

What Matters To Grandparents? A Glimpse on Grandfatherhood Through Chinese Grandfathers in Singapore

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Literature on Grandparents: Grandfathers as ‘Uninvolved?’

- **Tend to focus on grandmothers**

- A result of biases constructed from a “feminized” perspective, ignoring the role of masculinity in later family life (Mann, 2007; Mann and Leeson, 2010)
- Difficulties of involving men in grandparent research (Cunningham-Burley, 1984)

- **“They should be role models in religion, morals, and beliefs (especially in the case of grandfather). They should also instil self-discipline (on the grandchildren)” (by a middle generation parent) (Thang et al., 2011:561).**

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Objectives

- **To examine grandfathers' involvement with their grandchildren in Singapore through the perceived roles and functions of grandfathers**
- **Explored with particular attention on cultural continuity, value transmission, and its impact on the meaning making and practices of grandfatherhood.**

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Conceptual Framework

- The concept of “generativity” (Erikson’s 7th stage of human life span development), defined as “the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson, 1963:267), gives meaning to grandfathers who find satisfaction in active intergenerational engagements to ensure the wellbeing of succeeding generation, and eventually leaving a legacy.
- Note that while arguing that generativity informs the meaning of grandparenthood, the extent of intergenerational connection is contingent upon an array of factors, including age, gender, class, ethnicity, family relationships, geographic proximity and personal experiences (Mann, 2007)

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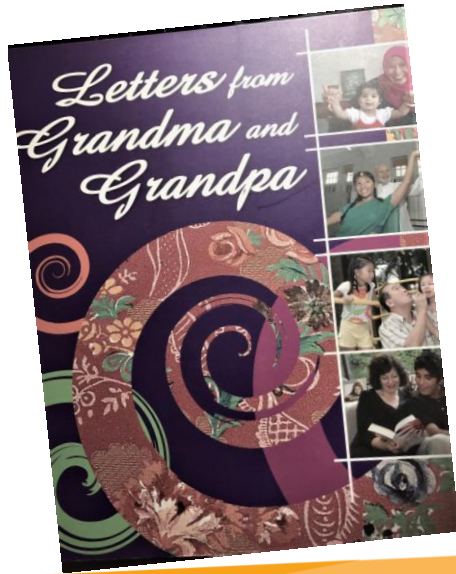


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Grandfathers In The Study

Major Source: Letters from 30 Chinese grandfathers in “Letters from Grandma and Grandpa” (NLB, 2008) and **给孙儿的信** (NLB, 2008) =12 (English), 18 (Chinese)



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Grandfathers In The Study

- Chinese grandfathers ranged from age 50s to 70s
- **Number of their grandchildren: 1 to 10, the youngest <1 year old, oldest graduated from the university and working.**
- **These grandparents and their families represent a microcosm of the globalized society that Singapore has become, e.g., mix-heritage grandchildren, had grandchildren living overseas due to their parents' cross-border work.**
- **From diverse backgrounds: from esteemed professionals, active community leaders to common folks.**
- **Tended to be disproportionately well-educated**
- **OTHER SOURCES: fieldwork with 5 families**

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Thang, L. L., What do grandfathers value? Understanding grandfatherhood in Asia through Chinese grandfathers in Singapore



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Grandfathers

Global Perspectives

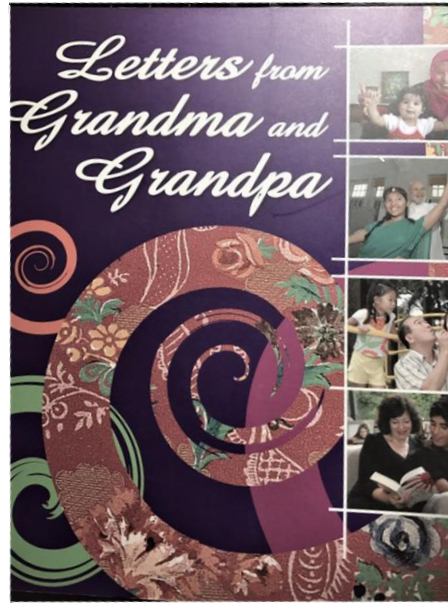
Editors: **Buchanan**, Ann, **Rotkirch**, Anna (Eds.)

