierarchy when interacting with their children. This demeanour, to some extent, is conveyed in an authoritarian or controlling parenting style, particularly when children misbehave (Xu et al., 2005). In support, Wu and Chao (2005) found that Chinese immigrant parenting tends to be more authoritarian and less authoritative than their Western counterparts. Authoritative parenting often entails parental warmth, which is responsive and assertive (but not restrictive) with children. In contrast, authoritarian parenting involves parental dominance that is seen to be restrictive and cold towards young people (Baumrind, 1971). However, traditional Chinese values not only emphasise child obedience and parental strictness, which are attributes of an authoritarian parenting style, but also promote parental acceptance and responsiveness, which are characteristics of an authoritative parenting style (Chao, 2000). Chao (1994) discussed how Chinese parents’ child-rearing responsibilities are fulfilled in the process of guan, which means to ‘govern’ as well as to love. Generally, Chinese parents in both Chinese and Western societies are immensely devoted to their children; they sacrifice much to meet their children's needs and they provide ample affection and warmth, two characteristics of an authoritative parenting style. Thus, authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles are intertwined with the Chinese value system (Chao, 1995).

Labels such as authoritative versus authoritarian parenting and differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures can provide some distinguishing features and dimensions into Chinese parenting practices (Chao, 1994, 1995, 2000). However, flexibility within the constructs must be recognised and it cannot be
assumed that identified patterns in one culture or parenting style will have the same meanings and consequences across all societies (Peterson, Steinmetz and Wilson, 2005). Furthermore, the emphasis upon cultural parenting norms is limiting as the impact of globalisation, migration flows, transnationalism and diasporas have arguably blurred the boundaries between countries and cultures, as the transfer of people, objects and information intensifies across the world (Orbuch and Fine, 2003). As such there can be diversity in cultural norms both within and between societies (Smidt, 2006). Consequently, the adherence to Chinese cultural norms by parents may not be as strong as previously suggested within the established research. By speaking to 12 contemporary British Chinese parents about their own childhoods and current child-rearing practices, this article emphasises parents’ own upbringing as a vehicle for change within contemporary Chinese parenting approaches. The valuing of children’s rights and opinions, as well as an awareness and acceptance of Westernisation also contributes towards British Chinese parenting methods. These findings are to some extent in contrast to both existing literature and generally held views that have portrayed the Chinese immigrant family as wholly conforming to Confucian values.

Research Sample
The exploration of contemporary British Chinese parenting was based on an ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funded PhD study undertaken with 12 British Chinese families. In each family, one parent and one child were interviewed separately either at home or within Chinese community centres. Each parent and child participated in three repeat interviews over a nine month period. This equated to six interviews per family and 72 interviews in total. By listening to both the parent’s memories of their experiences as children and their current attitudes as parents now, we can see the differences and similarities of parenting styles from the past and present. As the study recognised and acknowledged the significance of children’s voices, children themselves (defined as under the age of 18) were asked to participate within the research. However, as the focus of this article is upon contemporary Chinese parenting, only parental comments will be discussed.

Repeat qualitative interviewing was chosen as the most appropriate method to investigate Chinese parenting practices. Qualitative interviews allow participants to
tell their stories, on their own terms and in their own words. Within the semi-structured interviewing approach, it has been suggested that non-directive and open ended questions provide participants more of an opportunity to include the topics and modes of discourse that are familiar to them (Eder and Fingerson, 2003). By using a one-to-one interviewing technique, the researcher was able to engage and adapt the interview process in accordance with the respondent’s individual requirements and comfort.

