

The Chinese Culture

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I. Description of Culture

Demographics in Maine –

- As of the 2000 census, 2034 Chinese individuals lived in Maine.
- The number of Chinese individuals in major cities in Maine is as follows: Auburn (46), Lewiston (124), Portland (200), Augusta (46), Bangor (138), South Portland (67).

Brief history of China and its people –

- The Chinese culture is extremely old; it dates back to 2100 BC.
- Since 2100 BC, 45 dynasties and 2 different governments have “ruled” China.
- Millions of Chinese immigrants have been coming to the US since mid-18th century,
- The bulk of the immigrants came in 3 stages: just prior to 1882 Exclusion Act (illiterate male laborers), between 1882-1943 (traders or students), and after repeal of Exclusion Act in 1943 (women & children).
- China became communist in 1949, causing large numbers of professional, students, and scholars to come to the US.
- Large numbers of Chinese immigrants are still entering the US.

Chinese language –

- There are 5 main language families in the Chinese culture that include: Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Austro-Asiatic, Indo-European, and Other.
- In addition to the language families, there are many dialects in the Chinese language, the main one being Mandarin. Mandarin is the language spoken by government officials in China and is the dialect most often taught as “Chinese”.
- The Chinese also use a phonetic alphabet and the Chinese written language is non-alphabetic.

Religions and religious practices –

- Some common beliefs held by many Chinese people include Ancestor Worship, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.
- *Ancestor Worship*: This practice is based in belief that the living can communicate with the dead, and the dead influence living family members.
- *Confucianism*: This is more of a philosophy than a religion. The goal of Confucianism is to reach the highest standard in personal development.
- *Taoism*: This is a philosophy and religion. It focuses on regulation breathing and dieting in a way to promote health, while emphasizing the expressive nature of people, and sees people in harmony with nature.
- *Buddhism*: It teaches about the eternity of life and idea of reincarnation. Its central belief is that people’s conduct in this world can influence their eventual existence in next world.

Importance of foods –

- The characteristics of Chinese food are divided depending on the region of China they come from.
- The northern part of China has a Mongolian influence, and is characterized by noodles, soybeans, and breads.
- In the south, Cantonese cooking evolved and the local food reflects fresh fruits and seafood.
- Spicy foods are the mainstay in the western mountains of China, mainly Hunan and Szechwan.
- Many Chinese foods are classified with the yin-yang quality. When the forces of the body are in an imbalance, the correct amounts of food from one kind or the other are then given to counter the yin-yang imbalance. Yin foods are “cold” foods and yang foods are “hot” foods. This does not refer to the temperature of the food, but is an assigned characteristic.

Holidays and Celebrations –

- Festivals and celebrations are important for many individuals from the Chinese culture.
- The 3 most important are the Dragon Boat Festival, Autumn Moon Festival, and Chinese New Year.
- *Chinese New Year*: This festival starts 22 days before New Year date and continues for 15 days afterwards.

II. Family/Relationships/Roles

- Definition of family: Immediate and extended (father, mother, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins).
- Authority/decision making: Traditionally, husband. More recently and in Western society, men and women share decision-making.
- Group cohesiveness is valued.
- Gender roles: Traditionally, women are child bearers; serve husband and mother-in-law, responsible for cooking and keeping house. Traditionally, men are head of household and decision maker. More recently, women in work force, wife, mother, and responsible for household duties. Men are head of household, husband, father, and may share household duties.
- Elders are highly respected and valued. Elders live with family rather than living in assisted living facility or other institution.
- Family role in healthcare or hospital setting: Family takes care of the patient’s personal needs, (i.e. bathing). Medical staff responsible for clinical treatment.

III. Concept of work/play/time

- In traditional Chinese culture *balance* is important – work and play are no exception.
- Exercise is a common form of recreation in China both traditionally and currently. This is often done as a group and is not competitive i.e. martial arts: Tai Chi, Qi Gong. These exercises utilize movement, mental training and breathing/relaxation.

- Competitive games i.e. board games, chess, table tennis (games which take up little space and resources) are also popular within the Chinese culture.
- Work – Many Chinese people consider themselves to be individualistic in this domain (collectivism seen more with families). Not likely to compromise to benefit the group.
- Time orientation is based in the past (traditional). Punctuality is seen as a sign of respect.

