

Cultural Values and Educational Priorities: A Comparative Analysis of Chinese, Korean, and US Family Dynamics

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Abstract

Cultural values play an essential role in shaping family life and education, yet few studies directly compare Chinese, Korean, and American cultural values simultaneously. With a growing Chinese population within Korea and the US, this comparative study gains significance as cultural values influence children's development, parental expectations, and immigrant adaptation in multicultural communities. This review examines the similarities and differences across these three contexts with China at the center. Both Chinese and Korean cultures draw from Confucianism, which stressed filial piety and collectivism. However, Chinese families viewed education mainly as a path to financial security and family honor, while Korean families placed greater emphasis on social prestige and invested heavily in private tutoring. In contrast, American culture is based on individualism and the pursuit of personal achievement. Studies on Chinese immigrants in the United States showed that maintaining connections to Chinese heritage while adapting to American society supported psychological well-being and reduced family conflict. Through comparative analysis, this article highlights shared traditions and key differences in educational priorities and family dynamics, contributing to a deeper understanding of how cultural values influence educational and family experiences.

Keywords: Cross-cultural comparison, Educational expectations, Family dynamics, Acculturation

1. Introduction

Modern societies, such as China, Korea, and the United States (US), are increasingly multicultural, with diverse cultural backgrounds living and interacting in the same communities. These cultural differences influence important aspects of life, including education and family relationships. Understanding how different societies approach these areas is essential for cross-cultural communication and aids institutions with guidelines in supporting individuals to adapt to new environments.

This study examines China, South Korea, and the US, focusing on how each culture views education and family. China and Korea share Confucian traditions that emphasize collectivism, filial piety, and respect for elders. In contrast, the US is shaped by individualism, personal autonomy, and the idea of the American Dream (Chen & Uttal, 1988; Lihua, 2013). These cultural frameworks lead to distinct approaches to raising children, setting educational goals, and defining family roles. Migration further highlights these cultural contrasts. The Chinese immigrant population is the largest Asian group in the US (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). As of 2023, immigrants from China numbered about 2.4 million in the US, making them one of the fastest-growing foreign-born groups (Migration Policy Institute, 2025). In South Korea, a significant portion of the foreign resident population is also Chinese (Korean Immigration Service, 2024). The growing presence of Chinese immigrants in both countries underscores the practical necessity of understanding how cultural values shape family life and education.

Despite the population increase, many Chinese immigrants and international students encounter significant adaptation challenges. Studies in the US have documented that Chinese immigrants often report high levels of

acculturative stress, which correlates with depressive symptoms and psychological distress (Liang, et al., 2020). Chinese international students face academic difficulties even in circumstances where social adaptation is relatively smooth, and psychological adaptation can lag behind sociocultural adjustment (Zhang, 2022). Similarly, research in South Korea demonstrates that Chinese students and immigrants experience cultural adjustment stress that negatively affects university life adaptation even with a shared cultural context. (Kim & Lee, 2021). These findings point out the need to understand the interplay between cultural values, education, and family dynamics.

Previous research has explored the experiences of Chinese and Korean immigrants, especially regarding their adaptation to US culture. Zhou and Kim (2006) showed that Confucian values, such as filial piety and parental expectations, play a significant role in educational achievement among Asian American families. Bui (2008) found that conflicts between immigrant generations can affect family life and behavior. Maintaining connections to one's heritage culture while adapting to a new society supports psychological well-being. Most earlier studies focused on one or two cultures at a time, examining Chinese, Korean, and US separately. As a result, there is limited research that directly compares all three cultures together (Lieber et al., 2004). This gap makes it difficult to understand how shared Confucian values are applied differently in East Asian societies, or how these values compare to those in the US.

This study aims to address this gap by comparing Chinese, Korean, and US cultural values, focusing on education and family. Acculturation theory and ethnic identity development models are used to explore how individuals manage both heritage and host cultural values, especially in educational contexts (Chae & Foley, 2010). These theories help explain how immigrants maintain parts of their cultural identity while adapting to new surroundings. By analyzing these three cultures together with Chinese culture in the center, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how both shared and contrasting values shape education, family life, and adaptation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chinese Culture

Chinese culture is deeply rooted in traditional values such as filial piety and collectivism which stress family loyalty, respect for elders, and prioritizing the family over individual desires (Lihua, 2013). Although individualism is increasing among younger generations born after China's economic reforms and modernization efforts (Chen, 2015; Wang & Wang, 2024), traditional values still play a central role in daily life. Chinese parents often devote substantial time and resources to their children's education, reflecting a belief that academic achievement brings family honor and social mobility (Chen & Uttal, 1988).

