

## PARENTING PRACTICES AND CHINESE SINGLETON ADULTS

Sun Yuezhu  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

**Since the Reform Era, Chinese society has witnessed a rise of individualism. The family has transformed from a unit of economic production to a center of emotion. Based on ethnographic research with 24 second-generation Chinese singletons, this essay explores parent-child relations in contemporary Beijing through the memories of young singleton adults. This research identifies two cultural modes of parenting and demonstrates the central role of emotions in both. It also illustrates the psychological dynamics of individuals when confronted with multiple cultural models. (One-Child Policy, urban Chinese, parent-child relations, intimacy)**

This article examines current parent-child relationships in Beijing, China, by analyzing the meanings and values conveyed through the autobiographical memories of Beijing singleton young adults. It shows that emotion has become the central component of parent-child relations in contemporary urban China. It also illustrates that there are two modes of parenting, and both modes uphold love and affection as central to family life. Three case studies of adult singleton children demonstrate the attitudinal certainties, ambivalences, psychological comforts, and conflicts that Chinese singleton adults experience with two very different styles of parenting.

Entry into adulthood in the twenty-first century has developed into a less institutionalized and more individualized process, with the ability to achieve economic self-sufficiency and make independent life decisions held as the main criterion for acquiring successful adult status. This changed meaning of adulthood urges scholars to identify a developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood; i.e., “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2006:4). Roughly defined as encompassing ages 18 to 25, emerging adulthood is an “in-between” period when youths learn to live an independent life but are not yet fully independent (Arnett 2004:47–48).

Independence implies independence from parents and accepting responsibilities that were previously assumed by parents (Arnett 2004:48). Investigating the memory of parenting during this stage bestows two layers of significance to this research. First, it shows that the budding sense of independence allows emerging adults to view their relationship with parents in a more egalitarian light. Parents are viewed from a “much more sympathetic and benevolent” perspective; instead of perceiving them merely as “parents,” emerging adults also recognize their parents as ordinary persons (Arnett

2006:47). Therefore, research on parenting from the emerging adults' viewpoint offers a unique outlook on parenting practices that has not been widely explored.

Second, this research focuses on recalling childhood experiences. The literature on cognitive development indicates that, while autobiographical memory begins to emerge during the second year of life, it does not develop into a mature and coherent form until emerging adulthood, when it starts to exhibit "temporal, biographical, causal, and thematic" coherence (McAdams 2003:192–93). Hence, the emerging adults' accounts of their relations with their parents offer insights into the processes through which they construct their modes of parenting and parent-child relationships.

Memory is the "cultural storage of the past," or the "reproduction of the past in the present" (Berliner 2005a, 2005b). Anthropologists endeavor to construe memory as a cultural entity that represents historical pasts and transmits cultural traditions. However, memory is highly fluctuant and malleable (Berliner 2005a). This subjectivity of memory is especially salient when dealing with autobiographical memory, when people try to recollect their lives and/or particular episodes from their past (Baddeley 1992:26; Brewer 1986:34, cited in Rubin 1996:1). Autobiographical memory is not merely the "mental storing" of an original experience; it is the "mental reconstruction" of personal events and episodes (Schrauf 1997). The processes of memory encoding, storing, and retrieving are both biased and selective. They are influenced by various social factors, such as a person's affective state or the socio-cultural circumstances within which the memory is encoded or retrieved (Schrauf 1997; see also Brewer 1986, 1996). While the trivia may be "lost or distorted in autobiographical revisions," its "central meaning," "core truth," or "fundamental integrity" is sustained (Cattell and Climo 2002:16–17).

Although autobiographical memory is subjective and malleable, it is treated here not as the storage of personal past, but as the raw material upon which individuals extract, communicate, negotiate, and construe meanings (see Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999; Kuhn 1995, cited in Radstone 2000:13). I focus on how memory is experienced and expressed and how individuals interpret, evaluate, and reason about their family past. People not only engage in autobiographical remembering, they also "reason about, interpret, and evaluate their memories" (Singer and Bluck 2001:92). This leads to "inferences, lessons, and thematic insights" for the future (Singer and Bluck 2001:92).

The studies done by cognitive psychologists tend to neglect the rich socio-cultural context that gives meaning and value to autobiographical reasoning. The ethnographic narratives on parenting practices of Beijing singletons show

how cultural values about parenting are communicated through autobiographical reasoning. This is especially interesting with societies like contemporary urban China, where dramatic social changes are taking place and individuals are confronted with contested cultural models. By addressing autobiographical reasoning as a cultural experience, one can understand autobiographical memory as an inner perspective and see how individuals select, interpret, and assimilate different modes of parenting practices.

