

International Perspectives on  
Early Childhood Education and Development 19

Nirmala Rao  
Jing Zhou  
Jin Sun *Editors*

# Early Childhood Education in Chinese Societies

 Springer

# International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development

Volume 19

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Nirmala Rao • Jing Zhou • Jin Sun  
Editors

# Early Childhood Education in Chinese Societies

 Springer

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# Foreword

Remarkable, poignant, and timely, this seminal volume fills a chasmic void in the early childhood literature by creating an entirely new approach to thinking about three entwined issues: (1) understanding the trenchant relationship between embedded culture and emerging policies (e.g., globalization and glocalization); (2) addressing abundant pedagogical, programmatic, and policy polemics that envelop the burgeoning early childhood field (e.g., quality, equity, and sustainability); and (3) unveiling the unique (and fluid) cultural determinants affecting Chinese societies' surging commitment to young children (e.g., juxtaposing and linking western and Chinese cultures). Raising important contemporary policy issues, the volume provides remarkable insights into the processes of preserving culture in Chinese societies, and in its diaspora, while simultaneously advancing the multiple social changes that are associated with shaping effective early childhood services in today's world. In so doing, this vast tour de force looks backward to Confucianism, eastward to Japanese methodologies, and westward to European and American educational philosophies. Moreover, it importantly looks forward to a promising future where heritage and history are honored as vibrant, and culturally appropriates pedagogies, practices, and policies are adapted. A richly documented and eminently readable volume, Rao, Zhou, and Sun have fashioned an intellectual and practical gift that is destined to become a landmark volume for anyone dedicated to understanding and supporting the development of young children throughout the world. It is a veritable treasure of meticulous scholarship, nuanced analysis, and inventive interpretation—an unparalleled masterpiece for today's children and tomorrow's future.

Teachers College  
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Sharon Lynn Kagan

# Preface

There has been international interest in understanding education in Chinese societies for a number of reasons. Among these is the fact that students from Chinese societies have shown consistently high performance in cross-national studies of achievement. This volume considers early childhood education in Chinese societies. While early socialization processes in Chinese families are deliberated, the focus is on factors that influence early childhood policies and center-based services in different Chinese societies (the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Taiwan). Due consideration is given to sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and demographic changes and other influences that have affected and continue to impact early education policies and services.

The recognition of the importance of early childhood education for human capital development, research on early brain development, and the desire to promote equity and compensate for early disadvantage has led governments all over the world to reevaluate their early childhood systems and policies. Over the last decade, the majority of countries in the world have reformed their early childhood education policies to increase access to services, enhance their quality, and promote equity. All the Chinese societies considered in this volume have also issued new guidelines and policies for early childhood education in the past decade. Early childhood education in these societies has been influenced by traditional Chinese values, eastern and western curricular approaches, and the burgeoning scientific research. It has now entered a very positive era and is poised to stride ahead building on rich wisdom and history of education in these Confucian-heritage societies and with important learnings from both eastern and western societies.

Hong Kong, Hong Kong  
Shanghai, China  
Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Nirmala Rao  
Jing Zhou  
Jin Sun

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Nirmala Rao  
Jing Zhou  
Jin Sun



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

**Nirmala Rao and Jin Sun**

The foundations of development and learning are laid during the early childhood period, and there is now compelling evidence from the fields of neuroscience, economics, and developmental and behavioral sciences that highlights the importance of the early years of human development. Research highlights the speed of brain development during the first years of life and shows how environmental factors, such as early relationships, can alter brain architecture. Further, prolonged adversity in early childhood can result in toxic stress and lifelong impairments in learning, health, and behavior (Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009).

Studies on the economic returns of human capital investment typically indicate higher returns to society when the investment is in early childhood rather than in adult programs (Cunha & Heckman, 2007). Therefore, investment in the early years is seen as pivotal to “Building the Wealth of Nations” (UNESCO, 2010a). Given these findings, there has been a significant policy emphasis globally on promoting high-quality early childhood development and education programs.

