

In Search of the Confucian Family: Interviews With Parents and Their Middle School Children in Guangzhou, China

By: [Yudan Chen Wang](#)

Wang, Y.C. (2014). In Search of the Confucian Family: Interviews With Parents and Their Middle School Children in Guangzhou, China. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(6), 765-782. doi: 10.1177/0743558414538318.

Made available courtesy of Sage Publications:
<http://www.dx.doi.org/10.1177/0743558414538318>

*****© The Author. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from the Author & Sage Publications. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. *****

Abstract:

This article presents findings from interviews with 16 middle school students and their parents in Guangzhou, China, about parent-adolescent relationships. Themes revealed from the conversations suggested that adolescents were generally pleased with the good relationships with their parents, that they enjoyed the respect their parents had for them as their parents tended to use peaceful reasoning to communicate parental expectations, and that they themselves cared a lot about academic attainment because it would lead to good jobs in the future. In addition, working-class parents expressed a sense of inadequacy while holding on to the high hopes and expectations for their children, whereas middle-class parents and parents who had middle-class experiences either in their occupation or in their education tried to raise well-rounded children apart from emphasis on academic achievement. In sum, these parents and adolescents represented a generation that was influenced by a myriad of social forces in modern China, including Confucianism, Socialism, and Capitalism, instead of simply and solely by classical Confucianism. In other words, Confucianism, along with the lifestyle that supported it, was far less salient than assumed in a lot of research on Chinese families and parent-child relationships.

Keywords: parenting | Confucianism | authority | China | adolescent | Chinese parent-adolescent relationships

Article:

Research and theoretical writings on family relationships in China in general used to presume that Chinese people live in ways prescribed in Confucian philosophical teachings (Hwang, 1999, 2001). The principles of Confucianism suggest that subordinates in the social hierarchy should respect and obey authorities, and authorities are charged with greater responsibilities and granted disproportionate social advantages and resources. More specifically, the parent-child relationship

is a family-level example of such authority-subordinate relationships. As such, researchers like Ho (1986) and Wu (1996) tended to characterize parent-child relationships in China as conforming to Confucian prescriptions by upholding obedience to authority as an essential socialization goal. Nevertheless, more recent research challenged such characterizations based on a monolithic cultural model. For example, Fong (2007) found that working-class parents in Dalian, a medium-sized city in northern China, wanted their adolescent children to be obedient and receptive to parental influences yet independent in handling problems in school and workplace settings. Lieber, Fung, and Leung (2006) found that Hong Kong and Taiwan parents believed in the importance of not only filial piety, which was defined as obeying parents and developing a sense of shame in self-monitoring, but also autonomy granting. In addition, Way et al. (2013) found that middle-class mothers in Nanjing, another medium-sized city in mid-eastern China, focused on the socioemotional well-being of their adolescent children by trying to allow their children more autonomy, instead of focusing on the proprieties in parent-child relationships, as would have been emphasized in Confucian teaching. To continue and expand this line of research, I intended to investigate the beliefs and behaviors associated with the core Confucian notion of authority among not only parents but also their adolescent children residing in Guangzhou, a major industrialized city in southern China. Furthermore, both middle-class and working-class families were examined.

The Confucian Family: Philosophical Ideals Versus Social Practices

The notion of authority, according to Confucianism, starts within the family. In the family system, authority is assigned solely to parents. Emphasis on parental authority arises from the practical needs of maintaining an agrarian social system. The goal of philosophical Confucianism is to provide justification for such a family system historically rooted in an agrarian society, and to identify ways to regulate individual behavior within the system (Feng & Bodde, 1960). On one hand, parents, who are in authority positions, are considered to be capable of managing family assets and providing for children. Moreover, parents are obliged to fulfill these responsibilities to claim the legitimacy of their authority. On the other hand, sincerely respecting parental authority is not only an act of necessity for children but also an act of virtue, as cultivating filial piety lays the foundation for successful adulthood (Rosemont & Ames, 2009).

