

Cultural Consideration of Resilience for Chinese Immigrant Children and Adolescents

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The current article provides cultural considerations about resilience for Chinese immigrant children and adolescents for mental health professionals by 1) reviewing resilience and culture literature relevant to Chinese population and 2) reporting a pilot empirical study that compared Chinese and American middle school students' perception of resilience on the ClassMaps Survey. Overall, the literature on resilience and culture suggests that across cultures, including the Chinese culture, there are common resilience factors for children and adolescents. These factors include social support (such as positive adult-child relationships, peer friendships, and positive home-school/parent-teacher relationships) and individual characteristics (such as self-control, self-determination or goal determination). Enhancement of these factors would promote all children and adolescents' resilience, including Chinese immigrant children and adolescents. However, research also suggests that the expression and interpretation of the resilience factors, as well as the resilience mechanism, would depend on the culture. For Chinese students, academic self-efficacy does not play a significant role in resilience in school as for American students. Cultural strengths such as strong family relationships and Taoist and Confucianist approaches to adversity could be used for improving resilience among Chinese immigrants. It is hoped that, with cultural considerations, mental health professionals will facilitate resilience among Chinese immigrant children and adolescents more effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

In the process of development, it is normal for children and adolescents to face risks and negative life experiences at different times. Research in developmental psychopathology suggests that environmental variables in children's ecology play important roles in their mental health outcome and that the accumulative effect of multiple risk factors is associated with psychopathology development.¹ However, research has also found that many children and youth achieve developmental success, such as educational achievement, and psychological well-being despite exposure to multiple risks and adversities. Researchers call this phenomenon resilience. Identifying resilience factors and mechanisms could be informative for efforts to prevent psychopathology, promote psychological well-being, and intervene in mental illness. With the emphasis on the importance of the characteristics of social environments for children and youth, decades of research in risk and protective factors have consistently identified a set of resilience factors that serve as buffers to

help children develop successfully even when exposed to multiple risk factors.^{1,2} These resilience factors are found to be not only within the individuals (e.g., good intelligence and high self-efficacy) but also in their social contexts. In fact, the majority of the resilience factors are in children's social environment such as family (e.g., a close relationship with at least one caregiver and effective parenting) and school and community (e.g., access to responsive and high quality schools and positive adult models). More importantly, researchers agree that resilience is the result of the interaction of an individual child's characteristics and the social factors in their ecology, including their family, school, and community.^{1,3-5} Due to its emphasis on the social and cultural factors that enhance resilience and psychological well-being, research on resilience is especially important for mental health service providers in working with culturally diverse children and adolescents. This article informs readers about resilience and culture relevant to the Chinese population based on a review of current research and a pilot empirical study about school resilience with Chinese adolescents. Cultural considerations of resilience for Chinese immigrant children and adolescents will be discussed.

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REVIEW

Cultural Research on Resilience

Cultural research on resilience has been a recent development in resilience research. It explores the cultural and contextual variations of the resilience process because of the important role of an individual's ecology in resilience development. Cultural research on resilience also addresses the fact that the bulk of current research in resilience is conducted in Western individualistic cultures and mostly in the U.S. Ungar² proposed a social ecological conceptualization of resilience for culturally diverse populations that emphasized the need to focus more on the ecology that facilitates positive outcomes or resilience. In this conceptualization, whether a factor is an accepted and meaningful resource for resilience to a child depends on the child's context and culture. In addition, whether a child is resilient is determined in his or her own context and culture. This raises the question of whether the set of consistently identified resilience factors in the Western literature can be applied to culturally diverse children, adolescents, and those who recently immigrated to the U.S.

Empirical research that examines the cultural variation of resilience-promoting characteristics has found a set of similar characteristics amongst individuals and their environments across different cultures: self-determination, aspiration, positive peer relationship, family support, community/school support, and educational engagement.⁶⁻¹⁰ It appears that the cultural differences are mainly in how these resilience factors are expressed in the context and how the individual interacts with these environmental factors. In other words, there seems to be a set of similar helpful factors to individuals across cultures even though how these factors work or the mechanism of resilience largely depends on the context and culture.² For example, in the qualitative study by Theron et al⁸ that investigated the resilience factors of South African youth, a list of similar characteristics were identified by the local South African adults although they may name the factors differently, including resilient personality, dreamer (self-determination), educational progress (school engagement), acceptance (of the reality with difficulties), value driven (positive values as defined by the local culture), and active support systems (immediate and extended families, peers, social support services, and school and community). However, in descriptions of family and community supports and peer relationships, there were no identifications of *specific* significant adult mentors or positive relationships with the nuclear family in South African youth resilience; instead, supportive systems including the networks among families, schools, and communities were prominent, which is consistent with the African collectivist cultural values that emphasize the experiences of a family-community rather than an individual supportive person or the nuclear family. This suggests that how these factors were expressed and the understanding of the mechanisms of the South African youth resilience depends on the South African cultural values and context.