This book focuses on early childhood education in Chinese societies. Over the past decades, increasing attention has been accorded to understanding Chinese students and the Chinese education system, for several reasons. First, students from Confucian-heritage East Asian societies have shown consistently high performance in cross-national studies of school achievement, such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Arora, 2012) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Mullis, Martin, Foy, &

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Drucker, 2012). Second, there are large numbers of Chinese students studying overseas, and the People's Republic of China is the source of the largest number of outbound international students in the world (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). Third, China has experienced unprecedented economic growth over the past few decades. All these factors have contributed to the interest in understanding the education system in China.

China, the most populous country in the world, had a population of more than 1.37 billion in 2014 (China Statistic Bureau, 2016) and an area of about 9.6 million km<sup>2</sup>. There is great diversity within China. For example, there are 56 ethnic groups in China but about 90 % of the population is Han Chinese. There are also five main language dialectal groups, but Putonghua is its official language and is also the formal language of instruction in Han areas. Despite the fast economic growth since China adopted an "open-door" policy in 1978, regional inequalities between the eastern coastal and western inland provinces have been increasing (Chen & Fleisher, 2012).

This book is concerned with understanding early childhood education (ECE) in Chinese societies and considers the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, and Taiwan. We use the term People's Republic of China to refer to what is also known as Mainland China or the Chinese mainland. The terms China, Mainland China, and People's Republic of China are used interchangeably in this book. In these Chinese societies, families and schools are strongly influenced by Chinese belief systems, especially by Confucian values that emphasize academic achievement, diligence in academic learning, the role of education in self-improvement and moral self-cultivation, and the belief that the exertion of effort leads to high achievement, regardless of a child's innate abilities (Lee, 1996; Li, 2003; Rao & Chan, 2009).

A variety of terms including early childhood education (ECE), early childhood care and education (ECCE), early childhood development (ECD), early childhood education and care (ECEC), and early childhood care and development (ECCD) have been used to describe services for young children in different parts of the world. The different terms are a reflection of variations in the foci of services and the age group covered. International development agencies typically use the terms ECCE or ECD, ECCD to refer to holistic and converging services in health, nutrition, family care, education, and social protection for children from birth to 8 years. It should be noted that although the term ECD is used to refer to holistic, integrated services in common parlance, the term actually refers to the process of development during the early years. On the other hand, the term early childhood education (ECE) is used interchangeably with preschool education (PSE) or pre-primary education (PPE) and focuses on services for children ranging in age from 3 to 6 years. This type of pre-primary education typically aims to prepare children for formal primary education. To further complicate matters, what many countries refer to as ECCE, ECCD, or ECD are actually services for children ranging in age from 3 to 6 years (Rao & Sun, 2010). This book focuses on services for children from age 3 to the age when they enter primary school, and we use the terms ECE, PSE, and kindergarten education interchangeably in the different chapters to reflect the terminology used in the different Chinese societies. Table 1.1 shows the different terms used for prior to school services in the five Chinese societies covered in this book.

**Table 1.1** Terms used to denote early childhood services and age ranges covered in Chinese societies

Society	Definition and age ranges
China (PRC)	<b>Early childhood education (0 to 6 years).</b> Nurseries are for children below 3 years. Full-day kindergartens provide services for children from 3 to 6 years. Further, in rural areas 1 year of pre-primary education is provided in a primary school for children from 5 to 6/7 years for 1 year before they enter primary 1 at either age 6 or 7
Hong Kong	<b>Kindergarten education (from 2015) and pre-primary education (3 to 6 years).</b> This is provided in kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centers. All kindergartens are privately run, and services are provided in nonprofit-making or private independent kindergartens. Some kindergartens are attached to a primary school
Macao	<b>Infant education (3 to 5 years).</b> Free education is provided for 3 years in public kindergartens and in selected private kindergartens
Singapore	<b>Pre-school education (4 to 6 years).</b> Kindergartens are privately run with the exception of 15 kindergartens run by the Ministry of Education which have been recently opened to spur improvements in the quality of pre-school education
Taiwan	<b>Preschool education (2 to 6 years).</b> Preschool is not part of the compulsory education system but government provides financial assistance to needy families so children can attend preschools (kindergartens and nurseries)

