Using an interactional perspective to examine patterns of conflict resolution among Chinese adolescents and parents involved in schoolwork conflicts

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Abstract
Parent-child conflict resolution is an interactive process by nature. Adopting a family systems perspective, the present study examines patterns of schoolwork conflict resolution among Chinese adolescents and parents, placing an emphasis on parent-child interactions. Qualitative methods using a grounded theory approach are adopted, with twelve parent-child dyads participating in joint interviews and follow-up individual interviews. Three patterns of adolescent-parent resolution of schoolwork conflicts are identified: (a) adolescents complying with parental coercion reluctantly: parents use parent-centered resolution strategies, while adolescents are self-assertive in the beginning but yield to their parents in the end; (b) effective communication: adolescents adopt self-assertive strategies when parents use child-centered strategies, with the outcome being that adolescents have the final say in agreements reached; (c) disagreement in a stalemate: parents’ use of parent-centered strategies and adolescents’ adoption of avoidant and self-assertive strategies lead to a suspension of disagreement. Discussion of the findings sheds light on hierarchical and enmeshed parent-child relationships in China as well as Chinese adolescents’ development of autonomy as exhibited in the patterns of parent-child schoolwork conflict resolution. Suggestions are made for further study of adolescent-parent schoolwork conflicts in Chinese families, and practical implications related to healthy family relationships are discussed.

Keywords
patterns of conflict resolution, adolescent–parent schoolwork conflicts, parent–child relationship, adolescents’ development of autonomy, interactional perspective, Chinese families

Received 14 January 2021; accepted 9 March 2021
Introduction

Conflict resolution is an essential aspect in parent-child conflict research. Previous studies on adolescent-parent conflict resolution in Chinese families mainly focus on teenagers’ perspectives, examining the outcomes of conflict resolution and conflict resolution strategies. This study places emphasis on how patterns of conflict resolution are revealed in parent-child interactions during conflicts. Adopting an interactional perspective informed by family systems theory, the present study clarifies patterns of conflict resolution among Chinese adolescents and parents involved in schoolwork conflicts by examining their resolution strategies, outcomes, and the connections between strategies and outcomes. Parent-child relationships and adolescents’ development of autonomy are illuminated when patterns of conflict resolution among parents and adolescents are investigated through an interactional perspective. This section will first introduce the literature on conflict resolution within adolescent-parent conflicts in Chinese families. Later on, as family systems theory is drawn upon to explore patterns of conflict resolution in adolescent-parent schoolwork conflicts, parent-child relationships and adolescents’ development of autonomy will be presented. Finally, the research aims and research questions of the present study will be stated.

Existing studies on conflict resolution in adolescent–parent conflicts in China

Research on conflict resolution within adolescent-parent conflicts in Chinese families mainly consists of two aspects: outcomes of conflict resolution and conflict resolution strategies. Research focusing on outcomes of conflict resolution labels conflict resolution outcomes according to who has the final say, and three resolution outcomes are identified: parents win, children win, and both compromise (Chen, 2010; Yau & Smetana, 1996, 2003). Among these studies, Chen (2010) collected data from both parents and adolescents, while most only presented youths’ views about outcomes of adolescent-parent conflict resolution. These studies suggest that in Mainland Chinese families, it is more common for parents to have the final say (Chen, 2010; Yau & Smetana, 1996, 2003). Though it is reported that adolescents desire more autonomy in decision-making, they accept the resolution outcome, with parents having the final say on what is fair (Yau & Smetana, 2003). It is likely that such patterns of conflict resolution among Chinese adolescents are influenced by Chinese filial traditions originating in Confucianism. The Five Cardinal Relationships (Wu Lun) of Confucianism place strong emphasis on filial piety (Shek, 2006). Filial piety expects children to sacrifice, repay, and act responsible towards parents unconditionally. The influence of the Chinese filial tradition on adolescent conflict resolution is shown in how Chinese adolescents tend to suppress their needs for obtaining autonomy in conflict resolution and conform to parents’ wishes.