#### EMOTION IN THE FAMILY AND MODES OF PARENTING

Studies of Chinese family and kinship have historically been predominately based on the corporate model. This model views the family primarily as an “economic entity composed of rational, self-interested members [and] an organization characterized by a common budget, shared property, and a household economy that relies on a strict pooling of income” (Yan 2003:3). That is, the corporate Chinese family primarily functions as a unit of financial management and operation, with its members organized solely for the economic interests of the family. In this model, authority is the economic power that parents, especially fathers, retain over their offspring. There are two developmental stages of the Chinese family, and parents express their authority differently in each. During the first stage, parents control their offspring mainly through supervision of their career development. As the children mature and assume economic responsibility, the family enters the second stage, in which parents direct their children’s activities for the benefit of the family economy (Cohen 1976:70).

The corporate model of the Chinese family, with its singular focus on family economic reproduction, does not fit well within the sociocultural reality of contemporary China. Since the 1980s, the de-collectivization of communal lives has promoted a rise of individualism, and “people can make choices not with necessity but with personal life aspiration” (Yan 2003:7). Along with this augmented sense of individualism is an intensified demand for personal privacy and intimacy. As a result, the contemporary Chinese family no longer functions primarily for economic production, but is becoming a “private haven” that functions as the emotional center promoting the well-being of its members (Yan 2003:9). In an attempt to capture and accommodate the dramatic changes Chinese society and family have been experiencing in the last two decades, Yan (2003) proposes a private life approach to the study of the contemporary Chinese family. He believes that the private life approach allows researchers to reach into the “subjectivity” and the “emotionality, desire, intimacy, privacy, individuality ... and new form of sociality” of the Chinese family (Yan 2003:9).

Based on ethnographic data from 24 Beijing singleton adults, two cultural models of parenting co-exist in contemporary urban China. One is the “traditional family,” characterized by a hierarchical parent-child relationship with disciplinary and authoritarian parenting; the other is “modern parenting,” characterized by a more egalitarian parent-child relationship and intimate, even indulgent, parenting. The relationship between parents and children in both parenting models is predominantly based on mutual affection. The two models differ only by the degree to which love and emotion are emphasized. While traditional parenting stresses both authority and love, the modern model prioritizes egalitarian parent-child relations over parental control.

There appears to be a hierarchical parent-child relationship in modern China that echoes the parent-child power structure Cohen (1976) described in his corporate family model. However, the source of parental authority originates not from the economic power parents retain over their offspring, but from the love they establish with their children (Jamieson 2011). Parents still retain financial control, but this aspect is no longer accentuated in parent-child relations.

One informant, an adult male, pointed out the intertwined and intricate relation between parental control and parental love:

My mother’s love for me is often trivial and hard to notice, but I know she cares and loves me very, very much. When I was a college freshman, every time my mother called, the phone call lasted for more than 15 minutes. She asked what I had eaten, or told me how to eat healthily, or asked me if I needed anything, if I needed her to bring things to me. When it rained she asked me if I was cold or if I needed more clothes. These things were so trivial ... but I enjoyed it. ... I think this is Chinese parenting. ... It’s caring, but it’s also control. My mother wants to do everything for me because she loves me ... but a child does not need that much caring. The child can do things for himself as well.

A female singleton adult offered her opinion on the interrelatedness of control and love:

During my sophomore year I wanted to go to Qidao [a city in Northern China] with my classmates. ... I bought the train tickets, but my mother did not allow me to go. ... She exploded [with anger]. She said that I was forbidden to go ... but I promised my classmates [I would go]. I had to keep my promise. We started fighting. ... Every time we had a disagreement, my mother would repeat the sacrifices she made for me—how she cared about me, and how she took care of me when I was sick. She wanted to use the power of maternal love to make me obey. ... I know that she loves me very deeply and she has given me a lot ... but I think this is not logical. ... [She] cannot stop me from going just because [she loves] me so much.

Even parental disciplinary acts, such as physical punishments, are now interpreted as parental devotion and love. A contemporary female Chinese writer published her letter to her son as a heartfelt confession, explaining the

reasons for her severe beatings during his childhood. Beating, in her words, is charged with heightened emotions of both love and pain, for the mother as well as for the child:

Beating is love. ... Beating is laborious for the ones who beat. It makes your wrist ache, like carrying 5,000 pieces of coal from the first floor to the fifth floor. So people invented tools [to beat], such as rulers, shoes, or sticks. But I never used those tools. ... I wish when I beat you, I could feel the same pains you felt. So that I knew I did not beat you too hard. I have never doubted: every time when I beat you, the pains that exerted on me lasted longer and penetrated deeper than the pains I inflicted on you. What was hurt was not my body, but my heart. (Bi 1997)

While traditional parenting with both authority and love is still practiced in urban China, another parenting mode featuring a more egalitarian parent-child love has emerged (Jamieson 2011; Chow 1996; Chow and Chen 1994; Chen 2007; Li and Lamb 2012:35). For single-child families in Dalian, Fong (2004:29) observed some children gaining more power over family relationships and some parents engaging in practices of doting, spoiling, or drowning their children with love. Similarly, Zhong (2002:95) reported that single-child families tended to have more egalitarian relationships by encouraging more open family discussion and communication between parents and children.