Whereas traditional Confucian prescriptions of family relationships were intended to promote harmony and continuity in the family, the actual family in modern times is far from harmonious (Slote & de Vos, 1998). It is the parent generation, rather than the child generation, that emphasizes the value of filial piety. Young children and adolescents, especially only children, are far from demonstrating any tendency or willingness to be deferential (Fong, 2004). Chinese only children struggled to define boundaries between respecting parental authority and upholding personal autonomy. In sum, deference in the child seems to be forced and rewarded from outside rather than cultivated from within, and parent-child relations involve more practical than ideological issues.

Way et al.'s (2013) interviews with parents of middle school children indicated that parents were keenly aware of the change of time and the changing psychosocial needs of their children. Instead of emphasizing obedience to parental authority, they tried to protect the need for autonomy of their adolescent children by allowing their children to make their own decisions in areas such as extracurricular activities. Fong's (2007) interviews together with participant observation with parents and older adolescents, however, revealed a more complex picture. On the one hand, parents were influenced by Confucian traditions in their parenting, as they demanded that their children be obedient and sociable, which were critical in family relationships. On the other hand, those parents were also influenced by the influx of Western values associated with a market economy, as they expected their children to develop independence and excellence, which were important for building a successful career. From the adolescent perspective, those values and qualities were contradictory with one another, and it was challenging for parents to articulate, and impossible for adolescents to satisfy, both at the same time. Consequently, the parents were disappointed to find that their children were not the perfect children that they wished for.

Taken together, it is clear that the idealized, monolithic Confucian ideology is unlikely to be an adequate reflection of parent-adolescent relationships in contemporary China. Regardless of their expectation for their children, parents have come to realize that parental authority is no longer taken for granted, either by the modern society or by their adolescent children.

Social Class and Parenting

Confucianism was originally advocated by the literati, the educated class, yet prescribed for those who are less educated and engaged in agrarian work (Lau, 1979). Research suggests that people with higher levels of education and occupation are well-versed in their Confucian beliefs, whereas working class individuals and families tend to face the struggle between beliefs in Confucian principles and practical choices in family relations such as elderly care arrangement and parenting of adolescent children (e.g., Fong, 2004; Ikels, 2004; Slote & de Vos, 1998). Accordingly, parents with higher levels of education and occupation, or middle-class parents, might be more ready to parent based on principles of philosophical filial piety, such as emphasizing the value of education for family glory, family harmony, and parental authority. On the contrary, parents with lower levels of education and occupation, or working-class parents, might be more ready to forgo parental involvement and parental authority due to limited life choices and resources. Thus, exploring the behaviors and practices of adolescents and parents from different social classes in handling authority issues might provide clues regarding why the social and practical aspects of Confucianism are largely divergent from philosophical accounts.

This Study

This study was intended to provide an updated snapshot of parent-adolescent relationships in Guangzhou, China, a city influenced by a blend of multiple sociohistorical and sociocultural

forces. Interviews with parents and their adolescent children were conducted in order to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: What do parent-child relationships look like now that children have entered middle school?

Research Question 2: How do parents and the middle school children negotiate authority issues?

Research Question 3: In what ways participants from different social class backgrounds differ in their values, beliefs, and ways to handle authority issues?

Method

Participants

I interviewed 16 families in Guangzhou, China. Guangzhou is a major commercial and cultural center in southern China. It has “historically been China’s leading commercial port” (Guangzhou International, n.d.). According to its official website, Guangzhou’s GDP ranks third among cities in mainland China. Notably, Guangzhou has been promoting public access to information services, and almost 90% of local households were connected to the Internet in 2011. In addition, the city welcomes a wide variety of ethnic groups, religious practices, and nationalities. The local language, Cantonese, is used as the primary language in the media. The official Chinese language, Mandarin, is taught at schools and also used frequently in daily exchange. Finally, as a city with over 2,000 years of history and distant from the central government, a wealth of local traditions have been sustained. Thus, it is a city with a seamless blend of modernity and traditions, which is open to foreign influences and at the same time protective of its local culture. Therefore, diversity, rather than uniformity, in values and practices is likely to be a key feature of the snapshot of parent-adolescent relationships in the city.