Resilience in Chinese Cultural Context

It is not surprising that Chinese perspectives of resilience feature unique cultural views. For example, in Taoism,

adversities are often interpreted from a positive and dialectic/dualist approach. Thus, adversity is not necessarily viewed as negative but viewed as an opportunity for positive changes.¹¹ Confucianism emphasizes the importance of personality cultivation and developing one's potential and ability to cope with adversities. Self-control and moderate opinions are considered the means to social harmony.¹² In addition, Taoism emphasizes the rule of dualism, revealing the cyclical swing between extremes (e.g., adversity and success).¹² Thus, a person influenced by the Taoist and Confucianist philosophies may have a different interpretation of adversity than a person with a typical Western understanding (e.g., adversity as obstacles). Hue's⁶ qualitative investigation of Hong Kong teachers' interpretations of student resilience illustrated these unique Chinese perspectives of resilience. Consistent with the Confucianist value of self-cultivation, the study found that Hong Kong Chinese teachers first emphasized students' natural inner strength or "inner-power" of self-determination, self-control, and self-reflection. Furthermore, the teachers viewed problems in students' life as opportunities to develop social competence. Thus, encountering problems was not as important as being able to make a correction. This is also consistent with the Taoist interpretation of adversity.

Although limited, the current empirical studies about resilience in Chinese students concur with cultural research on youth resilience by identifying a similar set of resilience factors for Chinese children and adolescents including goal determination, social support, family support, positive cognition, and self-control of emotions.¹¹ Out of the social resilience factors in specific contexts, peer relationships are consistently evidenced to generally enhance Chinese students' resilience.^{7,10,11} However, research regarding parent-child and teacher-student relationships suggests that the academic overemphasis in Chinese education system may mitigate the roles of these typical protective factors found in Western student populations. For instance, a caring relationship with teachers did not predict a lower level of depression.¹⁰ Poor parental supervision and family conflict were not significant predictors for Chinese adolescents' academic outcomes.⁷ Thus, there might be already sufficient educational support present in schools for Chinese adolescents. Other research suggests that although lack of parental support can lead to greater risk for depression,¹³ parent over-involvement can contribute to more internalized problems.¹⁴ However, recent research reported that Chinese middle school students perceived a more positive teacher-student relationship than did American students.^{15,16} These conflicting findings warrant caution in interpreting the resilience factors of parent-child and teacher-student relationships with Chinese immigrant students.

For the individual resilience factors in the Chinese cultural context, research suggests that self-determination, goal determination, and self-control are emphasized in the resilience of Chinese students and are interpreted as the "inner power" or "inner strength" of the individual student.^{6,11} The emphasis on self-determination and self-control are consistent with research findings about Chinese

students' high achievement motivation and self-control. In the context of Chinese collectivist culture and its high value on education, Chinese students' high academic achievement motivation is considered family- and socially-oriented,¹⁷⁻¹⁸ which supports the idea of goal orientation or self-determination in the resilience literature for Chinese students' educational success. Studies in child development have reported that behavioral and emotional self-control is a theme of Chinese socialization;^{19,20} those from the Chinese culture view behavioral self-control (e.g., affect control, low level of physical activity, reserved public behavior) as one of the important socialization goals for Chinese children, which is conducive to both the child's school success and overall social harmony.^{16,21}

Consistent with the Western literature, Zhang et al¹⁰ found that individual students' meaningful participation, their goals and aspirations, problem solving, and self-efficacy could help with depression. However, research on Chinese students' academic self-efficacy does not seem to support that it is a resilience factor, as academic self-efficacy is not found related to student academic achievement. Despite Chinese students' outstanding academic performance and high achievement motivation, their academic self-efficacy is consistently reported lower compared to their Western counterparts, even though students with high achievement generally demonstrate higher self-efficacy.¹⁷ It is possible that the highly competitive examination system in Chinese schools and high expectations produce many failure experiences, which does not enhance academic self-efficacy.¹⁷ Another possible reason might be that the sense of academic self-efficacy contradicts the traditional Chinese cultural virtue of humility and modesty.^{17,22} Chinese students are expected to remain humble and modest amidst academic success.

In summary, current research suggests that Chinese scholars and educators apply a similar ecological approach to student success as the Western ecological approach. The limited research on resilience factors with the Chinese population indicates that in general, there is a set of similar resilience factors as found in Western research, but there are some different findings regarding teacher- and parent-student relationships. Furthermore, academic self-efficacy might not be conducive to school resilience for Chinese students due to Chinese school context and the cultural value of modesty.

PILOT STUDY ON CLASSROOM RESILIENCE

In order to empirically examine the similarities and differences in resilience between Chinese and American adolescents, we conducted a cross-cultural study with Chinese and American middle school students.