Sources:

China: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A26/jces\\_left/moe\\_705/](http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A26/jces_left/moe_705/)

Hong Kong: <http://www.edb.gov.hk/en/edu-system/preprimary-kindergarten/overview/index.html>

Macao: [http://portal.dsej.gov.mo/webdsejspace/internet/Inter\\_main\\_page.jsp?id=8718](http://portal.dsej.gov.mo/webdsejspace/internet/Inter_main_page.jsp?id=8718)

Singapore: <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool>

Taiwan: [http://www.studyintaiwan.org/album/v4\\_publications/55fbd7943aa41.pdf](http://www.studyintaiwan.org/album/v4_publications/55fbd7943aa41.pdf)

## The Focus on Early Childhood Development in Chinese Societies

As noted earlier, governments all over the world have developed and enacted policies to enhance the well-being of young children by focusing on access to early childhood education and its quality (Rao & Sun, 2010). A notable example is the PRC where the government made a landmark decision in 2010 to move towards 1 year of free and universal preschool education. This is a major commitment, as it entails the construction of preschools, the training of teachers and the provision of educational resources, to millions of children who do not receive any early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2010). The State Council of China issued ten specific guidelines to facilitate the development of ECE and mitigate existing problems (The State Council of the PRC, 2010). These encouraging developments indicate that ECE in China is entering a new and potentially positive era.

However, there is still much to be done to increase access to early childhood education and its quality. For example, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for pre-primary education (4 to 6 year olds) in China was 70 in 2012 (UNESCO, 2015) up from 44 in 2008 (UNESCO, 2010b). About half of China's population resides in rural areas and these GERs mask the marked discrepancies between urban areas

where there is nearly universal enrolment in early childhood education and poor and remote rural areas where early childhood education is not provided.

In Hong Kong, the government has accorded increasing attention to early childhood education over the last few decades. This is reflected in the emphasis in preschool quality (Ng, Sun, Lau, & Rao, 2017, Chap. 10; Rao, 2010), in the funding of the pre-primary education voucher scheme (PEVS) in 2007, and in the establishment of the free kindergarten committee in 2013. In a similar vein, the Singapore government has also been very proactive and has launched various initiatives to raise the quality of ECE since 2000. These include providing suggested key-stage outcomes of early childhood education, recommending curriculum frameworks, setting new standards for early childhood care and education (ECCE) teachers (including guidelines for ECCE teacher education), encouraging ECCE research, and a focus on quality assurance (Lim & Lim, 2017, Chap. 12).

The Macao government has also exerted a more positive role by introducing legislation since the 1980s to regulate the development of ECE in Macao (Vong & Vong, 2017, Chap. 11). Macao was also the first among the Chinese societies discussed in this book to provide free and universal early childhood education. The government in Taiwan now provides free early childhood education for all 5-year-olds and had allocated considerable attention to preschool quality and social justice (Chen & Li, 2017, Chap. 13).

## Why Focus on Chinese Societies?

Clearly, all the abovementioned Chinese societies have been focusing on improving ECE, but this is true of many countries and regions in the world. Why are we focusing on these societies and what are the potential contributions of this work? This book is the first English-language research-based review of ECE and the factors which affect it in Chinese societies. While researchers from disciplines such as cultural anthropology, political science, psychology, and psychiatry have conducted studies to understand the learning and development processes of Chinese learners (Ho, 1986), there is no work that systematically introduces and analyzes the development of ECE in Chinese societies.

We recognize ECE as a complex and multidimensional concept which is distinct from the child development process. The quality of ECE is influenced by the academic and professional preparation of caregivers; the curriculum, the physical and psychological learning environment, and the extent of parent involvement (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). Government early educational policy has the largest impact on access to, and the quality of, ECE, and this policy itself reflects policy priorities (e.g., social justice and the promotion of rural development) and circumstances (focus on quality after attaining universal access).

