
Cultural Differences in Beliefs and Practices Concerning Talk to Children

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Sporadic observations of non-Western culture groups have made it clear that the large literature on child-directed talk primarily describes Western parent-child interaction patterns. The current study used a survey instrument to contrast the childrearing beliefs and related verbal interaction practices of Chinese and Western mothers of preschoolers. Stepwise regression procedures indicated that culture differences in ratings for 6 belief statements and 5 interaction patterns accounted for 66–67% of the total variance. Discriminate functions derived from the regression analyses identified members of the two culture groups with 94–95% accuracy. The findings call into question the advice commonly given to parents of children with language delay and point to specific areas where practices more harmonious with Chinese culture could be recommended.

KEY WORDS: child-directed talk, family-centered, early language intervention, cross-cultural, Chinese parents

Speech-language pathologists who work with young children with language disorders increasingly engage parents as partners in intervention programs. This change in practice patterns is motivated by such factors as a desire to reduce service costs, a respect for parental knowledge, lengthy waiting lists, a commitment to client autonomy, and/or the realities of a multilingual society. Parent-oriented language intervention programs differ widely in their use of individualized learning goals and in the schedule of consultations. Typically, however, such programs advise parents about the kinds of parent-child interactions that are believed to facilitate language learning, with specific recommendations based on the extensive research on “Child Directed Talk”—the distinctive patterns of speech and discourse that are used by caretaking adults when interacting with young children (Rowe & Kingston, 2001; Snow, 1999).

Culture and Child Directed Talk

The notion of Child Directed Talk is culture-free, but the specific forms described in the literature have mainly been based on observations of Western European or North American families and thus are likely to incorporate cultural biases. VanKleeck (1994) and Crago and Cole (1991), among others, reviewed the ways in which cultures differ in beliefs about the status of children, the value of talk, the connections between social position and language dominance, the possibility of inferring the intentions of others, and the importance of parental teaching.

A growing body of work shows how these differences are reflected in parent-child interactions. Inuit parents, for example, are less likely than Western European parents to encourage children to talk (Crago, 1990). Japanese mothers focus on affect rather than reference when speaking to infants (Minami, 1997), and Basotho parents modify their speech patterns only in certain discourse settings (Demuth, 1986).

The link between culturally rooted belief systems and parental behavior is admittedly complex. There have been very few attempts to directly measure these relationships and, as Sigel (1992) notes, the reported correlations have thus far been disappointingly weak. He concludes, however, that the failure to find linkages stems largely from methodological limitations. The prevailing view in the more qualitative, ethnographic literature is that parent-child interaction patterns do reflect cultural belief systems. Chao (1996) argues even further that parental beliefs not only shape observable parent-child interactions, but are embodied in the organization of the home and in the ongoing history of family priorities and decisions, thus pervasively influencing child development.

The Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Parents

The purpose of this study was to investigate beliefs and practices in the Chinese culture concerning parent-child interaction as they might differ from those in Western culture, focusing in particular on aspects of interaction that could affect the contexts of language learning.

Western is used here to refer to the English-speaking, North American culture group that has its roots in Western Europe. *Chinese* is used to refer to the broad culture group originating in the geographical region traditionally known as China. Thus defined, Chinese and Western are macro-cultural categories that disregard the heterogeneity that exists within these two large culture groups. Without denying the importance of micro-level distinctions, this study—one of the first of its kind—was designed to address the research question at a more general level. The literature on Chinese families that is available in English reports on studies conducted primarily in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing. There are undoubtedly cultural differences among families from these different locales, related to differences in sociopolitical systems, geography, and history. Nevertheless, common cultural themes emerge from this literature and indicate at least three areas in which childrearing beliefs could have direct implications for patterns of parent-child interaction.

