

**High Hopes: Learning From Five Chinese Immigrant Families**

**About Their Challenges and Approaches to Home and School Involvement**

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**ABSTRACT** This qualitative case study shows how five Chinese immigrant families supported their children's academic achievement through parental involvement at home and at school. Participants believed they played an essential role in their children's education and that the parent-child relationship is paramount for learning outside school, sometimes to the exclusion of peer interaction. Data indicate that these Chinese immigrant parents had high expectations for their children's educational outcomes; in particular they believed their children must master the English language, retain or learn Mandarin, and develop a sound mathematical knowledge base. The study shows that they were highly engaged in home-based learning; they provided study areas, books, and learning materials and taught or assisted their children with all subjects but especially math and language. It also shows that these Chinese immigrant parents relied upon one another for resources and information about desirable school districts. Finally, the findings of this study call attention to the challenges and strategies of Chinese immigrant families with regard to their children's academic success, involvement at school, and home-school connections. Implications for teachers, schools, and families are also provided.

Data from the Migration Policy Institute (2012) indicate that America's four largest immigrant groups come from Mexico, India, China, and the Philippines. Chinese families often emigrate for the sake of their children's education (Chew, 2009; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Waters, 2003), and because parents are their children's first teachers, the home environment is vital in developing academic competence (Lee, 2009). Asian parents typically support their children's efforts by providing an environment conducive to academic success (Ho, 2003; G. Li, 2002; Okagaki, 2001; C. Zhang, Ollila, & Harvey, 1998). In this study the researchers examined the beliefs and efforts of five Chinese immigrant parents with regard to their children's academic achievement. The purposes of this research were (a) to understand how the five families supported their children's academic achievement through parental involvement in the home and school, (b) to help other immigrant families support their children's academic achievement, and (c) to provide suggestions for teachers who work with immigrant parents to benefit children.

A brief review of the literature shows that parental involvement in the education of children positively affects their educational outcomes (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Ho, 2003; Jeynes, 2005; X. Li, 1999; Ordonez-Jasis & Ortiz, 2006; Park, 2006; Quan & Dolmage, 2006). Christenson and Sheridan (2001) identified two dimensions of parent involvement—school- and home-based involvement—and Barnard (2004) pinpointed the following components: (a) parents' educational aspirations for their children, (b) parent-child communication, (c) the amount of home structure provided by parents, and (d) parent participation in school activities. Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, and Sandler (2007) studied parent motivation for involvement in children's education and in home-based activities, such as helping with homework, reviewing for a test, and monitoring the child's progress and found that parents' motivation for home-based involvement was higher than school-based involvement. Similarly, in the Asian context Ho (2003) found home-based involvement more popular than school-based involvement. Her research in home-school studies, conducted in China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, revealed that instead of participating and intervening in the classroom, Asian parents preferred to work with their children at home, investing additional resources and time to assure their children's academic achievement.

### **Methodology and Participants**

A qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998) was implemented to investigate how five Chinese immigrant families supported their children's academic achievement through parental involvement in both the home and school and to provide insights for teachers, school personnel,

and other immigrant families. The families share some characteristics and at the same time bring uniqueness as shown in the following descriptions of the participants and their beliefs. Data collection strategies comprised home visits, featuring informal observations, in-depth interviews, field notes and journal entries, and collection of relevant literacy documents. The first author and principal investigator, who is also a Chinese immigrant parent, gathered data from the following sources for each family over a 12-week period: (a) four interviews in participants' homes or at community locations, (b) four additional home visits to observe and document parent-child interactions, (c) photos of artifacts or documents (e.g., study areas, learning materials, homework assignments, and school information), (d) weekly involvement checklists, (e) parent-child audio teaching samples, and (f) follow up for clarity. All data were analyzed and interpreted. Collectively, multiple data sets provided valuable evidence to show how five Chinese immigrant families supported their children's academic achievement through parental involvement at home and at school. These diverse sources served to triangulate data, provide an understanding of participants' perspectives, and cross-check emerging themes (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). They also increased credibility and trustworthiness of the data and subsequent findings.