The urban Chinese singleton adults in my study were keenly aware of and frequently confronted with the two modes of parenting. Several informants called authoritarian parenting the “traditional Chinese style” and used words such as “controlling,” “strict,” “feudal,” and “authoritarian” to describe this kind of parenting. Informants referred to modern parenting as the “modern Western style” and associated it with words such as “democratic,” “open,” and “liberal.” A male informant elaborated on a comparison he drew between the two styles:

Some traditional Chinese parents are not like American parents. They do not want their children to face the same detours they encountered. They forcefully guide their children ... they care a lot about their children ... they are very strict ... they can never become friends with their children. They are parents. They should be respected by their children. ... This is the traditional [parenting] ideology. But [my parents] are my friends. ... They will not interfere with my school choices or my choices of girlfriends. They [often] talk with me about the unhappy things [about] their jobs. I’m willing to talk to them as well.

The three case studies presented below demonstrate how Beijing singleton adults described their parents and how they reflected upon and evaluated the two parenting models. These case studies are not meant to represent the spectrum of parent-child relations in urban China, but they present important facts and implications for the study of contemporary parenting and parent-child relations.

## METHOD

This study is based on interviews conducted from May to August of 2011 in Beijing, China, with 24 participants selected by snowball sampling. The participants were students enrolled in Beijing colleges. Five of the 24 were born and raised in other provinces; the rest were Beijing residents since birth. Ten participants were male and 14 were female. Their average age was 21, and they were university juniors or seniors (with the exception of one male who was a graduate student). All the participants were born under the One-Child Policy and all lived with their parents. When describing their family, they referred to the nuclear family as the “small family” and the extended family as the “big family.”

The interviews were open-ended and usually started with a brief self-introduction by the participants, followed by a brief family history. The interview questions were mostly based on the information informants provided. Pseudonyms are used here for confidentiality. The three case studies provided are the most representative of the patterns that emerged from the interviews. Xiao Qi’s story is one of “traditional parenting”; Fei Fei’s story, a mix of traditional and modern parenting (based on his evaluation of his parents’ parenting, not the parenting itself); and Jing Jing’s story is modern parenting.

## THREE CASE STUDIES

*Xiao Qi’s Story: Traditional Parenting*

Xiao Qi attended one of the top-ranked middle schools in Beijing, in the first tier of the entire middle-school system. Such schools are often referred to as “key point,” because their students are almost always guaranteed a spot in a privileged “key-point” high school. After graduation, Xiao Qi was admitted to a top-ranked university in Beijing to study food and food production. This university has the nation’s best agriculture programs. Xiao Qi described himself as an introvert, and during interviews this seemed to be the case. For example, he constantly avoided making direct eye contact, and he spoke in a soft voice. When asked how he chose his college and major, Xiao Qi said that he put little thought into it and relied solely on his parents:

My mother said, “Choose this major.” She said this major was very good. This major was rated at the top in Beijing, even in the nation. Also, she thought it fitted my interests because it included biology, chemistry, and physics, and it did not look like it was boring and dry. So she helped me to choose this major, and I listened.

Regarding how he felt about his mother choosing his college and major for him, he said,

I did not have an opinion. The college entrance exam was all I could think about. It occupied all my heart and mind. I felt that I did not have enough energy left to pick out schools. All I knew at that time was that I needed to do well on the entrance exam.

As to whether he liked the school and major his parents picked for him, he was indifferent:

What should I say? I think I'm okay with it. I don't like [my school or my major] particularly, but I don't hate it either. I think I'm kind of interested in some of the classes. I'm satisfied with [my parents' choices for me]. ... I don't think too much. I just do what my parents have arranged for me. ... I have always been like this.

Xiao Qi also mentioned that he did not consider himself an independent person:

I think I'm not particularly independent. I have no intention to make decisions myself, so I'm grateful to my parents. [But my parents] think my life is too comfortable. They think I'm not very independent and motivated. ... They told me that I will need to depend more on myself later, and they won't be able to help me forever. ... My mother comes from the countryside. Since she was little, she had to cook for her family, feed pigs on the farm, and cut grains. She also had to walk a long way to school. ... But my parents raised me to be lazy and dependent. I'm not as independent and motivated as they.

Asked to describe his father in five adjectives, Xiao Qi quoted a traditional Chinese adage, "strict father and kind mother." This expresses the roles of mother and father in the traditional Chinese family: fathers are supposed to make and enforce the rules while the mother behaves in a loving and kind manner. However, Xiao Qi said that in his family, the situation was the opposite. "I had a strict mother and a kind father," he said.

"My mother was excellent when she was young, so she has high expectations of me. She has been always very strict. ... She has really pushed me. She puts all her hopes in me," Xiao Qi declared. His mother's high expectations were mainly expressed through her strict discipline with his schoolwork. Many Chinese parents believe that academic achievement is the only means for their children's upward social mobility. Therefore, they exert substantial efforts to ensure that their children succeed in their academic competition with peers. For instance, Xiao Qi said that, ever since middle school, his mother would enter his room to ensure that he was spending enough of his time on academic work. Sometimes, his mother would even help him with his English by reciting the English vocabulary and asking him to write down the words on paper.