The development of ECE is, of course, closely intertwined with social, economic, cultural and demographic changes within a society, as well as outside influences. We endeavor to provide a comprehensive picture of ECE in Chinese societies

by giving due consideration to all these issues. In addition to an up-to-date account of relevant early childhood policy and practice in five Chinese societies, we will focus on the relationships among Chinese cultural values, early childhood policy, and practice. We will also critically evaluate the influence of wide-ranging worldwide socioeconomic, technological, and political changes on early childhood policy and practice related to ECE in Chinese societies and responses to global concerns about the excluded and disadvantaged and on quality and sustainability during the early childhood period.

In this book, we differentiate in some chapters between Chinese and Western approaches to parenting and early childhood education. It is important not to consider Chinese and Western early childhood approaches as opposite ends of a continuum for several reasons. Cultures are not static and contexts change over time for a variety of reasons (Sun & Rao, 2017, Chap. 15) and hybrid educational approaches evolve. We have a common biology and young children all over the world have common needs for care and nurturance. That stated, the east-west dichotomy has been used to explain cultural differences in beliefs and behaviors in a number of disciplines. We are cognizant of the fact that there is not one Chinese culture or one Western culture, but we use the terms “Western” and Chinese to simply illustrate the distinctions between Chinese and non-Chinese practices.

## Organization of the Book

This book has four sections. The introductory section includes two chapters that focus on the common Chinese cultural values that underpin early childhood development and education in all the societies covered in this book. In Chap. 2, Sun and Rao (2017) focus on Chinese patterns of socialization during the early years. The similarities and differences in socialization practices across ethnic Chinese parents in different Chinese and non-Chinese societies are discussed, and the influences of globalization and rapid societal changes on these practices are considered. Choy discusses Chinese culture in early educational environments in Chap. 3. She considers the influences of traditional Confucian values, government policies, globalization and national development on pedagogical practices in these environments.

The next section focuses on the PRC and includes six chapters. These chapters consider ECE policy, governance and finance, teacher education, curriculum and pedagogy, ECE in rural China, and ECE in emergencies. Feng (2017, Chap. 4) provides an overview of ECE in the PRC, emphasizing the influence of reform on early childhood education. In Chap. 5, Zhou, Sun and Lee (2017) analyze public investment policy, taking a historical perspective, and with a focus on developments after economic liberalization. Jiang, Pang, and Sun (2017, Chap. 6) discuss kindergarten teachers' professional development, including the preservice and in-service training for kindergarten teachers, in the PRC. In Chap. 7, Yu (2017) takes a history perspective to review early childhood curriculum reforms in the PRC. Zhang and Liu (2017) review the development of ECE in poor and rural areas of the PRC in terms of

policy, access, program quality, finance, and administration. In Chap. 9, Chen, Zhou and Zhang (2017) analyze the response to an emergency in ECE, through a focus on the aftermath of the earthquake in Sichuan province.

The following section focuses on smaller Chinese societies with chapters detailing developments in Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, and Taiwan. Ng, Sun, Lau, and Rao (2017) discuss the progress, challenges and opportunities for the development of ECE in Hong Kong. In Chap. 11, Vong and Vong (2017) discuss the development of ECE in Macao, considering the role of historical and economic factors, the impact of globalization, and the influence of traditional Chinese culture, and in Chap. 12, Lim and Lim (2017) do the same for Singapore. In Chap. 13 Chen and Li (2017) provide a comprehensive review of the factors that have influenced the developments in ECE in Taiwan.

Part IV focuses on lessons from, and for, early childhood education in Chinese societies. In Chap. 14, Li and Wang (2017) discuss how the interactions between Chinese and Western societies have influenced the development of ECE in varying four Chinese societies. In the final chapter of this volume, Rao and Sun synthesize findings from the preceding chapters. They examine similarities and distinctions in the development of ECE of each society to understand how it has been “glocalised.”

