

# Chinese and U.S. Mothers' Ethnotheories of Child Rearing

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## Introduction

Research on Chinese and U.S. parents 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).

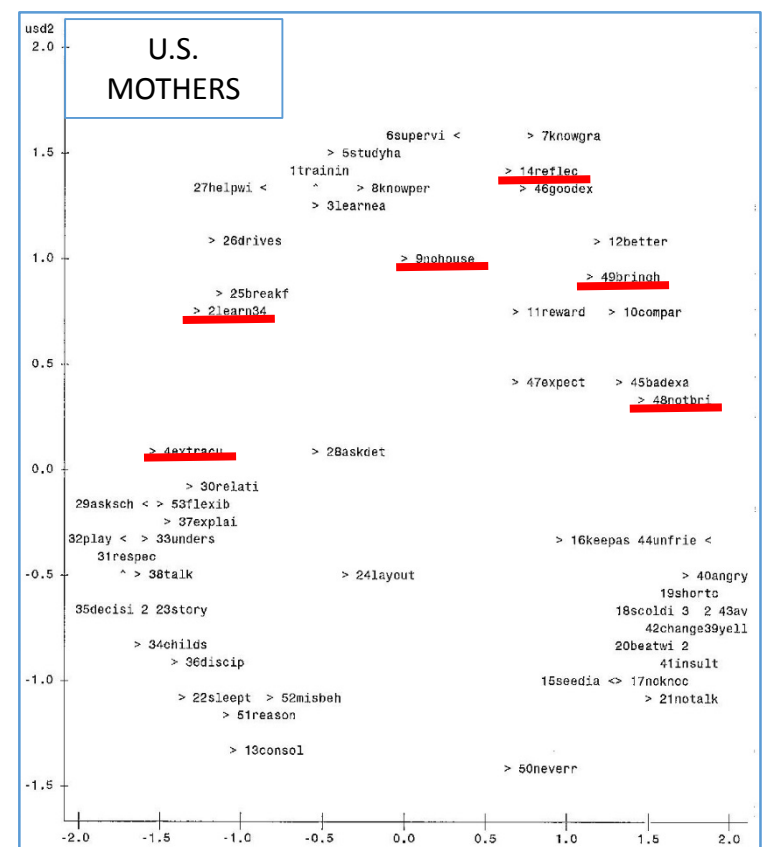
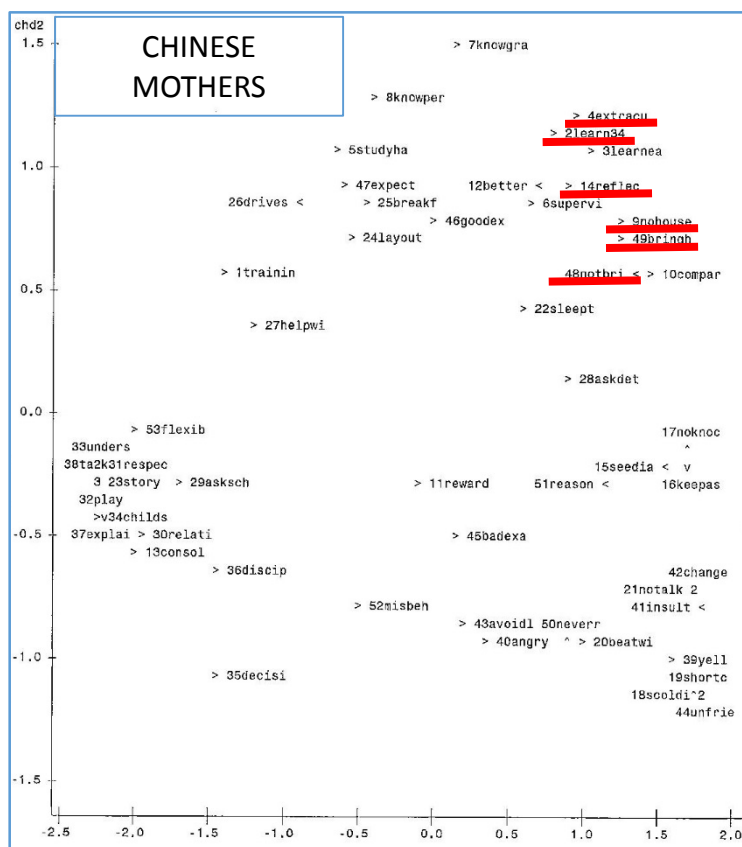
## Method

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 “UConn 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 -0.29 for the American mothers (or nearly average; *p* difference <.001, Wilcoxon).

