

## When Cultural Scripts Collide

Wakefield, John C.

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# When Cultural Scripts Collide: Conflicting Child-rearing Values in a Mixed-culture Home

*This paper discusses some key differences between the child-rearing values of American-English culture and Hong Kong-Cantonese culture. Evidence is drawn from contrasts in the child-rearing-related speech behavior of people from the two cultures, including the American English-speaking author and his Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking partner. Speaker-oriented cultural scripts written in the natural semantic metalanguage are developed in an attempt to articulate and explain these differences in verbal behavior. It is proposed that a major contrast between the two cultures is whether or not parents believe children can or should determine for themselves what is appropriate to say and do.*

*Keywords: child-rearing / Hong Kong Cantonese / American English / cultural scripts / natural semantic metalanguage*

## **Introduction**

This paper uses the cultural scripts method to describe some contrasts in child-rearing values between Hong Kong Cantonese (HKC) culture and American English (AE) culture. The cultural scripts approach articulates cultural norms and values based on linguistic evidence, i.e., based on what members of the speech community regularly say. Cultural scripts are written using the culturally neutral terms of the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004). NSM consists of semantic primes whose meanings are theorized to exist as exact equivalents in all languages. As such, cultural scripts are void of any ethnocentric meanings, and are therefore easily understood by people from outside the culture. The goal of this approach is to help people clearly and fully understand the (sometimes opposing) beliefs and values embedded in cultures that may be vastly different from their own (for a detailed description of the cultural scripts method, see Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2004; see also Wong, this issue, and references cited there).

This study is based on the assumption that by analyzing the language that adults use for child-rearing, culturally specific child-rearing values can be discovered. Evidence is drawn from contrasts in the child-rearing-related speech behavior of people from the two cultures, including me, a native-AE speaker, and my partner, a native speaker of HKC. The evidence from the two of us focuses on verbal behavior that has been directed towards our now 18-year-old daughter, and which is therefore assumed to be guided by our differing cultural values related to child-rearing. This approach is comparable to Wierzbicka's (1997) analysis of the language used within her own bilingual, bi-cultural home.

I have lived in a bilingual, bicultural family for 20 years and have tried to analyze the cultural differences between my partner and myself. This paper is limited to the different views my partner and I have about how our daughter should be spoken to and treated. The goal here is to explain the motivations that lie behind the contrasting forms of our verbal behavior that function to influence, guide and perhaps control our bilingual daughter's behavior. Some cultural scripts are developed with this goal in mind. Based on these scripts, it is proposed that a major contrast between the two cultures under discussion is whether or not parents believe children can or should determine for themselves what is appropriate for them to say and do.

An unspoken assumption of this paper is that the cultural scripts generalize to the populations of the two speech communities under discussion. Individual members of a society will differ in the degree to which they choose to follow their culture's norms and "operate in a manner acceptable to [society's] members" (Goodenough, 1957, p. 167), but this does not mean that the cultural scripts do not exist for such individuals. What defines people as members of a given social group is not their adherence to the norms. Rather it is their knowledge of what the norms are. Generalizing the scripts to the entire speech community is therefore not a limitation to this study (assuming the scripts are accurate). The limitation is in the treatment of both AE and HKC cultures as single speech communities. This is especially problematic for AE culture, which includes a large number of distinct subcultures. The scripts presented here should therefore be seen as generalizing only to the specific speech communities to which my partner and I belong.

Another obvious limitation is that my partner is a mother and I am a father, and we have a daughter and no son, so our differing speech behavior cannot be seen as an

overall cultural difference. The cultural expectations applied to mothers vs. fathers differ significantly between America and Hong Kong. In addition to a greater amount of and variety of data, a case study such as this one would ideally be supplemented with data from another one that looks at a couple with reversed roles, i.e. a HKC father and an AE mother.

### **Hong Kong Chinese vs. American English Child-rearing Values**

The literature has contrasted Chinese child-rearing values and practices with those of the West, saying that Chinese parents demonstrate comparatively more parental control (e.g., Chiu, 1987; Lin & Fu, 1990; Lai et al., 2000), put more emphasis on achievement (Ho & Kang, 1984; Lai et al., 2000), and express less affection, use more physical punishment, and use love withdrawal and shaming (e.g., Fung, 1999; Lin & Fu, 1990; Lai et al., 2000). It is reasonable to assume that these differences in behavior stem from unique cultural values related to child rearing.