The diversity of family and living arrangements within contemporary society has been argued to be the new norm in twenty-first century Britain (Silva and Smart, 1999). However, the flexibility in family and kinship ties amongst British Chinese households is not reflected in the literature. As such, the involvement of Chinese families with different backgrounds and family patterns was prioritised in the study. With regards to family set-ups, eight of the 12 families can be classified as a nuclear household. Within this group there was a remarried Chinese man who had then fathered children at a later age. The sample also had one blended household where previously separated parents remarry and combine families. The last two families in the sample included a female lone parent household and one astronaut family, which is a transnational family living arrangement, whereby the mother and children migrate and reside in the new country, whilst the male astronaut remains in the country of origin (often for work reasons), and regularly commutes or ‘flies’ to visit his wife and children (see Waters, 2005).

Family backgrounds were also varied in relation to migration histories and length of UK residency. One parent was British born, four parents had recently migrated to the UK (between 2001 and 2004), and seven parents had lived in England for over 15-20 years (either as a result of childhood migration or individual adult migration). All the parents had Chinese ancestry, but they originated from different countries (i.e. Mainland China, Hong Kong, Kowloon, New Territories and Malaysia). Parental backgrounds were wide-ranging in terms of education levels (from no qualifications up to doctorate level), careers (such as retirement, the catering trade, housewives, students, computing and health industries), and also in age (parents were in their forties, fifties and sixties). With regards to gender involvement, three fathers and nine mothers took part in the study. See table 1 below.
### Table 1: Examples of Family Difference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background differences</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family types</td>
<td>Nuclear families, blended family, astronaut family, lone parent family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of origin</td>
<td>Hong Kong, Kowloon, New Territories, Mainland China, Malaysia, Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decade of UK arrival (if applicable)</td>
<td>1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000 onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration history</td>
<td>The majority of the parental sample migrated to the UK as children with their own parents. Some parents migrated to Britain as adults (with or without their current partners and children) and only one parent was born in the UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of parents</td>
<td>Late-thirties up to early-sixties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational levels</td>
<td>Primary schooling in country of origin up to UK further/higher education levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupations</td>
<td>White collar work, take away trade, housewifery and retirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural identity</td>
<td>11 parents classified themselves as ‘Chinese’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 parent described themselves as ‘British Chinese’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children in family</td>
<td>1-4 children per family</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Seven families were invited to take part in the study through Chinese organisations, such as Chinese language supplementary schools and community groups. The other five families were snowballed from the initially recruited sample. All 12 Chinese families were from the North of England, including Leeds (5 families), Manchester (4 families), Huddersfield (2 families) and York (1 family). Whilst it is worth noting that seven families were recruited through Chinese organisations, and that their community involvement would possibly indicate a conscious awareness
and probable concern over the maintenance of Chinese traditions, the remaining families in the study did not participate within such organisations. However, the sampling technique was still acknowledged and recognised when analysing the data of contemporary British Chinese parenting.

Data Analysis
The researcher personally transcribed the interview accounts, as it allowed for a deeper level of familiarity and intimacy with the data sets for the analysis process. Meaningful data from the transcripts was then organised by themes (and further subcategories) according to parenting approaches, research questions within the interview guides, as well as links to pre-existing theories and research. The job of indexing, or slicing the data set, was done manually with the aid of computer programmes on ‘Microsoft Office’. The combination of personally transcribing the interview accounts, with the manual procedure of indexing, allowed a more thorough examination of what the interviewees had said and permitted repeated examinations of the interviewees’ accounts. The categorization of data also allowed easier searches and comparisons of the data, the identification of patterns and a greater sense of the scope and coverage of the data set, which aided conceptual, analytical and theoretical thinking (Mason, 2002).