Confucianism supports these values through its emphasis on rituals and social order, teaching proper behavior and respect for authority in the family, workplace, and society as key to social harmony (Li & Wu, 2022). Hierarchical relationships are important, and each family member is expected to help maintain family stability (Zhang, 2017). A sense of moral duty is present in daily life. From an early age, children learn to put the family's needs first and to develop humility, diligence, and respect (Lieber et al., 2004). Academic and career success are not viewed only as individual accomplishment but also as a method to help the family's well being, reinforcing intergenerational responsibility and collective achievement. Filial piety guides personal behavior and family life, intertwined with concepts of face, harmony, and personal relationships. Children are expected to respect, obey, and care for their parents throughout life by supporting parents in old age and making choices that considers the family as a whole (Lieber et al., 2004).

Collectivism means that family or community needs come before individual wishes. In Chinese society, family is a core social unit. A person's actions can affect the family's reputation and success or failure is rarely viewed solely as an individual matter (Li & Wu, 2022). While the younger generation may place more value on personal happiness, loyalty and responsibility to the family remain strong (Chen, 2015).

These cultural values are also reflected in China's education system and reforms. Historically, the imperial examination system bolstered the centrality of academic success as a pathway to social mobility and filial duty (Li, 2001). In modern times, policies such as the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) prioritize merit-based results, parental investment, and societal contribution (Li & Wu, 2022). Recent reform, including moral education

added within the curriculum, standardized tests, and expanded access to higher education, reflect enduring Confucian values linking personal achievement to family and community (Ministry of Education, 2020).

2.2 South Korean Culture

South Korean culture is deeply rooted in collectivist values, particularly in how family and education are viewed as interconnected tools for achieving success and maintaining social standing. South Korean families prioritize shared accomplishments that reflect the family's dedication and values, rather than purely individual goals (Sleziak, 2013). Education plays a crucial role in this dynamic, serving as a pathway not just for the individual but for the entire family. South Korean children are taught that academic success reflects both their personal abilities and their family's efforts. Parents invest heavily in their children's education, enrolling them in private tutoring programs known as hagwons to enhance academic performance (Park et al., 2011). This investment is both financial and time-intensive. Surveys and reviews reveal that approximately three quarters to four fifths of Korean primary and secondary students use private tutoring. Nearly 80% of students were reported to take private education as of 2023 and a government survey in 2025 showed that 47.6% of children under the age of six attend cram schools. (NCEE, 2023; Financial Times, 2025).

The extreme emphasis on education stems from the intense competition shaped by structural features of labor and university markets. Admission to a small range of elite universities and the narrow concentration of desirable jobs in a few top firms result in steep returns to excelling exam performance. Added with Korea's relative evaluation system which promotes competition with peers, demand for extra tutoring as well as the stress and burden on students and their families have intensified (OECD, 2024). Government attempts to reform the system, such as moderating "killer questions" on the Suneung exam, have had limited effects due to existing social incentives (Time, 2023).

South Korean society places notable emphasis on hierarchical relationships and proper social conduct. Confucianism has been credited with fostering strong family bonds, respect for education, and a sense of collective responsibility (Hahm and Guterman, 2001). The concept of *chemyeon* (face; *체면* in Korean) plays a crucial role in social interactions, with individuals striving to maintain their social reputation through proper behavior in public settings (Kim, 2000). In practice, *chemyeon* helps explain why parents enroll their children in multiple hagwons. Comparative in nature, when neighbors, coworkers, or relatives compare children's achievements, parents are pressured to preserve family honor and avoid public embarrassment. For example, a parent in a Seoul neighborhood may place extra math and English hagwons for the child after seeing friends' children being accepted to a top high school - partly to avoid losing face in the community and partly to keep up with social expectations (Kim, 2018; Korea Herald, 2024)

Likewise, parental support often extends beyond emotional encouragement to active involvement in their children's educational and career choices. Park et al. (2011) found that Korean parents frequently guide their children toward prestigious and financially secure professions. These career paths are not seen as personal preferences but as fulfilling a duty to uphold the family's reputation. This contrasts with cultures that emphasize individualism, where personal happiness and self-defined goals are often prioritized over familial expectations. The collective approach to education and success also influences the relationships between parents and children. Achievements are not only a source of pride for the individual but also a testament to the family's collective values and efforts (Hahm & Guterman, 2001). Children are expected to reciprocate this investment through filial piety, maintaining strong family bonds, and contributing to the family's welfare. This reciprocal relationship reinforces the interdependence that is central to South Korean familial dynamics.