There are no doubt many differences between my own child-rearing values and those of my partner's, and it would not be possible to address them all in a single paper. I will therefore focus on what I believe to be some key differences between us, the primary one being the degree to which we believe our daughter should, or even can, determine for herself what she should say and do. Although this is only one key difference in our values, I believe this difference is the driving force behind the contrasts in child-rearing behavior that were mentioned in the previous paragraph. It not only influences how explicitly and how frequently we each teach and instruct our daughter, but also the degree to which

each of us believe we should monitor her behavior and her relationships outside the home. It also affects the extent to which we have each felt the need to condition our daughter from the very beginning, psychologically, to do whatever we instruct her to do.

*Individualist vs. collectivist child-rearing values*

A useful way to conceptualize culture is Goodenough's (1957) reference to it as "whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members" (p. 167). Most authors' work on child rearing is based on the assumption that the ultimate aim of the child-rearing process is "to enculturate the child to become an effective and valued member of society" (Chan, 2011, p. 613), and this assumption is also made here. The approach to turning a child into an effective and valued member of society will be very different if what constitutes "acceptable" behavior is believed to be fixed rather than variant, and, extending from that belief, is seen as something that must be overtly taught as opposed to something that must develop uniquely and independently within the child's mind—the former motivates parents to focus on providing explicit instructions and getting children to follow those instructions, while the latter motivates parents to focus on instilling within the child a desire to do good, culturally acceptable things.

Believing acceptable behavior to be either fixed or variant is linked to the frequently cited notion of "individualist" vs. "collectivist" societies in reference to Western and Chinese cultures, respectively. Lau and Kuan (1988) said that individualism

in the Western sense does not exist for the Chinese, “nor is there any positive valuation of the virtues of individuality” (p. 41). In connection to this, Chan (2011) said:

In the Western world, in which independence is valued, an individual’s behavior is seen as regulated by his/her thoughts, motives, needs and feelings. The self represents an autonomous and independent entity with personal needs and attributes.... Group and social relationships serve to promote the strength of the self in an individualistic society. In a society in which interdependency is valued, ‘self’ is not equal to ‘individual’ in the Western sense. Instead of viewing the self as an individual with psychological needs and attributes, self is viewed as a person enmeshed in a network of relationships. Self is a constellation of ascribed or assigned social roles (p. 614).

In line with this, Chan’s (2011) study found that Hong Kong mothers raise their children to think of themselves as members of a group rather than as individuals. In order to maintain group harmony, they want their children to be “good at expressing other-focused emotions and controlling ego-focused emotions” (p. 620).

If a child is seen as a member of a group with “a constellation of ascribed or assigned social roles,” then it follows that parents will believe there is a set of prescribed rules that must be explicitly taught and strictly adhered to if the child is to function well within the community. Children should not be left to, in fact would be considered unable to, figure these rules out for themselves. If, on the other hand, a child is seen as one of many individuals “with personal needs and attributes” who interacts with other such individuals, then the social roles and social rules will vary slightly from person to person. It will be understood that when the child grows up, the community of individuals will view the child as an individual, and will thus allow relatively more leeway for unique behavior. Parents within this type of culture would consider their role to be less of an instructor and more of an exemplar of how a “good” individual might behave. This does

not mean that AE culture has no clearly defined rules of behavior. It is just that many of the rules in AE culture are not as overtly articulated and are not brought to people's conscious awareness to the same degree as in HKC culture.

Scripts (1) to (3) are an attempt to articulate some key child-rearing values within HKC culture. They are described below and are then followed by scripts that represent related child-rearing values in AE culture. All of this is then followed by examples of the linguistic evidence on which these scripts are based.

*HKC cultural script on parents' belief that children require instruction:*

- (1) it is good if I often say something like this to my child:
  - a. 'I want you to do this  
I want you to not do this'
  - b. 'I want you to say this  
I want you to not say this'if I don't say something like this many times, my child will not know it

*HKC cultural script on parents' desire that others link their children's good behavior to their explicit instructions:*

- (2) *it is good if people here think something like this about me*  
this someone's child does good things because this someone often says something like this to their child:  
'I want you to do these things'  
this someone's child doesn't do bad things because this someone often says something like this to their child:  
'I want you to not do these things'

*HKC cultural script on parental "love withdrawal":*

- (3) *it is good if my child thinks something like this*  
if I do something bad my mother won't want me  
because of this, I don't want to do something bad

As is true of all cultural scripts, these are written from the perspective of the individual, in this case the parent, who possesses these cultural values.