Selection of interviewees were based on a 2 (sex) × 2 (middle class vs. working class) × 2 (overall school performance of adolescent: high achieving vs. low achieving) design, so as to enhance diversity in the sample. Each category (eight in total) was represented by two adolescents and their parents. The interviewees were recommended by seventh-grade teachers from two schools; therefore, their social-class backgrounds were reevaluated based on the information obtained in the interview. One of the schools was a district school located in the outskirts of the city, where former family farmland was transformed into factories, warehouses, and industrialized farms. Households in this district had rural residency. The other school was a district school located in a tourist and cultural area in town, where households had urban residency. As expected, half of the participating families were of rural residency and half urban residency. One essential difference between rural and urban residency is that rural residents technically own their inherited land (farmland) and are allowed to have up to two children, whereas urban residents are involved in the buying and selling of the housing market and are

under the restriction of the one-child-per-family policy. However, few of the rural residents are still engaged in traditional farming. Instead, most of them work in factories in various capacities.

The participant families turned out to be quite diverse in terms of family structure, financial well-being, overall functioning, adolescent adjustment, and the extent to which they opened up themselves in the interview. Notably, one of the families had a stepmother, another family had a stepfather, and there were two families where the adolescent participants were cared for by grandparents due to the job location of the parents. The adolescent participants in the stepfamilies did not do well academically, but neither the parents nor the adolescents attributed it to the family structure. The adolescent participants who were cared by grandparents were high achievers at school, got along well with their grandparents, had regular communications with their parents who had jobs elsewhere, and did not consider such care arrangement an issue. Other 12 families were regular two-parent households with varying levels of socioeconomic resources. Additionally, parents were migrant workers in two of the families. They did not have local residency and their children were high achievers. The median age of parents was 42 years, and the median age of 13 years.

The interviews were conducted at home by choice of participants. Parents and adolescents were interviewed individually in separate rooms, except for three families who chose to be interviewed together. The adolescent participants in the families who chose to be interviewed together seemed to be well-adjusted and agreeable to the responses of their parents. Each interview took about 60 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcribing and coding.

In an attempt to avoid bias associated with having presumptions about participants' thoughts and personalities, I chose to recruit participants from two schools that I had no previous contact with, and hence I had no prior knowledge of the participants until I scheduled visits with them over the phone. In addition, as I asked participants to sign informed consent before the interviews started, I reassured them that I was not there to "test" them on their parenting knowledge or "assess" their family functioning. Rather, I was there to get to know them and hear about their ideas. In the event that participants asked me for advice regarding parenting and schooling after the interviews officially ended (the voice recorder was turned off), as they were informed by their schools that I came from an American university, I stayed on and talked with them from the perspective of a former middle school teacher. Last, I spoke Cantonese with participants who were more comfortable speaking Cantonese and Mandarin with those who preferred so.

Interview Protocol

The research procedures, including the interview protocol, were reviewed and approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview was roughly laid out based on the following guiding topics and questions, as well as Helwig, Arnold, Tan, and Boyd's (2003) vignettes. Also, participants were encouraged to describe real-life examples in response to the questions.

1. How are you getting along with your child (parents)?
 - a. Do you think your child (parents) feel the same way as you do?
2. For the following issues as well as other issues that are important in your family, what rules/expectations do you have for your child? (What rules/expectations do your parents have for you?)
 - a. Going out with friends
 - b. Dating
 - c. Staying online
 - d. Talking back
 - e. Lying to parents
3. For parents: How do you enforce your rules? How are your expectations communicated? (For children: How are the rules enforced? How do you learn about your parents' expectations? Can you describe an instance?)
4. Does your child listen to you (for each instance of the rules/expectations)? (Do you listen to your parents [for each instance of the rules/ expectations]?)
5. For the instances that your child listens to you, why do you think he or she listens to you? In the instances that your child does not listen to you, why do you think he or she does not? (In the instances that you listen to your parents, why do you listen to them? In the instances that you do not listen to your parents, why don't you?)
6. Examples of additional vignettes that the parents and children were asked to respond to include the following:
 - a. In a family, the parents of an eighth-grade child want to enroll him or her in a Saturday tutoring program. The tutoring will take all day, as it will cover a variety of subjects. The child does not want the additional tutoring. What do you think the child should do? Why?
 - b. In a family, the child wants to dye his or her hair when he or she starts senior high school (10th grade). What should the parent do? Why? What should the child do? Why?

