

# Effects of Parental Stress and Attachment in Chinese American Immigrant Families on Emotion Development of Second-Generation Youth

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## Abstract

Parental stress is a significant determinant of child development, particularly in immigrant families navigating dual cultural contexts. This systematic review examines how parental stress in Chinese American immigrant families is associated with attachment development among second-generation youth in the United States. Following PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive search was conducted across PsycINFO, PubMed, and Web of Science using the terms “parental stress”, “attachment”, “Chinese American”, and “immigrant families”. Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed empirical studies published in English that focused on Chinese American families and assessed both parental stress and children’s attachment-related or relational development. A qualitative synthesis of 11 studies indicated that parental stress was associated with youth emotional and relational adjustment. These associations appeared to operate through family relational processes, including parent-child conflict and parenting practices, rather than through direct effects on attachment security. Cultural orientation and intergenerational congruence were found to shape how stress and parenting behaviors were associated with child-focused outcomes. Overall, the findings suggest that parental stress associated with migration and cultural adaptation may shape children’s emotional development as well as broader family relational dynamics. This review underscores the importance of culturally responsive mental health interventions to support the development and well-being of second-generation Chinese American youth.

*Keywords:* Chinese American immigrants, parental stress, parenting, attachment

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## Introduction

Chinese American immigrant families experience unique challenges related to migration, cultural adaptation, and navigating between two cultural systems (Xie et al., 2004). Parents often face different types of stress, including acculturative stress, economic pressure, and intergenerational conflicts, which can influence family relationships and parenting practices. These stressors may shape the emotional environment in which children grow up and have important implications for children's development, including emotional adjustment and mental health. Attachment has been widely cited as an important psychological factor in children's development, as it reflects the quality of the parent-child relationship and is closely related to emotional and social functioning. Previous research has suggested that parental stress may be associated with children's insecure attachment and negative developmental outcomes (An et al., 2023; Jarvis & Creasey, 1991). However, the mechanisms of these relationships are not yet fully understood, especially within immigrant family contexts where cultural factors may play important roles. Few study have specifically examined the experience of Chinese immigrant families, and even less is known about how post-migration stress among first-generation parents shapes children attachment and emotional development. This systematic review aims to synthesize existing research on parental stress, attachment, and emotional development among second generation Chinese American youth to better understand the culturally specific pathways through which parental stress shapes children attachment and child-related outcomes within Chinese American immigrant family contexts.

## Methodology

The methodology of this review was guided by the PRISMA 2020 statement, which provides updated guidelines for reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).

## Search Strategy

This systematic review was conducted to examine the association between parental stress and children's attachment styles in Chinese American immigrant families. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using three electronic databases: Web of Science, PubMed (MeSH), and PsycINFO (Ovid). Only peer-reviewed articles published in English were considered. For Web of Science, the following search strategy was used: "Chinese American parent\* stress (All Fields) AND Chinese attachment\* (All Fields) AND Chinese American (Title) OR Chinese American family (Title) AND Chinese children (Title) OR Chinese adolescent (Title) AND Chinese immigrant (Title) AND Chinese immigrant stress (All Fields)". For PubMed, a MeSH-based search strategy was applied as follows: "(((("Parents"[MeSH Terms:noexp] OR "Mothers"[MeSH Terms:noexp] OR "Fathers"[MeSH Terms:noexp] OR "parent\*"[Title/Abstract] OR "mother\*"[Title/Abstract] OR "father\*"[Title/Abstract]) AND "attachment\*"[Title/Abstract] AND ("Asian American Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander"[MeSH Terms:noexp] OR "Chinese American"[Title/Abstract] OR "Asian American"[Title/Abstract] OR ("Emigrants and Immigrants"[MeSH Terms] OR "Emigration and Immigration"[MeSH Terms:noexp] OR "immigrant\*"[Title/Abstract] OR "immigrate\*"[Title/Abstract] OR "origin\*"[Title/Abstract]) AND ("China"[MeSH Terms] OR "Asian"[MeSH Terms] OR "China"[Title/Abstract] OR "Chinese"[Title/Abstract] OR "asia\*"[Title/Abstract]))) AND (english[Filter]))). For PsycINFO (Ovid), the search strategy included controlled vocabulary and keyword combinations related to Chinese American families, immigration stress, and attachment, including the following: "(((((((exp Chinese Children Mental Health/ and exp \*Chinese Immigration/ and exp \*Chinese Child Care/ and