palgrave
macmillan

This is the first book to bring together international scholars from around the world and from a wide variety of disciplines, to discover what is known about grandfathers and analyse the impact of close involvement with their grandchildren. Within the context of increased divorce rates, single parent families and healthier, more active elders, grandfathers have come out of the shadows and re-invented themselves in a new caring, nurturing role.

Major Emergent Themes

- Heritage
- Value transmission
- Provision of support and care



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Heritage

- **Knowing one's roots and identity**
 - Urgency of learning Chinese/Mandarin
- **Naming grandchildren**

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Knowing One's Root and Identity

- **Grandfathers were eager in urging their grandchildren to recognize their own cultural heritage and lineage.**
- **The concern for generativity is rooted both in inner needs and in external social forces (Erikson, 1963) = multi-ethnic and globalized Singapore society accelerate the sense of urgency to pass down before it disappears**

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Knowing One's Root and Identity

- ***“We hope you will also remember the very strong Chinese (Hainanese) and Peranakan heritage from your mum’s family... Ah Koong’s family came from Xiamen, Fukien Province, China as early as the 18th century...” (NLB, 2008a:34)***
(a grandfather to his two year-old grandson with an Afrikaner father)
- ***“You belong to the 23rd generation of the Chiang family”*** (A grandfather who was a former MP’s first line in the letter to his two grandsons of Italian-Chinese parentage).

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Knowing One's Root and Identity

CONTRAST on the perceived urgency of learning Chinese/Mandarin in the Chinese letters

- **English letters generally did not pursue the issue of Chinese language, showing the separate consideration of cultural values and heritage with language in Singapore context.**
- **Chinese letters give emphasis of heritage in terms of knowing the Chinese language as one's identity as culturally Chinese as well as other practical advantages**

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Knowing One's Root and Identity

- *“It is certainly important for us to recognize the practical value of English in a multi-ethnic nation of harmonious co-existence, but if one can also excel in the Chinese language, you will be better placed than others when you look for a job in the future and when seeking for survival... the 21st century is said to be the Century of Chinese.. many countries in the world has started a wave of learning Chinese language...”* (NLB, 2008b: 64). (a grandfather who is a writer to his 10 year-old grandson)
- *“The continual transmission of language is like the care that a grandfather has for the grandchildren. In time to come, the grandson will become a grandfather, he will care and love his grandchildren in a cycle that never breaks.”* (NLB, 2008b:127). (a grandfather to his 6 year old granddaughter)
- = juxtapositions of the concept of generativity with linked lives as he likens the language heritage to the cycle of life.

Maintaining The Cultural Practice of Naming A Grandchild

- **The traditional practice for grandfathers to name their grandchildren implies a generative move of family continuity projected through a name chosen == but not much in practice now.**
- **2 grandfathers in Chinese letters named their grandchild – perceived it as a serious responsibility and consulted many books before deciding on a name.**
- **== The act of naming a grandchild thus signals an invitation to foster a generational continuity , as well as to keep alive the practice of respect to elders in the Chinese tradition.**

Value Transmission

- **Passing down moral values**
- **Focusing on family ties and filial piety**
- **Other focus: Education and Religion**
- **Expectations on masculine role**

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Passing Down Universal Moral Values

- In general, the values that the grandfathers deemed important can be considered universal moral values such as compassion, respect, courage, faith, integrity.
- *“good old-fashioned values”* (NLB, 2008a:43).
- *“I started to plan how to use the knowledge and experiences I have accumulated in my whole life to teach you and your three and a half year old brother to lead a meaningful life.”* (NLB, 2008b:86) (letter to second grandson)
- Some grandfathers recognized that the gap that existed between the generations might be a barrier (NLB, 2008b:31)
- Some are concerned that the privileged life their grandchildren have may lead them to take things for granted (NLB, 2008a:80; NLB, 2008b:47) and forget to be humble (NLB, 2008a:122).