First, Chinese parents tend to view the ideal self as embedded in interdependent social relationships rather than as independent. Obedience and respect for others are thus valued more highly than self-esteem or

self-awareness (Chao, 1995). Second, and in part reflecting the influence of Confucian teachings, Chinese parents tend to view human behavior as highly malleable rather than as genetically determined. This leads them to emphasize the role of the environment in shaping learning and to believe in the rewards of effort (Stevenson, Chen, & Lee, 1992). Finally, Chinese parents draw a dramatic line between early childhood and the school years, the age of “not understanding” and “understanding.” Once school begins, the primary duty of mother and child will be to achieve academic success, but the early years are less demanding.

A cultural belief system that included these ideas could well lead to patterns of Child Directed Talk that differed from those described in the Western literature. For example, parents who are less concerned about their child’s self-esteem and independence might be less inclined to follow the child’s conversational lead. Parents who view their child as malleable and needing external assistance to learn might be more directive. Parents who believe that young children are less capable of learning might be less likely to create opportunities to teach.

Much of the cross-cultural research that actually observes Chinese parent-child interaction focuses on older children and does not concern Child Directed Talk. However, two recent studies of younger children provide initial support for these predictions. Vigil (1999) videotaped Chinese and British mother-infant dyads interacting with toys in the home. The Chinese mothers were more likely to direct their infant’s attention to new objects and to manipulate their infant’s hands to demonstrate the object’s use. British mothers were more likely to follow their infant’s own attentional cues. Similar findings are reported by Wang, Goldin-Meadow, and Mylander (1995) for Chinese mothers of 3-year-olds.

These studies suggest that Chinese mothers not only differ from Western mothers in their beliefs about children’s learning, but also that these beliefs lead to a culture-specific version of Child Directed Talk (CDT). The current study was designed to further investigate this possibility. As was true for the Vigil (1999) and Wang et al. (1995) studies, the current study is limited to looking at Chinese CDT from a Western perspective because there are as yet no ethnographic accounts available from within the culture. Despite this limitation, the results of the current study should serve to indicate whether the typical advice given to parents by speech-language pathologists is appropriate for Chinese families.

Method

A written survey instrument was used to document cultural differences in beliefs and discourse practices.

Mothers from Chinese and Western culture groups were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements regarding childrearing beliefs (e.g., “Young children learn best when they are given instructions”) and to indicate the frequency with which they use various discourse practices when interacting with young children (e.g., “Tell my child if s/he uses the wrong word”).

Survey Development

Survey items focused on childrearing beliefs and on patterns of Child Directed Talk (CDT) that were anticipated to be either congruent or incongruent with Chinese culture. Items were designed in consultation with child-language scholars and with speech-language pathologists and social workers from both the Chinese and Western culture groups. The first 20 items asked mothers to rate their level of agreement with statements about the independence of children’s learning, the nature of language learning, and early language milestones. The remaining 12 items requested frequency of use for various speech and discourse practices described in the Western CDT literature. The Appendix lists the survey items.

The survey instrument was prepared in both an English and a Chinese version. Because the same written language is used by speakers of all Chinese dialects, only one Chinese version was needed. Items were initially written in English, but were formulated collaboratively by the authors to optimize the eventual equivalence of the two versions. For example, in one item, the English verb *parenting* was used, with the intent to avoid either a “nurturing” or a “training” perspective on childrearing. Written Chinese has no equivalent denominal verb, but after discussion, a verb was found that carries both connotations. The second author, a fluent English-Cantonese bilingual, translated the survey into written Chinese. Two rounds of back-translation/revision were then undertaken to assure comparability of the two versions. A speech-language pathologist in Hong Kong served as the back-translator.

To confirm group membership, evaluate the comparability of respondents from the two culture groups, and aid in the interpretation of results, the survey forms also requested demographic information: place of birth, first language, years in Canada, number of preschool-age children, years of education, income range, and the presence of extended family members in the home. Respondents were further asked to note the language they used at home most frequently with children and with adults, to indicate their view on the importance of bilingual competence, and to indicate their preschoolers’ school experience and “first language.”