Methods

Sample. We used the ClassMaps Survey²³ on 184 randomly selected 7th and 8th grade students from a middle school in an economically developed area in Eastern China. The pilot study used a companion sample of 7th and 8th grade American students (n=570) from the study of Doll, et al.²⁴ Although the U.S. sample was larger, the two groups did not differ much in

gender and grade proportions (See **Table 1**). A Goodness of Fit test results suggest there was no significant gender ($p = .130$) and grade ($p = .554$) frequency differences between the Chinese and US samples.

Instrument. Anonymously, the participants completed in their classrooms the Chinese version of the CMS that was translated and modified based on Brislin's²⁵ back-translation procedure. The only modification made was to change all the survey items to a question format due to the applicability in Chinese classrooms based on comments from a panel of Chinese teachers and principals.

The CMS was developed based on the empirical findings in developmental resilience and educational research and has been evidenced to have robust psychometric properties with students in 3rd to 8th grade.^{23,24,26} It originally operationalized seven factors that promote student success and resilience. Later, a factor of peer aggression was added and included in peer relationship. The final version, CMS 2007, has 55 items in eight subscales, four of which describe social relational aspects of the classroom and three of which describe the student characteristics (See **Table 2**). A 4-point Likert Scale (*Never, Sometimes, Often, Almost Always*) is used for each item. In this study, the original seven subscale/factors (47 items) of the CMS were used because the companion sample was limited to seven subscales.

Analysis. An independent t-test was conducted to compare the group differences between the U.S. and Chinese students' mean scores on the subscales. The significance level (α) of .01 was used in this analysis.

Results

Table 3 presents the group mean differences between the two sample groups. The data suggest that the two groups had no significant difference in teacher-student relationships, self-determination, and peer friendships but differed significantly on academic self-efficacy, behavioral self-control, and peer conflict. Chinese students had significantly higher scores on peer conflict, behavior self-control, and the home-school relationship while American students had significantly higher scores on academic self-efficacy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Overall, the literature on resilience and culture suggests that across cultures, including the Chinese culture, there is a similar set of resilience factors (both social and individual factors) for children and adolescents. Thus, even though the bulk of research in resilience is conducted in the Western countries, service providers may apply the knowledge of these common factors with Chinese immigrant children and adolescents and other ethnic minority populations. There are two groups of resilience enhancing factors: social factors and individual factors. The social factors include positive adult-child relationships such as parent-child and teacher-student relationships, supportive peer relationships that could result in peer friendships and less peer conflict, and positive home-school/parent-teacher relationships that would contribute to

the alignment of educational and developmental goals and home-school communication and collaboration. The individual factors include self-control, self-determination or goal determination, and self-efficacy. Enhancement of these

factors would promote all children and adolescents' resilience, including Chinese immigrant children and adolescents.

Table 1. Demographics of the ClassMaps Survey (CMS) Participants.

	China		US	
	N	%	N	%
Gender				
Male	87	47.3	242	42.5
Female	92	50.0	323	56.7
Missing	5	2.7	5	0.9
Grade				
7 th	98	53.3	291	51.1
8 th	86	46.7	279	48.9

Table 2. Resilience Factors and Subscales in the ClassMaps Survey.

Resilience Factors	Subscales	Number of Items
Environmental factors		
Teacher-student relationship	My Teacher (MT)	7
Peer relationship		
Peer friendship	My Classmates (MC)	6
Peer conflict	Kids in this Class (KITC)	5
Peer aggression	I Worry That (IWT)	8
Home-school relationship	Talking With My Parents (TWP)	7
Individual factors		
Academic self-efficacy	Believe in Me (BIM)	8
Self-determination	Taking Charge (TC)	8
Behavioral self-control	Following Class Rules (FCR)	6

Table 3. Mean Differences Between the US and Chinese Groups.

Subscale	Mean (SD)		t	p
	US	China		
Academic Self-Efficacy	3.31(.58)	2.98(.59)	6.656	.00
Teacher-Student Relationships	3.42(.58)	3.39(.58)	0.694	.49
Self-Determination	2.89(.58)	2.90(.59)	-0.108	.91
Peer friendships	3.51(.61)	3.47(.65)	0.708	.48
Behavioral Self-Control	2.60(.66)	2.81(.74)	-3.465	.00
Home-School Relationships	2.55(.77)	2.86(.64)	-5.377	.00
Peer conflict	1.92(.72)	2.88(.69)	-15.839	.00

However, research in resilience and culture also suggests that the expression and interpretation of the resilience factors, as well as the resilience mechanism, would depend on the culture. For Chinese immigrant youth, mental health service providers should first be aware of and gain more knowledge about the unique Chinese interpretation of adversity and risk factors, which are often considered as opportunities for improving competence. With Chinese immigrant clients, mental health service providers may adopt this perspective and help the Chinese immigrant youth and his or her family to take a more positive view of the current difficulties and instill hope. Since this perspective aligns with the Chinese immigrant client's culture, such discussions could also enhance the therapeutic relationship.