### **The Wus: Chinese Visiting Scholars**

The Wu family included Han (father), Ting (mother), and Li (daughter); they came from Shanghai, a global city, China's largest by population, and the commercial and economic center of mainland China. Shanghai has one of the best education systems in China. According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), in 2011 Shanghai students, including local and migrant children, scored highest in math, reading, and science in the world (Fong & Altbach, 2011; Mervis, 2010; Reeves, 2011). In Shanghai, Han was an associate professor of English at a university; Ting was a university lecturer in English, and their daughter Li had completed first grade and the first semester of second grade. Mainland China has enforced the one-child policy for decades (Fong & Altbach, 2011) because China ranks first in the world in population; consequently, according to a popular saying, a boy will become the family's prince, and a girl will become the family's princess. Including the Chinese parents and both sets of grandparents, six adults raise one child. With all the attention the child, nearly spoiled, is seen as an investment in the family's future and status; therefore, the pressure for both parents and the child to succeed is intense.

In the United States, both Han and Ting were visiting scholars at a university in the Midwest. Han, who came to America with daughter Li one semester earlier than his wife Ting, was a visiting scholar from January 2011 to January 2012. Shortly after their arrival in spring

2011, Han and his daughter Li adjusted to the new environment, new school, new culture, and new friends; they had to speak English in order to communicate with others in daily life and in school. Han made his daughter's schedule a priority over his scholarly research. He not only became a tutor to assist Li in adapting to her new elementary school and learning English as a second language, but he was also a home teacher, who needed to find time to teach Li language arts, mathematics, and reading in Chinese in order for his daughter to maintain knowledge and language abilities in Mandarin Chinese equal to that of her classmates in Shanghai. The Chinese education system focuses primarily on high levels of academic achievement, but in the US, schools focus on both academic success and extended involvement in extracurricular activities, such as sports or volunteer service, areas for exploration.

### **The Wangs: Immigrant Chinese Entrepreneurs**

The Wang family included Mr. Wang (father), Ying (mother), an older sister (daughter), and Bob (son). Mr. Wang's parents were Chinese immigrants living in Myanmar. As an adult Mr. Wang immigrated to Taiwan and met Ying, a Taiwanese girl. They married and had their first child, a daughter, in Taiwan. Later, Mr. Wang and his family, who had remained in Myanmar, submitted an application for the America Diversity Visa Lottery. Upon arrival in the US, Mr. Wang worked in the restaurant to earn a living, and two years later Ying and her daughter came to the US from Taiwan to reunite with her husband in San Francisco. They worked hard to integrate into American culture, learn English, and begin new lives. Soon, they had their second child, a son whom they called Bob; and Ying kept busy with two young children. She continued her life as a housewife who stayed at home and cared for their young children. They met neighbors and friends in the park and made new friends from Taiwan in the Chinese community. During her fourth year in San Francisco, Ying visited and connected with people at the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation Service Center, where she made some good friends and became involved as a member.

After six years in San Francisco, Mr. Wang and his family had the opportunity to start their own business in the Midwest, but before their move they did some research on school districts to determine which city would offer the best education for their children. After making their decision, Mr. Wang became the owner and head chef at a sushi station in an American supermarket in the Midwest. Ying, who assisted her husband at the sushi station during busy hours or the busy season, continued as the primary caregiver for their two children. Like many Chinese immigrant families, the children were the center of their parents' lives. Ying took them to extracurricular activities and assisted with her children's academic learning whenever she could.

### **The Yangs: Chinese Family in the US for International Work–Study**

Four people constituted the Yang family: Mr. Yang (father), Gui (mother), older brother (son), and Debbie (daughter). Both Mr. Yang and his wife Gui were international students from Taiwan studying at an American university through a work–study opportunity that allowed them to immigrate to the United States. They married, had two children, and remained in the US for work and for the sake of their children’s education. Mr. Yang, who worked at an international company as physical scientist, was the primary source of income for the family. In 2005, the family relocated to the Midwest for Mr. Yang’s work. They purchased a home near the families of Mr. Yang’s Chinese colleagues, who recommended the town’s fine school system. Gui became a full-time mother when her daughter turned five years of age so that she could devote full attention to her two children’s physical and psychological needs, academics, and extracurricular activities. She took them to lessons at the local community center to learn and to play with other children, believing that “sports facilitate their health and group activities promote their social interactive ability.” Gui’s first child-rearing experiences affected the way she cared for her second child; thus, Debbie engaged in the same extracurricular activities that her older brother had enjoyed. For example, when the boy took tennis lessons, Gui took him and the baby Debbie to the club, where they stayed until he finished his lesson. While they waited, Gui played games and taught Debbie numbers, the names of body parts, and so on. To save commute time and avoid the difficulty of finding another good coach or teacher, Gui let Debbie take tennis lessons there, too, when she was old enough. The siblings participated in some of the same activities: swimming and piano and violin lessons.