When Xiao Qi did not perform well academically during his middle-school years, his mother exercised a more rigorous parenting method. On learning that Xiao Qi was ranked in the bottom third of his class, she took

away his television privileges and had Xiao Qi's father sign him up for more high-school preparation classes. She also went over all of Xiao Qi's exams with him, analyzing the mistakes he had made. "Don't think you are just being careless," she had said to him. "If you make the same mistakes again and again, it means you were not only careless, it means you don't understand the problem sets at all."

Xiao Qi's mother not only monitored his academic life, but was also in charge of the academic decisions important for his future. When Xiao Qi was in the fourth grade, his parents arranged to transfer him to a higher-ranked elementary school that they believed would offer him a better education. They arranged this without discussing it with or notifying Xiao Qi. This led to adjustment problems in his new school. Xiao Qi's college choice followed the same path—his parents choosing his major for him without seeking his opinion. Xiao Qi, as the obedient son, accepted their decisions without complaint. Regarding such matters, he said, "I think I'm okay with their decisions. We get along. Even though we do not communicate much, we understand each other."

For Xiao Qi, parent-child intimacy comes with strict parental discipline. Through his parents' disciplinary acts, he senses their love and devotion. He is very satisfied, even grateful, with his mother's authoritarian parenting. "My parents took good care of me and all aspects of my life. They gave me so much. They devoted their full hearts. ... My mother disciplined and monitored me strictly so that I could have a good life. [My parents] helped me in a silent way." Xiao Qi did not feel his parents' devotions immediately but knew he benefited from them in the long term. When Xiao Qi reflected on the adjustment problems he had following his elementary school transfer, he said, "It was just not necessary for my parents to tell me about this school transfer in advance. I was too young to understand it anyway. All I had to do was listen to them. ... I deeply appreciate their help. They put so much effort in me [without telling me]." Xiao Qi attributed his academic success directly to his mother's hard work. He believed that his parents always disciplined him correctly. "If my mother had not disciplined me so strictly, I would not have been able to study the Chinese alphabet well. Also, my math foundation would not be as solid. My mother made math exercise questions for me, twice as many questions [as math teachers provided]. ... I would not have reached this height without my mother."

Even though Xiao Qi occasionally resented his mother's strict parenting style, he justified the pressure she put on him as being necessary for his development. "I was depressed in elementary school, also middle school. ... I was not interested in studying at all. ... I had a very bad attitude. If my mother had not pressured me, I would have accomplished nothing."



Regarding the qualities he considered important for an ideal parent, Xiao Qi would use his parents' style to raise his child and listed "strict" as most important. "If a child does not listen to you, you should beat him. If he cries and screams because he does not want to study hard, you should be strict so that he finishes his school work." He referred to the traditional idea that "a filial son comes from sticks," meaning that strict parenting, and even physical punishment, is necessary for a child's success. "I think beating is necessary." He said:

When I was a child, I did not listen to my parents when they talked to me nicely. I rolled on the floor and cried. Beating is necessary because through beating, the child will realize that he has to study hard. ... You have to force the child sometimes. ... I feel comfortable after a nap, but later I will regret that I've wasted ten minutes of my life napping. Parents beat you for your own good. Pressure [from parents] is necessary for a child's upbringing and wellbeing. [There should be] strict rules. After all, children are willful. They cannot understand the importance of certain things in life. So parents have to be demanding and use rigorous means to constrain him.

*Fei Fei's Story: Mixing Traditional and Modern Parenting*

Fei Fei was a third-year college student who studied management and software engineering in a second-tier Beijing University. At the time of the interview, he had applied for a summer internship as an online administration assistant at one of the largest media companies in China. To prepare for this job, he had extensively researched China's media businesses.

Fei Fei had a relaxed manner and appeared to be relatively mature and confident compared to his peers. During the interviews, he often claimed to be a very independent and autonomous person, saying that he took great pride in not having to rely on his parents. As his father had recently passed away from a heart attack, he lived with his mother. She was a professor at Beijing Normal University, but Fei Fei thought that she was rather inexperienced with society, and he had to take on his father's role sometimes.

Fei Fei stressed the fact that he did not want to walk the path that his father designed for him. Instead, he wanted to follow his own dreams and do things he enjoyed. He hid the job internship opportunity from his mother because he believed that it was "his own business." He said, "Maybe I will tell her after I actually get the job. I have always been like this. I usually do things myself and tell my parents later." During his third year in college, for example, Fei Fei learned about a study-abroad opportunity his school offered. He went to all the information sessions by himself and only told his mother about it when he needed to pay for the tuition.