Script (1) indicates that HKC parents assume that their children depend on them to learn how to behave, and cannot figure this out on their own. A parent who believes this will feel compelled to tell their children very explicitly what to do/say and what not to do/say, and will consider it vital for their child to do as they are told. Otherwise the child will not develop into an effective and valued member of society. Script (2) implies that HKC parents think of the child-rearing process in terms of what other people think, whether they are friends, relatives or strangers. This is no doubt true in all cultures to some degree, but it is certainly more of a factor in collective societies such as Hong Kong, where people's various roles, including their roles as parents, are defined in relation to other people. The Cantonese phrase “有家教” *mou5 gaa1 gaau3* (NEG family teach) “No family teaching” is used to describe children or even young adults who have behaved in a socially unacceptable manner. This phrase indicates that Cantonese culture judges a person's behavior as primarily a product of parental teaching. Note that Cantonese examples are all shown in Chinese characters followed by Jyutping, the spelling of which has been slightly modified to represent the current pronunciation of most Cantonese speakers, e.g., initial /l/ replacing initial /n/.

Script (3) is proposed to be motivated by (1) and (2), which work in combination to create such a powerful need to get a child to do whatever a parent says, that the effective method of what is commonly referred to as “love withdrawal” has developed into an HKC cultural value. Script (3) refers to the child's “mother” rather than “parents” because the threat of no longer wanting the child is normally said in relation to the child's mother, who is assumed to be the one primarily responsible for child-rearing. This

cultural practice is therefore relevant to our family situation since my HKC partner is the mother.

In contrast to scripts (1), (2) and (3), an AE parent's child-rearing behavior is proposed to be guided by the following three scripts:

*AE cultural script on developing a child's desire to do good things in a self-deterministic manner:*

- (4) *it is good if my child can think something like this*
  - a. 'when I say something good, I say it because I want to say it not because someone else wants me to say it'
  - b. 'when I do something good, I do it because I want to do it not because someone else wants me to do it'

*AE cultural script on the parent's need to be a good example:*

- (5) a. when my child sees me do something,
  - I think that maybe they will want to do something like it because of this,
  - it is good if I do good things when they can see me
  - it is good if I do not do bad things when they can see me
- b. when my child hears me say something,
  - I think that maybe they will want to say something like it because of this,
  - it is good if I say good things when they can hear me
  - it is good if I do not say bad things when they can hear me

*AE cultural script on feeling good and bad about good and bad behavior, respectively:*

- (6) a. when my child does something good
  - I want them to feel something good because of this
  - I want them to know I feel something good because of this
- b. when my child does something bad
  - I want them to feel something bad because of this
  - I want them to know I feel something bad because of this

One major difference shown in the two sets of scripts is that an AE parent does not rear the child mostly by directly and explicitly saying things like “I want you to say/do this” and “I want you to not say/do this,” but rather attempts to cause the child to want for him or herself to say or do such things. This could be what lies behind many AE parents’ speaking to children as if they are free to choose how to behave, even when no real choice exists. It is a way of training the child to desire doing the right thing. An example that nicely captures the difference between the two parenting styles being discussed here comes from the philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek (2003: starting at 1:45), who explained the contrast between two types of fathers: 1) an “old-fashioned totalitarian father” who tells a child “I don’t care how you feel... you have to [visit] grandmother and behave there properly” and 2) a “so-called tolerant postmodern father” who tells the child “you know how much your grandmother loves you, but nonetheless you should only visit her if you really want to.” According to Žižek, children know in both cases that they have to go, and therefore only the first approach is honest. The second one, rather than being a choice, entails a stronger order: “not only do you have to visit your grandmother, but you have to like it.” I think Žižek’s observation is insightful. Perhaps in actuality it is dishonest since there is no real choice given to the child, but the “tolerant postmodern” father, regardless of whether or not he believes he is actually offering the child a choice, is overtly linking an act of good behavior to the child’s desire to do it.

Another cultural difference is seen in the phrase “something like it” at the end of the second lines of both (5a) and (5b), which implies that the speech and behavior expected of the child is not fixed and pre-determined, but is instead of a certain kind;

“good” behavior is therefore subject to relatively more variation. This can be contrasted with the wording “I want you to (not) say/do this” and “I want you to (not) do these things” in scripts (1) and (2), respectively, which refer to specific behavior rather than a kind of behavior.

Before children in AE culture are considered to have had a chance to develop their own code of behavior, their parents will feel the need to instruct them about everything. A two-year-old, for example, still needs to be instructed on what constitutes good and bad behavior, so something along the lines of script (1) should also apply to an AE parent of an infant. However, the script will be tempered by the belief that the child can eventually be guided to figure these things out for him- or herself. The contrast between HKC and AE parents in this case is not only in how instructions are given, but when (if ever) they believe a child no longer requires direct instruction. It seems, for example, that my partner is still largely influenced by script (1) in relation to our 18-year-old daughter, which I believe is what lies behind my partner’s frequent use of mother-to-daughter imperatives, which is discussed in the following section.

