In the first of the three empirical chapters, Chapter 6 argues that cultural stereotypes are no longer sufficient to explain the lives of contemporary British Chinese families. Such explanations are misleading, as individuals are not solely bound by cultural traditions; rather, they are free to form their own identities and values in the modern world. The agency of individuals to construct their own cultural identities – either through the notion of diaspora, globalisation, translocalism or personal experiences – impacts upon the belief system and behaviours of British Chinese parents. The viewpoint that individuals are free to create their own identities and self-narratives accords with the individualisation theories of Giddens (1991; 1992) and Beck (1992), as discussed in Chapter 4. British Chinese parents also try to connect with their children through their everyday exchanges and parenting decisions. Such behaviours relate to the concept of ‘relationality’, where connectedness, attachments to others and self-determination inform the active creation of their self-biographies, identities and meaning-making (Roseneil 2004).

Such processes indicate the complex nature of Chinese parenting and the nature of the parent–child relationship itself. Indeed, contemporary British Chinese parenting approaches should be seen as an interactive process, where individual and family experiences are created through, and are contingent upon, family practices within and outside the home (Morgan 1996). By exploring parents’ childhood experiences, their societal outlooks and their relationship with their children, Chapter 6 demonstrates how British Chinese parenting
approaches are influenced by a variety of other factors, in addition to cultural explanations.

6.1 Chinese childhoods of the past

The accounts of Chinese parents’ childhoods coincide with the existing literature, where Chinese parents were viewed as wholly authoritarian. This can be seen within the practices of patriarchy, filial piety and high levels of absolute parental authority. With regard to patriarchy in Chinese culture, compliance with, and respect for, authority – especially of elders and male authority figures – has been argued to be an integral part of the early socialisation process for Chinese children (Wang and Phinney 1998). The significance of the male within the Chinese belief system has led to the father being the principle disciplinarian of the child. Consequently, Chinese fathers are seen as stricter than mothers in terms of parental control (Shek 2008). Within the sample, parents recounted fathers as being the authority figure and the punisher of violations. As a result, fathers in the past were both feared and revered during the parents’ childhoods. As Heather (mid-40s) commented, ‘My dad was really strict, you didn’t back-chat’. Hing (early 60s, Chinese father) further remarked, ‘Back then, when you saw your dad’s face, you’d be scared’. Kwok-bun (2013) has also found the notion of authoritarian Chinese fatherhood to be prevalent amongst first-generation Chinese overseas.

Parents in the sample recalled that their mothers were strict, but they were gentler, kinder and more conversational in comparison with Chinese fathers. As Ting (early 40s, Chinese father) mentioned, ‘If I needed advice and help, I would turn to my mum, as my father was a distant figure of authority’. Such views coincide with Chinese cultural outlooks, where mothers are often perceived as primarily responsible for their children’s needs, leading to mothers developing a more responsive attitude and showing greater concern than fathers (Wu et al. 2002). Chinese women are also encouraged to express their emotions more freely than men. This is seen in the popular Chinese saying, ‘A man should drop blood but not tears’ (Shek 2008). Parental memories of the paternal role being disciplinarian and the maternal role as nurturing coincide with the notion of ‘strict father, warm mother’, which has been found in previous Chinese family studies (Shek, Ma and Sun 2011).