In research focusing on conflict resolution strategies, studies also emphasize adolescents’ perspectives, and a few studies include parents’ views or integrate standpoints from both sides. Among these studies, it is found that Mainland Chinese adolescents commonly adopt obedient and avoidant strategies (Deng et al., 2012; Fang et al., 2003; Tu et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2008), while such strategies are uncommon among Western children (Smetana, 2011); this, too, reveals the influence filial piety can have on adolescents’ conflict resolution strategies. Interestingly, while assertive strategies are documented as being used less often by Mainland Chinese adolescents (Zhao et al., 2015), adolescents have a higher tendency to be assertive with increasing age (Tu et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2015). The gradual adoption of self-assertive strategies for resolving conflicts with parents highlights the
adolescent endeavor to develop behavioral and emotional autonomy in this developmental stage (Smetana, 2011).

In sum, the extant research on parent-child conflicts in Chinese families indicates that in the context of resolution outcomes, adolescents tend to obey their parents, and parents always have the final say (Chen, 2010; Yau & Smetana, 1996, 2003). As for conflict resolution strategies, Chinese adolescents show a blended pattern, with a mix of strategies: obedience, avoidance, and assertion (Deng et al., 2012; Tu et al., 2008). The influence of the Chinese filial tradition on adolescents’ conflict resolution strategies is revealed in the outcome that parents always have the final say and in adolescents’ common use of obedient and avoidant strategies. It should be noted that few studies have examined parents’ and adolescents’ conflict resolution strategies by focusing on a specific type of conflict, which might result in findings that are too broad. Another research limitation is that most researchers study conflict resolution within adolescent-parent conflicts in Chinese families only from the youths’ perspectives, while parents’ perspectives are barely included. Research on conflict resolution within adolescent-parent conflicts should involve both parents’ and children’s perspectives, exploring how conflicts are resolved in parent-child interactions to understand this topic more comprehensively.

**Understanding resolutions of adolescent–parent conflicts with family systems theory**

Given the limitation that only adolescents’ perspectives are highlighted in most research on adolescent-parent conflict resolution, further research should investigate this issue from a more comprehensive perspective to better understand the interactional dynamics in parent-child conflict resolution. This study endeavors to understand parents’ and children’s conflict resolution strategies with an interactional perspective drawing from family systems theory.

Family systems theorists assert that there are hierarchical levels in a family unit: namely, subsystems (e.g., the parent-child subsystem and spousal subsystem) and family systems or supersystems (e.g., racial and ethnic subculture, community, and national system), with elements of family systems being interrelated in dynamic, mutual, and circular processes (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006). A key tenet of the family systems perspective is that the whole system is more than the simple sum of the subsystems; this approach illustrates features of nonsummativity/holism (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006).

Family systems and subsystems are maintained by internal and external boundaries that define the systems and mark their interfaces (Anderson et al., 2013). External boundaries determine the flow of information between the family and the external world, while internal boundaries represent how subsystems interact with each other and indicate the degree of autonomy that can be permitted among members of a family. When system boundaries are too rigid or too permeable, there are detrimental effects on family members’ abilities to feel, perceive, and develop opinions (Manzi et al., 2006). Setting clear boundaries between individuals is regarded as one of the basic tasks of family systems, as it helps to nurture family members’ autonomy and development of individuality (Anderson et al., 2013; Minuchin et al., 1978).

The family systems perspective enables researchers to study parents’ and adolescents’ resolutions of their conflicts by regarding conflict resolution as a dyadic process rather than simply a collection of individual behaviors. Interactions among family subsystems are emphasized, indicating not only parents’ and children’s behaviors in conflict resolution but their relationships as well. Such examination of parent-child relationships in the context of adolescent-parent conflicts is expected to reveal the state of the internal boundaries of parents.
and children and how adolescents’ development of autonomy is influenced by internal boundaries within the family systems.

**Research aim and research questions**

Given the research gaps—i.e., that few studies of adolescent-parent conflict resolution in China have examined conflict resolution on a specific conflict issue, and that an interactional perspective is rarely adopted in most investigations—the present research focuses on adolescent-parent schoolwork conflicts and examines patterns of adolescent-parent schoolwork conflict resolution in Chinese families. Schoolwork conflicts have been reported as the most significant type of adolescent-parent conflict in Chinese families (Deng et al., 2012; Yau & Smetana, 2003) and are expected to provide profound research information for exploring patterns of adolescent-parent conflict resolution in China. Drawing from the interactional focus of the family systems perspective, this study aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of patterns of resolution among Chinese parents and children in schoolwork conflicts. Three research questions are thus posed: (a) What conflict resolution strategies do Chinese parents and adolescents adopt when they have schoolwork conflicts? (b) How do different conflict resolution strategies of parents and adolescents lead to different conflict outcomes, and what patterns of conflict resolution are thereby revealed? (c) How are Chinese parent-child relationship and adolescents’ development of autonomy illuminated by the patterns of conflict resolution used by adolescents and parents in schoolwork conflicts?