Even for infants, however, differences can be seen. For example, when a child of any age does something good, an AE parent is more likely than an HKC parent to compliment the child, because they are guided by the three lines of (6a), which causes them to want the child to feel good about the behavior, and to let the child know that the parent also feels good about it. My daughter has frequently complained that her mother only seems to notice the bad things she does and not the good, which I believe stems from my partner being less compelled by her child-rearing values to use praise and

compliments. My partner also frequently reminds our daughter of past transgressions, which further adds to the impression that my partner only notices the bad things our daughter does. I suggest that this is motivated by the final line of script (1), which causes my partner to feel that she needs to frequently remind our daughter of her bad behavior as a way of ensuring that she learns how to behave. Miller et al. (2001) observed this same kind of behavior in parents from Taipei, Taiwan, who “treat[ed] children’s past transgressions as a didactic resource.” This contrasted with the American parents from Chicago in Miller et al.’s study, who downplayed or ignored the past mistakes of their children.

Further supporting the existence of script (6a), Wierzbicka (2004) discussed the frequently used expression “good boy (girl),” which Anglo parents direct at children and which, according to Wierzbicka, positively evaluates children and links this evaluation to their behavior. She said the use of “good boy (girl)” focuses on children’s accomplishments rather than on their obedience, and that this linking of good feelings with good behavior is an attempt on the part of the parents to encourage children “to do things like this” rather than “to do as I say.” Her analysis reinforces the arguments presented here.

Additional forms of language-based evidence in support of scripts (1) through (6) are presented in the following section.

### *Linguistic evidence*

*wh- imperatives vs. imperatives*

The use or non-use of *wh-* imperatives provides some evidence for scripts (1), (2), (4) and (6). Wierzbicka (1996, p. 316) wrote the script in (7) to represent the cultural value behind the use of *wh-* imperatives in Anglo culture.

- (7) *it is good if everyone can think something like this*  
‘when I do something I do it because I want to do it,  
not because someone else wants me to do it’

The script in (4) shows that AE parents want their children to develop a personal desire to do good things rather than to do good things because someone else wants them to. “Everyone” in the first line of (7) includes people’s own children, so this script can represent a cultural norm of AE parents, but not HKC parents, who, guided by scripts (1) and (2), want their children to do things because they tell them to. As a result, they very rarely use *wh-* imperatives when speaking to their children, even though they are commonly used in Cantonese when speaking to strangers. For example, when asking our daughter to take our dog upstairs, I will say “Can you take (or do you mind taking) Benny upstairs?” In contrast my partner will say “帶 Benny 上去呀” *Daai3 Benny soeng5-heoi3 aal* (carry Benny up-go PRT) “Take Benny up.”

Wierzbicka (1996) said that “in Chinese, in close personal relationships an imperative (perhaps with some additional “courtesy” phrase comparable to please) is regarded as more appropriate [than a *wh-* imperative]” (p. 320). Perhaps in addition to

being based on the “close personal relationships” between family members, the use of parent-to-child imperatives is a way to train the child to do whatever the parent says, which would also explain my observation that parent-to-child directives are more frequently used by HKC parents than AE parents. The use of love withdrawal discussed below also illustrates the importance that HKC parents place on training children to do as they are told.

Guided by script (5) I feel that providing an example of good behavior, rather than telling my daughter what to do, will make her feel a desire to do such things herself. From a child-rearing perspective I have often felt that, for example, clearing up something my daughter has gotten out, or getting us both something to drink, can be as good as, if not better than, telling her to do these things herself.

*Call uncle vs. look who's here*

Another example of language-based evidence in support of scripts (1) and (2) is the formulaic routine of telling young HKC children to address adults using the appropriate kinship term. HKC-speaking adults require children to address them and other adults using the correct kinship term—one of many such terms which exist in Hong Kong's group-oriented culture (McCoy, 1970). In contrast, guided by scripts (4), (5) and (6), AE parents typically do not require young children to address adults. Because children are seen as individuals, they are typically not expected to do something they do not feel comfortable doing. Demanding a shy child to say something to an adult, especially a stranger, would likely be seen as an infringement on the child's right as an

individual to choose not to speak. It would also go against trying to make children feel good when they do something good.