exp \*Chinese Parent Child Relations/) or exp \*Chinese American Acculturation/) and Chinese American, Chinese immigrant stress, Chinese Attachment.mp.) or exp Chinese Religious Beliefs/) and exp Chinese American Family/ and exp \*Chinese Cultural Groups/) or exp \*Chinese Family Relations/) and exp \*Chinese parent stress/ and exp Chinese Parents/) or children attachment.mp. [mp=title, abstract, heading word, table of contents, key concepts, original title, tests & measures, mesh word]”. In addition to database searches, manual screening of reference lists from relevant articles was conducted to identify additional eligible studies. The final literature search was conducted in September, 2025.

## **Eligibility Criteria**

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

Studies were included in this review if they met the following criteria:

- **Population.** Studies focused on Chinese American immigrant families, including Chinese American parents and their children or adolescents, or studies in which at least one subgroup consisted of Chinese-origin immigrant parents and their children or adolescents living in the United States.
- **Time.** No restrictions were placed on publication year.
- **Variables.** The exposure variable included parental stress, such as parenting-related stress, immigration-related stress, acculturative stress, economic stress, role conflict, time pressure, or general psychological distress in parents. The outcome variable included child or adolescent attachment style, attachment security, or relational patterns.
- **Study Design.** Quantitative studies, qualitative interview studies, or mixed-methods studies that reported sufficient attachment-related outcome data.

### ***Exclusion Criteria***

Studies were excluded if they met any of the following criteria:

- **Population.** The study did not focus on Chinese American immigrant families (e.g., studies of the general U.S. population, general Asian samples, or other ethnic groups without subgroup analysis). The study population included only non-parent caregivers (e.g., teachers or grandparents).
- **Variables.** The study did not include both parental stress and child attachment outcomes.
- **Language.** The full text was not available in English.

### ***Study Selection***

Titles and abstracts were independently screened by the first and second authors using the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Full-text articles were then independently reviewed by both reviewers. Complete agreement was achieved regarding study inclusion, and no discrepancies were identified.

### ***Data Extraction***

Data were extracted from each included study using a structured approach. Extracted information included sample characteristics, study design, measures of parental stress, measures of child attachment, and key findings relevant to the research question.

## Data Synthesis

Due to heterogeneity in study design, measurement of parental stress, and assessment of child attachment, a meta-analysis was not conducted. Instead, findings were synthesized using a narrative approach, with results organized according to types of parental stress and attachment outcomes.

## Risk of Bias Assessment

Risk of bias was assessed for all included studies using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal checklists, selected according to study design (<https://jbi.global/critical-appraisal-tools>). The assessment was conducted independently by the first and second authors. Inter-reviewer agreement was complete, and no discrepancies were identified.