Procedures

The survey data were collected with the assistance and support of public health agencies in two Canadian cities with large populations of immigrant Chinese. In one city, forms were mailed by a Health District staff member to a random selection of mothers of children between the ages of 2 and 4 or were distributed to mothers of preschoolers who contacted the central speech-language clinic to inquire about services during an 8-week period. In both instances the English or Chinese version of the survey was distributed according to surname. Chinese mothers could request an English form if they preferred, and three did so, presumably because they were more literate in English. In the other city, forms were handed out by social workers to all Western or Chinese mothers of children between the ages of 2 and 4 who attended community center programs during a 2-week period. A total of 325 surveys were distributed.

Accompanying the survey was a letter explaining the purpose of the study and offering a modest gift certificate from a toy store as a token of appreciation to those who returned the survey. The forms themselves had no identifying information (i.e., responses were anonymous).

Sample

Ninety-seven surveys were received. Eleven of these were excluded because they were incomplete or because they contained demographic information suggesting that the respondent was from neither of the targeted culture groups. Responses from 42 Chinese mothers and 44 Western mothers were ultimately used for analysis, for a total *N* of 86.

As was implicit in the mailing procedures, identification of the mother as either “Chinese” or “Western” was operationalized first by surname and second by language and place of birth. “Chinese” mothers were those who had Chinese surnames and spoke a Chinese dialect in the home. “Western” mothers were those who did not have a Chinese surname, spoke English in the home, and were Canadian- or European-born. Although it was not criterial, all but two of the “Chinese” mothers had been born in the geographical region of China. They had been in Canada an average of 8 years.

Approximately half of the Western group and one third of the Chinese group were mothers seeking speech-language services for their children. Preliminary analyses of response patterns revealed only one point at which there was a reliable interaction between service-seeking and culture. This point will be addressed later. Because the focus of this report is on cultural differences, the

data have been collapsed across the clinic variable for all analyses.

The mean age of responding mothers was 35 in both groups. Level of maternal education, a strong predictor of parent-child interaction patterns in North America (Rowe & Kingston, 2001), was similar in the two groups. In each, 36% of the mothers had completed university or college degrees, 57% had completed secondary school, and 7% had not completed secondary school. A higher proportion of the Western mothers had engaged in some amount of post-secondary education, but the overall group differences in maternal education were not statistically reliable [$\chi^2(3) = 6.8, p > .05$]. Western mothers reported somewhat larger nuclear families: Western mean = 2.0 children, Chinese mean = 1.7 [$\chi^2(5) = 11.4, p < .05$]. Virtually all fathers were living with the family. The Chinese families, however, were more likely to have members of the extended family living in their homes [$\chi^2(1) = 5.7, p < .025$]. Chinese mothers also reported lower family incomes [$\chi^2(3) = 15.6, p < .01$].

All mothers in the Western group spoke English in the home to both adults and children. All but three listed English as their first language, and all listed English as the first language of their children. Most of the Chinese mothers, in contrast, spoke Chinese at home to children (38 of 42) and to adults (40 of 42), with the remainder using both English and Chinese. All but two Chinese mothers listed Chinese as their first language, and most (33 of 42) listed Chinese as the first language of their children. Virtually all of the Chinese mothers (40 of 42) indicated that it was “very important” or “important” for their children to become bilingual, whereas only 13 of the Western mothers valued bilingualism this highly. Preschool-age children in both groups spent an average of 13–14 hours a week in daycare or preschool programs.

These demographic data indicated that the survey responses were likely to represent the beliefs and practices of the two targeted culture groups and that culture was likely to be one of the main sources of group difference.

Results

Culture Differences for Survey Items Considered Individually

The initial analyses looked at levels of agreement and frequencies of practice for the 32 survey items taken individually. Table 1 indicates the percentage of mothers who agreed or strongly agreed (or, in two cases, disagreed or strongly disagreed) with each of the 20 survey statements about childrearing and children’s learning. Distributions of responses for the two culture groups were compared for each item, using nonparametric,

Table 1. Percentage of Chinese and Western mothers agreeing (4) or strongly agreeing (5) with 20 statements of belief about childrearing and children’s learning.