Fei Fei said he liked to think about social reality critically and had no reservations about expressing his opinions. For instance, Fei Fei stated that he

went to a “very militarized high school.” All students there had to cut their hair to shoulder length. Fei Fei strongly objected to this rule and expressed his dissatisfaction. “It is my hair, and I should be making decisions on what to do with it. ... I had a lot of conflicts with my teachers because of this rule.”

The reason my father disciplined me so strictly was because he had very high expectations for me, [and] I feel that he loved me very much ... but he was kind of ridiculous. He repeatedly told me, from the time I was little, that I should go to Qing Hua University for a college education and then Harvard for graduate education.

With a bitter smile on his face, Fei Fei said:

But in fact, I’m just an ordinary human being. I’m not as excellent as he expected me to be, so he became disappointed, but then he demanded even more from me. I think eventually [his expectations] became my burden; they became a pair of shackles to me. ... I did not want to become the son he wanted me to become. So we had a very troublesome relationship.

Like Xiao Qi’s parents, Fei Fei’s father strictly disciplined him. Fei Fei’s father monitored not only his academic performance, but most of the other aspects of his life as well, from his romantic relationships to his hobbies. In the interviews, Fei Fei complained about his parents’ constant violations of his privacy. They regularly searched his pockets in order to inspect his life. Once, they discovered a letter, written by a girl, in his jacket, and this incident led to a series of conflicts. Fei Fei had developed romantic feelings for one of the girls in his middle-school class, and they started to exchange letters expressing their affection for one another. When his parents found out about the letters, they were very angry and accused Fei Fei of not concentrating wholeheartedly on his academic work. As Fei Fei reflected on this matter, he felt strongly that his parents had wronged him. “I was very unhappy. First I thought they had insulted the girl I liked. Also, I don’t think I made any mistakes. Love is not a crime.” Fei Fei’s parents’ supervision of his romantic relationships did not stop after he became an adult. At the time of my research, Fei Fei was dating a Chinese girl in college. When he told his father about this, his father immediately started to investigate the girl’s family history and personal background. “My father was really picky. He thought his baby boy was so precious that no girl was good enough to deserve him.”

The control Fei Fei’s father sought over him not only affected his romantic relationships but also trivial aspects of his life. His parents prohibited him from engaging in any non-school related activities. For instance, Fei Fei loved to street dance when he was in high school, but his parents did not allow him to join practice sessions with his friend because they believed that he should be spending more time on his academic work. Similarly, Fei Fei was not allowed to watch TV or play computer games at home because his parents

wanted him to devote all his time to schoolwork. To prevent Fei Fei from going outside and playing computer games in places that provide pay-by-the-hour internet service, his parents gave him no monthly allowance. This situation changed only after Fei Fei was admitted to university.

Fei Fei often rebelled against his parents' authoritarian commands, which caused serious conflicts. When Fei Fei's parents criticized him because of his poor grades in high school, he ran away from home. As a result of his long absence from school, he had to repeat his first year of high school. Recalling this incident, he commented, "I felt there was no place for me in my own family, so I ran away and stayed on the streets for a month, without any money in my pocket." During his time on the street, he once sent a text message to his father telling him not to worry. His father replied, "I don't have you as a son." "I was so mad at the time," Fei Fei said. "I told myself I would rather die on the street than return home." The situation was resolved when his friend told his parents where Fei Fei was staying, and his parents begged him to come home. Fei Fei said that only at that moment did he realize that his parents' love for him was very deep. They did not want to destroy him, as he had believed.

To discipline Fei Fei, his father sometimes used physical punishment to "teach Fei Fei a lesson." When Fei Fei was growing up, his parents would scold him, have him stand in the corner of a room for a long time, and even beat him. When his parents found out that he had taken family money to buy himself a Japanese mini-computer game that was very popular with Chinese children, they beat him severely. As Fei Fei recalled, "My father beat me. My mother watched at the side. He beat me very badly. He used a belt. He used a belt to whip me. They were angry even after the beating. They did not show me a kind face for a month, neither of them. When we talked about this again at the dinner table, my father hit me [on my head] with his chopsticks."

Fei Fei was very troubled by his relationship with his parents. He said that he liked to reflect upon it:

Sometimes I ask myself why my family is like this. I think my parents are confused too. They did not know how to bring up a child. They were going through trial and error as well. That was why there were so many conflicts [in my family]. Sometimes we discussed my family upbringing. ... They told me that their ideas [of parenting] were not adaptive to today's society. It is evolving too fast.

Highly critical of his parents' parenting, Fei Fei said, "I think I need to learn from my parents' experience. I will take my child's perspective. ... [My parents] never tried to think from my standpoint. ... I think parents should be able to understand their children."

## 344 ETHNOLOGY

One particular quality Fei Fei thought his parents lacked was the ability to communicate intimately with him. He attributed his personal problems to the inadequacy of family communication.