### **The Lees: Chinese Family in the US for International Work–Study Opportunities**

Five people constituted the Lee family: Mr. Lee (father), Mei (mother), Hua (son), younger sister (daughter), and younger brother (son). In addition, Mr. Lee’s parents and Mei’s father took turns visiting the Lee family for six months at a time, helping Mei take care of their two babies, who were a year apart. Mr. Lee and Mei were international students from China, studying at an American university, having immigrated to the United States through a work–study opportunity. After they married and had their first child, they remained in America permanently for work and for their child’s education. Mr. Lee, an associate professor in the Chemistry Department at a state university, provided the main income for the whole family.

When Mr. Lee found a faculty position in the Midwest, the family moved there. A few years later, they bought a home near Mr. Lee’s university. After their first son Hua was born, Mei became a housewife because he had allergies and asthma; so she had to spend extra time

caring for him. She read considerable information on how to take care of a child with allergies and asthma and followed advice from her parents, doctor, and friends to find the right foods for him. Mei did her best to improve his health in order to prevent his symptoms from becoming worse. She even postponed his entrance into preschool until he was four years old. He went to a half-day coop preschool, where Mei volunteered to assist with classroom activities or school events; thus, she received a tuition discount as well as supported Hua's physical needs while he adapted to his first year of preschool. In addition, Hua felt comfortable when Mei was around him at school. When Hua was nine and Mei had her second and third children, she had less energy to attend to him. She was less worried about his health and his academic study because he had learned to take care of his physical needs and did well in school. Mei put her effort into the care of her babies with the grandparents' help at home.

### **The Chens: Chinese Family in the US for International Work–Study Opportunity**

Four people constituted the Chen family: Mr. Chen (father), Yu (mother), an older brother (son), and Chris (son). Mr. Chen and Yu were born in China; he was a student, and she was a housewife raising their first son. After Mr. Chen earned his Ph.D., the Chen family immigrated to the United States as the result of a work opportunity; and they remained there permanently for work and for their children's education. Mr. Chen was employed as a material scientist; and Yu was a chemist in a laboratory. Both worked full time.

They relocated to the Midwest in 2009 because of Mr. Chen's job. They searched for a good school district, asking Chinese church friends who had also come from China. Friends recommended a few good school districts for them to evaluate as they searched for their future home. After Mr. Chen and Yu discussed the quality of the schools and the distance to their work places, they decided on a school system with a good reputation and purchased a home in an upscale community in the district. Yu had worked for years even after Chris was born. They found a Chinese family whose parents were in the US for a long visit, and the elders were willing to take care of Chris for a year. After Chris's caregivers returned to China, Mr. Chen and Yu found an American family to provide daycare until he went to preschool at age 3. At home Yu was the primary caregiver for their sons because she usually came home from work earlier than Mr. Chen. After work, he helped with the care of their two sons, so Yu could do housework and prepare meals. Mr. Chen played basketball with his sons and chess with Chris, who after lessons was almost as good as his father.

A summary of the details about these five immigrant families is provided in Table 1. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the mothers, who acted as the primary informants. Occasionally, fathers participated in some of the interviews and home visits.

Table 1

*Participant Families' Information*

Mother's name	Ting	Ying	Gui	Mei	Yu
Country	Mainland China	Taiwan	Taiwan	Mainland China	Mainland China
Mother's Age	37	42	44	38	40–50
Education Level	Master's Mainland China	High school diploma in Taiwan	3 Master's in the US	Master's in the US	Bachelor's Mainland China
Occupation in US	Visiting Scholar	Sushi Chef	Chinese Teacher	Housewife	Chemist
Father's Name	Han Wu	Mr. Wang	Mr. Yang	Mr. Lee	Mr. Chen
Father's Country	Mainland China	Myanmar Chinese	Taiwan	Mainland China	Mainland China
Father's Age	39	48	47	39	40–50
Father's Education Level	Ph.D. in Mainland China	High School Diploma in Taiwan	Ph.D. in the US	Ph.D. in the US	Ph.D. in the US
Occupation in US	Visiting Scholar in English	Sushi Chef	Physical Scientist	Chemistry Professor	Material Scientist
Reason for US Migration	Visiting scholar	Family	Work Education	Work Education	Work Education
Years residing in US	21	10	11	1	14
Focal Child's Name, Gender/Age	Li, Girl/8	Bob, Boy/9	Debbie, Girl/10	Hua, Boy/11	Chris, Boy/7
Child's Birth Country	Mainland China	US	US	US	US
Grade Completed	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 5	Grade 5	Grade 1