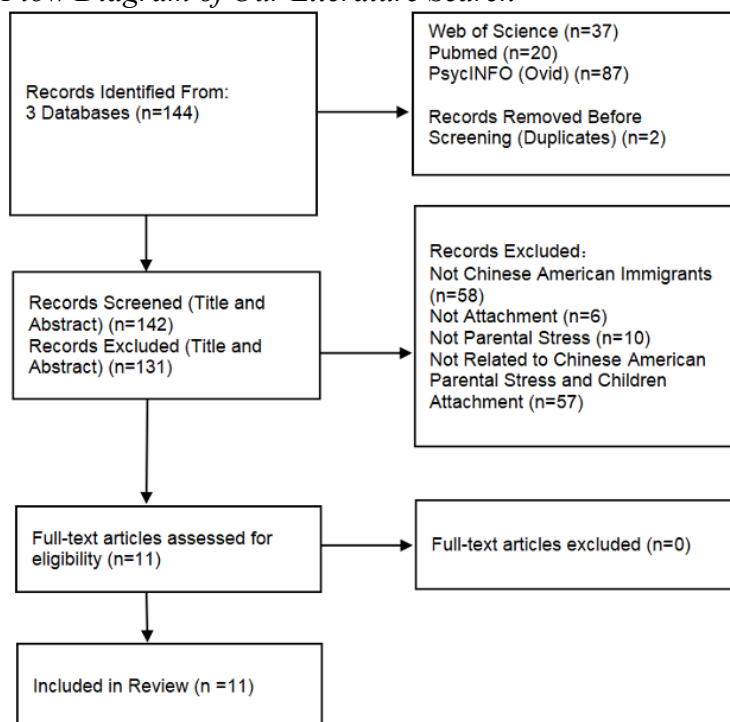
## Results

### Study Selection

A total of 144 records were identified through database searching, including 20 records from PubMed, 87 from PsycINFO (Ovid), and 37 from Web of Science. After removal of duplicate records ( $n = 2$ ), 142 records remained for title and abstract screening. Of these, 131 records were excluded based on title and abstract review because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, which studies not focused on Chinese American immigrant populations, not addressing attachment, not examining parental stress, or not related to Chinese American parental stress and child attachment. Full-text articles were assessed for eligibility for the remaining 11 studies. No full-text articles were excluded at this stage. As a result, a total of 11 studies were included in the final systematic review.

### Figure 1

*Flow Diagram of Our Literature Search*



*Note.* Eleven studies from three databases were included in the present review.

## Study Characteristics

A total of 11 studies were included in the final review. All studies used quantitative research designs ( $n = 11$ ), there is one study used a cohort design. The included studies were published between 2004 and 2024. Study samples consisted of Chinese American immigrant parents and their children or adolescents residing in the United States. Participants represented a range of developmental stages, including school-age children, adolescents, and young adults whose age range from 5–21 years old. Across the included studies, parental stress was conceptualized and defined in multiple ways, including parenting-related stress, acculturative stress, cultural stressors, and parental psychological distress. Child outcomes were assessed using attachment-related constructs or closely related relational and socioemotional indicators, such as attachment security, parent–child relationship quality, emotional communication, and psychosocial adjustment. A variety of methodological approaches were used to assess parental stress and child outcomes, including self-report measures, observational methods, and interview-based assessments, reflecting methodological diversity across studies.

## Risk of Bias Across Studies

Eight studies were rated as low risk of bias, and three studies were rated as moderate risk of bias based on JBI appraisal protocols of systematic review. Overall, the evidence base should be interpreted with caution because most findings come from observational and cross-sectional studies with inherent methodological limitations.

**Table 1**  
*JBI Risk of Bias Assessment Factors*

Cross-sectional Study	Cohort Study
Were the criteria for inclusion in the sample clearly defined?	Were the two groups similar and recruited from the same population?
Were the study subjects and the setting described in detail?	Were the exposures measured similarly to assign people to both exposed and unexposed groups?
Was the exposure measured in a valid and reliable way?	Was the exposure measured in a valid and reliable way?
Were objective, standard criteria used for measurement of the condition?	Were confounding factors identified?
Were confounding factors identified?	Were strategies to deal with confounding factors stated?
Were strategies to deal with confounding factors stated?	Were the groups/participants free of the outcome at the start of the study (or at the moment of exposure)?
Were the outcomes measured in a valid and reliable way?	Were the outcomes measured in a valid and reliable way?
Was appropriate statistical analysis used?	Was the follow up time reported and sufficient to be long enough for outcomes to occur?
	Was follow up complete, and if not, were the reasons to loss to follow up described and explored?
	Were strategies to address incomplete follow up utilized?
	Was appropriate statistical analysis used?

*Note.* Cross-sectional Study and Cohort Study checklists from Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal website, <https://jbi.global/critical-appraisal-tools>.

**Table 2**  
*Results of Risk of Assessment*

Studies	Designs	Level of risks
Chen, Hua, Zhou, Tao, Lee, & Main (2014)	Cross-sectional study	Low
Chung, Zhou, Kho, & Main (2021)	Cross-sectional study	Low
Curtis, Zhou, & Tao (2020)	Cross-sectional study	Low
Fung, & Lau (2009)	Cross-sectional study	Low
Hou, Kim, & Wang (2016)	Cross-sectional study	Low
Huntsinger, & Jose (2009)	Cohort Study	Moderate
Kho, Main, Chung, & Zhou (2019)	Cross-sectional study	Low
Williams, et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional study	Low
Ying, Lee, & Tsai (2007a)	Cross-sectional study	Low
Ying, Lee, & Tsai (2007b)	Cross-sectional study	Moderate
Ying, Lee, & Tsai (2004)	Cross-sectional study	Moderate

*Note.* The included studies were determined to have low to moderate risk of bias.

