

Authority, Autonomy, and Family Relationships Among Adolescents in Urban and Rural China

Wenxin Zhang

Shandong Normal University

Andrew J. Fuligni

University of California, Los Angeles

Approximately 700 urban and rural 10th- ($M = 16.6$ years) and 12th- ($M = 18.9$ years) grade students in China completed measures assessing their beliefs about parental authority and individual autonomy, as well as aspects of their relationships with their parents. Urban adolescents indicated a greater willingness to disagree openly with their parents, a greater intensity of conflict with their parents, lower levels of cohesion with their parents, and a lower frequency of discussions with their fathers. Urban males were distinct from all other adolescents in terms of several aspects of their family relationships, reporting the earliest expectations for autonomy, the lowest levels of closeness with their mothers, and the least frequent discussions with their fathers.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, China began to undergo radical social and economic changes that many observers believe will undermine cultural traditions of filial piety, parental authority, and family closeness (Fang, 2000; Huang, 1989; Yang, 1989). In an attempt to move the country from a socialist system to a free-market economy, the government began to allow citizens to develop private businesses, many state-owned enterprises became privatized, and stock markets opened in several major cities

Requests for reprints should be sent to Andrew J. Fuligni, Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, University of California, Los Angeles, 760 Westwood Plaza, Box 62, Los Angeles, CA 90024. E-mail: afuligni@ucla.edu

(Tang & Parish, 2000). The transition to a market economy that rewards individual initiative has generated concerns because such transformations have seemingly eroded familistic traditions in other societies in the past (e.g., the Industrial Revolution in Europe; Goode, 1971). Some social scientists in China believe that the same could occur in their country: "China is now at a crossroads: It can either become an individualistic, morally declined society, or it can re-establish a firm moral order according to traditional values" (Jing & Zhang, 1998, p. 274).

Several social observers have noted that the dominant political economy of a society shapes the nature of the adolescent period (e.g., Modell & Goodman, 1990). Focusing on the family relationships of contemporary Chinese adolescents, therefore, is a potentially valuable way to gain insight into the impact of the transition to a market economy on family life. Given that the economic changes have been taking place mainly in urban areas (Tang & Parish, 2000), a comparison of the family relationships of adolescents in urban and rural areas could provide an initial glimpse into the impact of economic change on family relationships. Families in rural Chinese areas live largely agricultural lives and severe travel restrictions result in limited exposure to the opportunities of the market economy in the cities. In the absence of historical data, then, an urban-rural comparison provides a way to examine potential variations in the family lives of adolescents in the same society who experience very different economic systems.

In an earlier paper, we reported that the urban-rural difference in Chinese adolescents' attitudes toward familial support and obligation depended upon the gender of the adolescents (Fulgini & Zhang, 2004). Chinese boys living in an urban center reported the weakest sense of obligation to support and assist their family, whereas urban girls were quite similar to rural boys and girls in their greater sense of familial duty. Traditional gender norms favoring the economic participation of men over women in China may mean that urban males are more likely to see economic opportunity in the recent market reforms, thereby lessening their sense of obligation to the family.

In the current paper, we examined whether urban-rural and gender differences are evident in other aspects of family relationships. Specifically, we focused on adolescents' beliefs and expectations about parental authority and individual autonomy and the frequency of conflict, cohesion, and discussions between adolescents and their parents. Adolescence is a critical period of transformation in these aspects of parent-child relationships (Smetana, 1988; Steinberg, 1990), and it is important to examine whether location and gender variations are apparent in teenagers' ideas of authority and autonomy and in their interactions with their

parents. On the one hand, it might be expected that rural adolescents accept greater parental authority and have closer relationships with their parents than urban adolescents. On the other, it is possible that the market reforms in the urban areas only affect notions of filial piety and duty to the larger family unit, as opposed to the more dyadic relationships between adolescents and their parents, which may be less dependent upon larger societal systems and structures (Fuligni & Flook, 2005). We also were interested in whether any effects of living in an urban area were more evident for boys than girls, as we found in our previous analyses of family obligation (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). Finally, given the higher levels of education and the higher frequency of only children in the urban areas, we believed it was important to examine whether these two factors contributed to any observed location differences in family relationships.