Item	Chinese	Western	Item	Chinese	Western
1	67	43	11	60	91*
2	93	86	12	91	39*
3	76	73	13	93	61*
4	91	66*	14	86	100*
5	93	98	15	88	86
6	90	95	16	71	82
7	55	89	17	31	27
8	38	41	18 ^a	62	64
9 ^a	57	36	19	50	86*
10	26	43	20	71	36*

^a The predominant responses were negative; percentages are given for “disagree” or “strongly disagree.”

* = $\chi^2(4)$ significant at $p < .01$, tested on entire distribution.

chi-square procedures. Alpha was set at .01 to reduce Type I error. As can be seen, statistically reliable group differences were found for seven items (4, 11, 12, 13, 14, 19, 20).

Table 2 indicates the percentage of mothers who reported that they “almost always” or “very often” (or, in one case, “hardly ever” or “sometimes”) used a given mother-child discourse practice. Distributions of responses for the two culture groups were again compared, using nonparametric, chi-square procedures, alpha = .01. Statistically reliable group differences were found for 5 of the 12 practices (22, 24, 25, 29, 32).

Table 2. Percentage of Chinese and Western mothers reporting that they use a practice “very often” or “almost always.”

Item	Chinese	Western
21	40	43
22	29	84*
23	31	59
24	7	55*
25	43	75*
26	69	82
27 ^a	57	66
28	79	91
29	52	91*
30	64	46
31	2	21
32	21	73*

^a Predominant responses were negative; percentages are for “hardly ever” or “sometimes.”

* $\chi^2(3) = p < .01$, tested on entire distribution.

Of the Chinese mothers who were born in geographical China, 26 were born in Hong Kong, 5 in Taiwan, and 7 in Canton. As a confirmation that the survey was tapping patterns of belief and practice at a macro-cultural level, the final preliminary analysis compared responses to the 12 differentiating questions listed for the mothers from these three areas. Seven of the mothers born in Hong Kong were selected from the larger pool for this analysis. This subgroup consisted of the first 7 who matched mothers in the other two groups on education level, age, and income. Selection was otherwise random. A nonparametric analogue to the analysis of variance, the Median Test, was used as our statistical procedure because of the small group sizes, the restricted range of possible scores, and the essentially bimodal distribution of actual scores. Reliable group differences were found for only 1 of the 12 questions: #29 [$\chi^2(2) = 8.69, p < .01$]. This finding remained true even when we shifted our alpha to the less conservative level of .05. These results indicate that, as intended, the survey captured broad cultural characteristics that held true regardless of micro-cultural distinctions.

The preliminary analyses of responses to individual survey items indicated points at which attitudes and practices concerning child rearing, children's learning, and Child Directed Talk were likely to differ between mothers in Chinese and Western cultures. However, because findings in the three sets of analyses were generated with experiment-wise alphas of .2, .12, and .12, respectively, they may include chance differences. To minimize this possibility, the primary analyses made use of multivariate approaches.

Culture-Specific Patterns of Response for Sets of Survey Items

Stepwise multiple regression procedures were used to determine the reliability of group differences in patterns of response to the survey items. The first analysis compared responses to the belief items, with culture group as the dependent variable and income entered in

the first step to control for group differences. Five Western respondents and 2 Chinese respondents did not provide income information, reducing the total N to 79. Once the variance attributable to income was removed, six items (12, 14, 19, 20, 10, 13) reliably accounted for unique portions of the remaining variance. Together with income, these items accounted for 67% of the variance (Multiple $R = .82$). Table 3 provides further summary statistics. A follow-up discriminate function analysis using the regression data indicated that a function based on responses to these six items could identify group membership with 95% accuracy. Mothers classified as Chinese were those who agreed more strongly that children learn best with instruction, that children should be encouraged to use words rather than gestures, and that older family members give good advice about child development. They also tended *not* to agree that parental use of baby talk impedes language development, that young children learn important things while playing, and that young children should be allowed to join in adult conversations with nonfamily members. Mothers classified as Western showed the opposite pattern.