## **Narrative Synthesis of Findings**

### ***Parental Stress in Chinese American Immigrant Families Associates With Negative Emotional Development in Children***

Immigrant parents experience multiple stressors and unique challenges that non-immigrant parents do not face, and parent stress is associated with negative child emotional factors. Results suggest that Chinese American parents' immigration pressures include acculturative stress (e.g. cultural orientation mismatch, bicultural management difficulties, perpetual foreigner stereotypes), economic stress (e.g. family income, socioeconomic status), and intergenerational conflict (e.g. cultural adaptation gaps, value conflicts) (Chen et al., 2014; Chung et al., 2021; Fung, & Lau, 2009; Hou et al., 2016; Kho et al., 2019). These stressors are associated with signs of parenting stress (e.g. punitive discipline, intrusive parenting, emotional expression styles) (Kho et al., 2019). These stressors not only affect parents' own mental health, but also indirectly influence second-generation youth's psychological and behavioral development through family interaction patterns (Fung, & Lau, 2009; Hou et al., 2016). For example, parental acculturative stress increases family conflict and alienation, thereby undermining adolescents' adjustment (Hou et al., 2016). In Chinese immigrant families, parents under immigration pressure tend to be more conflicted, controlling, and domineering towards their children, and are more likely to use punitive parenting skills toward children, second-generation youth tend to be more anxious, depressed, and present aggressive behaviors (Chen et al., 2014; Chung et al., 2021; Fung, & Lau, 2009; Hou et al., 2016; Kho et al., 2019).

Mothers and fathers influence children's mental health outcomes differently under parental stress. Specifically, mothers appeared to direct their acculturative stress in daily caregiving contexts to all family members, whereas fathers under similar levels of stress mainly showed increased conflict with children (Hou et al., 2016; Hunstsinger & Jose, 2009).

Overall, across all included studies, parental stress was identified an important contextual factor related to family functioning and child-related outcomes.

### ***Parent-Child Attachment Associates With Child Resilience***

Attachment security was rarely examined as a main outcome in the 11 included studies. In most studies, attachment-related concepts were studied indirectly or as part of broader relational or emotional frameworks, such as parent-child relationship quality or emotional security, trust, communication, or alienation (Ying et al., 2004, 2007a, 2007b). However, findings show that attachment-related processes influence children's development, and attachment is an indirect pathway through which parental stress influences child-related outcomes.

Results from all 11 studies suggest that attachment is a protective psychological resource for second-generation Chinese immigrant youth. Attachment provides children with an increased ability to cope with stress within immigrant family systems (Ying et al., 2004, 2007a, 2007b). It buffers the negative impact of stress on children's mental health (Ying et al., 2007b). The stronger the parent-child attachment, the better the child's internal coping resources, such as a sense of coherence (i.e. the ability to interpret and cope with life challenges, uncertainties, and stress, and form the positive meaning through adversity), which in turn makes the child more resilient.

Parent-child attachment security in Chinese American families is influenced by the parent's affiliation with and expression of Chinese culture. Parent expressions of Chinese culture foster a sense of belonging in second generation children and thereby support the parent-child attachment (Chung et al., 2021; Fung & Lau, 2009). Specific indicators of parental cultural affiliation noted in the literature included parental emotional expression styles (Chen et al., 2014; Curtis et al., 2020; Ying et al., 2007a, 2007b), cultural scripts (a broader framework instructions to teach how Chinese people understand and present Chinese culture (Chen et al., 2014; Fung & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Williams et al. 2024), e.g., Chinese philosophies, Chinese religions, language, Chinese characters, etc.), relational affection (Williams et al., 2024), training of Guan/Chiao Shun (the unique culturally based concepts of parental control) (Fung & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009), culturally coded parental affection, and validation (the act of communicating a child's internal experience) (Curtis et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2024). Additionally, emotional attunement, trust, and communication are positively related to attachment security, whereas parent-child alienation (children want to estrange from parents to avoid manipulation) is negatively associated (Ying et al., 2007b).