METHOD

Sample

A total of 704 students in the 10th ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.6$ years) and 12th ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.9$ years) grades of six high schools in China completed self-report questionnaires during school hours. Approximately half of the sample lived in an urban area and attended three schools in Jinan, the capital city of Shandong Province in Middle Eastern China, with a population of 3 million. All students in the urban schools grew up in the city and lived with their families while attending school. The other half of the sample attended three schools in the rural areas of Shandong Province, where the majority of the population is classified as peasants. In China, peasants are individuals who have their own farms and till the land for their own subsistence. These individuals do not have permanent jobs in which they earn regular incomes throughout the year. Rural individuals who are not peasants tend to work at permanent jobs in the neighboring towns. During the school year, the students follow the typical practice in rural schools of residing at the schools 6 days/week, and returning home to visit their families on Sundays. The total sample from both locations was fairly evenly divided between males (53%) and females (47%).

Adolescents in the urban and rural areas differed in terms of a number of family characteristics, consistent with national trends. As a result of the differential enforcement of the one-child family policy in urban and rural areas, 82% of the adolescents in the urban schools had no siblings as compared with only 24% of those in the rural schools. The majority of the parents in the rural schools were peasants, with most of the urban parents working in occupations ranging from blue collar to professional. Parental

educational level showed similar differences, with the parents in the urban areas having received more formal education than the parents in the rural areas (e.g., mothers who attended some college: urban, 20%, rural, 3%).

Measures

The measures used in this study were Chinese translations of measures originally used by Fuligni (1998) in a similar study of family relationships among ethnically diverse adolescents in the United States. Measures were evaluated by Chinese psychologists in China for their appropriateness, and the measures were translated into Chinese through a process of translation and back-translation by independent individuals who knew and understood both Chinese and English. Alpha coefficients for each multiple-item measure are presented in parentheses.

Beliefs and Expectations about Authority and Autonomy

Acceptability of disagreement with parents. Using a scale ranging from "almost never" (1) to "almost always" (5), students responded separately for mothers and fathers to six items such as "I should argue with my mother [father] when I disagree with her [him]," "If I am mad at my mother [father], I should tell her [him] so," and "If I think one of mothers' [father's] rules is wrong, I should tell her [him]." (α 's: mother = .74, father = .75).

Expectations for behavioral autonomy. Adolescents' expectations for when they would be allowed to engage in various autonomous behaviors were measured by a scale that Feldman and her associates had used in their studies of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1990). Students were presented with a list of 11 behaviors such as "watch as much TV as you want," "choose your own hair style even if your parents disapprove," and "choose what clothes to buy, even if your parents disapprove." The original scale consisted of 12 items. In the present study, one item ("go to parties at night") was deleted because of the rare occurrence of this activity among adolescents in China. Adolescents then indicated the age at which they expected to be allowed to do each thing using a five-point scale indicating particular ages, such as 1 (before 14 years old), 3 (16–17 years old), and 5 (never be allowed to) ($\alpha = .79$).

Endorsement of parental authority. Using Smetana's (1988) measure, students were presented with a list of 13 topics, such as curfew, choosing clothes, and choosing friends, and were asked whether it was "OK" or "Not OK" for their parents to make a rule about each topic. The number of items to which students indicated "OK" were then summed to yield a total score ($\alpha = .69$).

Parent-Adolescent Relationships

Cohesion. Students completed the cohesion subscale of the Family Adaptation and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES) II inventory separately for each parent (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979). Using a scale ranging from 1 ("almost never") to 5 ("almost always"), students responded to 10 questions such as "My mother [father] and I feel very close to each other," "My mother and I are supportive of each other during difficult times," and "My mother and I avoid each other at home" (reversed). This scale has been used in previous research on the changes in parent-child relationships during adolescence (Fuligni, 1998; Steinberg, 1988) (α 's: mother = .75, father = .81).

Conflict. Adolescents' perceptions of the incidence and intensity of parent-adolescent conflict were measured using the Issues Checklist, developed by Prinz, Foster, Kent, and O'Leary (1979). This measure has been used in numerous studies of parent-child relationships during adolescence (e.g., Steinberg, 1988; Fuligni, 1998). Students indicated whether any of 11 specific topics (e.g., chores, cursing, helping around the house) were discussed with their mother and father in the last 2 weeks. For each topic that was discussed, the intensity of the discussion was rated from 1 ("very calm") to 5 ("very angry"). To be consistent with previous research (e.g., Steinberg, 1988), the measure of the incidence of parent-adolescent conflict was computed by summing the number of discussions rated as containing anger (2 or greater). Students completed two versions of the checklist, one in reference to each parent. The measure of intensity of conflict was obtained by averaging adolescents' rating on those discussions that were rated as conflictual (α 's: mother = .72, father = .73).