Coding Social Class

In this study, both education and occupation were considered to determine a family's social class (Kohn, 1995). The families were categorized into middle class, working class, and two additional mixed social classes according to the following coding scheme:

1. Middle-class families: Both parents are middle class by education and at least one parent is middle class by occupation.
2. Working-class families: Both parents are working class by education; one or both parents have a working-class occupation or are unemployed; neither parent can have a middle-class occupation.
3. Mixed social-class families 1: One parent is working class and the other is middle class.
4. Mixed social-class families 2: middle-class education + workingclass occupation (unemployed) or working-class education + middleclass occupation for one or both parents.

Middle-class occupations are those that afford self-direction and autonomous decision-making, such as director, accountant, and police officer. Middle-class education refers to experiences in the higher education environment (i.e., beyond high school). Working-class occupations are those that afford little self-direction and involve mostly mechanical repetition, such as assembly line worker, janitor, and driver. Working-class education refers to no more than 12 years of school education. For example, if both parents had associate degrees and held executive positions, that family was classified as middle class. If both parents had fewer than 9 years of education and worked as farm laborers, the family was classified as working class. If one of the parents had a high school education but worked as a company manager, that family was classified as Mixed 2. If both parents had an associate degree but one was a driver and the other was a factory worker, that family also was classified as Mixed 2. If one parent had an associate degree and was an accountant but the other one had a high school degree and was unemployed, that family was classified as Mixed 1. Post hoc analysis suggested that social class was not related to residency status.

Analysis of the Dialogues

Analysis of the interview data was conducted immediately after each interview, updated as more data were collected, and continued until themes were finalized. Following the steps outlined by Maxwell (2005), I first listened to the audio recordings of each interview multiple times and wrote reflective memos (comparable with the narrative summaries used by Way et al., 2013). Next, I had the interviews transcribed. To aid the process of identifying themes, I assigned two or three key words that summarized each segment of the interviews as I was transcribing them. I also went back and forth to adjust the key words, so as to use the same or similar terms whenever reasonable as a means of data reduction. Then, I compiled the key words across participants.

In the end, I was able to use the three sets of key words to summarize the adolescent responses: school and job, communication, reasonable parents, together with three sets of key words to summarize the parent responses: lessened control, school performance and character building, manners. Finally, the key words were turned into narrative themes. In an attempt to pursue trustworthiness of the results, I consulted my collaborator on this project in each step of data analysis. Furthermore, I presented my themes (without any participant quotes) to two local middle teachers not working in the same schools, asking for their opinions regarding the likelihood of these themes. The teachers suggested that the phenomena described in these themes were commonly seen among students and parents that they knew.

Results

Results from the adolescent interviews were presented first, followed by results from the parent interviews. Overall, the parents (parent figures) and adolescents in the families I visited got along well with each other, and the participants welcomed my visits. I discussed this “good impression” with some teachers in those schools and they were not surprised. They said, “most parents are good parents, or at least try to be good parents, and want their children to be good.” The teachers also suggested that harsh parenting as well as serious problem behaviors (e.g., drugs and violence) were extremely rare.

Adolescent Responses

A good job as the ultimate goal. When I asked the adolescent participants about parental expectations in terms of academic achievement and schoolwork, all of the adolescent interviewees affirmed that they were expected to study well to get to a good high school, then college, than a good job in the future. Regardless of their current academic standing or their actual interest in schoolwork, they all unambiguously acknowledged the importance of academic achievement for their own future. In addition, they all believed that they should have studied harder, and they have wanted to study harder. Furthermore, they suggested that they understood the worries and pressures borne by their parent generation and understood that their parents’ nagging and pushing were well-intended. As such, the adolescent participants did not consider themselves to work hard at school simply as a response to parental authority or expectations; rather, they believed that they needed to build a better life for themselves and achieving high at school was a crucial start. These adolescents had a mutual understanding with their parents with regard to the ultimate goal: a good job.