A conceptual map was subsequently developed on paper to interpret the data. The broad themes of the research, which were (1) parenting approaches, (2) parent-child intimacy levels and (3) children’s agency, became the overarching categories to which relevant interview verbatim was assigned. Relationships between data categories and established research and theories were then made. This allowed searches for common themes and a record of data which did not ‘fit in’ with established patterns. Analysis from the conceptual map also fed into the next stages of investigation and data collection for the following interview waves. The repetitive interplay between theory, data collection and the analysis of data was completed in an iterative manner, also known as an abductive process (Blaikie, 2000). Within an abductive strategy, theory is constructed by firstly describing the activities and meanings by groups and individuals, followed by the formulation of categories and concepts to understand or explain the problem at hand (Blaikie, 2000: 117). The emerging data categories and theories in this research were therefore seen as ‘thick
descriptions’, where there was interpretive focus on the meaning and intentions of the interviewee’s behaviours. The alternating process of moving between everyday concepts and meanings, lay accounts and social science explanations means that theory is generated as an intimate part of the research process (Blaikie, 2000).

**Chinese Parenting Approaches: Past and Present**
Contemporary parental accounts of their childhoods support the existing literature where Chinese parents were viewed as authoritarian, seen within the practices of patriarchy, absolute parental authority, filial piety, and high psychological control. With regards to patriarchy in Chinese culture, compliance with, and respect for, authority, especially of elders and male authority figures, has been argued to be an integral part of the early socialisation process for Chinese children (Wang and Phinney, 1998). Chinese fathers are also seen as stricter than mothers in terms of parental control (Shek, 2008). Parental memories of the paternal role being disciplinarian and the maternal role as nurturing, coincides with the notion of ‘strict father, warm mother’, which has been found in previous Chinese family studies. One father in the sample still placed importance upon patriarchy in his own family life now:

> My understanding of authority in the family is very Chinese and traditional. Very paternalistic basically- so I expect to be obeyed essentially, I expect to influence and have an influence in the decisions my children make. This is counter to wider [Western] culture. This is the clearest example of how I think my Chinese heritage still plays an important role in the way I think. It does affect the way I understand how relationships work (Edmund, mid-fifties, Chinese father).

Interestingly, Edmund was born in the UK but his paternalistic viewpoints were expressed more strongly in comparison to the other fathers who had migrated to England at a later age. Despite Edmund’s emphasis upon patriarchy and in contrast to the past, all three Chinese fathers suggested that they were more affectionate towards their children than their own fathers were towards them. In this sample, the notion of ‘strict fathers, kind mothers’ may, therefore, be outdated (see also Shek, 2008). For the lone parent and astronaut household, the mothers assigned themselves the role of the disciplinarian. Under such circumstances, children from these families also saw their fathers as less authoritarian.
For intact families, despite both sets of parents describing their marriages and family lives as being more egalitarian than in the past, there was still the perception of modern fathers being the main disciplinarian. This may have been due to the mother’s insistence on, and promotion of, the father as the head of the family. This gender divide occurred in most families, whether they had recently migrated or had lived in Britain for a long period of time, even amongst those who considered themselves as Westernised. The Confucian emphasis upon patriarchy was still evident within this set of British Chinese families, despite their diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Patriarchy and filial piety has been found to contribute towards the use of corporal punishment towards children within Chinese families (Chang et al., 2004). All parents in this sample remembered the use of physical punishment as a form of discipline in their childhood:

Back then, our parents would not have treated us as friends, because of their attitudes and thinking. It was strict how they brought us up and taught us, you couldn’t laugh if they shouted at you or if they told you off. You had to listen attentively or you would be hit (Sue, early-fifties, Chinese mother).

As current research suggests that parents who strongly adhere to Chinese traditions are likely to rely more upon physical disciplinary methods, one would expect parents who classed themselves as Westernised to be against this form of discipline. However, this was not the case, as nine of the parents who described themselves as incorporating Western views and norms (as a result of growing up in Britain, experiencing Western schooling and working within various white collar occupations) still emphasised the continuation of Chinese traditions, such as corporal punishment. One explanation may be the long held Chinese belief that corporal punishment is an effective method to develop and train the integrity of the child’s character, rather than as a punishment and a deterrent as in Western culture (Lau, Liu and Wong, 1999).