**School Context**

The five families in this study relied heavily on other immigrants for information on choosing high-quality schools, so it is not surprising that although they were in four different Midwest cities or towns, the schools shared similarities. First, the five schools were public; three

were in middle- to upper-income neighborhoods with 10% or less poverty in the respective district. Although the other two schools were middle- to low-income schools (42% poverty), both of them were in university towns, and the schools were university-affiliated, enrolling the children of international students, professors, and university staff; part of the poverty was the result of the poverty status of the university student families. All schools were predominantly white with one of the upper middle-income schools having a 27% minority make-up and the other two at 6% and 5% minority; the university-affiliated schools each had a 25% minority population. All schools were considered safe and in relatively low-crime areas. Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, and Simon (1997) identified six dimensions of broad family–school–community involvement, including parenting, communicating, learning at home, volunteering in school, participating in school decision-making, and collaborating with the community. The websites and newsletters of the five public schools in this study identified these dimensions as well.

Home- and school-based involvement differs by nature, so they affect children in different ways. According to Epstein (1992) “students at all grade levels do better academic work and have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved” (p. 1141). Hill and Taylor (2004) suggested that school-based involvement increases parents’ skills and knowledge to better equip them to assist in children’s learning activities.

The parents in this study would have had no personal experience with the home–school–community involvement dimensions identified by Epstein et al. in their home countries and their own schooling, but they were exposed to them through their children’s Midwestern schools. Ho’s (2003) work on Asian school systems fosters the conclusion that these parents would probably have been familiar only with the dimensions of parenting, learning at home, and receiving information from the school in a one-way communication process. How to engage in home, school, and community would have been an additional element of U.S. culture for each of the families to learn to navigate.

### **Discussion of Parents’ Beliefs and Involvement Practices**

#### **Parents’ Beliefs**

Both the literature and the multiple data sources in this study show that the beliefs and perspectives parents held on education affected their involvement. Findings demonstrate that parents with high expectations, involvement, and investment in education promoted positive educational outcomes for their children. In the homes of all five families (even the small apartments), desks, children’s books and bookshelves, pencils, and paper were available in a clearly defined and prominent child study area. For these five immigrant families, particular



attention was paid to literacy and mathematics activities to promote children's learning in the home milieu. All participants expressed a strong concern for their children's education, and enthusiastic support of their children's educational learning was observed. These Chinese immigrant parents believed that they played important roles in promoting their children's academic achievement.

**Academic achievement.** All parent participants expressed a strong concern for their children's academic achievement, especially building language and literacy skills as the prerequisite for a solid foundation in all subjects. Four of the five families explicitly stated "high expectations" as reflected in practice and in grades, and the fifth parent strongly implied this. Ting, her husband Han, Gui, and Mei said they expected their children's report cards to contain straight As.

Han said, "I hope Li's report card has all As according to her effort and ability. We will help her as much as she needs and we can."

Ting stated, "I have high expectation for Li because I invest time and am very involved in her learning. But now, we try to convey our expectations and try to be flexible in setting goals for her according to her natural learning pace."

Gui indicated that her son is a straight A student and that her expectations for her daughter included straight As, too.

Mei said, "All As. I set a goal for him to forge ahead, and he can do it."

Yu said, "I have high hopes for my sons; we want them to be high achievers."

Ying was the only one who did not directly state high expectations, but she said, "The higher grade is better, but I will not push them." When asked about her expectations for her children's academic achievement, she answered:

I hope they will do well in their studies and get at least OK grades. Neither my husband nor I have higher education, so the degree to which we can assist our children in their learning is limited. I told my children, if you have any problem in your studies, you have to tell me because I may not aware of what problems you may have. When you come to me with a problem, if I do not know how to solve it, I will try to find help for you. I do not want to receive phone calls from school because of their poor grades or behavior. They must maintain at least B. If I see a C, I will talk to them and ask whether they are having trouble and whether they need help. If they can improve, that's great; but sometime they can't, so I will not push them too much!

During the time of the visit at which Ying stated the above, Bob received his report card; he earned all As. She had not demanded straight As from Bob, but he may have inferred that she

had indeed done so; he understood what was expected. In addition, Bob's parents were the only ones without advanced degrees; in fact, they were the only entrepreneurial family in this study. Thus, they may have understood success in terms of entrepreneurship in the US.

