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### Recommended Citation

Tan, Fujuan (2017). "The Transformation of Chinese Only-child Parents in Empty-nests," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2017/roundtables/12>

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# The Transformation of Chinese Only-child Parents in Empty-nests

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study investigates the transformation of Chinese only-child parents in empty-nests through attending cultural activities in the Chinese community, when their only children leave home and become independent.

**Key words:** Chinese only-child parents, transformation, human development

The only-child policy, which was launched by the Chinese government in 1979 and stopped in 2015, was practiced for several decades as a solution to restrict population growth, conserve the nation's resources, and advance China's economic development (Chow & Zhao, 1996; Howden & Zhou, 2014). The disadvantages of the only-child policy have been heatedly discussed throughout the years (Howden & Zhou, 2014; Short, Zhai, Xu, & Yang, 2001). Research has mostly focused on how the policy has impacted the personalities and personal development of only children, as well as the related social relationships, population structure, and social-cultural patterns. Moreover, little research has been done regarding the effect the policy has had on only-child parents from the perspective of human development. The attachments that have been formed from the way they raise their children based on social norms were significant, and the empty-nest feeling the parents suffer when their children grow up and leave home has been strong. Because a substantial number of Chinese and Chinese American parents who live in the United States belong to this group, this research, from the human development point of view, investigates these parents' perspectives on the following: (1) how they think they differ from those who have more than one child, (2) how they feel in the US, where the only-child policy is not practiced, (3) how they feel and undergo the change/dilemma when their children leave home to go to college, and (4) how they transform their perspectives and develop personal growth with the support of regularly attending cultural activities in the Chinese American community. Mezirow's transformative learning theory is used as a framework.

According to Mezirow (1978, 1994), there are three basic elements in transformative learning: dilemma (can be accumulated), critical reflection, and change/development. Transformation generally involves an experience that is not easily assimilated into the mental matrix (known as a dilemma in transformative theory), critical reflection on that experience and its effects, and the formulation of a new perspective, often called development (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991). "Transformative theory is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 130). Moreover, Mezirow's ten-step process of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) is among the most noted models (Brock, 2010). In Mezirow's model, experience can come in myriad dimensions from direct to vicarious, critical reflection is the critical self-examination and revision of assumptions that structure experience interpretation, reflective discourse seeks other opinions to test, understand, and possibly refine new perceptions, and action can be immediate, delayed, or continued, and range from a simple decision to political protest (Merriam et al.,

2007). Cultural groups can serve as a good vehicle through which people can seek justification of their feelings, understanding transformational processes, and refine new perceptions.

A qualitative study using in-depth interviews was employed. Six Chinese or Chinese-American, one-child parents, all females, who live in Kentucky, volunteered to participate in the study. The interview questions were developed to inform the research questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants lasting about 45 minutes a piece. Consent forms were signed before the interviews, and the interviews were audiotaped. Data was transcribed and coded. Common major themes emerging from data analysis include that Chinese one-child parents regard their way of raising their only children as different from other Chinese parents with more than one child, and American parents in the United States, in the way that their lives revolved around their only children more, and their children were the center of their lives. Emotionally, they developed a serious attachment to their children. From their perspective, American parents seem more independent of their children and do not seem to care about as many details of their children's lives and schooling.

The Chinese parents in the study experienced great challenges when their children left home for colleges (all of the participants' children went to college). They worried extensively about their children and became somewhat lost of the meaning of their lives. They tried to keep daily contact with their children and know all the details of their school lives. When their children did not keep them informed, they became upset. All the participants expressed great benefit from regularly participating in cultural activities within the Chinese community; they took advantage of these opportunities to talk to other parents from whom they sought and received understanding and justification. They all believed they achieved personal growth from going through the experiences, understanding their children are now adults; they are becoming more independent parents and live healthier lives.

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