### ***Attachment Partially Mediates the Relationship Between Parent Stress and Child Emotion Development***

In Chinese immigrant families, the relationship between parental stress and children emotional development does not appear to be a simple direct relationship. Instead, it also operates through indirect pathways, i.e. parent-child relationship processes. Parental stress is associated with changes in parenting behaviors, such as more intrusive parenting, punitive discipline, and less effective emotional expression. These patterns are associated with parent-child conflict, alienation (i.e. the child refuses to have relationship with parents), and lower levels of intergenerational congruence (i.e. emotional bonding and family cohesion), which in turn are related to poorer attachment and child-related outcomes (Chen et al., 2014; Chung et al. , 2021; Fung, & Lau, 2009; Hou et al., 2016; Kho et al., 2019). Also, a stronger parent-child attachment, better emotional communication, and higher levels of coping resources are associated with greater resilience and better mental health outcomes in children (Ying et al., 2004, 2007a, 2007b). Overall, findings suggest that parental stress affects children's emotion development indirectly through parenting behaviors, parent-child relationships, and attachment-related processes.

### ***Cultural Congruence Supports Children's Emotional Development***

All included studies describe ways in which culture shapes parenting practices and influences child-related outcomes and parent-child relationships in Chinese immigrant families.

Chinese cultural factors influence parenting practices among Chinese American immigrants. For example, cultural training and Confucian beliefs, such as Guan/Chiao Shun, emphasize guidance, care, respect, and parental responsibility (Fung & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Chinese American immigrant parents demonstrate varying levels of culture-specific parenting practices. Some strongly retain Chinese culture, and Chinese traditions are strongly present in parenting practices; others assimilate and acculturate, showing less Chinese influence and more American influence in their parenting (Fung, & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Kho et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2024; Ying et al., 2004, 2007a).

Regardless of the parent's level of assimilation and acculturation, cultural congruence between immigrant parents and second-generation youth is associated with positive emotional outcomes

in children, whereas cultural incongruence is associated with family conflict and negative emotional outcomes in children (Fung, & Lau, 2009; Kho et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2024; Ying et al., 2004, 2007a). Studies also indicate that Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; disagreements about cultural belonging between parents and children were associated with greater parent-child conflict and weaker quality of relationships (Chen et al., 2014; Chung et al., 2021). When parents and children differ in their levels of acculturation and cultural values, parenting behaviors are misinterpreted by children, which increases tension among family members (Fung, & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger, & Jose, 2009; Kho, & Main, 2021).

Studies suggest that what children internalize and how they form meaning from their experiences determines how children understand their parents' behavior, which influences their mental health outcomes (Chao, 1994; Fung & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Kho et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2024). For example, when there is high cultural congruence, parenting behaviors that are considered undesirable in American culture, like authoritarian behaviors, controlling behaviors, training, and discipline, were not simply interpreted as negative by second generation children, but rather, they were interpreted as expressions of care, love, involvement, and responsibility. Findings suggest that when cultural training and Confucian beliefs are understood and accepted by children, children are associated with stronger parent-child relationships and better emotional adjustment. However, when children do not agree or accept Chinese meanings and beliefs, these parenting practices may be associated with increased conflict, poorer communication, and insecure attachment-related children's outcomes.

Finally, studies suggest that families that support bicultural identities in their children have the best child-related outcomes. For example, among families that consist of fathers who are American Born Chinese (ABC) and mothers who are first generation immigrants, when children have more bicultural experiences, they tend to show better emotional adjustment and fewer mental health difficulties, suggesting that bicultural family environments play a positive role in mitigating the effects of parental stress.

Overall, findings reveal that cultural context and congruence affect how children interpret parenting behaviors and how parental stress is experienced and transmitted within family systems, thereby influencing child-related outcomes.

## **Discussion**

This systematic review suggests that Chinese American immigrant parents experience elevated levels of stress, and higher parental stress is associated with poorer emotional outcomes in second-generation youth (Hou et al., 2016; Kho et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2004). Despite methodological limitations across studies, all studies consistently suggest that stronger parent-child attachment is associated with better emotional adjustment and greater resilience in youth, which indicates the function of attachment is an important protective factor in children's emotional development. Parental stress directly and indirectly affects children's emotional development (Fung, & Lau, 2009; Hou et al., 2016; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Kho et al., 2019; Ying et al., 2007b). Parental stress affects children emotional development through attachment processes (e.g., children feel increased family tension, or they have insecure attachment, or children have emotional distress in the household, or children experience negative emotional climate from parents, etc.) (Chung et al., 2021; Fung, & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger, & Jose, 2009; Kho et al., 2019; Ying et al., 2004, 2007a, 2007b). Also, attachment-related processes may

partially explain how parental stress is associated with children's emotional development (Kho et al., 2019; Ying et al., 2004, 2007a).

