



CHINESE COMMUNITY

The **Chinese Dragon** is held in reverence and respect in Chinese culture and Folk Religion. The Dragon, long expressed in folklore and art, symbolises wisdom, power and luck. Temples and shrines have been built to honor the Dragon and many Chinese see divine attributes in the Dragon which they aspire to.

Summary of Essential Practice Points:

Please refer to the full text of the highlighted points related to the following summary points.

1 *General cultural features and social experience - Fusion of beliefs:*

Chinese people tend to be influenced by a fusion of belief systems that developed in China over previous millennia. These include Confucianism, a code governing personal behaviour and societal functioning; Taoism, which promoted the need to maintain a balance between *Yin and Yang*; *Buddhism*, which developed in China as a religion relatively free of prescribed ritual; and *Chinese folk religion*, which includes worship of the family ancestors, etc.

2 *General cultural features and social experience- Social interaction norms:*

Chinese and some other Asians are socialised to conduct themselves to particular standards in public settings, which are indicators of respect for the other. As a result, social interaction is often different to the Western norm.

3 *General cultural features and social experience- Naming convention:*

Chinese naming conventions are different to the Western norm; in China the surname is written first. In the Western world many Chinese reverse the order of the name so that it appears like a Western name.

4 *Beliefs about the treatment of illness and Traditional Medicine:*

Some ethnic Chinese work with practices from *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, including herbs, as a first alternative in alleviating illness and complement it with Western medicine. Some Chinese may also

be reluctant to force the body to recover. It may be useful to check if herbs are being used and that their content does not counter the effects of any medication prescribed.

5 *Religious contacts and religious practices:*

Religious affiliation varies among the Chinese. There are followers of Buddhism among the older and newer communities, Christianity, and some who indicate no particular religious affiliation. The religion followed will have implications for rituals and practices at major life events, including death. It is best to source the name of a personal contact for these purposes. A Chinese community contact has given her contact details for emergencies where no family is available and these are available at the end of the section.

6 *Food and the content of medicine:*

The Chinese diet varies by region, hence food preferences need to be discussed with patients. At a minimum the main meal each day should be culturally appropriate and arrangements need to be made to meet this standard.

7 *Gender issues and modesty:*

Chinese women may prefer to be treated by a female practitioner, particularly when intimate areas of the body are being examined.

8 *Initiation ritual/infant baptism:*

Where there is imminent threat to a newborn baby's life and the family is Christian it is best to check with the family if they would like the baby to be baptised.

Profile of the Chinese Community in Ireland ¹⁷

The number of ethnic Chinese in Ireland is estimated at 60,000. The group is potentially the largest (and if not the second largest) Minority Ethnic Community in the Irish State.

The Chinese community can be categorised in three ways:

- *Ethnic Chinese born outside People's Republic of China (mainland China):* The earliest Chinese migrants to Ireland arrived from Hong Kong (reunited with China in 1997) from the 1950s onwards and spoke Cantonese as a first language. Later arrivals from the 1970s onwards came from Malaysia, Taiwan and Singapore and spoke Mandarin, the official language of China, as a first language. Many of this cohort are now settled in Ireland running businesses, etc.
- *Irish born Chinese* who are mainly the children of earlier migrants.
- *Chinese people born in the People's Republic of China:* A more recent community from mainland China who are now the largest cohort of ethnic Chinese in Ireland. This group, most of who are from the Fujian province in the south and the Shenyang province in the north, are mainly university and language students while there are also some professional workers. This newer community speak Mandarin as a first language and many may not speak English fluently.

¹⁷ The data and categorisation of Ethnic Chinese in this section is taken from O' Leary, R. and Li Lan (2008) *Mainland Chinese Students and Immigrants in Ireland and their engagement with Christianity, Churches and Irish Society*, pages 2-3.

General Cultural Features and Social Experience

This section contains broad information that may be helpful for those with little familiarity with Chinese culture. This information needs to be applied recognising that each person is an individual; there is national/regional diversity among the ethnic Chinese in Ireland; and some of the Chinese community may be more Westernised as a result of having been born in Ireland or living here for decades.

Essential Practice Point

1

- ***Fusion of beliefs:*** Chinese people are influenced by various belief systems that developed in China over previous millennia, some of which has also influenced the development of other parts of Asia.
- *Confucianism* is believed to have had the strongest influence on Chinese personal and societal development. Originating in China almost two thousand five hundred years ago, Confucianism is a personal and social code governing personal behaviour, morality, ethics and societal functioning. Within the belief system people are socialised to behave themselves with dignity in social settings, respect authority and obey their leaders, originally viewing the Emperor (and later leaders) as the *Son of Heaven*.
- *Taoism* developed at the same time as Confucianism and is a more philosophical and individualistic thought stream. Taoism speaks of the *way of the Tao*, a belief that there is a natural flow to the universe and remaining in harmony with this underlying flow will ensure positive wellbeing and good

health. Among other things Taoism reinforced the need to maintain balance between *Yin* and *Yang*, the opposites that Chinese philosophy has believed to be part of all life for eons of time. The principles of Taoism, and the need to maintain the balance of *Yin* and *Yang* in particular, have influenced the development of the system of medicine called *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, music, arts and practices such as *Qi (Chi) Gong* and *Tai Chi*.