When one of my girlfriends broke up with me, I was in great pain. I felt like I could not live without her. I wanted to kill myself. But I have never brought this up with my parents. ... If I could have talked to my parents, if they had been willing to try to understand me, I think I would have felt much better. ... Because I kept too many things to myself, I have sleeping problems now. I have insomnia.

Fei Fei cherished parent-child communication and listed it as an ideal quality of parenting:

Communication [should be] defined in a wider [context]. You have to accept the mistakes and detours of your child. For example, if I told my father I wanted to talk with him ... if I told him I thought smoking was cool, he would probably have slapped my face. Then I would not want to say anything. I understand that parents worry about their child, but I think a child grows up fast and mistakes are only short-term problems.

Another criticism Fei Fei had about his parents' parenting style was their use of physical punishment. "As a child, I always lived in fear. It [physical punishment] affected me deeply. ... I was so scared. They were so tall and strong. I was like a small animal. I was frightened. It was like an animal instinct." When asked if he would use physical punishment on his children, Fei Fei hesitated to give a completely negative answer:

Honestly, I'm not against scolding or beating. I have been thinking about this for a while. I don't know whether I support it or not. On the one hand I'm against it. It leaves a scar in the child's heart. But I think the reason they [my parents] scolded me and beat me so hard was because they truly cared about me. My parents both cried once after they beat me. ... I was neither very understanding nor mature as a child. I broke their hearts indeed. There was no argument there ... [they] devoted all their heart to me. Beating and scolding are [parents'] love ... they never beat me simply because they were in a bad mood. So I am conflicted [about using physical punishment].

### *Jing Jing's Story: Modern Parenting*

Jing Jing studied administrative management in a highly ranked university in Beijing, but she was not happy with her current major. When she applied to college, neither she nor her parents knew much about administrative management. Jing Jing learned more about her major after she entered college and began taking classes.

Jing Jing met her boyfriend in elementary school, and they had been classmates throughout her elementary school years. She has started planning for her wedding. "I met my boyfriend in 1996, so I think we should get

married in 2016. My boyfriend has his own apartment, so we will move in together after we are married.” Jing Jing’s face lit up when she talked about her marriage plans. She also had a meticulous plan about her life after marriage:

My boyfriend thinks we will have a baby two years after we get married. Now we are only planning on having one child. ... I won’t consider having a second child unless we both have accomplished careers. ... In order to support our child, we need to have a monthly salary above 15,000 (\$2,000 US). I think our child’s future will be affected negatively if we could not earn at least that amount of money.

Jing Jing is outgoing and active. She answered questions quickly and eagerly, expressing her thoughts in rapid speech. She had carefully planned not only her romantic life, but also her academic and professional life. For her college applications, she said that she knew she had to be very careful about which schools to apply to. “I was admitted into my first-choice school,” she said. “I knew I could get into my first choice. I was very confident about that.” Jing Jing had always been an excellent student, and she was sure about her ability to succeed academically. “I scored 116 out of 120 on both my Chinese and English high-school entrance exams ... even though my middle school was not a top-ranked school.” Her plan for her career development was to work for one or two years after graduating from college. However, knowing the importance of higher education for her career, she planned to eventually go back to school for a master’s degree.

Jing Jing did not like to rely on her parents to achieve high scores in school. Her mother worked in communications and media. Sometimes, her mother would tutor her on writing assignments, but Jing Jing did not like to follow her mother’s suggestions. Instead, she insisted on expressing her thoughts in her own words. “I think my mother’s writing is too adult-like. So I disagreed with her on my writing sometimes.”

I think my parents are like my friends. We are equals. My parents never said to me that they were my parents. They don’t use commanding tones. We discuss everything together. Our family environment is very harmonious.

She thought her parents behaved that way because early in her childhood they had read many books on child development. “All the books they read said that parents had to respect and support their children,” she said. “So they think that’s what they should do. They think the traditional, commanding way of raising children is not good.” Jing Jing said her parents cared about her very much. “My parents never asked me to do chores. Maybe it is because I’m a girl. I think it is [also] because of the indulgent love [*chongai*] parents typically have for their child.”

Jing Jing's parents not only indulged her, they also involved her in important family decision-making. She related how, when her parents decided to purchase a new apartment in a suburban area of Beijing, they took her to several places and asked her opinion. Originally, Jing Jing's mother preferred one apartment in the south of Beijing because it had more living space. But Jing Jing pointed out that another site, in the north of Beijing, was closer to her school and her future workplace, and the location would make it more convenient for her to commute between school, work, and home. When Jing Jing gave her opinion at a family discussion, her parents respected her needs and purchased the apartment that Jing Jing preferred.