Discussions. Adolescents responded to five items asking whether or not they discussed a number of different topics (future job plans, current classes, personal problems, future educational plans, future family plans) with each of their parents. The adolescents rated the frequency of these

discussions from 1 (“almost never”) to 5 (“almost always”) (α 's: mother = .78, father = .79).

Parental rules. Using a measure developed by Smetana (1988), adolescents were presented with a list of 13 topics, such as curfew, choosing clothes, and choosing and friends, and were asked whether or not their parents had a rule about each topic. The number of items to which students indicated “Yes” was then summed to yield a total score ($\alpha = .72$).

RESULTS

Variations in adolescents' beliefs, expectations, and relationships were examined by conducting a series of location (urban versus rural) \times gender (male versus female) and grade (10th grade versus 12th grade) analyses of variance. These analyses were then followed by analyses of the role of parental education and adolescents' sibling status (only child versus those with siblings) in any observed location differences.

Beliefs and Expectations about Authority and Autonomy

As shown in Table 1, urban adolescents generally believed that it was more acceptable to disagree openly with their parents than rural adolescents, Location: F 's(1, 684, 691) = 13.90 and 23.19, p 's < .001. The location difference for disagreement with father was modified by gender, however, indicating that urban girls reported a greater acceptability of disagreeing with their father than urban boys and rural boys and girls, Location \times Gender: $F(1, 684) = 5.85$, $p < .05$. In terms of behavioral autonomy, both location and location \times gender effects emerged as significant, indi-

TABLE 1
Adolescents' Beliefs and Expectations about Authority and Autonomy According to Location and Gender

	Urban, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		Rural, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Disagreement with mother	3.24 (.82)	3.41 (.81)	3.02 (.66)	3.09 (.66)
Disagreement with father	2.86 (.86)	3.26 (.89)	2.79 (.69)	2.89 (.63)
Behavioral autonomy	3.52 (.70)	3.83 (.56)	3.82 (.49)	3.88 (.44)
Endorsement of parental authority	5.81 (2.76)	6.67 (2.80)	6.45 (2.80)	6.52 (2.47)

cating that urban boys had earlier expectations for autonomy than urban girls and rural boys and girls, who, in turn, possessed similar expectations for autonomy, Location and Location \times Gender: F 's(1,687) = 17.73 and 9.98, p 's < .001 and .01. Urban and rural adolescents did not differ in their endorsement of parental authority, but girls reported a greater endorsement than boys, Gender: F (1,691) = 5.57, p < .05. Overall grade differences did not emerge in any of the adolescents' beliefs and expectations, but grade did interact with gender in predicting adolescents' expectations for autonomy, Grade \times Gender: F (1,687) = 3.87, p < .05. Boys expected earlier autonomy than girls in the 10th grade, but there was no gender difference in the 12th grade.

Parent-Adolescent Relationships

As shown in Table 2, urban adolescents reported a slightly higher frequency of conflict with mothers and a greater intensity of conflicts with both parents than did rural adolescents, Location: F 's(1,527-676) = 5.17-9.05, p 's < .05-.01. Overall, boys reported more conflicts with mothers than did girls, Gender: F (1,676) = 4.86, p < .05. The gender difference in conflict with fathers varied according to location such that boys reported more conflicts with fathers than did girls in the rural area, whereas boys and girls indicated a similar incidence of conflict with fathers in the urban area, Loca-

TABLE 2
Parent-Adolescent Relationships According to Location and Gender

	Urban, <i>M (SD)</i>		Rural, <i>M (SD)</i>	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Conflict incidence				
Mother	1.60 (1.81)	1.51 (1.81)	1.52 (1.82)	1.01 (1.37)
Father	.92(1.40)	.95 (1.42)	1.11 (1.65)	.67 (1.09)
Conflict intensity				
Mother	1.54 (.55)	1.54 (.64)	1.42 (.44)	1.41 (.63)
Father	1.63 (.76)	1.62 (.86)	1.45 (.55)	1.39 (.56)
Cohesion				
Mother	3.37 (.52)	3.72 (.65)	3.62 (.47)	3.78 (.58)
Father	3.30 (.67)	3.46 (.69)	3.54 (.58)	3.53 (.67)
Discussions				
Mother	2.56 (.83)	2.86 (.81)	2.69 (.79)	2.86 (.75)
Father	2.41 (.78)	2.66 (.83)	2.76 (.80)	2.75 (.74)
Parental rules	5.01 (3.37)	6.05 (2.90)	5.91 (2.79)	5.74 (2.55)