However, the majority of the parental sample who had used physical methods of discipline when their child was younger, no longer used such strategies, due to the legality issues concerning corporal punishment in Britain, in terms of what can be
classed as ‘reasonable chastisement’. Two British Chinese mothers originally from Hong Kong also aired their reluctance to use physical discipline methods due to unfavourable societal attitudes. Although English law does not prohibit corporal punishment within the family, recent debates in the UK regarding children’s human rights are arguably influencing contemporary British Chinese parenting practices.

Only three parents were against corporal punishment all together, based on their own negative childhood memories. These parents were from varied family constructions, but they were amongst the younger age range of the sample (late thirties and forties) and felt less of a generational divide with their children. These parents saw their children as individuals in their own right and respected their feelings more. As a result, the parents did not want to violate their children’s rights or self-worth by using physical methods of discipline on them:

**Interviewer:** Why don’t you use corporal punishment anymore?

**Abigail** (early forties, Chinese mother): Firstly, it’s looked down upon more these days. Secondly she is older now and has her own thinking and should know what she has done wrong. So I try to explain to her instead of smacking her. As I say, I’m in my forties now and I still remember my father and mother hitting me. It affects you for the rest of your life. So, if I hit my daughter now when she’s in her teens she’ll remember it when she’s in her forties too.

Corporal punishment towards children of secondary school age was also seen as preventing and interfering with parent-child relationships, especially feelings of closeness:

I don’t want to smack her [daughter] and for her to think that I am an evil mum. Otherwise she will automatically have secrets and she won’t tell you things. They think, I won’t tell my mum she can’t help, she will only shout and hit me (Heather, early-forties, Chinese mother).

Despite the persistence of some Chinese values, such as patriarchy, filial piety and corporal punishment, contemporary British Chinese parents suggested that their
experience of authoritative parenting had led them to be less authoritarian with their own children now:

You think well, my parents were like that, so I'm not going to be as strict as my parents but a little bit like them. But I think I give my kids more leeway than my parents gave to me. I think in a way I've been there and you think I hated not being able to go out and not being able to do that, so I know how she [daughter] feels in a way, so at least I let her do a bit of it. But I wasn't even allowed to do anything when I was a kid (Ava, mid-forties, Chinese mother).

Strict and hierarchal parent-child relationships within the family structure were the cause of distance between family members in the past, and parents wanted to overcome this with their own children. 10 out of the 12 parents grew up believing that there was little interest shown in their day-to-day lives and felt little parental support (both for those who grew up in their country of origin and those who had migrated to Britain with their parents). Parent-child closeness in the past was also affected by the limits of the topics of conversation in the migrated family, either because certain topics were “out of bounds” (such as going out, drinking and having more freedoms) or because parents could not understand children on a cultural level, as parents were seen as naïve and alienated from Western society:

As children we never brought up issues that challenged our parents’ views of things. At the same time, there were things that we simply didn’t bring up, because we didn’t think they would understand (Edmund, mid-fifties, Chinese father).

One topic of conversation that was not raised by six parents whilst they were growing up in Britain was the resentment and frustration that they felt at their parent’s lack of cultural diversity. In line with previous literature, first generation Chinese parents held onto their own cultures whilst discouraging Western traits as they regarded such behaviours as signs of disobedience and disloyalty to their own traditions (Lee and Chen, 2000). Westernised Chinese were often labelled as ‘bananas’ - “to be white on the inside, yellow only on the outside” (Parker, 1995: 191). The majority of parents described anti-Western feelings from their parents whilst growing up:
My parents didn’t want me to be Westernised. It’s typical Chinese you see, they don’t like you to play with the English people too much- you might get influenced cause they’re naughty (Av, mid-forties, Chinese mother).