A second stepwise multiple regression analysis of responses to the discourse practice items was conducted, again with culture group as the dependent variable and income entered in the first step to control for group differences. Once the variance attributable to income was removed, five items (32, 22, 30, 29, 25) were found to reliably account for unique portions of the remaining variance. Together with income, these items accounted for 66% of the total variance, Multiple $R = .81$. Table 4 provides further summary statistics. A follow-up discriminate function analysis using the regression data indicated that a function based on responses to these five items could identify group membership with 94% accuracy. Mothers classified as Western were those who reported that they frequently read to their preschooler, talked with their child about nonshared events, expanded their child's utterances, and prompted personal-event narratives; mothers classified as Chinese tended not to use these practices. The Chinese mothers did

Table 3. Summary statistics for the multiple regression analysis of responses to belief items.

Step	Item	Multiple		Change in R^2	F
		R	R^2		
1	Income	.41	.17	.17	15.85
2	#12 learn best with instructions	.68	.47	.29	41.85
3	#14 learn while playing	.72	.52	.06	9.22
4	#19 converse with adults	.76	.57	.05	8.11
5	#20 grandparent advice	.79	.62	.05	9.28
6	#10 baby talk	.80	.65	.03	6.97
7	#13 gestures	.82	.67	.02	4.17

Table 4. Summary statistics for the multiple regression analysis of responses to items concerning mother-child discourse practices.

Step	Item	Multiple		Change in R2	F
		R	R2		
1	Income	.41	.17	.17	16.08
2	#32 prompt personal narrative	.63	.40	.23	28.92
3	#22 read to child	.73	.53	.13	21.10
4	#30 use pix to teach words	.78	.61	.08	15.93
5	#29 talk re: nonshared events	.80	.64	.03	5.02
6	#25 repeat after child	.81	.66	.02	5.02

report using picture books and flash cards to teach new words to a greater degree than did the Western mothers.

Discussion

The survey results show that Chinese mothers indeed differ from Western mothers in their beliefs about childrearing and in their verbal interaction patterns with preschool-age children. Together the univariate and multivariate analyses indicated reliable group differences for 44% (14) of the survey items. In the discussion to follow, we will focus on the 11 items that accounted for unique portions of the variance; however, it is likely that they underestimate the extent of the differences.

Culture Differences in Patterns of Child Directed Talk

One area of clear difference between the two culture groups concerns what might be called conversational apprenticeship. The Chinese mothers were much less likely to report that they often prompt their young child for personal narratives, talk with the child about nonshared events of the day, or allow the child to converse with adults who are not family members. Such activities would treat the child as a potentially equal conversational partner and hence reflect an expectation for independence and early verbal competence. As reviewed earlier, these are not the childrearing goals of Chinese parents, who instead value social interdependence and hold only modest performance expectations for preschoolers (Chao, 1995a; Stevenson et al., 1992; Wang, 2001).

A second area of clear group difference concerns instruction and learning. Here again we find connections to culture-specific beliefs. The Chinese mothers were more likely to report that they often use picture books and flash cards to teach their child new words. They agreed more strongly that children learn best with instruction and disagreed more strongly that children learn while playing (Cheah & Rubin, 2001). This

response pattern is consonant with the Chinese emphasis on “nurture” rather than “nature.” Parents expect not only to teach children what is morally and socially right, *jiao xun*, but also to be active participants in all aspects of learning. As Wang et al. (1995) explain, “Chinese ideology [holds] that hard work and effort on the part of parents and children are essential to realize a child’s potential.” At first it seems surprising that there were no reliable differences on other items that seem to involve parental teaching—for example, the use of explicit correction for linguistic errors or requests for repetition. However, neither group of mothers reported many explicit corrections or requests for sentence repetition, the latter perhaps being viewed as a type of correction. The absence of negative feedback on linguistic forms has been interpreted in the Western literature as reflecting the natural focus of communication on meaning (Ingram, 1989), an explanation that is likely to hold true for Chinese mothers as well.

