Grandparent–Grandchild Relationships in Chinese Immigrant Families in Los Angeles: Roles of Acculturation and the Middle Generation

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Abstract
Being a grandparent is an important social role for Chinese older adults. Despite an increasing number of older Chinese immigrants in the United States and the uniquely differing culture of the United States relative to Chinese culture, few studies focused specifically on Chinese immigrant families in the United States. By conducting four focus groups (n = 32) in Los Angeles, CA, this study aimed to explore grandparent–grandchild relationships in Chinese immigrant families in the U.S. We found that the majority of Chinese immigrant grandparents maintained close relationships with their grandchildren. Grandparents’ adjustments of acculturation played an important role in maintaining close relationships with their grandchildren through improved English language proficiency, acceptance of American culture, and adjusted expectations. In addition, the middle generation acted as instructors, models, and interpreters in grandparent–grandchild relationships. The study contributed to literature by finding that Chinese immigrant grandparents and middle generation parents play important roles in their grandchildren’s lives via cohesive relationships. Practical services or programs can consider decreasing the acculturation gaps with grandchildren and linking three generations together when strengthening grandparent-grandchild relationships in the United States.

Keywords
acculturation, grandparent–grandchild relationships, middle generation, Chinese immigrants

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Introduction
Chinese immigrations comprise the largest, fastest growing, and older ethnic group in the United States (McCabe, 2012; Terrazas & Batalova, 2010), and older Chinese immigrants are the fourth largest group in the United States following individuals from Mexico, Cuba, and Philippines (Batalova, 2012). The majority of older Chinese adults immigrate to the United States later in life to be reunited with family members (Tienda, 2017). Because they have limited ability to speak English and little or no work experience in the United States, many older Chinese immigrants find that their social network revolves mainly around their family (Treas & Mazumdar, 2002). Study showed that upon immigrating to the United States, more than two thirds of older Chinese immigrants live in extended family households and settle into domestic roles as homemakers or caregivers of grandchildren (Wang, Yoo, & Steward, 2006). Grandparents thus have many interactions with and emotional investment to their grandchildren in Chinese immigrant families. Although there has been much research on relationships between Chinese immigrant parents and their adult children in the United States (Ishi-Kuntz, 1997; Qin, 2006), few studies have looked at grandparent–grandchild relationships in these families. Such topic is of importance because positive grandparent–grandchild relations are important in influencing the well-being of grandparents, healthy family functioning, and younger people’s attitudes toward aging (Goodman & Silverstein, 2005; Xu & Chi, 2015).

Being a grandparent is an important social role for Chinese older adults (Xu & Chi, 2015). In traditional Chinese culture, grandparents often care for their grandchildren, and grandchildren in turn are expected to respect and care for their grandparents when they grow...
up. However, such a close and cohesive relationship may not exist in Chinese families that have immigrated to the United States. Because of the acculturation gaps or imbalance between the old and young generations, conflict and increasing alienation may exist between immigrant grandparents and their grandchildren (Qin, 2006; Vo-Thanh-Xuan & Liamputtong, 2003; Yeung & Chang, 2002), which inevitably influences immigrant grandparents’ physical and psychological well-being (Liu, Ng Sik, Weatherall, & Loong, 2000). However, very limited studies on grandparent–grandchild relationships have been conducted in Chinese immigrant families in the United States. Moreover, though the parental generation played important roles in linking grandparent and grandchild, we know very little about such knowledge in immigrant families. In this study, we explored whether and how Chinese immigrants grandparents maintain close relationships with their grandchildren. In addition, we attempted to generate a better understanding of acculturation and the role of the middle generation in impeding or facilitating these intergenerational relationships. Given these exploratory research purposes, this study used a qualitative approach.