Despite the suggestion in much of the literature that the high levels of cultural difference between parents and children may lead to more elevated and intense levels of parent-adolescent conflict (Tardif and Geva, 2006), parents suggested that arguments and disagreements were rare in their childhood due to Confucian teachings. Within Confucianism, non-compliance and lack of deference to parents is seen as a serious violation of filial piety and the most shameful conduct within Chinese culture (Chen et al., 2003). Consequently, parents were obedient in their childhoods due to moral and social norms which stressed that ‘Perseverance, obedience, duty and loyalty are the essential qualities of a good son or daughter’ (see Sham and Woodrow, 1998:204).

Two newly migrated mothers in the sample from nuclear families also upheld the traditional parent-child hierarchy within their households. Research has suggested that less ‘acculturated’ parents tend to hold onto their traditional values in the new country (Tang, 1998). The other parents however encouraged their children to be more communicative, and to negotiate and to assert their choices as part of their parenting strategies. As one Chinese mother, Louise (late-forties), commented, ‘the children should make their own decisions instead of being told all the time. I think it’s dangerous if you grow up being told what to do’. Consequently, parents were aware of, or were already experiencing, conflicts with their children as a result of encouraging children to express their expressions and thoughts. The recognition of conflicts and disagreements by contemporary parents is in sharp contrast to their own childhoods, when Chinese ideology suggested that harmony must be maintained between oneself and others (Pang, Roberts and Sutton, 1998):

When you raise and encourage your children to question things, you expect some things to become part of their personality, like their criticalness, their attitudes, their questions and their outlook on life (Edmund, mid-fifties, Chinese father).
Within the entire parental sample, mothers and fathers were keen for their children to become more independent and self-reliant, albeit to varying degrees. Such characteristics are again at odds with the generalisation of Chinese parenting being simply authoritarian which restricts children’s growth. For example, Annabel (early fifties) was an astronaut mother who was particularly encouraging of her daughter’s independence skills. Annabel’s own personal experiences of autonomy, as a result of solo parenthood in England, appeared to be a driving force in her parenting outlook. Other parents also actively encouraged their children to travel to places on their own and to participate in extra curricular activities, to boost self-esteem and to expand the child’s social circle and social skills:

Because our son is an only child, we [parents] encouraged a more active way of life for him in terms of socialising. At primary school, we enrolled him on a few activities organised by the school, so he learnt how to work as an individual and as part of a team. I deliberately wanted him to mix with other children for those reasons (Ting, early-forties, Chinese father).

All children were also asked to help with housework in all family types. Using household chores to train children to be more responsible for themselves and others coincides with individualist (Western) and collectivist (Chinese) cultural values (Bowes et al., 2004).

**Contemporary Parents Acceptance of Westernisation**

Unlike previous research with earlier generations and on parents’ childhoods, eight of the contemporary parents accepted their children’s Westernisation. Being culturally open and accepting of mainstream values was seen as being fair to the child and the family, as well as helping their children’s social integration. Inevitably this affected contemporary parenting decisions and outlook:

Wherever you live you have to follow that society’s way of life and how it is, how the families act, so you follow that. Like in England here, it is more free and children speak more openly and decide more on their own lives so you have to relax more and allow that (Chloe, early-fifties, Chinese mother).

Even though there are more opportunities and places to meet with other Chinese individuals in modern British society, such as Chinese organisations and community
centres, these parents viewed their child’s Westernisation as normal and even inevitable. The more Westernised Chinese parents often grew up in Britain (2 parents) or experienced the majority of their education in the UK (6 parents). Seven out of the eight parents also originated from Hong Kong and felt that they had an added advantage of accepting and understanding British customs and values, as Hong Kong used to be a British colony (up until the year 2000) and hence, was seen as modernised and Westernised despite the preservation of traditional Chinese values:

Hong Kong was a British colony for so long and this influences you . . . The way our parents taught us was with completely Chinese traditions, but with our generation we had English to learn at school and Western learning so our mind was more open. We were already used to a Westernised type of lifestyle, I don’t know about other people, but with me I found it easy to accept a Western approach of living (Hing, early-sixties, Chinese father).