The Importance of Cultural Meanings

Further interpretation of the connection between values and survey response items quickly becomes ad hoc, although it is tempting to relate the tolerance of “baby talk” to the general belief that preschoolers have limited understanding, to relate the requirement for words rather than gestures to the general value placed on learning through effort, and so forth. What is quickly apparent when generating such interpretations is that a specific behavior can stem from more than one belief and hence that the cultural roots of a parental behavior cannot be determined from the behavior alone. The “directiveness” of Chinese parents and their commitment to “training” provide further illustration of this point.

In the Western literature, “authoritarian” or “controlling” parenting is associated with poor school achievement, but this relationship is not found in Chinese families (Chao, 1995a). Similarly, when Tsang (1998) looked at the interaction patterns of Chinese and Western mothers and toddlers, she found that although

the Chinese mothers used more “directive” speech acts, this fact did not have Western implications. In the Western literature, “directive” speech acts are used more frequently by mothers who are also more dominant, talkative, or insensitive conversationalists, but Tsang did not find these correlations in Chinese mothers. Such evidence indicates that even when the same types of parental behavior occur across cultures, the relationships between these behaviors and parental characteristics or beliefs can be culture-specific (Halle & Mariner, 2001).

This specificity can be viewed at two levels: behavioral and ideological. First, parental behaviors cluster differently from culture to culture. Rao, McHale, and Pearson (1998), for example, found that some “training” behaviors belonged to an “authoritarian” style cluster whereas others loaded with an “authoritative” style cluster. Likewise, Tsang (1998) found that although Chinese mothers were “directive,” their behavioral directives occurred primarily in the context of joint attention and were not attempts to redirect the child’s focus. Vigil (1999) seems to have missed this distinction by focusing on those directives that did attempt to redirect the child’s attention. Facts such as these suggest that Western observers should look for broader patterns of childrearing practice when studying non-Western cultures and avoid drawing conclusions from isolated behaviors.

Second, barring extreme examples, it is ultimately the cultural meaning of a parental behavior that counts. These meanings stem from ideological frameworks that are used by parents not only to guide their own actions, but also to interpret the child’s behavior (Wang & Wang, 2001). Returning to the example of “directiveness,” Chao (1995a) argues that in Western cultures, being “directive,” “controlling,” and dedicated to “training” may indicate parental mistrust and a desire to dominate. In the Chinese culture, however, these same behaviors can reflect the notion of *guan*, a complex idea that means to “govern” or “discipline” but also to “care for” and “love.” Again, the potential for differences in the ideological meaning of a given behavior cautions us to use care in deciding whether a given non-Western practice does or does not support learning.

The Nature of Chinese Child Directed Talk

It would be wrong to claim that the survey data reveal patterns of mother-child interaction in Chinese culture that are completely different from those seen in the West. The two culture groups scored similarly on many items. Mothers in both groups interpreted babble as meaningful, used parallel talk, did not use overt correction, and recognized that children understand some words before they can speak. Moreover, at an abstract

level, mothers in the two cultures evidence the “same” goals (Chao, 1995b). Although the particular target skills differ, mothers in both cultures desire to teach skills for relating to others, try to build the skills needed for success, and so forth.

It would also be wrong to deny a priori that there are differences among mothers within any culture group in the degree to which they hold characteristic beliefs. As discussed earlier, there may be micro-level groupings within broadly defined cultures and also differences among individual mothers at any level of analysis. German mothers are not quite like Italian or British mothers, although all are Western in their general perspective. Likewise, the fact that Chinese mothers from Canton, Taiwan, and Hong Kong showed virtually no differences in their responses to key survey items certainly does not mean that there are no differences in other areas.

With these caveats, the survey data indicate clear and important differences in Child Directed Talk between Western and Chinese families, as well as differences in many of the beliefs and values that underlie such discourse practices. The differences may not be total, nor are they likely to represent all mothers, but they do seem to provide a useful starting point for a discussion of intervention practice. The reduced use of expansions and the lack of conversation prompting are particularly telling given their prominence in Western literature.