Acculturation and Grandparent–Grandchild Relationships

Acculturation plays an important role in grandparent–grandchild relationships in immigrant families. The term acculturation refers to the overall process of cultural involvement and reflects two important subcomponents: retaining culture-of-origin involvement and establishing host culture involvement (Berry, 1980; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2006). In general, it is harder for older immigrants than young ones to adapt to Western society because of their strongly established traditional backgrounds (Birman & Poff, 2011). For example, study had shown that the grandchildren of older Mexican immigrants to the United States are more acculturated than their grandparents, and use of the native language and adherence to traditional cultural values weaken among successive generations (Silverstein & Chen, 1999). Conflict due to acculturation can result when messages from the culture of origin and the host culture became difficult to reconcile. When grandchildren and grandparents share similar attitudes and values, the gap between levels of affection toward each other are significantly smaller, regardless of ethnic differences (Giarrusso, Du, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 2001). Level of acculturation was found to affect intergenerational communication and grandparent–grandchild relationships among Chinese New Zealanders (Liu et al., 2000), Mexican Americans (Silverstein & Chen, 1999), and Australian Vietnamese (Vo-Thanh-Xuan & Liamputtong, 2003). However, to the authors’ knowledge, few studies have investigated how acculturation affects the grandparent–grandchildren relationships in Chinese immigrant family in the United States, especially how Chinese immigrant grandparents can manage the acculturation gaps and strengthen their relationships with grandchildren. Such topic is of theoretical and practical significances, especially in this age of increased life expectancy, when more people are grandparents or grandchildren for longer periods of time (Bengtson, 2001). Practically, the United States is the number one host western country for Chinese immigrants and has been seeing a big continuous increase in immigrant Chinese older adults in recent years. Theoretically, compared with other minority groups, the Chinese American tend to carry their values, customs, lifestyle, and beliefs with them wherever they go, particularly for first-generation immigrants (Smith & Hung, 2012). And the big differences between Eastern dependency culture and Western independence culture make the acculturation gaps more evident between the old and young generations in Chinese American immigrant families.

Role of the Middle Generation

Another important factor influencing grandparent–grandchild relationships in immigrant families is the role of the middle generation. In all cultures, parental influences combined with social norms and values affect grandchildren’s relationships with their grandparents (Chan, 2007; Mills, Wakeman, & Fea, 2001). For example, when Caucasian parents in Iowa encouraged grandparent–grandchild interaction, grandparents were roughly three times more likely to have influential, supportive, or authority-oriented relationships with their grandchildren (Mueller & Elder, 2003). The middle generation often influences intergenerational relationships by encouraging or hindering interaction between grandparents and grandchildren in Asian population (Xu & Chi, 2015). Positive relationships between grandparents and grandchildren in China were possible only if they were mediated and facilitated by the parents (Xu & Chi, 2018; Xu, Silverstein, & Chi, 2014). For immigrant families, one study found that the link between Australian Vietnamese grandparents and their grandchildren was dependent upon the link between the grandparent and parent generations (Vo-Thanh-Xuan & Liamputtong, 2003). Despite these studies showed the importance of middle generation in grandparent–grandchild relationships, little is known about how the middle generation facilitated grandparent–grandchild relationships in Chinese immigrant families in the United States. In conclusion, although the aforementioned studies have added greatly to our understanding of grandparent–grandchild relationships, they were limited in some respects. Most of them were conducted outside the United States, among non-Chinese immigrant families in the United States, or among Chinese immigrant families in other countries. Few focused specifically on Chinese immigrant families in the United States. Yet, this population is worthy of study because of the increasing number of older Chinese immigrants in the United States.
States and the uniquely differing culture of the United States relative to Chinese culture. It is also important to extend previous research by investigating specific mechanisms affecting grandparent-grandchild relationships in immigrant families (e.g., level of acculturation and the role of the middle generation).

To address these research gaps, the current study explored intergenerational relationships in Chinese immigrant families in Los Angeles, California. Los Angeles boasts the second largest population of Chinese Americans in the United States based on the 2011-2015 community survey (Wikipedia.org). We sought to describe the relationships that exist between grandparents and their grandchildren and how grandparents manage to maintain close relationships with their grandchildren. Specifically, this study aimed to (a) describe the nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships among older Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles, (b) explore the way/strategies that grandparents used to manage acculturation gaps to maintain close relationships with grandchildren, and (c) examine the role of the middle generation in grandparent-grandchild relationships.