Also, findings suggest that cultural factors play an important role in shaping these processes (Fung, & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Kho et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2024; Ying et al., 2004, 2007a). In Chinese American immigrant families, parenting practices, culturally based trainings, and Chinese beliefs may be interpreted differently depending on how children internalize and form cultural meaning of their experiences (Chen et al., 2014; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Kho et al., 2019). Cultural congruence and perceptions of cultural belonging among family members may decrease conflict and support parent-child relationship quality, which in turn improves child-related outcomes (Fung & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger, & Jose, 2009; Ying et al., 2004). When children understand and accept Chinese parenting practices, Chinese parenting behaviors may support stronger relationships and better children adjustment, but when there is a mismatch in cultural belongingness in that when parents are more aligned with traditional Chinese cultural values while children are more oriented toward American cultural values, children may experience mental health challenges (Fung, & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger, & Jose, 2009; Ying et al., 2004).

Finally, parental stress may function differently in maternal and paternal roles, which indicates family stress processes are not equally transmitted and directed to children; instead, intergenerational transmission of stress depends on how caregiving and authority are distributed within the family (Fung & Lau, 2009; Hou et al., 2016; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). This may be because fathers influenced by mainstream Chinese (i.e. Confucian) culture are expected to prioritize work and social obligations outside the home. Confucian norms also encourage men to suppress emotional expression in family interactions. These factors may contribute to higher levels of father-child conflict. Additionally, fathers who spend less time at home may give less attention to their children, further increasing conflict.

Mothers, by contrast, are expected to take on primary caregiving roles. Their greater presence at home allows parental stress to be distributed across the family rather than directed toward the child alone.

When both parents and children are American-Born Chinese (ABC), children benefit from having parents who have navigated acculturation successfully (Fung & Lau, 2009; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). These parents model integrated parenting styles that draw on both Chinese and American values. As a result, children in these families tend to adapt more effectively to a bicultural environment and show more positive outcomes overall.

### **Limitations and Future Studies**

Our systematic review had limitations. Most of the studies used cross-sectional designs, which limits the ability to understand the causal effects of parental stress, attachment, and children's developmental outcomes. In addition, variations in how parental stress and attachment were defined and measured across studies make it difficult to directly compare findings.

That said, this study highlights a topic that woefully understudied. Although parental stress and attachment have been examined in other populations, there is limited research that specifically addresses how those processes operate within culturally and contextually unique Chinese American immigrant families. This gap is especially important given that Chinese American families may experience distinct cultural values, such as collectivism, Confucianism, and

interdependence, as well as migration-related stressors that could shape parent-child relationships in different ways. It is meaningful to explore this topic by using longitudinal and experimental designs in future studies to better examine causal pathways.

This area of research has important clinical implications. This study helps to better understand of how parental stress influences Chinese parent-child relationships in the post-migration stage. Future research should explore culturally responsive interventions by considering the impact of unique training of Guan/Chiao Shun, the different influences from mothers and fathers (ABC fathers and non-ABC fathers), cultural beliefs, and parenting patterns. Such research would benefit Chinese-American families in supporting parenting practices, parental mental health, children's mental health, stress management, and attachment in the family system.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, findings from this review suggest that parental stress in Chinese American immigrant families is associated with children's emotional and relational development through attachment-related and family processes. Findings also support the importance of attachment-related factors, cultural congruence, and bicultural family functioning in children's emotional adjustment and resilience. However, the current studies on parental stress and attachment processes in Chinese American immigrant families remain limited and have several methodological limitations. Given the bicultural experiences of second-generation Chinese American youth, more culturally sensitive research is needed to better understand how parental stress affects children's attachment and emotional development in immigrant families. As methodological standards and culturally sensitive approaches continue to improve, future research may provide a better understanding of how parental stress, attachment, and cultural processes interact within immigrant family systems.

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