The picture of Child Directed Talk in Chinese families that emerges from the survey data is necessarily incomplete. As noted earlier, survey items were designed with Western patterns of Child Directed Talk in mind. The data thus allow us to say that the Chinese mothers do or do not report using the interaction patterns known to characterize Western parent-child interactions, but they do not allow us to describe whatever interaction patterns may be found only among the Chinese. This limitation was unavoidable. The cross-cultural literature on Chinese belief systems is quite rich, but the observational literature on the interaction patterns of Chinese parents and their young children barely exists. Even with this limitation, however, the present survey data strongly suggest that speech-language pathologists and other educators need to reconsider their advice about facilitative interaction patterns. The next section considers the implications of our findings for clinical practice.

Options for Advising Families

This investigation was motivated by the need to develop best practice guidelines for parent-centered language intervention in a culturally diverse society. Given convincing, albeit partial, evidence of culture differences

in Child Directed Talk, there seem to be three available options when advising families from Chinese and perhaps other non-Western culture groups.

Find Functional Equivalents

First, when currently recommended Western practices are not found in a culture, we can attempt to identify their “functional equivalents.” An intriguing case in point concerns the common recommendation that parents read to their young children. In the present survey data, only 30% of the Chinese mothers reported frequent book reading with their preschool-age children. Similar findings have been reported by Chao (1996) and Stevenson et al. (1992). The latter authors argue that the absence of reading reflects the view that “there is little utility in attempting to get the child to develop certain kinds of behavior...before the age of reason begins” (p. 23). It also seems likely that the nature of Chinese orthography plays a role. Written Chinese is not a phonologically based system, cannot represent all features of Chinese “dialects,” and is learned through laborious schooling. These facts create a distance between the written and spoken language that might well lead Chinese parents to reserve reading for older children.

Given the rapidly growing literature that shows links between parent-child book reading and oral language development (e.g., Havlik & Cissell, 2001), the absence of this opportunity in Chinese homes could be viewed as problematic, especially for children with learning problems. The solution to this gap may lie in an analysis of the dynamics of book reading. Parent-child book reading apparently promotes language learning because it creates a context in which language is repetitive and predictable, extra-linguistic cues to meaning are available, and parents can scaffold the use of new language forms (Dale, Crane-Thoreson, Notari-Syverson, & Cole, 1996). These same conditions may be achieved without using books per se. Family photo albums or oral story telling may prove to be effective functional equivalents in cultures where parents typically do not read to young children. Well-practiced family narratives, supported by pictures, can give rise to the adult prompts and familiar meanings that seem to foster language growth.

Recommend Practices From Within the Culture

The second option is to set aside the recommendations typically found in the intervention literature and advise practices that are more consonant with the non-Western culture. As an example of this strategy, consider the common recommendation that parents use play activities as a context for language teaching—a recommendation that is motivated in part by a desire to avoid the “directiveness” of explicit speech and language lessons.

The survey data suggest that Chinese mothers might find this recommendation peculiar because they see less potential for learning in play activities. But, as reviewed above, there is also less need to avoid “directiveness” because it does not have negative connotations in the Chinese culture. Early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists may therefore wish to recommend that Chinese parents create explicit language lessons rather than embed their teaching in play.

Identify the Extraordinary

Finally, there may be occasions where the common recommendation to parents runs counter to cultural expectations, but is nevertheless necessary. Consider, for example, the use of sign systems to augment severely dysarthric or dyspraxic speech. Ninety-three percent of the Chinese mothers agreed that children should be encouraged to use words rather than gestures. Interestingly, this opinion was strongest among Chinese mothers who were seeking speech-language services for their child, implying that they would be quite reluctant to use sign systems were they to be so advised. Ritchie (2001), however, argues that the cultural determinants of childrearing beliefs can be suppressed by parents who face illness or disability in their child. In such circumstances, they become more open to the immediate advice of an expert. Educators and speech-language pathologists may help families override cultural norms (e.g., accept the use of sign) by explicitly identifying such practices as extraordinary, but important, parental responses to a child’s learning needs.