Although 11 of the families suggested that they were Westernised to varying degrees, contemporary parents still retained elements of Chinese traditions in their family patterns and functioning. Chinese cultural involvement included speaking Chinese, eating Chinese food, the use of chopsticks, Chinese etiquette and being involved with Chinese organisations.

Parents agreed that their parenting should still incorporate Chinese cultures regardless of their immigrant status and length of residency in the UK. Parental comments accord with the arguments, which reject the notion of assimilation, where immigrants lose their cultural distinctiveness and blend into the majority culture (Lim and Wieling, 2004). Parents in this sample can be seen as “bicultural” individuals who are oriented to both host and native cultures (Tsai, Ying and Lee, 2000):

I think my parenting is half and half [Western and Chinese approaches]. Whatever happens in your child’s life, you decide which side you need to use. Like in everyday life, we eat with chopsticks and Chinese bowls. At the same time, you can’t use some of the Chinese traditions from the generation before, because no one knows about those practices and no one may listen to this. I guess you learn to adapt to where you live (Chloe, early-fifties, Chinese mother).
Chinese customs and festivals were also highly regarded upon by parents and with happy memories. All parents attempted to celebrate and preserve as many Chinese traditions as possible for their children. Newly migrated parents appeared to participate in such activities more readily than the other families who had lived in Britain for a longer period of time. Families who were more settled, suggested that Chinese celebrations were not always achievable due to the lack of resources, heavy work schedules and limited family time. British Chinese children also understood and engaged more readily with Western celebrations in comparison to Eastern festivities. Most children in the research did not know the dates of, or stories behind, Chinese festivals and often needed reminding by parents. Losing part of your Chinese heritage and culture was seen as a shame by families, though inevitable due to the circumstances of living in Britain and the impact of British culture:

It’s nice if you can keep both cultures together, but if one has to take over the other, I think it should be the British culture as you are living in Britain. Living here, you have to be integrated into the society and live and work like the others (Louise, late-forties, Chinese mother).

Another example of the acceptance of British culture within the home was the use of English as the main language for communication in the household. This finding is different to previous research, which highlighted the importance of Chinese language in retaining Chinese culture (as parents themselves had experienced). This was evidenced within eight of the Chinese households. Many of these parents had grown up in Britain themselves and their language decisions were influenced by the fact that they were more understanding of the difficulties of predominately speaking Chinese when surrounded by Western society and schooling.

Endorsing Chinese use was also seen as potentially affecting the parent-child bond. For a minority of children whose parents had poor English skills (mainly those from the catering trade and parents from newly migrated families), Chinese was the only language employed within the home. For these children, communication and personal relationships with parents suffered, as the children felt more eloquent in their English skills compared to their Chinese speaking abilities.
Eight parents were more accepting of their children’s Westernisation due to their own childhood experiences and upbringing. Contemporary parents suggested that the anti-Western feelings and non-acceptance of Westernisation in their parents’ household made it difficult for them to partake and feel included by friends and other institutions, such as school. In having first hand experience of a non-supportive environment from parents to incorporate Western ideas and behaviours into the home, these parents did not want their children to feel alienated and rejected like they had been:

"It's important that my daughter is allowed freedoms and to go out, otherwise she will feel like an outsider with her friends. . . I'm going back to when I was a kid, and I've been there. In the end your friends give up [and say], 'oh forget asking her she can never come (Ava, mid-forties, Chinese mother)!

Regardless of preferred language use in the home, all parents, regardless of education, occupation, gender or age, recognised the benefits of retaining Chinese language in terms of understanding Chinese culture. However, the main reason behind the emphasis on children retaining their mother tongue was related to future career prospects, especially due to China’s growing global position.