The dialogue in (8) is a typical example of this formulaic routine in Cantonese. The context is when a male belonging to the same generation as the parent comes into the presence of the parent and the child:

- (8) Parent: 叫叔叔.  
*Giu3 suk1-suk1.*  
call uncle (father's younger brother)  
'Address uncle.'
- Child: 叔叔.  
*Suk1-suk1.*  
uncle (father's younger brother)  
'Uncle.'
- Uncle: 乖喇.  
*Gwaai1 laa3.*  
well-behaved PRT  
'Good boy/girl.'

Kinship terms are used to address friends, relatives or strangers, so the “uncle” in (8) is not necessary a relative. The term 叫 *giu3*, which is the first word in the parent's line, can translate into English as “call,” “tell” or “address,” depending on the structure of the sentence. The nearest translation is “address” when it is used as the main verb of an imperative clause and takes a kinship term or a name as its complement. The term *giu3* is always used in this particular formulaic routine and is an instruction for the child to address the older person by the correct kinship term. The child's response in (8) represents the expected behavior. If children do not comply, and especially if they



purposely refuse, then the parent might say something like 冇禮貌! *mou5 lai5maau6!* (NEG manners) “You’ve no manners!”, or more severely 衰仔/女 *seoi1 zai2/leoi5!* (bad boy/girl) “You bad boy/girl!”

Wong (2006) discussed the linguistic context of (8) in relation to Singapore English, which has adopted this form of Chinese cultural behavior using the English word “call” in place of *giu3* because this word often translates as “call.” Wong developed a semantic explication to explain why Singapore English caregivers say “Call Auntie/Uncle” to children. The explication shown in (9), which is the same as Wong’s except for two lines which were deleted, is proposed to apply to HKC culture:

*Semantic explication for “giu3 [kinship term]” said by parent to child*

- (9) I want you to say this word to this person now: [kinship term]  
at the same time, I want you to know this:  
    you have lived for some time, this person has lived for some time  
    more  
because of this, this person is not someone like you, this person is  
    someone above you  
because of this, you have to say this word to this person

The first and last lines of this explication are a direct command related to a clearly prescribed, unwavering form of expected behavior. This is in line with what has been said about HKC child-rearing thus far.

Sandel (2002) also discussed this practice of kinship address based on interviews of members of a small community in central Taiwan. What he described is virtually identical to what I have observed in Hong Kong, further indicating that this practice is probably very similar among all the Chinese communities. Sandel said he did not have

enough data to say it with certainty, but it seemed to him that kinship address is demanded of children who are considered old enough to know how to greet adults. He also said that the perceived performance of a caregiver was linked to whether or not their children regularly performed kinship address, providing further evidence of a script along the lines of (2) in Chinese culture. Children's adherence to kinship address functions as a measure of obedience; it provides a clearly observable form of evidence regarding whether or not they do what they have been taught to do.

In contrast, when AE parents experience the same scenario (i.e., when an adult belonging to the same generation as the parent comes into the presence of the parent and the child), they might say something like "Oh look, it's Jerry." This can be seen as an invitation to the child to speak, but not as a directive to say anything in particular, or anything at all. Based on my own behavior plus an open-ended survey given to 10 AE-speaking parents, the same scenario in AE culture would go something like this:

- (10) Parent: 'Oh look it's [(title) name]  
Child: 'Hi, [(title) name]' or [silence]

Young children are free to remain silent if they choose, which is understandable in light of scripts (4) to (6).

The adult will carry on the conversation, providing an example to the child of how this is done. I propose the following script for AE culture, which applies to this scenario as well as anytime that parents talk to other adults when their children are present:

- (11) I want you to know this:  
it is good to say things like this to people like I am doing now  
you can do this with me now if you want to

(9) and (11) again show a contrast between 1) telling children specifically what to do and then expecting them to do it, and 2) demonstrating “proper” behavior to children with the aim of causing them to want to behave in a similar way.

In HKC culture, telling a child to address someone by the proper kinship term extends to the parents themselves. When children see their mothers for the first time on any particular day, they are expected to address her by her title of “媽咪” *maa1mi4* “mother.” When they don’t, I have often seen a mother say “有冇叫我呀?” *Jau5 mou5 giu3 ngo5 aa3* (have NEG call me PRT) “Have you addressed me?”, or more sternly “做咩唔叫媽咪!?” *Zou6 me1 m4giu3 maa1mi4!?* (do what NEG-call mother) “Why haven’t you addressed mother!?”, referring to herself in the third person. It is considered a child’s responsibility to address the parent (or any adult) before saying anything else, or even if nothing else is to be said. My partner has said this many times to our daughter, either in the morning or after our daughter returns from school. In contrast, I will just as often say hello to my daughter first, which can arguably be seen as providing an example of how you speak to someone, plus perhaps thinking of my daughter as an individual on more equal terms with myself.