All participants indicated the high value they placed on education in various ways. Parents viewed their responsibilities as crucial to the success of their children and played active roles in guiding and scaffolding their academic learning. They hoped their children would gradually build skills for their future academic advancement and career choices. Ting and Han, Gui, and Mei expressed high expectations for their children's academic achievement indicated by their desire for straight As. Yu hoped Chris achieved above most of his classmates. Ying hoped Bob earned at least a B average, yet Bob earned straight As during the time of data collection. Participants valued their children's exploration of academic resources and pushed practice for a strong academic foundation. The evidence in this study fortified Zhou's (1997) conclusion that Chinese parents typically try to do their best to involve themselves and invest in their children because of the belief that hard work, not simply intelligence, accomplishes or contributes to academic success. Gui valued academic resources, believing "the more the better." Ting and Han believed putting effort in the right content areas and managing time wisely would enhance Li's academic performance "in the long run." Mei knew Hua well and believed that pushing him further would help him realize his potential. Ying believed regular extra practice would enhance Bob's reading comprehension. Yu encouraged Chris to increase the time he spent on reading and studying academic materials. Two parents believed that to be well-educated is to become good people. They tried to do their best to fulfill their children's educational needs and believed their children were capable of doing better if parents encouraged and pushed them forward.

These parent participants viewed mathematics as an important subject to learn well from the outset and voiced confidence in teaching and supporting their children's learning of mathematics. All five participant families provided regular extra mathematics practice for their children when they were young. Han and Ting focused on Li's homework from school and emphasized English, Mandarin Chinese, and mathematics. Ting said that as long as Li performed well on mathematics at home, she would do well at school because Chinese mathematics materials covered more and in greater depth than U.S. schools at the same grade level. Ying provided extra mathematics practice for her children two to three days per week. Gui believed that children could progress rapidly in mathematical skills through much practice and with good teaching. When her children were young, she taught them Mandarin Chinese language and literacy and mathematics at home, addition and subtraction when they were four years old. Hua began as an average ESL student, but by the time he was in fourth grade, he was

in advanced classes in both reading and mathematics; as soon as he came home from school, Mei had him work on homework first, completing 10 extra mathematics questions per day. So that Chris could practice and master numeracy skills, two or three times per week Yu or Mr. Chen gave him extra mathematics questions or workbook practice, which was more difficult than what the teacher taught. Yu also bought sets of age-appropriate basic skills or mathematics workbooks for Chris to work on during summer vacation.

These parents also had high aspirations for their children's literacy in English, which they highly valued because they believed languages served as resources. Although parents were unable to teach their children English, they supported learning it (a) for academic achievement and social success and (b) for connection with the American and global society. All participant parents emphasized the acquisition of English language and literacy as essential for immigrant families' integration into American society (D. Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). Except for the family who returned to live in China, the rest of the immigrant parent participants strongly recognized the immediate need and impact of mastering English language and literacy as essential for their children's integration into American society and acquisition of all the educational opportunities it offered.

**Bilingualism.** All families deemed bilingualism highly desirable for themselves and their children. Ling reflected on the adults' reasons:

Listening and speaking are important because you must communicate with others, especially for us; we need to communicate with our customers. Reading and writing are also important for students; for us as parents, we have to read and understand many written communications sent home from school in order to respond. If I have a chance to go to school in the future, I will attend ESL classes to improve my English, especially reading.

Han valued both languages and hoped Li would achieve balanced bilingualism in Mandarin Chinese and English. He said, "The environment and input are two important factors that impact language learning." He, too, recognized that after they returned to China, Li's Mandarin Chinese would certainly improve more rapidly than her English. Both parents tried to assist Li in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English so that her language skills remained above those of her peers in China. For Han and Ting, having balanced competence in Mandarin Chinese and English was essential for them and for Li.

Ying believed that Mandarin Chinese and English were valuable to her children, yet English had greater importance than Mandarin Chinese in certain situations. Ying said:

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With regard to Mandarin Chinese, first, Bob is Chinese. If you are Chinese, you must speak Mandarin Chinese. And your parents can speak only Mandarin Chinese. With regard to English, we live in America, where English is a dominant language. And you need English to keep up with schoolwork. If you are bilingual, you will have more and better job offers. I told my children I had to work to help my family and did not have the time to study hard in school. But I told them that at one point, I put effort into studying and went to the library to study and took notes until very late. I just want him to have a better life in the future.

Gui valued both Mandarin Chinese and English and wanted her children to learn them for several reasons. She said:

First, we are Chinese and our native language is Mandarin Chinese; therefore, my children absolutely cannot say they do not know Mandarin Chinese. Second, all our families and relatives are in Taiwan, so when they visit, they must be to speak Mandarin Chinese with them. Third, Mandarin Chinese is very popular and much in demand now. American teachers who knew we speak Mandarin Chinese to our children at home encouraged me to insist my children continue to learn Mandarin Chinese.

