

# Cross-Cultural Education Journal



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## Faith Lutheran Church

### Eastern and Western Approaches to Honoring Parents

#### Introduction

In the following paragraphs we compare Chinese and Western definitions of honor. We look at Chinese and Western cultural attitudes toward honoring parents. And we discuss major differences with pros and cons (the good and bad). We also comment on how this relates to Christian beliefs and life in secular society. While this essay focuses on Chinese customs, some of it might apply to people from other Asian cultures, such as India, and even some more westernized countries outside of Asia. The discussion below considers only “normal” relationships within the cultures.

#### Definitions of Honor

The character, “xiao,” (honor) in Chinese combines two words: “lao” (parents) above and “xi” (son or child) below. This implies that parents and their son have “oneness” not matched in other relationships. The word “xiao” implies submission, obedience and compliance. Thus the son is filial to his parents. The Chinese concept of honoring parents is to obey them and comply physically and spiritually to please them and make them happy.

In Chinese Bibles the word for honor is expanded to be translated as “xiaojing” (honor and respect). But it is used as “xiaosun” (compliance and sub-

mission with no question). Due to cultural influences on interpretations, Chinese Christian communities can mix in secular Chinese values to dominate definitions used in Christian faith. These cultural values can confuse the intent of the Bible. Thus parishioners can be misled to read the word “honor” in the Bible so that they practice “honor” in the traditional Chinese way. This is because Chinese people are so familiar with the word and their minds naturally go to their own definition.

The word “honor” in English, used as a verb, is defined as to hold in high respect, or to confer distinction upon, or to show a courteous regard. It applies generally and is not specific to honoring parents. Thus native English-speaking people, who do not know Chinese language, do not have the same interpretation. Indeed, English-speaking people do not readily understand the narrower Chinese version of honor. And they are surprised to learn the differences.

#### Chinese Approaches to Honoring Parents

In most cultures, parents see themselves in their children, and Chinese, especially, are acutely aware that their offspring provide a continuum to their lives. In Chinese culture, parents feel that their deep love for their children dictates that they sacrifice time, energy and money to raise them and

*“Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you, for the Glory of God.”*

Romans 15:7



**The Chinese character for “honor” has the symbol for parents set over that for son. This is reflected in family relationships. This article explores the significance of “honor” and effects of Chinese culture on adult children living in Western societies.**

educate them. They consider this to be the “number one great thing in the world.” Chinese are well-known for stressing the importance of education to their children.

This self-sacrifice is admirable, but it comes with a cost to children. Guilt-driven, blood-tie obligations are set up that follow them for the rest of their lives, or at least as long as the parents live. Chinese feel that children must remain emotionally dependent on their parents. Sometimes, this can be harmful to marriages of adult children.

Even if parents have mistreated their children, they are to be honored. Children who do not honor their parents are considered “worse than animals” in Chinese culture.

Today many older Chinese are dismayed because they feel that their adult children love their own children

**“CHINESE ARE WELL-KNOWN FOR STRESSING THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION TO THEIR CHILDREN”**

more than those adult children love their parents. In many immigrant Chinese families now, the elders are not the center of the family. Instead, young children are. The elders think this violates morality and civilization. To see their adult children mature and fly away, as a bird, is abhorrent to them. It goes against the way they were raised and all their fundamental beliefs.

It can be said that immigrant adult Chinese children rebel against their parents as they grow up and become more integrated into Western society. As this defiance grows, the traditional authority of the parents declines.

Many Chinese elders consider American society as “the grave of old people.” Perhaps this means that America is the grave of the *spirit* of old people. In America (and other Western countries) old people are taken care of to a great extent by the social welfare system (Social Security, Medicare, etc.). While this helps older people living in America manage their personal day-to-day lives, they feel they have lost “respect.” And they have lost a spiritual connection to their offspring. They feel hopeless, lonely, physically separated from family and separated from the

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love of family.

In some cases, Chinese people may feel guilty for moving away from their parents to live in America. When their parents come to visit them, the children may over-compensate and be submissive to the parents. This can hurt the relationship with their spouse. This can be especially true when a mother-in-law visits her son and his wife. Based on the historical significance of the relationship of women within Chinese families, this is not surprising. Chinese family structures are based on parent/son relationships. So when a woman marries a man, she also “marries” his family. And she becomes subservient to them.