Discussion
Growing up as children, parents’ descriptions of their childhoods was in line with established research findings, where Chinese parents from the previous generation were authoritarian and adhered strongly to Confucian values within the family. Although the influence of Confucian values has waned in recent years, certain values such as clearly defined gender roles, responsibilities and obligations of the individual, children’s deference to parental authority, as well as reverence and respect for fathers still exerted a considerable influence on contemporary British Chinese parenting beliefs. However in contrast to parents’ childhoods, less authoritarian family set-ups with open lines of communication between parent and child were also seen as an ideal parenting method for the modern age and during the time of adolescence.

For parents who accommodated and assimilated both Chinese and Western cultural norms, this was mainly due to the parents’ own negative childhood
experiences. By experiencing an upbringing that only prioritised Chinese values in the home, contemporary parents experienced first hand the difficulties that this could bring. In order to support their child in growing up to be a British and Chinese citizen, parents more readily understood the need to be flexible in their cultural beliefs and parenting approaches. Parents who were more culturally flexible and diverse were also more aware of the difficulties of being Chinese and living in the UK. By accepting that their child’s Westernisation and a loss of Chinese culture and traditions would be inevitable, parents happily encouraged and incorporated both Chinese and Western values within the home. Therefore, the importance and adherence of Chinese cultural norms can therefore be manipulated and overridden by parents’ own experiences and upbringing. Such findings also contradict the findings of existing literature, which suggest that Chinese traditions are highly prioritised over Western ideals by migrant families (Kwak, 2003).

From the study, it is argued that the use of cultural stereotypes is no longer sufficient in explaining the lives of contemporary British Chinese families. Such explanations are misleading as individuals are not solely bound by cultural traditions, but are free to form their own identities and values in the modern world. The agency of individuals to construct their own cultural identities, either through the notion of diaspora, globalisation, transnationalism or even personal experiences, then impacts upon the belief system and behaviours of British Chinese parents. The viewpoint that individuals are free to create their own identities and self-narratives, accords with the individualisation theories of Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck (1992). However, Chinese parents also tried to connect with their children through their everyday exchanges and parenting decisions. Such behaviours relate to the concept of ‘relationality’, where people’s connectedness, attachments to others and self-determination informs the active creation of their self-biographies, identities and meaning making (Roseneil, 2004). Such processes indicate the complex nature of Chinese parenting and the nature of the parent-child relationship itself. Indeed, contemporary British Chinese parenting approaches should be seen as an interactive process, where individual and family experiences are created through, and are contingent upon, family practices within and outside of the home (see also Morgan, 1996).
By exploring parents’ childhood experiences, their societal outlooks as well as their relationships with children, this article demonstrates how British Chinese parenting approaches are influenced by a variety of other factors in addition to cultural explanations. Such findings would be beneficial to social and health care professionals, as the lack of information, guidance and advice regarding Chinese families has been noted (NSPCC, 2005). Due to a limited understanding of Chinese family values, available support for Chinese individuals has also been criticised for being inadequate (Lau, 1997). As the results of this study has uncovered much needed data regarding Chinese family life at the micro level, and the varying nature of Chinese and Western values upon parenting practices, these findings can help professional organisations to become more aware of the processes and relationships within contemporary British Chinese homes. Currently, the new coalition government believes that “strong and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society” (HM Government, 2010, p.19). By knowing how British Chinese families operate and function, local authorities, government groups and professional bodies can determine the best plan of action when reaching out to British Chinese families to achieve such stability and strength.

Conclusion
By considering individual factors and family diversity, a more holistic account of Chinese family lives was gained. Such findings not only provide new insights into British Chinese parenting, but help to challenge the homogenous findings of Chinese households from the past. Although it is recognised that this research was on a small scale and that there are limitations inherent within the research itself, such as the use of qualitative research approaches, interviewing techniques and the ethnical issues concerning research with ethnic minority groups (Brah, 1992), it is hoped that the increase of knowledge and understanding of contemporary British Chinese households will not only contribute towards the existing literature, but also contribute towards the improvement of professional and governmental services aimed at the British Chinese community.
References