IV. Communication

- Modesty and humility: Traditional Chinese consider it impolite to accept compliments regarding self and/or family members. That is not to say that they do not enjoy receiving compliments about their children. They take pride in their children and compliments regarding children are accepted gracefully.
- Admiring the appearance of the opposite sex could be interpreted as a sexual overture.
- Self-restraint and courtesy is highly valued. For example, the patient may be in extreme pain after surgery, but will not ask for pain medication from the nurse. This would be viewed as imposing on the nurse.
- Accepting an offer the first time is viewed as impolite (i.e. food, medication). Offer more than once.
- Greetings: The Chinese family name is first and then the given name. (i.e. Zhang Minwen, Zhang is the family name and Minwen is the given name.) Rule of thumb: More than 95% of Chinese family names are single syllable words and the given names are two syllables. If an English title were added, the result would be Miss Zhang. In Chinese it would be Zhang ziaojie (the family name first and then the title).
- Touch and personal space: It is in poor taste for members of the opposite sex to touch in public. Holding hands or walking arm-in-arm is not uncommon among same sexes.
- Saving face: A “no” response is viewed as lacking knowledge or education. Education is highly valued and responding by saying “no” would be embarrassing. Therefore, “yes” does not always mean that the patient understands instructions or that they will return for the next visit.

V. Health and Wellness

- Traditional Chinese Medicine and Philosophy view the person as whole, not fragmented as body, soul, and spirit.
- Humans are products of nature, humanity and its natural environment.
- Health – is achieved through balance in environment (nature and relationships), mental health and equilibrium of body’s flow of energy.
- Traditional Chinese understanding of nature, cosmos and humans are tied to three main concepts: chi, yin/yang and the five elements.
- Ch’i (vital force or energy) this energy can be seen and felt. **Every** object in the universe has Ch’i, from the cosmos to humans as well as the organs within each person.
- Yin and yang (passive and active elements of the universe) yin is passive, yang is active. These Principles apply to entire universe. A mild imbalance between yin and yang can cause a diseased state, and a total disruption of yin and yang leads to death.

- Wu-hsing (five elements or phases) metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Traditionally, the Chinese culture assigns the five elemental attributes to every observable object and phenomenon in the universe, seasons, planets, odor, music, emotions – everything.
- Health - a person enjoys perfect health when s/he has a strong and unobstructed flow of Ch'i, is under the influence of well-balanced yin-yang forces, and is accompanied by a harmony with the five phases/elements of the environment. In this state pathogenic factors will not be able to interfere with the health of the person.
- There is a large focus on prevention in traditional Chinese medicine. Balance of activity, diet, mental health, and environmental factors such as the weather are all factors in maintaining health.
- Treatment for illness/imbalance – Plant based medicine, other common treatments include acupuncture (metal needles at specific point to redirect Ch'i), Moxibustion (heating pulverized woodworm and applying this directly to the skin over certain meridians), Cupping (creating a vacuum in small glass by burning oxygen out of it and placing over skin), and coin rubbing (rubbing coin over skin) are some of the healing practices to be aware of.
- Sick role – The Chinese culture believes it is acceptable and expected to be a passive patient. A person who has fallen ill is dependent on family and health care professionals. This sick role includes the privilege to be relieved of a large share of personal responsibility, including making medical decisions (even if rational and competent).
- Fatal illness – From a Confucian point of view the patient should **not** be informed of fatal illness. It is considered morally inexcusable to disclose terminal illness to patient due to the further harm it would cause.
- Death (view of)
 - Taoism: *Philosophic* – death is homecoming; *Religious* – death is feared
 - Confucianism – death is acceptable only when most or all moral duties of life have been fulfilled. If those duties have not been fulfilled a person may wish to prolong life through medical treatment.

VI. Barriers to Practice

General barriers to Chinese culture –

- There is a small representative population in Maine, (2034); therefore health professional exposure to individuals from the Chinese culture is limited. For example, fewer culturally sensitive resources are available.
- There are many dialects in the Chinese language; Mandarin is the primary dialect. Finding a qualified interpreter who speaks the client's specific dialect may pose a problem.
- Understanding written instructions or directions may be hard for a Chinese individual who has trouble with or does not speak the English language.
- Individuals in the Chinese culture practice various religions. Therefore, a health care practitioner needs to be culturally sensitive to potential ideational/religious differences that may affect the client's view of health.
- Foods in the Chinese culture are categorized as either hot or cold based on factors not associated with temperature or spice. For example, in traditional Chinese medicine hot foods are used to treat cold illnesses and vice versa.

- Be aware that there are many holidays throughout the year in the Chinese culture. These holidays may impact intervention/therapy in various ways. For example, holidays may determine the foods that may be eaten and therefore should be taken into consideration when medications or diets are prescribed or planned.