Gui further explained she believed that children could progress rapidly in mathematical skills through much practice and with good teaching, but improving in language in a short time was difficult, especially written language; so she strongly emphasized the importance of reading and writing in English over mathematics. The reasons that Gui valued English are shown in the following comment:

We live in the United States, so no question about how important it is to learn and use English for academic achievement and social success. To survive in American society, it is very important to learn English well and master it for upward social mobility. I am not worried if they are not in mathematics classes for the gifted. But I would if their English reading and writing would not allow placement in advanced classes. The higher the grade they are in, the more difficult their English classes will be; and in the long term, we will not be able to help them with their learning of English. Also they cannot improve their English skills in a short time as they can in mathematics.

In contrast with other subjects, Gui emphasized her children's English reading and writing abilities; and she hoped they could do better in these areas.

Mei adhered to her plan to have Hua learn the Mandarin Chinese language and acquire literacy until he reached a level deemed acceptable by her, one at which his knowledge would be permanent. She said:

When children learn a language until age 3 to 5—even if their language is fluent—once they stop studying it, they will eventually forget that language totally. But if children learn one language from the time they are young until age 15 to 16, they can listen, speak, read newspapers, and write some simple passages; then they won't forget that language because they internalized it.

All participants encouraged bilingualism in their children for economic possibilities and family communication and respect.

### **Parental Home- and School-Based Involvement**

The findings of this study support Ho (2003), who showed home-based involvement to be more popular than school-based involvement among Asian parents. Her research was done in the Asian context with home-school studies conducted in China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan; she showed that her participants invested additional resources and time at home to assure their children's academic achievement instead of participating and intervening in their classrooms. Respect for teachers as professionals, as compared to parents as teachers, was evident in Ho's research and accordingly, Asian parents valued education and showed a high regard for teachers. From an Asian cultural perspective, school and home have different functions; the school is responsible for developing children's academic and social skills, and parents are responsible for supporting the school's role and providing a healthy emotional environment.

The five immigrant families in this study believed that (a) the school cultural practices in the US differed from those in their respective home countries and (b) their limited English restricted their school involvement in the US. The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (2004) identified limited English language and literacy ability, economic disadvantage, and racial or ethnic minority background as barriers to parental involvement in their children's schooling. Complicating this statement are findings from several researchers (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Moles, 1993) who showed that reduced contact by immigrant families with limited English can be perceived by the school personnel as lack of interest in the children's academics. Lightfoot (1987) expanded this deficit view, noting that a consequence of perceiving parents in this manner leads to an inaccurate stereotype that is projected onto the students along with a lowering of expectations; these beliefs are perpetuated and may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Respect for the teacher continued even when these parents observed openness in their children's schools for some parents and limited access for themselves. Thus, all participant parents in this study engaged in home-based more than school-based involvement.

Ting and Han described schools in China, where parents were unwelcome in the

classroom. This might explain Ho's (2003) conclusion that home-based involvement is more popular than school-based involvement in the Asian context. After arriving in the United States, they found their new country differed from China, so they tried to be involved in Li's school.

Ying had limited English language and literacy; consequently, she hesitated to become involved in her children's schools. She confessed:

One time during a pregnant check-up at my doctor office in San Francisco [a few months after she immigrated to the United States], I was so nervous when I saw someone come toward me who looked to chat that I took cellphone and pretend I was talking to avoid embarrassing English.

This continued to be her stance with school involvement and parent-teacher conferences, which she felt she needed to attend. Yu was a full-time employee, and time was a barrier to her involvement; but she was free for a few months when she was between jobs and able to involve herself at the school. Gui and Mei tried to become involved in the school as much as they could as housewives.

All parents in the study spoke of involvement in schools, indicating to their children that they cared about their learning in school and that the children felt happy and perhaps proud when their parents were involved in school. For example, Gui went to Debbie's school to share Chinese New Year; she prepared cultural materials and brought her Chinese cooking pot to the classroom. She shared a festival story and taught Chinese words and even helped students make dumplings while Debbie served as her assistant. After returning home that day, Debbie told Gui that her classmates had enjoyed her visit; Gui felt Debbie was confident and also recognized the value of the ability to speak Chinese. Gui's hard work was rewarded with Debbie's smile and her positive attitude toward the Mandarin Chinese language.