## American Approaches to Honoring Parents

In American families, “honoring” the parents might better be described as “respecting” them. Most Americans do not consciously think about honoring their parents. But that does not mean they do not “honor” their parents.

American children are raised not to feel obligated to their parents. Blind obligation to parents is a strange concept to American children.

In well-adjusted American families, parents emphasize to their children the benefits of a good education. If the parents sacrifice to provide opportunities for education, they see it as their duty and obligation to the children to give them the best possible start in life. Any feelings of obligation by the children are generally limited to those of becoming productive adults worthy of the sacrifices.

The primary job of most Americans is to become obsolete as parents. Children are encouraged to be independent, and to rebel is seen as a normal part of growing up. Many parents are amused by the exploits of their children, as they see them stumble through the results of their

**“AMERICAN PARENTS KNOW THAT FAILURES ARE SOMETIMES THE BEST TEACHERS”**

bad decisions. Parents know that failures sometimes are the best teachers. As children progress into adults, the stage has been set for them to be self-sufficient and independent. Children may not revere elders as much as Chinese do, but this does not always result in a loss to the parents.

Typical American teen-agers think their parents are ignorant and foolish. But by the time they reach the age of 30 or so and have had to face similar life decisions, this opinion disappears, along with youthful rebelliousness. Parents feel successful when they see this.

Typical, mentally healthy adult Americans love and respect their parents into their old age, free of feelings of obligation to do so. Thanks to social welfare systems, pensions, investments, and other societal and individual support, American children usually do not have to support their parents financially. But the parents can usually rely on their children to provide help and care if needed.

In Christian families, spiritual support for parents comes from churches and personal relationships with God. It does not come from children. However, the children might share the parents' commitments and beliefs. From a biblical standpoint, Genesis 2:24 states "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (NIV translation) Clearly, the Bible encourages adult children to be independent.

## Major Differences in Chinese and Western Cultures Regarding Parents & Children

Several major differences in the cultures are apparent:

- Chinese foster dependence in their children; Americans foster independence.
- Chinese revere their elders; Americans do not revere elders as much.
- Chinese children may not rebel against parental authority during youth; American children almost always rebel.

- Chinese honoring of parents is based on obligation; American honoring of parents is based more on freely given respect as the children mature and are forced into making adult decisions.
- Chinese stress the son's relationship to his parents over his relationship to his wife; Americans stress the spousal relationship.
- Chinese culture does not provide a social welfare system for all; American culture does.

Most of these differences appear to favor the American approach. However, a primary fault in the American approach is that elders do not command the same level of respect as those in Chinese society. This can be harmful because younger children do not learn to value experience as much.

While any historical explanation for the differences in the cultures is based on speculation, perhaps over the years, development of Chinese society was heavily dependent on maintaining insularity. Chinese civilization for many years in the distant past was probably more advanced than most of the West and contact with outside cultures was avoided. Outside influences became less important; this probably extended into families and was maintained by the parent/son relationship.

Solutions to the problems of Chinese living in America are not actively addressed here. But we hope to have illustrated some of the differences clearly enough to stimulate constructive dialogues within the Chinese community.

We'll close this discussion with the following poem. It illustrates a healthy mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship in Western culture (see back page).

**"CLEARLY, THE  
BIBLE  
ENCOURAGES  
ADULT CHILDREN  
TO BE  
INDEPENDENT"**

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*A caring people...  
Growing spiritually...  
Reaching out*

### About Faith Lutheran Church:

Faith Lutheran Church is a caring people, who support one another's spiritual growth and who reach out to the community with Christ's love.

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## **Daughter-In-Law**

by Grace Noll Crowell

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There are no words that I am master of  
With which to thank you, God, for  
my son's wife:

This girl who is part mother in her love,  
Part young girl and part woman,  
and her life

So gathered up in flame to meet the one  
Who is my son.

I yield him to her, I who have so long  
Been lovingly preparing him for her.

I would not bind them with one  
selfish thong  
That through its constant chafing  
might deter

Their love upon the highroad, they  
must be

Free as the wind is free.

Dear God, I am so grateful that my son,

In searching for a woman, found this one.