As research on Chinese students' resilience suggests, some resilience factors such as the parent-child relationship, teacher-student/home-school relationship, and self-efficacy may not work the same way as in Western culture. Chinese culture values education. Chinese parents have been reported to be over-involved in their children's education.¹⁴ As previously reviewed, when the academic pressure from the student's ecology (e.g., family and school) is too high, it could mitigate the facilitative role of parent-child and teacher-student relationships in promoting resilience and psychological wellbeing. Mental health service providers should collect as much information as possible regarding these factors before making recommendations. Our finding from the pilot study (that Chinese middle school students

scored much higher on the home-school relationship than their American counterparts) is consistent with the findings from previous studies about Chinese parents' over-involvement in their children's education. Thus, it is important for a mental health professional to gain an understanding of the level of academic pressure from parents and teachers and its effect on the adolescent. In addition, when the parent-child and home-school relationships focus overwhelmingly on high academic goals, attention should be drawn to aspects of parent-child and home-school relationships beyond academics to relieve the Chinese immigrant student's stress caused by high academic pressure.

Research regarding academic self-efficacy with Chinese students does not support its role in enhancing resilience and psychological wellbeing. The emphasis on academic self-efficacy contradicts Chinese cultural beliefs and values of modesty and humility^{17,22} even though it greatly contributes to resilience and psychological wellbeing for U.S. youth.²³ Our findings from the pilot study concur with the previous literature, suggesting American participants scored significantly higher than Chinese participants on academic self-efficacy. It is important for mental health service providers to know that Chinese students, and possibly recent Chinese immigrant students, might not have high self-efficacy even if they have high academic achievement. Considering the context of American schools where individualistic cultural values such as self-efficacy and confidence are encouraged,²⁷ Chinese immigrant students' low self-efficacy might not be beneficial for their cultural adjustment to the American schools. It may be helpful for mental health professionals to educate Chinese immigrant youth regarding the importance of self-efficacy in American culture and gently encourage self-efficacy. With the knowledge of Chinese cultural values regarding self-efficacy, mental health professionals should be more prepared to make clinical judgments on when and how to hold the conversation regarding self-efficacy.

Different from other individual characteristics, self-control and self-determination are highly valued in Chinese culture, as suggested by research. Thus, addressing these factors would be culturally appropriate for Chinese immigrant students and families. Consistent with the literature, our pilot study found that Chinese students scored significantly higher than American students on self-control. Chinese socialization literature indicates that Chinese children are socialized to self-control both emotionally and behaviorally. From the observer's point of view, it might be difficult to assess the behavioral and emotional difficulties the Chinese child may be experiencing by observation because open expression through behavior and language is discouraged in the culture. Therefore, in addition to the traditional measures, mental health professionals, for Chinese immigrant youth, should also consider alternative tools to assess their behavioral and emotional difficulties. Interviews with parents, family members, peers, and teachers and asking detailed questions would also be informative.

In addition, literature consistently suggests that peer relationship is a resilience-enhancing factor for Chinese students and that Chinese students have better peer relationships compared to American students.¹⁵ However, our pilot study found that the Chinese middle school participants scored significantly higher on peer conflict than their American counterparts although there was no difference on peer friendship. The Chinese participants' significantly higher scores on peer conflict might be associated with heavy academic competition caused by the overemphasis on academics and high academic pressure in Chinese schools. Thus, it is important for mental health service providers working with Chinese immigrant students to pay more attention to the perceived academic competition and peer relationships among middle and high school students.

CONCLUSION

The current article provides cultural considerations about resilience for Chinese immigrant children and adolescents for mental health professionals by 1) reviewing resilience and culture literature relevant to Chinese population and 2) reporting a pilot empirical study that compared Chinese and American middle school students' perception of resilience on the ClassMaps Survey. Overall, the literature on resilience and culture suggests that across cultures, including the Chinese culture, there are common resilience factors for children and adolescents. These factors include social support (such as positive adult-child relationships, peer friendships, and positive home-school/parent-teacher relationships) and individual characteristics (such as self-control, self-determination or goal determination). Enhancement of these factors would promote all children and adolescents' resilience, including Chinese immigrant children and adolescents. However, self-efficacy does not play a significant role in resilience in school for Chinese students as for American students. In addition, a few cultural strengths could be used when improving resilience among Chinese immigrants, such as emphasizing strong family relationships and support, collectivism, and Taoist and Confucianist approaches to adversity. In summary, it is hoped that, with cultural considerations, mental health professionals will facilitate resilience among Chinese immigrant children and adolescents more effectively.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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