Barriers to Family Relations –

- Be aware that the elderly Chinese population may follow traditional gender roles where the man is the head of household and decision maker. Younger generation Chinese individuals living in the US may feel conflicted between Western gender roles and traditional Chinese gender roles.
- Informed consent and confidentiality are issues that may arise depending on who is the decision maker in the family.
- A health care practitioner can/should expect the family to be involved and present with health care.

Barriers to Work/Play and Time –

- Be aware of, and sensitive to, the preferred recreational activities of the Chinese client so that adaptations can be made if necessary. For example, Qi Gong and Tai Chi are two of the more popular activities engage in by Chinese individuals.
- The traditional Chinese culture views punctuality as a sign of respect and may even arrive up to 15 minutes early for appointments. Likewise, health care providers should be as timely as possible to demonstrate respect for the client.

Barriers to Communication –

- Because modesty and humility are highly valued, health care providers may be surprised by the response, or lack there of, to compliments. Compliments may not be viewed or accepted in the spirit in which they are given. Health care providers should be sensitive to the cultural rules and should use tact when giving supportive encouragement.
- Traditional Chinese culture has high regard for self-restraint and courtesy. The healthcare professional may find themselves having to anticipate the needs (i.e. pain meds) of the patient, because the client is not apt to request them.
- Greetings in the Chinese language can be confusing because the family name is usually addressed before the given name. Be aware of Chinese family and given names so that respect will be shown to the patient by addressing he/she correctly.
- Be aware of, and sensitive to, social rules regarding touching and personal space. Traditional Chinese culture views touching between strangers and the opposite sexes in public as distasteful.
- Touch and personal space. As with any client, let them know beforehand how and where you are going to place your hands on them. Always ask permission to do so.
- Saving face. Be aware that the client may say, “yes” as a way to avoid embarrassing either party. Because “no” suggests lack of education or knowledge, the client is more apt to say “yes.” Therefore, the OT must be extra vigilant in educating/explaining importance of their

therapy and necessity of keeping follow-up. If the OT must say "no," do so as tactfully and professionally as possible. Avoid confrontations.

Barriers to Health and Wellness –

- Traditional Chinese cultures view the body as an integrated whole, rather than as separate parts. Therefore, a barrier may develop if you address the ailment instead of the whole person.
- Health care practitioners should be aware of the way illness is perceived by the Chinese culture. For example, traditionally, illnesses are caused by imbalance of physical, mental or even environmental factors.
- A traditional Chinese family may view full disclosure of fatal illness as counterproductive and morally reprehensible. Occupational Therapists should not assume client is aware of fatal diagnosis and therefore not reveal or discuss such information.
- Some traditional Chinese healing practices may have the physical appearance of abuse. This is of particular interest when a practitioner is working with a minor.
- A Chinese client who has fallen ill may not expect or desire to be an active participant in their treatment, due to the traditional passive sick role.
- A Chinese client may express reluctance towards invasive surgery. Traditionally, Chinese medicine believe that vital energies are held within the body's organs and these could be lost during surgery.

VII. Suggestions and Tips

- Ask permission to touch and let client know where and when touching.
- Avoid asking "yes" or "no" questions.
- Ask client regularly if they are comfortable. Anticipate discomfort, if possible.
- If necessary, have qualified interpreter who is not a family member – if possible. Interpreter should not be younger than client and they should be the same gender.
- Be aware that a healthcare co-worker may be of Chinese culture. Be mindful of the differences in language, gestures, and slang. (i.e. "Cold feet" may not mean the client is having second thoughts or is nervous about therapy. It may be interpreted as a circulation problem.)
- Learn some common greetings and be aware of their Mandarin dialect:
Ni hao (nee how) means "good day" or "greetings"
Ni hao ma (nee how mah) means "how do you do?"
Xie-Xie (shyee-eh shyee-eh) means "thank you"
- Be respectful of Chinese elders who follow traditional beliefs.
- When meeting the client, other family members may be present.
- Have patience, may take long time for client to gain trust in you
- Reassure client regarding confidential information
- Give tangible help and prove expertise as soon as possible
- Respect and expect family as part of decision making
- Recognize that individual treatment may be preferred to group treatment

- Respect patient's need to use culturally relevant alternative care; acupuncture, Chinese herbal doctor, herbal medicines
- Understand that the client may be more receptive to pharmacology and less receptive to blood work or surgery.

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