2.3 United States (US) Culture

The US is a culturally diverse nation shaped by centuries of immigration, resulting in a mix of ethnicities, religions, and languages (Schudson, 2004). Despite this diversity, core US values such as individualism, freedom, and equality are widely shared. The idea of the American Dream is central to US culture. It promotes the idea that through hard work and determination, anyone can achieve a better life. This ideal has drawn people worldwide to the US in search of opportunity.

Family is important in US society, but family relationships often reflect individualism. Family members are seen as a support system, but there is a strong focus on personal independence. According to Chen and Uttal (1988), US parents encourage independence and self-expression in their children from an early age. Adolescents are taught to make decisions that align with their own goals, even if these differ from family expectations. This approach creates a family environment where mutual respect is valued over strict hierarchy.

Education is a key example of how individualism shapes family life in the US. Many families see education as a way for children to achieve their own goals and pursue the American Dream (Bui, 2008). Parents may support higher education financially, but children are expected to take responsibility for their academic choices and future careers. This reflects the cultural priority placed on self-reliance and personal achievement. The US educational system is decentralized, with significant control at the state and local levels. This creates diversity in curriculum and teaching methods. Unlike more standardized systems, US schools emphasize individualized learning, student-centered teaching, and the development of critical thinking skills. Extracurricular activities are also valued as important for developing well-rounded individuals (Lareau, 1989). While families support their children, there is an expectation that individuals will ultimately take ownership of their achievements (Foner, 1997). This focus on individual responsibility and self-determination is seen in many aspects of US life, including education, career choices, and personal relationships.

2.4 Similarities and Differences Between the Cultures: Chinese and South Korean Culture

Chinese and South Korean cultures share considerable similarities due to their common Confucian heritage, yet they also display notable differences in how these values are expressed. Both cultures emphasize collectivism, where family needs often take precedence over individual desires. This collectivist orientation creates strong family bonds and a sense of mutual obligation that extends across generations (Chen & Uttal, 1988; Kim, 2000). In both cultures, filial piety guides behavior, and respect for elders is considered essential for social harmony. Despite these shared foundations, the cultures differ in the extent and social consequences of competition.

Chinese families view education primarily as a path to financial security, upward mobility, and family honor, with academic achievement reflecting well on the family and providing long term stability (Lieber et al., 2004). The emphasis leans towards stable futures, secure occupation, and fulfilling traditional obligations, and though competition exists, social pressure is often framed within the family unit rather than constant peer comparison.

In contrast, Korean families place greater emphasis on social prestige and reputation, with parents investing heavily in hagwons to enhance their children's competitive advantage (Park et al., 2011). This difference reflects Korea's intense social competition, where educational credentials strongly influence social status. As falling behind peers is seen as a threat to the family's social reputation, children are placed under more severe competition.

The concepts of “face” further illustrate the distinction. Both Chinese *mianzi* and Korean *chemyeon* involve managing reputation and social harmony but *chemyeon* operate in a more comparative, performance-based manner (Kim, 2000). For example, a child with academic achievement not only elevates the family but also affects the social network linked to other families with children. On the other hand, *mianzi* is related with hierarchical relationships and moral conduct rather than competitive benchmarking (Li & Wu, 2022).

Family dynamics show both similarities and differences. In both cultures, parents are actively involved in their children's education and career choices. However, Korean parents often guide their children toward the most prestigious professions that will enhance the family's social standing (Park et al., 2011), while Chinese parents may emphasize careers that provide financial stability and honor the family name (Chen & Uttal, 1988). Both cultures expect children to reciprocate parental investment through filial piety and contributing to family welfare, creating a reciprocal relationship that reinforces interdependence (Hahm & Guterman, 2001; Lieber et al., 2004). Yet, whereas Korean achievement validates family reputation publicly, Chinese achievement accomplishes moral and familial duty more privately.

As both societies undergo rapid industrialization and economic development, transitioning from agricultural societies to urban, technology-driven economies (Chen, 2015; Kim, 2000), they face similar challenges in balancing traditional values with changing social norms. Younger generations in both societies increasingly value personal

happiness and individual choice (Chen, 2015), yet family obligations and collective achievement remain important. This creates a dynamic tension as both cultures adapt to global influences while maintaining their distinctive cultural identities. Chinese and Korean cultures represent variations on shared Confucian principles, with differences in how these values are prioritized and expressed in daily life, education, and family relationships. Understanding these nuances helps explain the unique challenges and opportunities faced by individuals navigating between these cultural frameworks.