Method

Study Approach, Recruitment, and Sampling

This study used a focus group approach, a qualitative method especially well suited for exploratory research (Sofaer, 1999). Participants were recruited through flyers, word of mouth, and with the help of the administrators of senior housing, senior centers, adult day health care centers, and social services agencies. The inclusion criteria were the following: (a) older adults aged 65 years or older, (b) had grandchildren younger than 25 years old (adopting the upper bound of youth age by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), (c) a clear ability to communicate with others and express their own thoughts, and (d) agreed to participate in a focus group. In total, 32 older adults were recruited from four locations with high concentrations of Chinese American immigrants in the Los Angeles area. We conducted four focus groups (seven to nine per group). The average age of focus group participants was 78.23 years (SD = 7.38, range = 65-92). The majority was female (77%). All were first-generation Chinese American immigrants who had resided in the United States an average of 20.72 years (SD = 8.40, range = 6-36). Data collection was stopped after completing the four focus groups, because data saturation was achieved with little new information yielded (Wu, Wyant, & Fraser, 2016).

To create a comfortable environment, we conducted all focus group sessions in settings familiar to participants (e.g., senior centers, adult day health care centers, senior housing). The focus group discussions were conducted in Mandarin or Cantonese depending on participants’ preference. We limited the sessions to approximately 1.5 hr to reduce the likelihood of participant fatigue. An experienced focus group moderator facilitated each group and two other research team members observed and recorded each session. All sessions were videotaped. Each participant received a US$20 gift card as a token of our appreciation for their time and effort. The protocol was approved by the affiliated university’s institutional review board.

Structured Interview

Our research team developed five guiding questions with structured probes: (a) How are the grandchildren in America important/unimportant to the participants? (b) How do the participants view their relationships with their grandchildren in America? (c) What types of barriers exist between participants and their grandchildren, and how do they deal with these barriers? (d) What factors are associated with grandparent-grandchild relationships in an immigrant family? and (e) What role does the middle generation play in grandparent-grandchild relationships? After the initial probe regarding the importance of grandchildren, the order of the remaining questions was determined by the flow of the discussion. These guiding questions were followed by other supporting questions that prompted the participants to provide more details or share their own stories to explain their opinions. The participants seemed eager to share their ideas and personal stories. The guiding questions were effective in helping us achieve our research objectives by eliciting detailed information from the participants.

Data Analysis

Videotaped data were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. Bilingual members of the research team reviewed the translated transcripts for accuracy. The study used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to delineate the codes or themes and a constant-comparative process to establish themes (Creswell, 2012; Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton, & Ormston, 2013). Researchers coded quotations from the transcripts that exemplified a common concept. As additional quotations were coded, they were compared to other similarly coded quotations. This process of comparison enhanced consistency and expanded the dimensions and comprehensiveness of each code. Codes were later combined or synthesized into broader, recurrent themes. In addition, the third author was invited to provide an outsider perspective to ensure the accuracy of the emergent codes and themes. There was agreement on 85% of the codes applied, indicating good reliability (Boyatzis, 1998).

Results

The Nature of Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships

With only a few exceptions, grandparents reported that their grandchildren were very important to them. Three
themes emerged: grandchildren bringing happiness, continuing the family line, and being a burden. The majority of grandparents stated that their grandchildren brought them much happiness, describing it as happiness that money could not buy. For example, many participants stated that they felt younger and more energetic when around their grandchildren. Also, they reported that the family atmosphere was different when younger grandchildren were present; thus, their grandchildren brought them happiness and good feelings. Some grandparents said their grandchildren were important because they belonged to the same family and represented the continuity or integrity of the family.

However, a few grandparents stated that their grandchildren were not really important to them or that “it [was] hard to say” how important their grandchildren were because they created a burden or sense of loneliness. Some grandparents said they could not understand their grandchildren because of significant language barriers. Therefore, they had nothing to share when they spent time together. Others said they felt lonely because of this language barrier. Other participants stated they considered their grandchildren to be a burden because they had to cook every day for them or had to do a lot to prepare for their grandchildren’s visits and clean up after they left, which made them very tired. Despite this, these grandparents said they did not feel that their relationships with their grandchildren were bad.