Jing Jing and her parents also discussed intimate subjects, such as her dating and marriage. She revealed that her mother was not particularly satisfied with her boyfriend. Like many Chinese parents, Jing Jing's mother believed the husband should attain a higher education degree. That Jing Jing's boyfriend did not have a college degree deeply concerned her mother, who also thought that Jing Jing and her boyfriend were not equal in physical attractiveness. Although Jing Jing's mother had reservations about her future son-in-law, she did not intervene in her daughter's romantic relationship. "Even though my mother is not especially happy about my boyfriend, she is gradually changing her mind," Jing Jing said. She added that her father was more supportive toward her boyfriend. "My father was very nice to my boyfriend when he visited me in my home. [My father] said it all depends on my romantic fate [*yuanfen*, karma]." At the same time, Jing Jing told me her father also warned her to pay close attention to her boyfriend's family because he believed family background and family relationships were crucial for his daughter's future well-being.

Jing Jing also could not recall a single instance when her parents used physical force to gain her obedience:

They have never beaten me. ... Once they brought a very expensive Yamaha piano for me. But I was not interested. I practiced for a year but then I wanted to give it up. ... They first tried to coax me into practicing again. They said they would buy me ice cream if I practiced again, but I refused. Then they tried to threaten me. They said they would beat me. But I did not buy it [because she knew they would not really beat her]. Their hands were tied.

Jing Jing ended her story with a smile. "My family relationship is good. I think my communication with my parents is successful. There are no difficulties [in understanding each other]."

Jing Jing regarded her parents' parenting as very successful in terms of family communication. Her ideal of parenting mirrored her own experience. "I think an ideal parent should try to understand her or his child. ... [Parents] should also make their children understand them—let children know their

sacrifices for them and why they are willing to sacrifice.” Her idea of an ideal child resembles herself. “A perfect child should try to understand her parents. Also, she should know her life goal, and she should have some control over her own life. Jing Jing did criticize her parents for not praising her enough:

I think parents should give a child support and encouragement. One failure of my parents is that they lectured me too much. ... I think it is useless. Children don't have time to listen to [lectures]. It is better to use examples: when the child does something bad, tell her it is bad and when she does something good, tell her it is good and praise the child. I think Chinese parents never praise a child. They only say what you have done wrong. My mother has this problem; she only emphasizes my wrongdoings. Once, I went back home from school but no one was home. So I waited at the door. The neighbor invited me to stay with her, but I didn't. [When her mother returned, she said that] I did the right thing because it might be dangerous [to stay with a stranger], but she did not praise me. She did not say I did well. Instead, she told me [how dangerous] it would be if I stayed with that woman. That annoyed me. Finally I did something right. I wanted to be encouraged and praised. This made me sad and uncomfortable.

## DISCUSSION

The traditional corporate model of the Chinese family portrays an institution. This limits studies of the Chinese family to the public domain and to the “economic, political, jural” aspects of family life (Yan 2003:6), while neglecting the private sphere of individual experiences and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. The corporate family model constrains the study of the contemporary Chinese family in at least two ways. First, it is inadequate in dealing with the rise of individualism and the increasing demands of individual autonomy, with its associated emotional needs witnessed in rural Chinese family life since the reform era (Yan 2003:7). Second, it is also problematic when dealing with the contemporary urban Chinese family, where the collective working unit system has been replaced by an unprecedented expansion of private space (Lee 1998:523). The urban Chinese family has become a relatively isolated nuclear unit that provides emotional support for family members (Gold 1985:671). The One-Child Policy that was successfully implemented in Chinese cities has had urbanites withdraw from “public movements” and “channel energy and emotion into bringing up one perfect child” (Gold 1985:671–72).

Jankowiak (1998) also points out that the focus of China's urbanization has been on the “particular urban institution or facet of urban life that includes native place associations, ethnic identity, kinship and family composition, elderly status and care, working class culture, women's position in the family and in the market place, the emergence of youth culture, and the relative importance of personal satisfaction in marriage” (Jankowiak 1998:377). The “domain of private experience” and the “affective dimensions of Chinese

urban culture,” however, “continue to be under emphasized” (Jankowiak 1998:377). Yan’s private life model and Jankowiak’s call to explore emotionality offer new approaches to fill the research gap of the affective and private sphere of the urban Chinese family and the interpersonal relationships within it.

With China’s urban singleton families, the intimate emotional bond between parents and children is as powerful as the conjugal bond, if not more so. Single children have become the primary source of emotional investment as well as emotional satisfactions for their parents, according to Fong (2004:125, 143). Moreover, children also seek emotional support and intimacy from their parents. The Beijing singleton adults’ remembrances of their childhood parenting experiences offer a glimpse into the establishment and formation of the affective relationship between urban Chinese youth and their parents.

#### CONCLUSION

These case studies of parent-child relationships among Beijing singleton families illustrate the co-existence of two radically different modes of parenting: the traditional and the modern. Both parenting models have developed to embrace love as an essential force. Mutual affection, instead of economic duty or obligation, has become the cardinal value of contemporary parent-child relations in urban China. The three case studies presented here show singleton children’s attempts to either completely align with one parenting model or synthesize the two in ways that suit their individual needs.