Conclusion

This project identified clear differences between Chinese and Western cultures in childrearing values and beliefs and in related maternal discourse strategies. The need remains for descriptions of those features of Child Directed Talk that are uniquely Chinese. Nevertheless, the information reported here can assist speech-language pathologists and early childhood educators to build on cultural strengths or to offer functional equivalents when Western models run counter to cultural biases. Given the complex relationships between culture-specific beliefs and childrearing practices and the growing diversity of urban society, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for professionals to fully understand the practice implications inherent in the cultures of client families. However, this initial information about Chinese culture and parent-child interaction patterns should help professionals work in partnership with Chinese families to create more effective intervention programs. The study may also provide a model for future work with other culture groups.

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Appendix. Survey Items and Instructions.

We would like to know your ideas about young children. Circle a number to indicate how much you agree with each of the statements below. Here is what the numbers mean:

- 1 = *strongly disagree* with the statement.
- 2 = somewhat *disagree* with the statement.
- 3 = unsure about the statement.
- 4 = somewhat *agree* with the statement
- 5 = *strongly agree* with the statement.

Think especially about your 2-4 year old child(ren) when you answer.

Here's an example:

	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	
	1	2	3	4	5
A. Young children should have a rest period every day.	1	2	3	4	5

If you strongly agree with this statement you would circle the number 5. If you disagree with the statement, but not very strongly, you would circle number 2.

Please give us your opinion about the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Children who spend time quietly observing tend to be smart.	1	2	3	4	5
2. It is important to find out what young children are thinking.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Parents should ask young children to repeat new words in order to help them learn to talk.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Speech is especially important because it helps young children to make friends.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Children understand some words even before they can speak.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Parents should let children experiment, even if they might make mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The proper titles for people ("Aunt" Sally) are more important to learn than the names of objects.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Parents should wait until young children ask before giving help.	1	2	3	4	5
9. It is more important for young children to speak clearly than to speak politely.	1	2	3	4	5
10. If parents use "baby talk" (like "wawa" for water, or "jamies" for pajamas) their child won't learn to speak well.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Three-year-olds are too young to help with household chores.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Young children learn best when they are given instructions.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Young children should always be encouraged to communicate with words rather than gestures.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
14. Young children learn important things while playing.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
15. When babies babble, they are trying to communicate something.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
16. Young children should be given choices instead of being told what to do.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
17. Children will learn to talk on their own, as long as they are spoken to.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
18. Young children generally like the same things as their parents.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
19. Young children should be allowed to take a turn in conversations that include adults who are not family members.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
20. Grandparents or older family members give good advice about the way that young children grow up.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

Here is a list of ways that you might talk with your young child.

Please circle a number to tell us how often you do them.

Think especially about your 2-4 year old child(ren) when you answer.

	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Very often	Almost always
21. Tell my child if s/he uses the wrong word.	1	2	3	4
22. Read a book to my child at bedtime or naptime.	1	2	3	4
23. Ignore the fact that I do not understand something my child says.	1	2	3	4
24. Follow along with my child's topic of conversation.	1	2	3	4
25. Repeat what my child says, adding new words.	1	2	3	4
26. Talk about what is going on when my child and I are playing or doing things together. <i>Example: When playing tea party, "Now, I'm pouring my tea. You're eating a tea cake. Is it good?"</i>	1	2	3	4
27. Tell my child if s/he leaves some words out of a sentence.	1	2	3	4
28. Change my words or sentence when my child does not understand me.	1	2	3	4
29. Talk with my child about what happened that day when I wasn't there. <i>Example: at preschool, or at home while I was at work.</i>	1	2	3	4
30. Use picture books or flash cards to teach my child new words.	1	2	3	4
31. Ask my child to repeat a sentence after me.	1	2	3	4
32. Ask my child to tell another family member about something that we did together.	1	2	3	4

Thank you.

Copies of this survey as translated into Chinese can be obtained by writing to the first author.