This book endeavors to systematically review ECE policy and practices in Chinese societies in the context of recent empirical and theoretical work, in order to facilitate evidence-based policy making in ECE in Chinese societies. Given that “science does not speak for itself” (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011), it is necessary to interpret the meaning and implications of research findings and analyze the effectiveness of relevant policies. Linkages between research, policy, and practices are necessary to promote development and learning during the early years, in Chinese societies and further afar.

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**Part I**  
**Understanding Early Childhood Education**  
**in Chinese Societies**

# Chapter 2

## Growing Up in Chinese Families and Societies

Jin Sun and Nirmala Rao

Socialization, which begins shortly after birth, is the process of learning interpersonal and interactional skills that conform to the values of one's society: one behaves appropriately, knows the language, possesses the requisite skills, and upholds the prevailing beliefs and attitudes (Harris, 1995). It is widely accepted that socialization is a bidirectional process and that the characteristics of the child affect the process. Nevertheless, parents' efforts to raise their children to have qualities valued by their society, and the education children receive in formal educational settings, are significant for child development. Research indicates that socialization goals vary across cultures, and this chapter focuses on the Chinese patterns of socialization during the early years.

Chinese parents have been characterized as exerting a high degree of control and emphasizing academic achievement (Rao, McHale, & Pearson, 2003). As noted in Chap. 1, students from Chinese societies have shown consistently high performance in cross-national studies of achievement (e.g., Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012), and there has been international interest in understanding the early socialization processes in Chinese families. The publication of the book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, in 2011 (Chua, 2011) ignited a heated debate in Chinese and overseas media on the appropriateness of parenting practices adopted by Chinese parents. The book describes a "Tiger Mom" who adopted a strict, controlling (Chinese) parenting style in the USA and raised two very successful children. The memoir drew a considerable amount of attention in the media and was rather controversial and drew criticism from both researchers and lay people. Is Tiger parenting a common

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parenting style in Chinese societies? Not really. Chinese parents are stricter and more controlling of their children's behavior than Western parents, but they are also warm and loving toward their children. Tiger parenting cannot be equated with authoritarian parenting which involves high parental control and low warmth. A special issue of the *Asian American Journal of Psychology* has provided a critical evaluation of the notion, prevalence, and impact of Tiger parenting in overseas Chinese (Juang, Qin, & Park, 2013).

In this chapter, we discuss the nature and characteristics of Chinese parenting, which influence various parenting practices in Chinese societies, including Tiger parenting. It begins with an overview of the commonalities and distinctions in parenting practices between Chinese and non-Chinese families. Second, it considers how Chinese parenting practices and early childhood education have changed in recent years. Third, it summarizes relatively recent changes in preschool pedagogy. Finally, it considers how one major policy, the one-child policy, has influenced child-rearing.

## **Commonalities and Distinctions Between Chinese and Western Families in Parenting Practices**

In this section, we consider research that compares Chinese families living in either Chinese or non-Chinese societies, with non-Chinese families. Two major paradigms have been deployed to describe parenting practices (Wang & Chang, 2010): Baumrind's authoritative-authoritarian parenting typology (Baumrind, 1971) and Rohner's parental acceptance-rejection theory (Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2007). Both of them are based on studies conducted in Western cultures. Authoritative parents are warm and responsive, use inductive discipline, and provide age-appropriate autonomy to children. They also monitor children's behavior closely and set reasonable rules for children (Berk, 2009, p. 569). Authoritative parenting is considered to be the ideal style of parenting to facilitate children's development. In contrast, authoritarian parents use punitive disciplinary measures, exert a high level of control, and rarely offer autonomy to children (Berk, 2009, p. 570). Researchers believe that authoritarian parenting can have negative consequences for child development. Similarly, the parental acceptance-rejection theory posits that children everywhere need acceptance from parents and other attachment figures; if children are not accepted by their parents, they tend to develop negative traits, including hostility and aggression, impaired self-esteem, and emotional problems (Rohner et al., 2007).