The cravings for intimate parent-child communication and intensive parental emotional commitment are recurrent themes throughout the 24 interviews conducted with Beijing singleton adults. Almost all of the 24 interviewees were second-generation children born under China’s One-Child Policy. Born, raised, or having lived in Beijing, these children are urban elites who enjoy social status and material privileges that are unavailable to previous generations or their rural counterparts (Liu 2011:59; Fong 2007). However, when these young college adults reflect and comment on their relationships with their parents, economic or material satisfactions were not the foci of their narratives. Instead, they constantly lingered on the emotional intimacy their parents had offered, or had failed to offer.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnett, J. J. 2004. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. Oxford University Press.



- . 2006. Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way of Coming of Age. *Emerging Adulthood in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. J. J. Arnett and J. Tanner, pp. 3–19. American Psychological Association.
- Baddeley, A. D. 1992. What Is Autobiographical Memory? *Theoretical Perspectives on Autobiographical Memory*, eds. M. A. Conway, D. C. Rubin, H. Spinnler, and W. A. Wagenaar, pp. 13–30. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Bal, M., J. Crewe, and L. Spitzer. 1999. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. University Press of New England.
- Berliner, D. 2005a. The Abuse of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Anthropology. *Anthropological Quarterly* 78(1):197–211.
- . 2005b. An Impossible Transmission: Youth Religious Memories in Guinea-Conakry. *American Ethnologist* 32(4):576–92.
- Bi, S. 1997. Hai Zi, Wo Wei Shen Mo Da Ni? [Child, Why Did I Beat You?]. *Zhong Xue Yu Wen* 12.
- Brewer, W. F. 1986. What Is Autobiographical Memory? *Autobiographical Memory*, ed. D. C. Rubin, pp. 25–49. Cambridge University Press.
- . 1996. What is Recollective Memory? *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory*, ed. D. C. Rubin, pp. 19–66. Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, Y. 2007. Parent-Child Relationship in Single-Child Families in China. *World Cultural Psychiatry Research Review* 2(4):123–27.
- Chow, E. N. 1996. The One-Child Policy and Parent-Child Relationship: A Comparison of One-Child with Multiple-Child Families in China. *The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 16(2):35–62.
- Chow, E. N., and K. Chen. 1994. The Impact of the One-Child Policy on Women and Patriarchal Family in People's Republic of China. *Women, the Family, and Policy*, eds. E. N. Chow and C. W. Berheide. State University of New York Press.
- Climo, J. J., and M. G. Cattell. 2002. Introduction: Meaning in Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives. *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. J. J. Climo and M. G. Cattell, pp. 1–36. AltaMira Press.
- Cohen, M. L. 1976. *House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan*. Columbia University Press.
- Fong, V. L. 2004. *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy*. Stanford University Press.
- . 2007. Morality, Cosmopolitanism, or Academic Attainment? Discourses on "Quality" and Urban Chinese-Only-Children's Claims to Ideal Personhood. *City and Society* 19(1):86–113.
- Gold, T. B. 1985. After Comradeship: Personal Relations in China since the Cultural Revolution. *The China Quarterly* 104:657–75.
- Jamieson, L. 2011. Intimacy as a Concept: Explaining Social Change in the Globalisation or Another Form of Ethnocentrism? *Sociological Research Online* 16(4):15.
- Jankowiak, W. 1998. Research Trend in the Study of Chinese Cities: A Review Essay. *City and Society* 10(1):369–95.
- Lee, E. M. 1998. Cities and Lives in Post-Mao China. *American Anthropologist* 100(2):523–26.
- Li, X., and M. E. Lamb. 2012. Fathers in Chinese Culture: From Stern Disciplinarians to Involved Parents. *Fathers in Cultural Context*, eds. D. W. Shwalb, B. J. Shwalb, and M. E. Lamb, pp. 15–41. Routledge Academic.
- Liu, F. 2011. *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet, and the Self*. Routledge.

### 350 ETHNOLOGY

- McAdams, D. P. 2003. Identity and Life History. *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of Narrative Self: Developmental and Cultural Perspective*, eds. R. Fivush and C. A. Haden, pp. 187–207. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Radstone, S. 2000. Working with Memory: An Introduction. *Memory and Methodology*, ed. S. Radstone, pp. 1–22. Berg.
- Rubin, D. C. 1996. Introduction. *Remembering Our Past*, ed. D. C. Rubin, pp. 11–15. Cambridge University Press.
- Schrauf, R. W. 1997. Costalero Quiero Ser! Autobiographical Memory and Oral Life History of a Holy Week Brother in Southern Spain. *Ethos* 25(4):428–53.
- Singer, J. A., and S. Bluck. 2001. New Perspective on Autobiographical Memory: The Integration of Narrative Processing and Autobiographical Reasoning. *Review of General Psychology* 5(2):91–99.
- Yan, Y. 2003. *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village*. Stanford University Press.
- Zhong, M. 2002. Conflict Management in China's Only-Child Families: Situations and Strategies. *Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution*, eds. G. Chen and R. Ma, pp. 85–100. Ablex Publishing.