Chinese and U.S. Mothers’ Ethnotheories of Child Rearing
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Introduction
Research on Chinese and U.S. mothers often demonstrates different values in the two groups. Kim and colleagues (2013) for example identified a cluster of parental styles they called “tiger parenting,” endorsed by about 25 percent of immigrant Chinese-American parents. That style emphasized the importance of children learning at an early age, of not bringing shame to the family, and of other elements sometimes associated with the “authoritarian” parenting style (Baumrind,1966). In contrast, a “supportive” style was more “authoritative,” disciplining children through reasoning for example. Some researchers, however, have suggested that behind the apparent contrast in parenting styles, there are differences in underlying concepts, such as “training” (chiao shun 培训) in the Confucian tradition (Chao, 1994). The present study explores the coherence of different parenting concepts, or cultural models of child rearing, in Chinese and U.S. mothers’ ethnotheories (Harkness & Super, 1996).

Method
Participants were 30 Chinese mothers and 20 American mothers with children aged 2 to 20 years, all native speaker of their country’s language. Chinese mothers were from Chang Zhou, China, and were recruited to the study through personal contact and “snowball” procedures. American mothers were from Connecticut and were recruited through the database of “UCconn Kids”, supplemented with snowball methods. Mothers were given 53 3”x5” cards, each of which briefly described a parenting behavior derived from Kim et al. (2013) – see column to the left. Parents were asked to organize the cards into piles based on similarity, or ones that “go together”. Participants were asked to explain their responses and the responses were recorded for later analysis. The sorting results were pooled into a co-occurrence or similarity matrix for each culture group and subjected to multidimensional scaling (MDS). Results are shown below from a three-dimensional solution (stress=.11, China; and .12, U.S.).

Results
Key elements of “tiger parenting” as described by Kim et al. are underlined with red in the two MDS graphs below and the list to the left. It is visually evident that the items are closely related in the minds of the Chinese mothers, but not that as much in the minds of the U.S. mothers. The average standardized distance for these items is -1.5 for the Chinese mothers (that is, among their closest), and -.29 for the American mothers (or nearly average; p difference <.001, Wilcoxon).

Conclusions
These results demonstrate that Chinese and U.S. mothers organize their thinking using different concepts, or cultural models, when they think about parenting behaviors. The practices that were grouped together by the Chinese mothers correspond to those found by Kim et al. to be highly valued by the Chinese-American “tiger mothers”. Further, those behaviors are closely related to the concept of “training” discussed by Chao (1994), which prescribes strict but loving control over children’s behavior and learning. In contrast, the U.S. mothers did not organize the same parenting practices into a cohesive group, indicating they did not have such an idea in mind.

References