In sum, relationships between participants and their grandchildren were generally positive, cohesive, and harmonious, as represented by the following quotes: “We are Chinese people. We definitely think about the family heritage: my parents, my children, my children’s children, my grandchildren’s children. . . . It is integrity [of the family]” (G31, Male, 74). “I think grandchildren are very important [to me]. They bring joy into the house. I am really happy to see them, ‘cause they make me feel younger’” (G11, female, 78). “Our relationship isn’t that ideal. I wouldn’t specifically think about them the same way as I think about my children. I am closer to my children, and the bond is not as strong for my grandchildren as I think about my children. I am closer to my children, and the bond is not as strong for my grandchildren. I wouldn’t specifically think about them. I don’t really think about them that much.” (G19, Female, 72). “Our relationship isn’t that ideal. I wouldn’t specifically think about them the same way as I think about my children. I am closer to my children, and the bond is not as strong for my grandchildren.” (G4, Female, 79).

Grandparents’ Acculturation and Grandparent–Grandchild Relationships

Most of the grandparents in this study stated that barriers either prevented them from communicating well with their grandchildren or affected their relationships with them. Most of these barriers stemmed from language and cultural differences. The majority of grandparents spoke Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, or other dialects) and had limited English proficiency. They reported striving to hold on to their ethnic identity even while embracing some aspects of their host culture. However, their grandchildren, especially those born or raised in North America, spoke English or French and had limited proficiency in Chinese. Most of the grandparents had assimilated and adapted to almost every aspect of mainstream American culture. In response, the grandparents in this study said they chose to become more acculturated to U.S. culture in hopes of preventing conflict or bad relationships with their grandchildren. The grandparents improved their English language skills so that they could communicate with their grandchildren, accepted more aspects of American culture to better understand their grandchildren’s behavior, or adjusted their own expectations to give less weight to the undesirable aspects of their relationships with their grandchildren.

Improving English and learning to use the computer. Besides encouraging their grandchildren to learn Chinese, most grandparents chose to improve their English language skills or learn to use computers. Not only did these skills benefit them when they communicated or interacted with members of the larger society, but they also helped improve their communication and interaction with their grandchildren:

My eldest grandson likes to speak English, and I can understand. I also can communicate with him for most of the time, because I have studied English more than six years in the adult school, church, and this center. I am happy for this. Feelings of “I can talk or communicate with my grandchild generation, the Americans” is good to me, you know. (G1, Female, 74)

You have to let them believe you know a lot of stuff. For example, I will talk about the reason I learned the computer. Why? Because they looked down on me (if I know nothing about computer). When you ask them because you don’t know something, guess what they say? “Again?” (G7, Female, 70)

Accepting American culture. Most grandparents also mentioned that they tried to understand and accept American culture when in disagreements with their grandchildren:

My oldest daughter’s son also wears an earring. Yes, in China, it seems to be unacceptable to the grandparents because it makes him [unmasculine or feminine]. But here . . . it’s nothing. Youth of today [in the United States] are all like this; why pick on him? (G21, Female, 84)

We do not like American food so much, like French fries and lots of meat. However, my grandchildren like them a lot. I do not say anything. I know it is their life in the United States. It is hard for them to change it. (G18, Female, 74)

Adjusting/lowering expectations. Grandparents were generally altruistic toward their grandchildren. They said they hoped for nothing more for their grandchildren than that they be healthy, do well in school and have a successful career. Even when grandparents said they desired more care or concern from their grandchildren or had strained relationships with their grandchildren, some chose to adjust their own behavior, mind-set, and expectations.
According to participants, changing one’s lifestyle rather than holding on to the past will bring happiness. “Sometimes, we older people have to have an ‘Ah Q spirit’ [think positively about something negative]. Otherwise, we will be discomforted” (G14, Female, 89):

I hope to have a meal with [my grandchildren] at festival time. I have lived here for about twenty-four years without a reunion with my grandchildren. They live in San Francisco and have to work on New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day. That’s the reason why I cannot have high expectations. The higher the expectation, the greater the disappointment. I don’t think too much about it. (G2, Female, 88)

**Role of the Middle Generation**

We found that members of the middle generation played an important role in help maintaining grandparent–grandchild relationships. Most parents created a bridge between grandparents and grandchildren or became moderators by acting as instructors, models, or interpreters. In this way, they helped establish, ameliorate, strengthen, or weaken the grandparent–grandchild relationship.