tion \times Gender: $F(1, 663) = 4.51, p < .05$. Tenth-grade students reported higher conflict frequency and greater conflict intensity with parents than did twelfth-grade students, Grade: $F's(1, 527-676) = 6.07$ to $15.31, p's < .05$ to $.01$.

Location differences also emerged in parent-adolescent cohesion, with rural adolescents reporting closer relationships with both mothers and fathers than did urban adolescents, Location: $F's(1, 675-681) = 10.52$ and $15.10, p's < .01$. The location difference in cohesion with mother was modified by gender, however, such that urban boys reported lower levels of cohesion with their mothers than did rural boys but girls of both locations reported similar cohesion with mothers. Twelfth-grade students reported greater closeness with mothers than tenth-grade students, but there was no grade difference in cohesion with fathers.

Rural adolescents had more frequent discussions with their fathers concerning their future career, education, and their school performance than did urban adolescents, Location: $F(1, 639) = 13.88, p < .001$, but the two groups did not differ in how frequently they communicated with their mothers. The location difference in discussion with father was modified by both gender and grade, however. Urban boys reported fewer discussions with their fathers than did urban girls, but rural girls and boys reported similar amounts of communication with their fathers, Location \times Gender: $F(1, 639) = 5.10, p < .05$. Tenth-grade students reported more communication with fathers than did twelfth-grade students in the urban area, whereas the two age groups did not differ in how often they communicated with fathers in the rural area, Location \times Grade: $F(1, 639) = 7.98, p < .01$. Overall, girls reported more frequent discussions with their mothers than did boys, Gender: $F(1, 649) = 13.45, p < .01$.

Although there was no overall location difference for parental rules, girls reported more rules than did boys, $F(1, 688) = 3.99, p < .05$. A Location \times Gender interaction did emerge such that urban boys reported fewer rules than did urban girls and rural boys and girls, Location \times Gender: $F(1, 688) = 7.03, p < .01$.

Parental Education and Sibling Status

Parental education was associated with a number of different beliefs, expectations, and aspects of parent-adolescent relationships. Adolescents with parents of higher educational levels possessed a greater acceptance of openly disagreeing with parents, a greater endorsement of parental authority, more cohesion and discussions with parents, and perceived more parental rules. Controlling for parental education reduced only one location effect to nonsignificance, however, such that the location difference in

the incidence of conflict with mothers became nonsignificant. All other location effects remained significant after controlling for parental educational levels.

The only association of sibling status with beliefs, expectations, and relationships to emerge was the tendency for only children to indicate a greater acceptance of disagreeing with mothers than those with siblings, $F(1, 695) = 8.82, p < .01$. Controlling for sibling status did not change the original location difference for disagreement with mother.

DISCUSSION

Many differences between urban and rural adolescents emerged in terms of their beliefs, expectations, and relationships with parents. Urban adolescents indicated a greater willingness to disagree openly with their parents, a greater intensity of conflict with their parents, lower levels of cohesion with their parents, and a lower frequency of discussions with their fathers. Other findings suggested that urban males were distinct from all other adolescents in terms of several aspects of their family relationships, just as they were with their sense of familial duty and obligation in our previous paper (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). Urban boys possessed the earliest expectations for autonomy, the lowest levels of closeness with their mothers, and reported the least frequent discussions with their fathers. The only exception was in the tendency for urban girls to report the greatest willingness to disagree with their fathers. Although urban and rural adolescents together still reported greater endorsement of parental authority, later expectations for autonomy, and less conflict and more cohesion with their parents than do American adolescents with both Chinese and European backgrounds (Fuligni, 1998), the differences between urban and rural teenagers suggest that the economic reforms taking place in China may be changing the traditional dynamics of authority, autonomy, and closeness in urban Chinese families.