(I should study hard) because I want to get a good job when I grow up. (LZW, boy)

I understand that high school is crucial for getting into college, so I need to work hard right now. But I also understand that I need to work well and rest well, and I should not give myself too much pressure. (DZR, girl)

I do not pay enough attention in class, I always feel tired . . . and I don't quite understand what the teacher says, perhaps because I did not have a good foundation . . . The good thing about my mother is that she really cares about my schoolwork . . . I am a little worried about high school, after all I hope I can make it into high school (instead of vocational school). (LGB, boy)

Daddy said that a good life is not something to be taken for granted, it is something to be attained. I always remember that and I do my best in my studies. (OJE, girl)

Notably, none of the adolescents or the parents mentioned anything related to the Confucian ideas of family glory when speaking about academic achievement. They tended to focus on practical considerations and the harsh reality of an ever-changing, all-the-more-competitive society that is going to present tremendous opportunities and challenges for the younger generation.

Satisfactory parent-adolescent relationships. Most of the adolescent participants felt genuinely pleased with their relationships with their parents or parent figures, except for two girl participants (LIT complained that her mother spent too much time on her ill stepfather and did not pay enough attention to her, while OJE complained that her mother was not open-minded enough and lost her temper easily).

In addition, some adolescents commented on the open communication with their parents. If they wanted something, from a new backpack to hanging out with friends in a shopping mall, they would ask their parents for permission. This is significant because it suggested that these adolescents were not ashamed, or made ashamed, of their wants that were unrelated to getting good grades. Most of the time, they did not expect objection from their parents, and they were ready to negotiate with their parents about what they needed to do in order to get what they wanted.

(Mom) seldom loses her temper, and she is considerate. (DZR, girl)

I get along quite well with my mom. I talk to her about everything. (LGB, boy)

My father and I talk just like we are friends. (CJY, girl)

I like my father's involvement because it is for my own good. I am pleased with my relationship with my parents. (JRH, boy)

Use reasoning to handle authority issues. The interviews were oriented toward how everyday authority issues, such as schoolwork, dating, and going out, were handled. There was not much talking back, slamming doors, silent treatment, scolding, or spanking going on in these families. When asked about how parental rules were enforced, all adolescent interviewees, except for OJE commenting on her mother, said that parents generally used peaceful reasoning, and that was central to the pleasant parent-adolescent relationships that these adolescents felt contented about.

Moreover, they considered it a necessity, not an exception, for parents to reason with children. In other words, they would behave according to parental expectations not simply because of reward or punishment (although these methods were certainly used and accepted), or because they were intimidated by parental authority, but because of their recognition that parents were reasonable and well-intended. At times, they suggested that they were not always well-behaved, they made trouble at school, or they spent too much time on computer games and not enough times on studies, and it was because they could not control themselves, even though they knew what was the right thing to do.

My dad tells me to make friends with classmates who do well at school, and he would just talk peacefully about things like this. He is nothing like harsh or strict . . . He always tells me the reasons. (GWD, boy)

Sometimes if you use strong words, the child would rebel instead of obey. (MZH, boy)

My dad is a patient person. He listens to what I have to say, and then he shares with me his thoughts and helps me sort things out. (OJE, girl)

Grandma teaches me a lot of things. She doesn't need to raise her voice or anything. (WHR, boy)

My parents never spank me, because they are against violence . . . My father is actually pretty strict, I mean he expects me to behave really well at school. He just chats with me, not really serious. (HWX, girl)

Parent Responses

Working class: Feeling incompetent. The working-class parents had two things in common. First, they hoped that their children would do well at school, find a good job in the future, and live a more comfortable life. Second, they felt that they were incapable of helping their children that much in realizing their dream due to their very limited education, long working hours, meager income, and limited knowledge of the modern world. Some of the fathers laughed off the idea of spanking, saying that “it won't work now, they are middle school students!”

The sub-par living conditions created a lot of worries and anxiety for these parents. They were worried that their children were lured by delinquent peers or older adolescents to go astray from the “right track,” therefore they would seriously prohibit their children from going to the internet cafes, where those delinquent youths hung out. They were also worried that their children were at a constant disadvantage compared to their better-off peers at school because they could not afford the extracurricular activities, study materials, and extra tutoring. For one migrant worker family (HWX, girl), the father also mentioned his predicament in their limited choice of high schools because they did not have local residency, even though HWX was a high-achieving

student. Regardless, the ultimate solution to those worries was to make sure that their children stay at school and focus on schoolwork.