**Instructor.** Most members of the middle generation in this study had good and cohesive relationships with their parents (i.e., the grandparent generation). They provided many kinds of support for grandparents and taught their children to do the same. For example, most grandparents said that their adult children asked their grandchildren to call them regularly or on special occasions. Grandchildren were also told by their parents to show respect to and care for their grandparents. For example: “They [the middle generation] educate the kids on how to be devoted to older generations and show respect to grandparents. This is what dad’s father says to the dad” (G22, Male, 84). In addition, another participant said,

If I don’t feel well, they [the middle generation] ask me how I feel. (In this way) They teach their son to care about me, too. If it’s my birthday or Mother’s Day or something, they will ask their son to call me. We will have dinner together. I am really happy. (G8, Female, 78)

**Model or example.** According to a Chinese saying, role models are the most powerful teaching instruments. Members of the middle generation were told to act as good examples or models for their children rather than mere teachers or instructors. Through their own actions, they teach grandchildren how to treat their grandparents. For example, one participant (G25, Female, 79) mentioned, “Because my son and daughter and son-in-law respect me a lot, their children respect me, too.” Similarly, another participant described her family dynamic:

My three grandsons are young (between eight and twelve). Their parents did not talk much about instruction or theories. But my oldest son did very well through his own behavior. My mom is now in a long-term-care facility. I go to take care of her every day for three meals. On weekends, my oldest son will do this for me. He feeds my mom, helps her wash her face, etc. I am so touched. I am sure [that] his two sons learn something from that. I think his sons will treat me in a similar way when I am too old to do anything. (G30, Female, 81)

**Interpreter.** Some grandparents were not willing or capable to learn English, so they had very limited English language proficiency. Even participants who attended adult school or other English classes still had difficulty communicating with their grandchildren, especially those who knew little Chinese. Members of the middle generation often took on the important role of translator for grandparents and grandchildren, thus helping to improve understanding:

Every time they come, they definitely go out and have a meal with me. I need her father to be an interpreter for me, because I cannot speak English and she cannot speak Cantonese. If her father didn’t come, I would have no idea. He’s acting as a communication bridge between us. (G15, Female, 83)

I would ask my son or daughter, who understands, to translate. He or she then would say to their children, like “Grandpa wants to eat this thing, can you order that for him?” Sometimes my daughter encourages or even forces her son to learn to speak Chinese to me. Of course, my daughter has to translate between us so that my grandson can learn and speak Chinese. (G17, Male, 77)

**Discussion**

This study found generally cohesive and positive (rather than conflicting and negative) grandparent–grandchild relationships among Chinese immigrant families in Los Angeles. There are several reasons for this. Age influences the perception of grandparent–grandchild relationships. Compared to younger grandparents, older grandparents perceive greater affection in their relationships with their grandchildren (Silverstein & Long, 1998). The majority of participants in our focus groups were quite old (M = 78.23 years) based on the life stage age classification that older adults at age 75 years or above is considered as very old age (Newman & Newman, 2012), which might have influenced their positive perceptions of their relationships. Another important factor is the phenomenon of intergenerational stake, which asserts that the older generation always has a more positive perception of a relationship than the younger generation. According to this theory, grandparents are concerned with the continuity and closeness of the relationships in their family. Therefore, they tend to minimize conflict and overstate solidarity with their grandchildren (Silverstein & Chen, 1999). Thus, in grandparents’ eyes, the grandparent–grandchild relationship is always positive and cohesive, even though some sort of conflict or unhappiness might
exist. Although generally a cohesive grandparent-grandchild relationship was reported by grandparents, we cannot ignore the effect of social desirability bias in this study. This concept describes the tendency of respondents to report in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. Because their peers were watching them, the grandparents in this study may have felt social pressure or the cultural tendency of “saving face” to report an overly positive grandparent-grandchild relationship.