Table 1. Comparative cultural values between China and South Korea.

Category	China	South Korea
Collectivism	Family-centered; emphasizes duty, harmony, and stability	Competition-centered; emphasizes reputation, ranking, and social comparison
Educational Focus	Academic success for family honor and financial security	Academic success for social prestige and visible status
Competition Level	High, but mainly within family expectations	Extremely intense; driven by peer comparison and societal pressure
Parental Strategy	Support for stable, reputable careers	Heavy investment in hagwons to outperform other families
Face Concept	<i>Mianzi</i> : preserving dignity through proper behavior and hierarchy	<i>Chemyeon</i> : maintaining face through public performance and outcompeting peers
Career Expectations	Stability and financial contribution to family	Prestige and social ranking through elite career paths
Overall Pattern	Collectivism = duty + harmony	Collectivism = competition + status

2.5 Similarities and Differences Between the Cultures: Chinese and US Culture

Chinese and US cultures represent distinct approaches to family dynamics, education, and individual development. While both cultures value family as a foundation for social structure, they differ fundamentally in how they conceptualize the relationship between individuals and their families. Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, where family needs often take precedence over individual desires (Li & Wu, 2022). This orientation fosters strong interdependence and mutual obligation across generations (Chen & Uttal, 1988). Personal achievements are seen as family achievements, and success or failure reflects on the entire family. Filial piety guides behavior, and respect for elders and family harmony are central values (Lieber et al., 2004).

In contrast, US culture places greater emphasis on individualism, autonomy, and self-reliance. US parents encourage independence and self-expression in their children from an early age, viewing these qualities as essential for success (Chen and Uttal, 1988). Adolescents are expected to make decisions aligned with their own goals, even when these differ from family expectations. The concept of the American Dream further reinforces these values by emphasizing that personal effort can lead to success regardless of background (Schudson, 2004). This narrative encourages the pursuit of self-defined goals, sometimes over collective family obligations.

Education serves as a critical domain where cultural differences are evident. Chen and Uttal (1988) found that Chinese parents spent substantially more time helping their children with homework than US parents. Chinese mothers of first graders reported spending nearly an hour per day working with their children on homework, compared to 32 minutes among US mothers. This difference reflects the Chinese cultural belief in the importance of effort and self-improvement. Chinese philosophy traditionally emphasizes the potential for change through persistent effort. US education, by contrast, places greater emphasis on developing critical thinking, creativity, and diverse forms of achievement. US parents tend to value their children's happiness and satisfaction with school, with Chen and Uttal (1988) finding that US mothers' satisfaction with their children's performance was significantly related to their perceptions of how much their children enjoyed school, not observed among Chinese mothers who prioritized achievement regardless of their children's enjoyment.

The decentralized US educational system creates diversity in curriculum, teaching methods, and educational standards across different regions. Unlike China's highly standardized national curriculum and examination system, US schools emphasize individualized learning approaches, student-centered teaching methods, and the development of critical thinking skills. The US system also places greater value on extracurricular activities, viewing them as integral to developing well-rounded individuals rather than distractions from academic pursuits (Lareau, 1989).

The immigration experience in the US often intensifies cultural differences in family dynamics. Guo et al. (2021) found that Chinese immigrants in the US with higher levels of acculturation were more likely to report conflicts with their parents regarding norms, values, and relationship dynamics. These conflicts often stem from the tension between traditional Chinese values of filial piety and the US emphasis on independence and self-determination. Chinese immigrants strongly adhere to filial expectations, with younger immigrants often reporting even higher levels for themselves than older immigrants expected from them. This suggests that traditional values remain important for Chinese immigrants across generations, even as they adapt to US society. Intergenerational conflict often centers around different acculturation paces between generations. Guo et al. (2021) found that maintaining one's traditional culture, particularly through endorsing a sense of filial obligation, served as a protective factor against various types of intergenerational conflict. This suggests that preserving cultural values while adapting to a new society may help immigrant families navigate cultural transitions more successfully. Chae and Foley (2010) noted that individuals with a bicultural orientation—those who maintain connections to their Chinese heritage while adapting to US culture—demonstrated higher levels of psychological well-being compared to those who either fully assimilated or remained separated from mainstream US culture. These bicultural individuals reported higher levels of self-esteem and self-concept, suggesting that maintaining cultural roots while adapting to a new society promotes optimal psychological functioning.