Although these parents placed all of their hopes on their children's school outcome, in practice, they did not know how to get involved other than occasionally reminding their children to complete their homework. I could sense their helplessness when they said, "They (the children nowadays) know more than me." They felt that they did not have the "expert" authority to monitor, evaluate, or plan for their children's studies, so they faithfully trusted the schoolteachers and believed that the best they could do was asking their children to follow teachers' directions and advice.

Overall, these parents did not actively or strictly control their children's behavior, and they tried to reason with their children by explaining why it was important to spend more time on studies. They also tried to avoid having expectations that were beyond their reach. All they hoped was that their children would have a stable job or an office job in the future. CJY's (girl) father mentioned fate as well. He said, "People have their own fate, there is really no use pushing her right now."

Middle class and Mixed 2: Concerned and involved. Like their working-class counterpart, middle-class parents and the Mixed 2 parents (who either had a middle-class education or occupation but not both) insisted on the utmost importance of schoolwork for the same reason—to get a good job in the future. They were more actively involved in knowing their children's progress at school, setting up rules, and planning activities. In the process of managing their children's behavior, however, no parent would take it for granted that those adolescent children would just be obedient to parents without a lot of parenting skills and good parent-adolescent relationships.

In addition, they frequently mentioned the problem of computer games and the importance of listening to teachers. They came up with various ways of dealing with the problem of computer games, such as limiting computer time to weekends, cutting off internet connection, and using screen time as a reward for good grades. Similar to the working-class parents, these parents also emphasized the importance of following teachers' directions and advice. They considered it crucial to one's academic success, besides spending more time on studies after school. Nonetheless, they would check on children's homework, arranged for tutors, and kept regular contact with teachers. Another issue related to schoolwork is dating. Parents believed that dating distracts the boys and girls from their focus on schoolwork. While all parents simply rejected the idea of dating before college, only OJE's (girl) mother talked about it as a plaguing issue for her daughter. She said,

The boy's mother called me and demanded OJE leave her son alone, as her son is going to college in the future (so he must not be distracted from schoolwork now); I was so humiliated, my daughter is going to college, too.

After talking about their concerns and efforts related to children's academic progress, these parents were more expressive than many of their working-class counterpart and would say something like "just doing well at school is not enough." LH's (boy) mother told me that she was so proud of her son when he asked them to donate money to a girl with leukemia after he learned about the girl on TV. The mother said, "Although LH is not the best at school, but he is a sweet boy with a loving heart." WHR's (boy) grandmother, who was educated in a classic Confucian academy in the 1940s, insisted that youngsters needed to grow up to be caring and capable citizens and contribute to society, and that was her expectation for her grandson. She said, "It is not enough just to take care of oneself, one needs to do more for society." MZH's (boy) mother mentioned the word "independent" a few times. She believed that being obedient to parents was good, but she frequently told her son that children needed to learn to be independent in order to survive in the modern world (although she did not necessarily consciously train her son to be independent, based on her description of how she raised her child). OXT's (girl) parents knew that their daughter was not doing well at school, but they both said that they wanted their children to be healthy and happy, and be close to family.

These parents made great efforts in building good relationships with their children. When conflict arose, they were careful not to distance their children and would try to avoid controlling their children too much. The few parents with more reserved children were concerned about the potential consequences of not having good enough parent-child communication and eagerly asked me for advice. Quite a few parents indicated that they were proud to be able to be "friends" with their children, meaning that there was open parent-child communication.

All parents: Manners matter. The moment I stepped into their homes, many parents would say to their children, "Ask your teacher to be seated and get tea for her!" Manners, especially appropriate manners in front of seniors (being a teacher, I was considered a senior figure), have always been an important topic of family socialization, albeit the manners required are no longer as elaborate as in the times of classic Confucianism. For example, DZR's (girl) grandparents emphasized that they did not ask too much of her, other than the basic things of being a decent person, such as greeting guests when they arrive no matter how busy you are (i.e., no matter how much you want to stay in your room).

Parents also mentioned that one should love their parents and grandparents, not in the sense of "tending seniors" as suggested in classical Confucianism, but to be polite, show good manners to elders, and talk with elders, which would "make them happy." However, no parent considered filial piety as a born obligation of children, although they said that they hoped their children would "take care of" parents when in the future they indeed got a good job.