Focusing On Family Ties and Filial Piety

- Unrivaled emphasis on advice for strong family ties
- *“be honest, loyal and love, care and respect your elders, family and friends. Love your siblings and your cousins and always try to stay close-knit. Be there for one another in both happy and difficult times. Never take one another for granted.” (NLB, 2008a:72).*
- *“Having strong family ties is key to success.....You must enjoy a happy family life before you can concentrate and do well in your work. Everyone must play a part to have a happy family. Then you help your friends, society and country.” (NLB, 2008a:160).*
- Similar Confucian-related values such as ‘filial to your parents’, ‘respect the elderly’ are found in almost all the letters.

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Other Focus: Education and Religion

EDUCATION

- **Relates good education to a successful career in life**
- **Some seem much involved with school work and progress of their grandchildren (serving as tutors)**

RELIGION

- **Christian grandfathers emphasize on loving and believing in God**

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The Role of Masculinity In Grandfather-Grandson Relationships

- One grandfather's letter in Chinese focusing on encouraging his engineer grandson to be open to the opportunity to work in Shanghai emphasized that *“as man, one should remember the Chinese teaching that “men cast their ambitions far and wide” (nan er zhi zai si fang) (NLB, 2008b:70)*
- In another letter from a young grandfather (60 years old), although his grandson was only one year-old then, was already giving advice on perseverance in National Service and reminding him that “life is more than just work or material success or awards and achievements” and asking him to take care of himself and his family (NLB, 2008a:93).

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Provision of Support and Care

- **“New Grandfather” as caregiver**
- **Financial support and rewards**

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“New Grandfather” as Caregiver

- As assistants to their wives, ferrying their grandchildren to school and extra classes.
- Motivated to finish work earlier and rush home to spend time with his grandchildren, feeding them and playing with them (NLB, 2008b:132).
- Tend to mention “playing with grandchildren” as a way of spending time together
- Emergence of full time caregiver grandfather – with wife still working

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Financial Support and Reward

- Little mention of support in monetary terms by the grandfathers
- One mentioned that among the kinds of legacy one should leave to the young, *“enough money for a kickstart to their adult life”* (NLB, 2008a:95)
- Only one who explicitly mentioned monetary award, in the letter in English to his 13 year-old granddaughter, wrote that he has opened a bank account under his granddaughter’s name and deposited \$3000 into the account as a reward to her for doing well in primary school examination, with promise that she will received further rewards if she excels in later examinations (NLB, 2008a:39) (A grandfather in his seventies with five grandchildren)
- == a way of meaning and value as a grandparent, contrast with grandmother

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Discussion and Conclusion

Impact and influences of grandfathers on children?

- **Transmission of moral values and heritage: Portrayal of grandfathers' roles as the “wise man” of the family with knowledge of culture and lineage**
- **THROUGH involvement with caregiving of grandchildren: grandfathers also assume an alternate gentler role expressing their joy to be involved with caregiving -- as a means to influence their grandchildren with the desired values and teachings.**

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Discussion and Conclusion

- **GENERATIVITY: why people come to behave generatively: besides cultural demand in society for continuity, inner desire – to leave a legacy, a desire to be needed by others (through nurturing, care for and sustaining others) are equally important (McAdam, 1992)**
- **These motivations contribute to the meaning-making of grandfatherhood, and enable the realization that grandfathers – although often underestimated in significance when compared to the central role of grandmother in family relations – is nonetheless a significant figure in the network of embedded shared relationships of “linked lives” (Elder, 1998).**
- **Grandmothers have similar concerns, love and teachings = grandfathers differentiated by masculine-specific perspective in grandfather’s desire for generativity.**

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