- *Buddhism* developed over two thousand years ago. Observers indicate that there has been a mutual influence between existing Chinese thought streams and the development of Buddhism. As Buddhism developed in China it emphasised a religion relatively free of prescribed ritual and accessible to ordinary people and family life. Chan (known as Zen elsewhere) Buddhism initially developed in China.
- *Chinese folk religion* has been practised in much of China for thousands of years. It includes worship of the family ancestors; worship of the sun, moon, earth, heaven and various stars; and figures within Chinese mythology, among them the Chinese dragon.
- **Communism:** The Communist Party of China established the People's Republic of China in 1949 and its first leader was Mao Zedong (also known as Chairman Mao). Initially, thought streams that detracted from Communist thinking, including religious practice, were not favoured under Communist rule. This has relaxed since approximately the 1980s and many Chinese are practicing particular religions including Buddhist, Taoism and Christianity. Some Christian churches have mission programmes in China.
- **Family bonds:** In Confucianism one of the virtues to be cultivated is *filial piety*, a love and

respect for one's parents and ancestors. This includes taking care of one's parents into old age, not damaging the good name of the family, not be rebellious, and ensure heirs so that the family and ancestral name lives on. This virtue continues to influence those of Chinese origin, including young Chinese migrants, some of whom are supporting parents at home with money earned in low paying jobs in Ireland.

Essential Practice Point

2

- **Social interaction norms:** Chinese and some other Asians are socialised to conduct themselves to particular standards in public settings, some of which are different to the socialisation processes in the West. The Asian norms are indicators of respect for the other in that society and not an indication of sociability or capability. With these caveats in mind, some Chinese/Asians:
 - May appear reserved when speaking with another.
 - May be deferential to those in authority and may not always seek clarity on an instruction that is not understood in order to not cause offence.
 - May hold personal feelings in check and avoid conflict with others in order to maintain social harmony and avoid loss of dignity in social situations.
 - May go to considerable lengths to avoid saying 'No' in order to not be impolite.

Essential Practice Point

3

- **Naming convention:** In the written form, the surname usually comes first, followed by the family generation name (which may not be used) and finally the personal name. In the Western world many Chinese reverse the order of the name so that it appears like a Western name. A female example is where Li (surname) and Lan (personal name) is written as Lan Li in the West and a male equivalent is where Wang (surname) Chen (personal name) is written as Chen Wang in the West. If a hyphen is used in the written form, for example Lan-Yee Li, the first part continues to indicate the personal name and the second part the generation name. Check which name is the surname for patient information purposes.

- The older Chinese community in Ireland tend to use herbs to address illness and complement it with Western medicine. Younger Chinese are tending to use Western medicine as a first option. It may be useful to check if herbs are being used and that their content does not counter the effects of any medication prescribed.

Religious contacts and religious practices

Belief systems vary among the Chinese and some evidence suggests that some may subscribe to a fusion of beliefs. Many Chinese are likely to be influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Chinese Folk Religion (these four belief systems are described above) irrespective of identified religious affiliation or apparent absence of religious affiliation.

Care of the ill

Beliefs about the treatment of illness and Traditional Medicine

Essential Practice Point 4

4

- *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, the system of medicine that developed in China some millennia ago, emphasises working with the natural processes of the body to alleviate illness. Traditional treatments including herbs (taken orally or as teas), acupuncture and diet management are used to prevent and cure illness. The natural processes advocated by this traditional system have been used effectively to cure illness for centuries.

Essential Practice Point 5

5

- Contributors have indicated Buddhism is followed by the more established Chinese community, some of whom meet at a small Temple room in Dublin. There are also established ethnic Chinese Christian congregations in urban areas such as Cork, Dublin and Limerick. Some of the newer community, who tend to be younger, also follow Buddhism while others describe themselves as having no particular religious affiliation.
- The religion followed will have implications for rituals and practices at major life events such as birth, critical illness and death. It is best to source the name of a spiritual contact for these purposes and if that is not available a personal contact who can advise the setting of the practices to follow.

- For those who are Buddhist and who do not have a formal contact the local Buddhist contact (developed by the healthcare setting from the contacts provided in the Buddhist section) is likely to be willing to assist.

Food and the content of medicine

Essential Practice Point

6

- Diet varies by region, hence food preferences need to be discussed with patients. Those from Northern regions mainly eat wheat including noodles, bread and dumplings while those from Southern regions include rice in the diet.
- At a minimum, the main meal each day should be culturally appropriate and arrangements need to be made to meet this standard.