Ying and Gui, Chinese immigrant mothers in the US approximately 10 and 11 years, respectively, differed in their views on involvement at school, showing the individuality and disposition of each mother. Ying remembered studying English by herself at home after she arrived in San Francisco, memorizing the dialogue from an old English conversation book and the definitions of all words new to her. After Ying had lived in the US for 11 years, she said:

In the United States, an English environment, I learned English naturally. You eventually learn certain things after coming in contact with them many times. For example, I read the children's school news, and if there were words I did not know, I checked the dictionary or asked my daughter. At work, when I talked to American colleagues, if they did not understand what I said, I tried to explain to them what I meant. Sometime to confirm that they understood what I meant, they rephrased what I had said and repeated it back to me. That way I learned the phrase an American would use. Learning English this

way was totally different from the way we learned English in Taiwan.

In this study all participants appreciated parent–teacher conferences. They asked teachers for information about school literacy resources and activities that they could use for practice at home to enhance their children’s reading and writing to connect home–school literacy practices. For example, to promote the development of Gui’s children’s English written literacy, she asked every teacher whom she met at parent–teacher conferences, “How is my child’s reading and writing? Because English is not our native language, how can I assist my child to do better in English reading and writing?” Teachers always answered that her child was doing fine. Still, Chinese parents were very concerned about their children learning English, feeling partially useless and lacking confidence to teach their child English at the prescribed grade level. They were ready to be proactive but did not receive the direction they wanted. Because their confidence in math was stronger, they believed they could teach the child at home to excel in that subject. Exemplifying the fears of these participants, Yu told the story of a Chinese American girl who immigrated to the US when she was in elementary school:

This girl is [now] a student at MIT. Both her Mandarin Chinese and English language and literacy are excellent. She earned perfect scores on the SAT, and she had a high GPA. She returned home for the holidays, and she told her mother that she found out her English was still not as good as that of her American classmates. She was nervous and had difficulty handling her schoolwork. She had to work so hard, reading a lot and spending more time studying, but her classmates seemed to read faster and write more quickly than she did.

Her mother shared her daughter’s experience to let other mothers know that Chinese parents were not able to scaffold their children’s English learning as American parents could; she advised them not to focus on Mandarin Chinese too much but to attend to their children’s English language and literacy development.

Even though the participants had limited English ability and time constraints, they accepted invitations to fund raising events, volunteered in the library, and attended special classroom activities. In addition, some families volunteered to share their culture, language, and the traditional food associated with Chinese festivals; however, none of the families believed that they could participate as English-speaking families did as classroom assistants and tutors. School involvement of this nature, though desired, was not feasible for them. Perhaps as a result of naïveté or lack of knowledge, the teachers and school personnel limited the involvement of Chinese immigrant parents, who noted that a different stance was taken with native English speakers. Given that teachers did not understand how to give specific reassurance to parents about their children’s performance in terms they could understand or instructions on how to

engage in meaningful involvement, school personnel may have actually hindered the families' on-going engagement. Possible strategies to address this problem appear in Implications below.

These five families believed to varying degrees that home involvement practices revolved around the parent–child relationship and structured lessons; the importance of learning from peers was minimized even though their own language learning experiences were furthered by nonstructured learning opportunities. For example, Ying said, “In the United States, an English environment, I learned English naturally”; yet some parent–child conflicts arose from restraining children from natural English learning in favor of family activities or structured activities. For example, Ting and Hua’s family once spent an entire day at the zoo, and when they returned home that night, Li saw neighborhood children going to swim and wanted join them. Her father told her, “No, we are so tired because we played the whole day at the zoo.” Li replied unhappily to her father, “Why can she go and I cannot?” That night, Ting and Han reflected on this incident. They thought maybe they should have let her go swimming because it was her own body, and she might have known better how tired she was. Ting and Han’s overall intention was to protect Li and to keep her from developing unacceptable behaviors. After a few similar incidents, Ting and Han tried to see life from Li’s perspective, and they gradually let her have more control. They tried hard to persuade Li to continue certain routines even when she resisted, such as regular piano practice and routinely memorizing Chinese classics; but Ting indicated their primary goal was for Li to become a good and healthy person as well as achieve academically.

In addition, Chinese immigrant parents were affected by the uproar that arose in the US after Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* was published in 2011. When asked about the book, Gui explained she was not as strict as a tiger mother, but she was not at all indulgent either. For example, she allowed a rare sleepover only if it served a particular purpose, such as work for a school project; and she permitted her son to have a farewell sleepover before they moved. She described herself as a “cat mother” because the cat and tiger are from the same family, but the cat is less ferocious than the tiger.