The following exchange that I observed on the train in Hong Kong between a mother-son pair and a man they didn’t know nicely illustrates many of the differences under discussion between the two cultures. The man stood and offered his seat to the

young boy. In response, the mother said this to her son without looking at the man: “多謝叔叔” *DoIze6 suk1-suk1* (thank uncle) “Say ‘thank you’ to uncle.” Later, when the mother and son exited the train before the man did, the mother said this to her son: “叫叔叔坐呀” *Giu3 suk1-suk1 cho5 aa1* (tell uncle sit) “Tell uncle to sit down.” The mother never looked at or spoke to the man on the train who offered his seat to her son. This conversation was like an explicit training session for the child. The mother told her son precisely what to say and the child was then expected to follow these explicit instructions, which he did.

If a similar scenario were to transpire in America, it may go something like the following. A man on the train gives up his seat for a young boy. The boy’s mother looks at the man and says, “Thank you. (That’s very kind of you),” providing an example of what to say, rather than telling the child what to say. When they exit before the man, the mother might say something like this to him: “This is our stop. You can have your seat back,” again providing an example of what to say rather than telling the child what to say. The scenario I witnessed on the train in Hong Kong would not be done in the same way by all HKC mothers, but it seemed like a natural thing for a HKC mother to do, and other HKC-speakers who I have asked about this told me they agree. On the other hand, it would seem like odd behavior if done in English by an AE mother; the constructed version I described in this paragraph seems much more appropriate. This can be seen as a further form of evidence that Americans have a child-rearing value along the lines of (5) instead of (1) and (2).

*Love withdrawal*

Quinn (2005) referred to a “universal” child-rearing behavior that she termed “predispositional priming,” which involves giving the child a “suitable emotional predisposition,” priming him or her for yet-to-come training (p. 482). I have frequently observed something in HKC culture that should qualify as an example of predispositional priming. When my daughter’s cousin was less than 2 years old, young enough to still be held but old enough to speak, one of her great uncles was holding her when her mother walked out of the room. He said the following to her after her mother had left:

- (12) 你媽咪走咗喇. 媽咪唔愛你呀.  
*Lei5 maa1mi4 zau2-zo2 laa3.Maa1mi4 m4 oi3 lei5 aa3.*  
you mommy leave-PERF PRT mommy NEG want you PRT  
‘Your mommy left! She doesn’t want you!’

This common, formulaic dialogue is inspired by script (3). It primes a child to be susceptible to the future practice of love withdrawal, a child-rearing practice that the literature has frequently associated with Chinese culture (e.g., Fung, 1999). The Cantonese word *oi3* is normally translated as “love” in English, but in this context it is better translated as “want.” The polysemous word *oi3* can obviously mean “want” because it can be used, for example, to ask what food someone wants to order in a restaurant. Another Cantonese verb, 要 *jiu3*, which can only mean “want” is often used instead of 愛 *oi3* in utterances like the second sentence of (12). The implication is therefore not just that the mother does not have certain feelings towards the child, but that the mother will choose to abandon him or her.

As one would imagine, this conversational routine is very effective at priming children for future child-rearing lessons that involve words and actions which imply that the parent does not “want” them. When the great uncle of my partner’s niece said what is shown in (12), other great aunts and uncles in the room repeated it, causing her to cry intensely. The adults laughed, appearing to think this was funny. I have often seen mothers play along with this, and it invariably ends with the mother soothing the child by saying she actually does “want” him or her.

Once children are conditioned to fear the loss of being wanted by their mothers through the use of scenarios such as (12), then the mother can link this to the child’s behavior. When a child is misbehaving, a traditionally common thing for a HKC mother to say is something like “你咁曳, 我唔愛你呀” *Lei5 gam3 jai5, ngo5 m4-oi3 lei5 aa3* (you so naughty, I NEG-want you PRT) “If you’re going to be so naughty, then I don’t want you.” Another common strategy, which may be used on its own or in combination with the statement “I don’t want you,” is a form of non-verbal behavior which seems to express a loss of feelings towards the child. The mother will become stone faced, look away from the child, and ignore the child’s attempts to talk to her. These attempts often become desperate as the fear of love-loss increases.