Gender issues and modesty

Essential Practice Point

7

Chinese women are comparatively modest and may prefer to be treated by a female practitioner, particularly when intimate areas of the body are being examined.

Family dynamics and decision making

Chinese may prefer if a family member is not informed of a poor prognosis so that the person is given every opportunity to recover. Some may wish to have time to engage in spiritual practices, such as prayer and offering to the ancestors, in the hope of averting a poor prognosis. It is advised to discuss

with family how a loved one will be informed of a poor prognosis.

Blood Transfusion and Organ Transplantation

Contributors indicate that blood transfusion and organ transplantation will need to be discussed and clarified with a person of Chinese ethnicity as there may be concern about these practices.

Care of the Dying

Family and community visits

Family and community will wish to be present at times of critical illness and imminent death.

Death-related religious rituals

- There are no particular cultural rituals surrounding death and any rituals will be determined by the religion followed. Check what religion should be followed with the person, family or spiritual/personal adviser.
- The requirements for Christian traditions are described in their particular sections. Chinese tend to follow Chan Buddhism, which tends to be freer from overt ritual than other traditions.

Cleaning and touching the body

The religious affiliation may have implications for how the body is prepared and any requirements will also need to be checked with the person or family. For example, in Buddhism the manner in which the body is handled immediately after death is usually important and these requirements may apply.

Postmortem requirements

Traditionally a body would not have been cut, while in modern Chinese society practices have changed. Additionally, Buddhist groups indicate a preference that postmortem is conducted only if absolutely essential. There are likely to be variances in the approach to postmortem and the family should be consulted before the procedure takes place.

Interment ritual and bereavement

- Both cremation and burial are practised.
- Traditionally, the family held a ceremony for the deceased person at home, which lasted for up to three days, ending with releasing the spirit of the person to the ancestor shrine, heaven and their grave. The location of the grave traditionally was determined using the principles of an ancient practice called *feng shui*, which has been commonly used in Chinese architecture over the centuries. Some may continue this, while others hold a simpler ceremony or a religious related one.

Religious Icons and Symbols

Personal and religious items

Some Chinese may have statues of particular deities, for example Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. Others may wear jewellery of significance in Buddhism. Christian followers may wear a plain cross.

Use of religious symbols

Christian symbols, such as a plain cross, will only be appropriate for Christian followers.

Additional Notes on Maternity and Paediatric Care

Birth rituals

Traditionally, Chinese women work within particular cultural norms after a birth and many may still follow these norms:

- According to Chinese custom, Chinese women should rest after giving birth to a baby. The custom is called *zuoyuezi*, which literally translates as 'stay in for one month'. No personal washing (shower or bath) is done after a birth for a period of time, which can be up to two weeks or possibly longer and cold water in particular is avoided. They may also not drink cold liquids during this time and may avoid outdoors in order to not be exposed to cold.
- Family may wish to bring particular foods to the hospital that were traditionally used to recoup the new mother's energy.
- Chinese women are open to breastfeeding.

Initiation ritual/infant baptism

Essential Practice Point

8

Where there is imminent threat to a baby's life and the family is Christian it is best to check with the family if they would like the baby to be baptised. Infant baptism is not practised in the evangelical tradition and other Christian churches have individual requirements. A baby born to a Buddhist family will not need to be baptised.

Foetal, infant and child death

There are no particular cultural norms regarding miscarriage, stillbirth or child death. Any religious affiliation (most likely Buddhist or Christian) may determine how these processes are managed.

Naming convention

See *Essential Practice Point 3* above.

Developing a Contact for the Chinese Community

First endeavour to source a personal contact from the person who can be called for support and for guidance should religious services be necessary.

Overall:

The Irish Chinese Information Centre is an established service run by the Irish Council of Chinese Social Services. The organisation has indicated that it can assist ethnic Chinese who may need help in healthcare settings and/or who do not have family in Ireland. The Centre is located in Dublin.

Tel: (01) 8788358

Out of hours emergencies contact:

Dr Katherine Chan Mullen, Chairperson of Irish Chinese Information Centre @ 087 2322607.

Buddhist:

It is best to source the name of a spiritual contact from the person as the Chinese form of Buddhism is relatively free of overt ritual, while there are some practices that should be conducted respecting the person's language and culture.

Christian:

The website of the Chinese Christian Evangelistic Association provides details for three Chinese Christian groups in Ireland.

Cork Chinese Christian Fellowship
Tel: (087) 9310841

Chinese Gospel Church of Dublin
Tel: (01) 873 0606

Dublin Christian Life Fellowship
Tel: (01) 815 7642

Contributors

Three cultural informants from the Chinese community in Ireland contributed to this section and approved the finalised material. They were:

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