Discussion

The participants shared with me their beliefs, stories, worries, and hopes for a better future for the younger generation. None of the participants suggested the sort of absolute authority-

hierarchy relationship as stipulated in Confucian classics. Also, none of the parents mentioned any of the “old sayings” as a way to guide their parenting. In addition, adolescents considered that they got along well with their parents (parent figures), while negotiating for more and more behavioral autonomy. Good communication between parents and children and the need for children to be competitive in the future job market are the most frequently mentioned principles in handling parent-adolescent relationships by both parents and their adolescent children

Loosening Parental Control

The classical Confucian principles that were supposed to guide family relationships are not seen as an obvious part of these families, partly because the social context has changed, partly because these families were infused in a much more complex blend of cultural influences from Confucianism, socialism, and capitalism, instead of dominantly Confucianism (Fong, 2007). As Fong argued, parents wanted children to be obedient (to parents and seniors) and at the same time independent (to strive for excellence), they also wanted children to be sociable with good manners (with relatives and “important” people for their career) and at the same time competitive and ambitious (in personal achievement). I saw this uneasy, sometimes seemingly contradictory, mixture of expectations in my parent interviewees as well. For example, parents wanted their children to follow directions and advice from teachers in order to achieve high at school. Challenging teacher authority was out of the question. Meanwhile, parents understood that their children would not obey parental rules simply because they were parents. In other words, there was not much absolute, taken-for-granted authority in the home. Parents realized that children listened to them not due to fear of parental authority, but due to congenial parent-child relationships and mutual agreement on issues. Taken together, parents had conflicting attitudes toward parental authority versus teacher authority.

Similar to findings by Pomeranz and Wang (2013), both parents and adolescent in this study suggested a decline in parental control after children entered middle school. There was a great deal of nuance, however, in why and how such decline was occurring. Whereas all parents suggested that this was inevitable as long as one wanted to maintain good relationships with adolescent children, parents of different social-class backgrounds demonstrated various degrees of intentionality in forgoing the dominating aspects of parental authority. For working-class parents, there was a sense of passively refraining from making decisions for their children because they believed that they had nothing substantial for their children to rely on for future success; for parents with middle-class experiences, they wanted their children to learn to be independent in order to succeed in the market economy.

Parent-Adolescent Relationships

Unlike the adolescents in Fong’s (2007) study, most of my adolescent participants were pleased with their communications and relationships with their parents, even among the working-class families. The parents in Fong’s family seemed to be more consistent with Kohn’s (2006)

argument about the inability of working-class parents to prepare their children for middle-class lifestyles. On the contrary, the working-class parents in my study were not as preoccupied to demanding and nagging their children even about schoolwork. Instead, they were intimidated by the rapidly changing world, so that they were willing to take more of a supportive than guiding role in their children's development. Consequently, the working-class parents were not as involved in their children's learning, which reduced the chances of conflicts. In reference to the middle-class parents, they were actively involved in their children's learning and had clear parenting goals in mind which included supporting children's academic work, promoting children's independence, and maintaining good family relationships. As a result, they tried to avoid over-controlling their children, which was likely to contribute to the satisfactory parent-adolescent relationships. These middle-class parents were similar to the participants in Way et al.'s (2013) study. In addition, adolescents reported that parents tended to use reasoning in communicating and enforcing their rules, which was, according to the adolescent participants, why they would "listen to their parents." These patterns were consistent with Xia et al.'s (2004) finding regarding the importance of parent-adolescent communication for the socioemotional well-being of Chinese adolescents.

Focus on Academics and Manners

Nonetheless, all participants, regardless of social-class background and generational status, reiterated the importance of schoolwork and believed that doing well academically at the present time is a necessary precondition for a better future. Moreover, adolescents demonstrated willingness to put more efforts in their schoolwork, or a sense of shame and anxiety for their failure in doing so. Such emphasis on schoolwork suggested continuation of the Confucian tradition in valuing the educated class (the literati) and hence education. According to philosophical Confucianism, however, family glory should be the major motivation and even ultimate goal for one's educational and career attainment. In contrast, families in this study focused on the practical and material returns of education.