This strict yet less ferocious approach was evident in all of these families. Mei discussed how she educated Hua, whom she described as “a boy who does not focus easily, so he is not effective in studying alone.” In her estimation, if she pushed him, he moved one step; if she did not push, he did not move. Mei said:

Because of the way Hua acted, I had to be strict with him. I did not require my child to become Number 1 at school. If he understood or mastered the subjects, that was fine; but if he was lazy and showed little interest in studying, I had to be stricter with him so he would learn.



Mei said that she had Hua work on homework first, completing 10 extra mathematics questions per day; they adapted the amount of Chinese homework he was required to do to his various lessons and practices. If he finished his work and wanted to play computer games for fun within the time limits Mei set for him, he was allowed to do so. Mei thought she was strict about important things, but she noted that he could self-manage many things, too.

In sum, this sample of school involvement shows that the participants believed the school prevented them, perhaps unintentionally, from achieving the school relationship they desired.

### **Findings and Implications**

Five Chinese immigrant families and their beliefs and practices with regard to facilitating their children's academic learning through home and school involvement were described in this study. It provides insightful information important (a) for Chinese immigrant families for their own self-reflection, (b) for other immigrants, and (c) for teachers and administrators in U.S. schools.

First, these Chinese immigrant parents believed they played essential roles in their children's education; furthermore, they believed the parent-child relationship superseded—sometimes to the exclusion of—spontaneous or planned peer relationships. Second, the parents had high academic expectations for their children's educational outcomes; they especially believed their children needed to master the English language (verbal and literacy), learn or retain Mandarin, and build a sound mathematical knowledge base. Third, the study shows that these parents were highly engaged at home, providing study areas, books, and learning materials; and teaching and assisting with all subject learning but especially with math and language. As part of family involvement, they paid daily attention to English language learning (homework and reading), scheduled learning or participation in sports and music lessons, family or free time, and learning or retaining Chinese, particularly at Saturday School. Fourth, this study shows that Chinese immigrant parents rely on one another for information about desirable school districts, employment, and places of worship in order to preserve their own beliefs and cultural practices while navigating U.S. education and cultural practices. Finally, it shows that these parents responded to invitations from the school for involvement and learned that they were more welcome in schools in their new country than in their home countries. As a result, some of the participants volunteered to share aspects of Chinese culture in school and sought on-going involvement similar to that of nonimmigrant parents, but the traditional Chinese respect for teachers as professionals may have limited their roles in the school.

This study provides implications for teachers and schools by calling attention to the challenges Chinese immigrant families faced and the strategies they used to ensure their

children's academic success and their own school involvement and home-school connections. Possible strategies for involving Chinese immigrant parents in schools and classrooms include the following:

1. Continue on-going involvement in cultural and educational events. Typical school events, such as conferences, open houses, and celebratory or cultural programs, can serve as introductions to ongoing relationships in the school; but continued invitations or welcoming from the teacher are necessary until a pattern is established.
2. Establish "conversation partners" between families who speak Chinese or other languages and families who are native speakers of English. This could be established as a weekly after-school activity for families on school grounds to further the English-speaking skills they so strongly desire while sharing their home language. This extends the engagement beyond parent-teacher to parent-parent and promotes sociocultural processes beneficial to all participants in the conversation partner exchange. This concerted effort could lead to broader authentic experiences and relationships between immigrant and American-born families. The school could serve as a language hub.
3. Show Chinese immigrant families that high involvement in the home-learning environment may further isolate their children from the out-of-school culture that would further language understanding, usage, and fluency that the families are at home striving to learn and teach. To support this information, interesting family educational and recreational activities connected to the school could be offered. Information about purposeful study habits and academic practices could also be shared with U.S.-born families.
4. Consider teachers as learners and use faculty meetings to ask teachers to generate ideas and opportunities to engage families of the children in their classroom and the school. All families and children could be asked for input. Roundtable events could generate ideas to pilot in a specific school and then share the results with other schools.

The findings of this study call attention to the strong need for home-school connections and parent-teacher cooperation among Chinese immigrant families. All participating mothers were actively interested in both home- and school-based involvement; in reality, they experienced greater involvement at home than at school. Although parents' desire for home- and school-based involvement was substantiated in Ho's work in Asia, whether or not her conclusion is universal is less clear. These families wanted to be part of the school and to have real interactions in the same way they perceived nonimmigrant families had. Awareness of the

desires of at least these five families may encourage teachers to open themselves to the idea that Chinese immigrant parents are interested in authentic, school-based involvement for the sake of their children's achievement.

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