Our results are consistent with findings of previous studies that English language proficiency and similar opinions or perceptions with grandchildren help strengthen communication and relationships between grandparents and grandchildren in Latino immigrant families (Silverstein & Chen, 1999). The present study went beyond previous study by finding that the grandparents in this study did not ask their grandchildren to improve their Chinese language proficiency or accept Chinese culture. Instead, they chose to act/change themselves to improve or strengthen the relationship. This is in line with altruism theory, which asserts that intergenerational exchanges are driven unconditionally by the needs of potential support recipients rather than by the principle of reciprocity (Stark & Falk, 1998). Unlike what would be predicted by exchange theory, which proposes mutual giving and receiving behavior between two persons, the grandparents in our study did not hope to receive “payback” from their grandchildren. On the contrary, they said they wished their grandchildren all the best and were willing to do anything their grandchildren needed. They preferred to sacrifice their own time, feelings, and expectations to fit their grandchildren’s lifestyles.

In this study, the middle generation, especially their filial obligation behavior toward old parents also played an important role in the grandparent-grandchild relationship. This result confirms previous study findings that the middle generation facilitated the close relationship between grandparent and grandchild (Xu & Chi, 2018; Xu et al., 2014). Filial obligation is a traditional Chinese value and can be defined as the expression of responsibility, respect, sacrifice, and family harmony that regulates children’s attitudes and behavior. In immigrant families, the middle generation acted as instructors, models, and interpreters in the family dynamics to show their filial obligation to aging parent. Watching parents’ filial behavior in daily life, grandchildren might internalize these norms as a result of being socialized by their parents. Therefore, the respectful and obedient behavior of children toward older adults helped develop, maintain, and promote the grandparent-grandchild relationships.

This exploratory study, which contributes to research on relationships between grandparents and grandchildren in Chinese immigrant families in the United States, is not without limitations. First, although it is important to listen to the voices of grandparents, it is also necessary to hear the views of grandchildren regarding these relationships. Therefore, future research on grandparent-grandchild relationships should be conducted at the level of the dyad rather than the individual. Second, because all of the participants in the present study were first-generation Chinese immigrants, future studies should target older grandparents with diverse backgrounds. For example, it would be beneficial for researchers to compare grandparent-grandchild relationships among first-, second-, and third-generation Chinese immigrants. Third, the study findings are based on the Chinese immigrants living in Los Angeles only. The interpretations of the findings need to be addressed with caution when applying the results to Chinese immigrant families in other locations of the United States. Fourth, potential self-report bias and social desirability bias may exist during the survey process, and thus the interpretations of the results need to be cautious. Finally, the study used a qualitative method with purposive and convenient sampling to recruit participants for the present exploratory study. Future studies using quantitative survey with nationwide random sampling method could be a better option. This will allow researchers examining how different levels of acculturation gaps and parental involvements affect grandparent-grandchild relationships, by controlling for the demographic variables such as age of grandchildren, living arrangement, proportion of gender, and time since participants immigrated to the United States. Moreover, using random sample can generate more representative results that allow generalization to larger Chinese immigrant populations in the United States.

Despite these study limitations, this study filled the research gap that few studies had investigated how Chinese immigrant grandparents dealt with acculturation gaps to maintain or strengthen their relationships with grandchildren. In addition, this study contributed to the literature on how parent generation facilitated such grandparent-grandchild relationship. The current study found that Chinese immigrant grandparents greatly adjusted their behaviors to reduce the acculturation gaps with their grandchildren. Family educators, social workers, family counselors, and other professional staff in the community can help immigrant grandparents in the acculturation process by helping grandparents improving English language proficiency, understanding and accepting American culture, and adjusting expectations on their relationships with grandchildren. The findings also highlighted the importance for grandparents to cultivate their relationships with the middle generation for close grandparent-grandchild relationship. Practical services or programs can consider linking three generations together when maintaining or strengthening grandparent-grandchild relationships in Chinese immigrant families in the United States.

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Notes
1. Grandparent #3.
2. Age: 74 years old.

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