Another area where Confucian influences seemed to be present was the attitudes toward seniors (based on generational status and social position). Parents in the current sample cared deeply about manners for treating seniors and teachers, just like parents in Fong's (2007) study. However, they tended to be tolerant and patient in providing guidance to their seventh graders on this matter, and there did not seem to be much conflict around this issue. In addition, these parents seemed to demand a relatively low level of deferential manners in their relationships with their children, as they did not take for granted their own authority as parents.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. First, accessing families via teacher recommendation might have resulted in a relatively well-adjusted group of participants. Second, as the sample was recruited within the seventh grade in two middle schools located in a single

city, generalizability of the findings should be greatly cautioned in terms of age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural-historical backgrounds. Third, in the few families where parents and adolescents were interviewed together, both the parents and the participants might have avoided discussion of sensitive topics, such as those involving family conflicts, adolescent dating, and difficulties in adolescent adjustment.

To conclude, there did not seem to be a Confucian family with strict hierarchy or one that valued obedience more than independence in this sample. Further research that integrates interviews with observation will offer more insight in terms of the complex cultural models that shape the lives of modern Chinese families. In addition, an extended sample characterized by a different set of socioeconomic and cultural-historical backgrounds will provide a more complete picture of parent-adolescent relationship dynamics in China.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research was supported by a Omicron Nu Doctoral Research Fellowship from the Kappa Omicron Nu Honor Society to the author.

References

Feng, Y., & Bodde, D. (1960). *A short history of Chinese philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fong, V. L. (2004). *Only hope: Coming of age under China's one-child policy*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Fong, V. L. (2007). Parent-child communication problems and the perceived inadequacies of Chinese only children. *Ethos*, 35, 85-127.

Guangzhou International. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://english.gz.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/gzgovcn/s9148/201104/789508.html>

Helwig, C. C., Arnold, M. L., Tan, D., & Boyd, D. (2003). Chinese adolescents' reasoning about democratic and authority-based decision making in peer, family, and school contexts. *Child Development*, 74, 783-800.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1986). Chinese patterns of socialization: A critical review. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The psychology of Chinese people* (pp. 1-37). Hong Kong, China: Oxford University Press.

- Hwang, K. K. (1999). Filial piety and loyalty: Two types of social identification in Confucianism. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 2, 163-183.
- Hwang, K. K. (2001). The deep structure of Confucianism: A social psychological approach. *Asian Philosophy*, 11, 179-204.
- Ikels, C. (Ed.). (2004). *Filial piety: Practice and discourse in contemporary East Asia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Kohn, M. L. (1995). Social structure and personality through time and space. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder, Jr., & K. Luscher (Eds.), *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (pp. 141-168). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Kohn, M. L. (2006). *Change and stability: A cross-national analysis of social structure and personality*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Lau, D. C. (Trans.). (1979). *The analects*. London, England: Penguin Books.
- Lieber, E., Fung, H., & Leung, P. W. (2006). Chinese child-rearing beliefs: Key dimensions and contributions to the development of culture-appropriate assessment. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 9, 140-147.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Pomeranz, E. M., & Wang, Q. (2013). The role of parental control in children's development in Western and East Asian countries. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18, 285-289.
- Rosemont, H., Jr., & Ames, R. T. (2009). *The Chinese classic of family reverence: A philosophical translation of the Xiaojing*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Slote, W. H., & de Vos, G. A. (Eds.). (1998). *Confucianism and the family*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Way, N., Okazaki, S., Zhao, J., Kim, J., Chen, X., Yoshikawa, H., . . . Deng, H. (2013). Social and emotional parenting: Mothering in a changing Chinese Society. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 4, 61-70.
- Wu, D. Y. H. (1996). Parental control: Psychocultural interpretations of Chinese patterns of socialization. In S. Lau (Ed.), *Growing up the Chinese way: Chinese child and adolescent development* (pp. 1-28). Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Xia, Y., Xie, X., Zhou, Z., DeFrain, J., Meredith, W., & Combs, R. (2004). Chinese adolescents' decision-making, parent-adolescent communication and relationship. *Marriage & Family Review*, 36, 119-145.

Author Biography

Yudan Chen Wang, PhD, is currently working as a research associate in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). Her primary research interests include quantitative methodology, mixed methods, parenting, adolescent development, and educational measurement.