Collectively, Chinese and US cultures both value family, but they differ in how they define individual success, family roles, and educational priorities. These cultural differences create distinct environments that shape how individuals develop their identities, form relationships, and define success. Understanding these differences is essential for fostering cross-cultural communication and supporting immigrant families as they navigate between cultural systems.

Table 2. Comparative cultural values between China and the US.

Category	Chinese Culture	US Culture
Core Value System	Collectivism	Individualism
Family Priority	Family needs > individual desires	Individual goals > family expectations
View of Achievement	Success reflects on entire family	Success reflects personal effort
Parenting Style	Hierarchical; emphasis on obedience & duty	Egalitarian; emphasis on independence
Educational Focus	Effort, persistence, exam success	Creativity, critical thinking, student interest
Parental Involvement	High, academically oriented	High, emotionally supportive
Motivation for Success	Family honor & social mobility	Personal fulfillment & self-determination
Concept of Responsibility	Lifelong filial obligation	Self-reliance & personal autonomy

3. Discussion

This study examined cultural values, family dynamics, and educational expectations across Chinese, Korean, and US cultures. The analysis highlighted both differences and similarities in how these cultures approach education, family relationships, and individual development. Chinese and Korean cultures emphasize collectivism, where family needs often outweigh individual desires, while US culture prioritizes individualism and personal autonomy (Chen & Uttal, 1988). These differences shape how parents engage with their children's education. In both Chinese and Korean contexts, academic achievement is closely tied to family honor, social mobility, and collective pride, leading parents to invest significant resources and often guide them toward prestigious professions (Park et al., 2011). In contrast, US parents tend to support educational choices that align with their children's interests and talents, viewing education as a means for individual self-fulfillment (Lareau, 1989).

The acculturation process experienced by immigrant families reveals the dynamic nature of cultural values. First-generation immigrants typically maintain stronger connections to their heritage, including educational values and family relationships, while later generations often experience value conflicts as they navigate between heritage and host cultures (Bui, 2008). These conflicts can appear in parent-child relationships, educational expectations, and identity formation. Prior research suggested that maintaining connections to one's heritage culture while adapting to a new society supports psychological well-being and helps reduce intergenerational conflict (Chae & Foley, 2010).

Educational systems in these three cultures reflect their underlying values. China and Korea emphasize standardized curricula, rigorous testing, and academic competition. The US system focuses more on critical thinking, creativity, and diverse forms of achievement. These differences create distinct learning environments that shape how students develop academically and personally. Recognizing these cultural differences may help inform approaches to multicultural education and support for immigrant families. Educational institutions serving diverse populations can benefit from an awareness of how cultural backgrounds influence learning, family involvement, and educational expectations. Supporting the maintenance of heritage cultural values alongside adaptation to the host culture may help immigrant families navigate cultural transitions more successfully (Bui, 2008).

This study is not without limitations. As a review, the conclusions are drawn from patterns identified in existing studies, rather than from new empirical data. Future research that collects and analyzes original data could provide a stronger empirical basis for understanding how cultural values shape educational experiences and family dynamics. Such studies may offer more nuanced insights and clarify how these patterns operate in different and changing societies. Understanding these cultural differences can guide future inquiry and practice in multicultural educational and family contexts.

4. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Chinese, Korean, and US cultural values highlights how cultural frameworks shape educational expectations and family dynamics. The findings show that Chinese and Korean cultures share Confucian foundations, emphasizing collectivism, filial piety, and family honor, but differ in their educational priorities and social structures. Chinese culture views education as a pathway to financial security and family honor, with the gaokao examination system playing a central role in determining future success (Li, 2001). Korean culture also values academic achievement but emphasizes social prestige and reputation, with parents investing heavily in private tutoring to enhance their children's competitive advantage (Park et al., 2011). US culture, shaped by individualism and the idea of the American Dream, contrasts with these East Asian values. US parents encourage independence and self-expression from an early age, viewing education as a means for individual self-fulfillment rather than collective family achievement (Chen & Uttal, 1988).

These differences create unique challenges and opportunities for immigrant families navigating between collectivist heritage values and individualistic host culture expectations. Prior research suggested that maintaining connections to one's heritage culture while adapting to a new society supports psychological well-being and helps reduce intergenerational conflict (Chae & Foley, 2010; Bui, 2008). A bicultural approach that integrates aspects of both heritage and host cultures may help families adjust more successfully to changing environments. Consequently, this review underscores the importance of cultural context in shaping educational and family experiences. Understanding these differences can inform future research and support ongoing discussions about multicultural education and immigrant family adaptation.

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