As urban children perceive greater opportunity for economic advancement based upon individual initiative, they may be lessening their ties to their families more than the rural adolescents who do not have the same opportunities, a dynamic that has been observed historically in other societies (Goode, 1971). This may be especially true for urban males, who may anticipate being more able to take advantage of the market reforms because of traditional gender norms regarding the economic participation of men and women. It appears that parents actually may be contributing to this gender differentiation, given the reports of the urban males that their parents place the fewest number of rules upon them and that they expect the earliest autonomy.

Given the lack of historical data on these issues, it is possible that the location variations in family relationships observed in this study reflect long-standing differences between urban and rural families rather than the impact of the shift to a free-market economy. Family relationships in rural and urban families may differ because of variations in occupational demands, the nature of schooling and peer groups, and residential living arrangements that are independent of the dominant political economy. It is also important to note that the findings of this study are limited to Chinese adolescents who attend secondary school and may not apply to the approximately 50% of the population who do not attend school because of failing to pass the required entrance exams (The Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China, 2002). Additional studies should be conducted in future years with a broader population of Chinese adolescents and should be compared with this study in order to examine whether the social and economic changes taking place will indeed have a long-term impact upon traditional patterns of family relationships in China.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Support for this study was provided by a William T. Grant Faculty Scholars award to the second author. The authors would like to thank the participating students and schools, and acknowledge the assistance of Meiping Wang and Yiwen Wang with the data collection and preparation.

REFERENCES

- Fang, G. G. (2000). Exploration of filial piety of confucianism. In D. Q. Wang (Ed.), *Research on the oriental morality* (pp. 34–44). Beijing: China Business Association Press.
- Feldman, S. S., & Rosenthal, D. A. (1990). The acculturation of autonomy expectations in Chinese high-schoolers residing in two western nations. *International Journal of Psychology, 25*, 259–281.
- Fuligni, A. J. (1998). Authority, autonomy, and parent-adolescent conflict and cohesion: A study of adolescents from Mexican, Chinese, Filipino, and European backgrounds. *Developmental Psychology, 34*, 782–792.
- Fuligni, A. J., & Flook, L. (2005). A social identity approach to ethnic differences in family relationships during adolescence. In R. Kail (Ed.), *Advances in child development and behavior* (pp. 125–152). New York: Academic Press.
- Fuligni, A. J., & Zhang, W. X. (2004). Attitudes toward family obligation among adolescents in contemporary urban and rural China. *Child Development, 74*, 180–192.
- Goode, W. J. (1971). World revolution and family patterns. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 33*, 624–635.
- Huang, J. H. (1989). Practice of filial piety in modern life. In K. S. Yang (Ed.), *The psychology of Chinese*, (pp. 25–38). Taipei: Guiguan Press.

- Jing, Q., & Zhang, H. (1998). China's reform and challenges for psychology. In J. G. Adair & D. Belanger Kdion (Eds.), *Advances in psychological science, Vol. 1: Social, personal, and cultural aspects* (pp. 271–291). Hove, U.K.: Psychology Press/Erlbaum(UK)/Taylor & Francis.
- The Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China. (2002). *Communique on National Education Development in 2001*. Beijing: China Statistics Press.
- Modell, J., & Goodman, M. (1990). Historical perspectives. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 93–122). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Olson, D. H., Sprenkle, D. H., & Russell, C. S. (1979). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: I. Cohesion and adaptability dimensions, family types, and applications. *Family Process, 18*, 3–28.
- Prinz, R. J., Foster, S. L., Kent, R. N., & O'Leary, K. V. (1979). Multivariate assessment of conflict in distressed and nondistressed mother–adolescent dyads. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis, 12*, 691–700.
- Smetana, J. G. (1988). Adolescents' and parents' conceptions of parental authority. *Child Development, 59*, 321–335.
- Steinberg, L. (1988). Reciprocal relation between parent-child distance and pubertal maturation. *Developmental Psychology, 24*, 122–128.
- Steinberg, L. (1990). Autonomy, conflict, and harmony in the family relationship. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliot (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescents* (pp. 255–276). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tang, W., & Parish, W. L. (2000). *Chinese urban life under reform: The changing social contract*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Yang, K. S. (1989). Conceptual analysis of the Chinese filial piety. In G. S. Yang (Ed.), *The psychology of Chinese* (pp. 39–73). Taipei: Guiguan Press.

This document is a scanned copy of a printed document. No warranty is given about the accuracy of the copy. Users should refer to the original published version of the material.