Abbreviation	Full Text Given on Cards to Sort
1 trainin	This mother begins training as soon as her child is ready.
2 learn34	This mother starts to let her child learn different kinds of things when her child is 3~4 years old.
3 learnea	This mother lets her preschool daughter learn primary school materials and let her primary school children learn middle school materials.
4 extracu	This mother lets her son have extracurricular courses.
5 studyha	This mother wants her child to study hard.
6 supervi	This mother always supervises her son's studying.
7 knowgra	This mother always want to know the child's grades, the grades of other students, and the rank of her child in class.
8 knowper	This mother always wants to know about her child's behavior and performance in school.
9 no house	This mother believes that the main task for children is to go to school, to study. Children do not need to care about other things, such as housework.
10 compar	This mother always compares her own child with other children.
11 reward	This mother gives her son rewards if he does well on exams and give him punishment (such as cancelling a vacation trio) if he doesn't do well.
12 better	This mother want their children to be better than other children.
13 consol	This mother will console her child after he/she has been reprimanded by his father.
14 reflac	This mother believes the achievement of her child would reflect well on her.
15 seedia	This mother always wants to see her daughter's diary.
16 keepas	This mother keeps asking her son things he does not want to talk about, like the relationship with his friends.
17 noknoc	This mother goes into her daughter's room without knocking or notifying her.
18 scoldi	This mother scolds her child loudly in public for bad behavior.
19 shortc	This mother talks about the shortcomings of the her son to her friends when her son is sitting right there.
20 beatwi	This mother might use a ruler to beat her child's hand as punishment when her child makes a mistake.
21 notalk	This mother would not allow her child to talk back or question her when she scolds him/her. It her child says “No I don't” and talks back loudly, she would become more angry.
22 slept	This mother lets her daughter to sleep with her when she was young.
23 story	This mother tells her child stories before he/she goes to sleep.
24 layout	This mother would lay out the clothes for her daughter when she was young.
25 breakf	This mother gets up very early to make breakfast for her child.
26 drives	This mother gets up very early to drive children to school.
27 helpwi	This mother helps her son with his homework, checking it and helping memorize the words and readings.
28 askdet	This mother asks her child, when he/she goes out, details about who else is going, where they will go, what they will be doing, and when they will return.
29 asksch	This mother asks her child what happened in school.
30 relati	This mother asks her child about relations with friends.
31 respec	This mother respects her child's choices.
32 play	This mother plays with her child.
33 unders	This mother understands her child.
34 child	This mother asks her child's opinion before she makes a decision.
35 decisi	This mother gives reasons for decisions.
36 discipl	This mother disciplines her child through reasoning.
37 explai	This mother explains things to her child.
38 talk	This mother often talks with her child.
39 yell	This mother would shout or yell at her daughter when she makes a mistake.
40 angry	This mother gets angry when her child makes mistakes.
41 insult	This mother might insult or swear at her son when he makes a mistake.
42 change	This mother might change the subject when her son has something to say.
43 avoidl	This mother would avoid looking at her daughter if disappointed about something.
44 unfrie	This mother would become less friendly when her son does not see things in the parents' way.
45 badexa	This mother would teach her child what not to do by using examples of bad behavior in other youth.
46 goodex	This mother would teach her son by pointing out other youths that she thinks are successful.
47 expect	This mother tells her son to consider her wishes or expectations in his actions.
48 notbri	This mother tells her son that his action should not bring shame on her.
49 bringh	This mother tells her son that his actions should bring respect or honor to the family.
50 neverr	This mother would never reward a child for doing something he should do anyway.
51 reason	This mother would usually find a good reason (such as hunger or illness) when her child misbehaves.
52 misbeh	This mother thinks that when her child misbehaves, it is just a passing phase he/she will grow out of.
53 flexib	This mother thinks being flexible is really important for parenting.



## 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

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