Statements like the one shown in (12) and the follow-up linking of this love-withdrawal to improper behavior is considered normal and acceptable in HKC culture. During one of my classes, I informally asked 35 HKC university students for their opinions about (12), and none of them appeared to think anything was wrong with it, or with telling a child “If you’re going to be so naughty, then I don’t want you.” They indicated it was a perfectly normal thing for a mother to say.

In contrast, AE parents think that saying such things to a child is unacceptable. I sent emails out to my family, explained the scenario related to (12), and translated the dialogue into English. I asked for their opinions about it without telling them that the speakers were Chinese or that this was considered normal and acceptable behavior in Hong Kong. I presented it as a made-up situation and asked for their opinions. Their resulting judgments were harsh. One said it “goes against everything I know/feel to say those kinds of things to a child!” Four others described it as “reprehensible,” “cruel,” “unthinkable,” “uncaring and awful.” These views clearly indicate conflicting values between the two cultures.

I have never heard my partner say “If you’re going to be so naughty, then I don’t want you” or the related “你唔乖, 我唔愛你” *Lei5 m4-gwaail, ngo5 m4-oi3 lei5* (you NEG-well behaved, I NEG-want you) “If you don’t behave, I won’t want you.” However, she told me that her mother frequently said things like this to her when she was young. Interestingly, even though my partner has not expressed this verbally to our daughter, she has on many occasions used the typical non-verbal behavior of HKC mothers, going stone-faced, purposely preventing eye contact, and ignoring our daughter after she said or did something that my partner disapproved of. Based on HKC children’s reactions to this behavior, I believe they learn to interpret it as a form of love withdrawal. Our daughter always seemed to understand the severity of this non-verbal message from her mother, and appeared quite distraught whenever it happened, especially when it lasted a long time.

Although script (3) says that HKC parents think it is good if their children think their mothers won’t want them if they do something bad, it does not mean that mothers (or fathers) actually stop wanting their children when they do bad things. In fact, the

degree of connectedness and concern for children seems to be stronger in HKC culture than in AE culture. This is to be expected if they see themselves and their children, not as separate individuals, but as members of a unit, and therefore as people who cannot be fully separated from each other.

### *Parental control*

Parental control is another natural byproduct of believing that a child does not know good from bad and therefore needs to be told such things. Such a belief causes parents to worry more about a child being led astray by peers. If children are perceived to be ignorant regarding what constitutes “correct” behavior, they will not be trusted to resist any potentially undesirable influences from others. Ho and Kang (1984), who looked at intergenerational comparisons of child-rearing attitudes and practices in Hong Kong, said that there was little change between generations’ perceptions regarding “the importance of social-environmental influences in the development of character” (p. 1011). This indicates that the culturally motivated concern over bad influences from friends and strangers remains strong, and this is very likely based on a belief that children do not know what to say and do without being explicitly instructed.

The difference in our concerns about outside influences on our daughter is demonstrated virtually every time our daughter asks to go out with friends. My partner’s initial response is usually a reflexive “唔得” *M4dak1* (NEG can) “No,” and mine is usually “Sure.” My daughter normally pursues if told “no,” and my partner’s follow-up question is inevitably “有邊個去呀?” *Jau5 bin1go3 heoi3 aa3?* (have who go PRT)



“Who’s going to be there?” This shows that my partner is more concerned than I am about our daughter’s ability to avoid and/or resist “bad” influences from others. It reflects a difference regarding the usual degree to which children in the two cultures are allowed to freely associate with whomever they choose. A parent from the Chinese community may see this as protecting children from potentially bad influences, while an American parent may see it as isolating them from healthy relationships with peers.

When script (1) influences parents, they will believe themselves to be the authority in matters related to the child’s life, and therefore will feel they ought to carefully monitor the child’s behavior. Looking through the child’s personal things (or Facebook® page) for signs of “bad” behavior is not considered inappropriate if a parent sees oneself as the one in charge of ensuring that the “unknowing” child requires explicit instruction to learn good from bad. Since I am instead guided by scripts (4) through (6), I believe my daughter needs to learn to desire “good” behavior, which entails figuring these things out for herself. In addition, the definition of “good behavior” is not as strictly defined, so she is given relatively more leeway to decide for herself. I also see her as an individual who must develop her own standards. All of this makes me feel much less compelled to carefully monitor her behavior. She of course understands these differences between my partner and I and therefore was much more willing to allow me to be her Facebook® “friend” than my partner.

*Parents are never wrong*

One of my partner's aunts illustrated a contrast between HKC culture on the one hand, which sees parents as possessors of knowledge that must be passed on, and AE culture on the other hand, which sees parents as well-intentioned role models who don't necessarily have all the answers. My partner once told her aunt that she apologizes to our daughter whenever she feels she has criticized her or punished her when she shouldn't have. Her aunt told her she should never admit being wrong to our daughter. This is perfectly understandable if a parent is guided by script (1), because if you ever openly question your own past judgments about the child's "right" and "wrong" behavior, it will be very difficult to effectively play the role of someone whose instructions must always be obeyed without question.

As an American, I strongly disagreed with my aunt-in-law's suggestion that parents should present themselves as always being right, and should therefore never admit their mistakes and misjudgments to their children. A similar contrast in views between American and Chinese parents was reported by Miller et al. (2001). They discovered that European-American parents from Chicago talk about their own past transgressions to their children in an attempt to develop an egalitarian relationship with their children. In contrast, Chinese mothers from Tapei, Taiwan "portray themselves, their spouses, and other 'elders' as worthy of emulation" (p. 170), which makes sense if the mother believes it is her responsibility to play the part of an infallible authority on correct behavior.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Studies like this one can help cultural outsiders better understand why people in a given culture say and do the things they do. Behavior that appears “reprehensible” and “unthinkable” when judged according to one’s own cultural values can be, if not accepted, at least better understood. For example, the valued use of so-called “love-withdrawal” as expressed in (3) should be more understandable to people from outside the culture when considered in tandem with the belief shown in script (1), which indicates that children could never become a valued member of society without following their parents’ precise instructions. And script (2) provides additional incentive to get children to behave properly as defined by the culture.

The scripts of this study also help to explain the differing cultural views expressed in Miller et al. (2001), who said that the American parents in their study judged the Chinese parents to be too severe, and to hold their children to too high a standard, believing this would “undermine the child’s faith in his or her ability to act” (p. 167). Assuming that a Chinese parent is strongly guided by script (1), then this undermining effect can actually be seen as a goal rather than an undesirable side effect.

Miller et al. (2001) said that from the Taiwanese perspective, the child-rearing behavior of American parents is “courting self-indulgence, irresponsibility, and narcissism” (p. 168). But what a Chinese parent sees in such terms may look to an American parent like a healthy level of self-esteem. Based on script (4a), a strong dose of self-esteem is something that children are believed to need in order to develop their own personal set of moral values and to confidently act in accordance with those values.

Other cultural contrasts that appear on the surface to involve contradictory behavior can also be better understood when considered in light of the cultural scripts

presented here. Considering the appalled reactions of AE parents to verbal behavior like that shown in (12), it seems ironic that it is much more likely that AE parents, as opposed to HKC parents, would encourage their children to leave home and live on their own by the time they turn 18 or soon thereafter. And living at home after getting married is much more common and accepted as normal in Hong Kong than in America. Many HKC parents have spoken to me about what they perceive to be this expectation by many American parents that their children move out of the house after graduating from high school. They indicate that they are unable to comprehend it. There is a clear difference between the cultures in the degree to which it seems normal for a child to leave home at such a young age.

In this regard, it appears that Australian and Polish cultures are somewhat comparable to American and Hong Kong cultures, respectively. Wierzbicka (1997) said she was “initially shocked and astonished... [to hear Australians] express their satisfaction that their children (in their late teens) were leaving home... to study in another city.” Guided by scripts (4) and (5), AE (and perhaps also Australian) parents will see their children’s success at living independently as the ultimate proof that their guidance and role-modeling has worked to enable their children to function successfully as a well-behaved individual in society. In contrast, because of script (1), which never fully diminishes in HKC culture, parents believe their children always need their instruction and guidance, which produces a strong incentive to keep their children closely connected to them.

There are a number of obvious limitations to the present study. The data is not only limited, but is biased by my selection of what to include and how to interpret it. It is

also only a portion of what is certainly an area of culture (i.e., child-rearing values) that includes a larger number of scripts than what have been presented here. This should therefore be seen as a preliminary study. Further studies to collect more data, which would ideally include surveys administered to a large number of parents from both cultures, would be a good way to test the scripts validity and help us understand how to modify them or add to them as necessary.

Despite the limitations of this study, Sandel's (2002) description of the practice of kinship address in Taiwan indicates that scripts (1) and (2) generalize to a significant degree to the Chinese speech community as a whole. Wong (2006; this issue) provides another example of the same thing for the Chinese-Singaporean community. And Miller et al.'s (2001) contrast between European-American and Taiwanese parents provides further evidence that many of the conclusions made here may generalize to the Chinese and Anglo-American speech communities.

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