**Methods**

A qualitative grounded theory approach was adopted in the present study to probe into how Chinese adolescents and parents resolve their schoolwork conflicts. According to Annells (1996), symbolic interactionism is the philosophical underpinning of the grounded theory approach. This philosophical tradition builds on the assumptions that people strive and act based on what represents meaning for them, and that meaning, which arises out of social interaction, is dealt with and modified through interpretive processes (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following this philosophical underpinning, our research team hypothesizes that the grounded theory approach can facilitate the exploration of parents’ and children’s conflict-resolving behaviors in schoolwork conflicts by focusing on meaning-making in parent-child interactions.

**The sample**

The sample was selected in Yinchuan, Ningxia, located in the northwestern region of Mainland China. As a relatively remote region in China, it is likely that parents in Yinchuan are more conservative and traditional compared to their counterparts in major cities (Huang, 2013). This research context is thus expected to provide an opportunity to examine Chinese cultural patterns of conflict resolution.

The sampling unit of this study is the family, with each participating family including one parent and one adolescent. When multiple members of the same family are included in the sample, unexpected responses and contradictions in the data enable researchers to search for new complexities, which contribute to the depth and breadth of data (Roy et al., 2015). Convenience and snowball sampling were adopted at the beginning to establish the pool of potential participants. Purposive sampling based on five criteria was then performed to ensure the heterogeneity of the sample: (a) parent’s occupation, (b) parent’s educational background, (c) adolescent’s age, (d) school standing of adolescent, and (e) adolescent’s academic
performance level. This research adopted theoretical sampling procedures in that data collection and data analysis were carried out simultaneously so that further data collection was informed by the results of prior data analysis (Glaser, 1978). Fieldnotes and data analysis memos were taken to offer directions for further data collection until theoretical saturation was achieved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The final sample comprises 12 pairs of adolescents and parents from the same families. Background information on the sample is presented in Table 1. Among the parent informants, there were four fathers and eight mothers. Their mean age was 42.17 years (SD = 2.95), with a range from 38 to 46. Different occupations of parents were included in the sample to show a diverse range of family socioeconomic statuses: e.g., self-employed workers, state-owned enterprise staff, private enterprise staff, journalists, teachers, doctors, and homemakers. The education levels of parents ranged from secondary school to a master’s degree. Among the adolescents, seven were boys and five were girls, with ages between 12 and 17 years (M = 15.08; SD = 1.73). They were enrolled in middle schools of various academic standing in Yinchuan.

Data collection

Joint interviews were adopted as the main method of data collection in the present study. They provided opportunities for the research team to obtain detailed information on parent-child interactions and dynamics in conflict resolution. Joint interviews recognize the value of interconnected relationships (Caldwell, 2013) and utilize a holistic approach to allow for the emergence of family life in data collection and analysis (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Roy et al., 2015). Verbal and nonverbal cues on how individuals react to one another’s resolution strategies revealed in joint interviews provide clues to how family members may interact privately (Reczek, 2014). Moreover, power dynamics within a family unfold when interviews capture how family members silence, interrupt, and speak over one another (Eggenberger & Nelms, 2007; Houston et al., 2010).

Joint interviews have been used in previous studies on adolescent-parent conflicts (Campione-Barr & Smetana, 2004; Gonzales et al., 1996; Smetana et al., 1991) in which dyads of parents and adolescents engaged in discussions of conflict issues, including chores, appearance, personality, and homework. This study followed a similar practice by inviting parent-adolescent dyads to discuss schoolwork conflict issues. These issues were identified in a pilot study on four mothers and six adolescents who represent prominent issues faced by Chinese families with adolescents: namely, daily study tasks (e.g., homework, tutorials), mid-term/final exams, Zhongkao (a high school entrance examination), and Gaokao (a college entrance examination). Ethics approval by the research ethics committee of the authors’ academic institution was obtained prior to data collection.

All twelve joint interviews were conducted by the first author, who is a native of Ningxia, in private settings, such as interviewees’ residences or offices chosen by the participants. At the beginning of the joint interview, a list of schoolwork conflict issues was presented to the parent-adolescent dyad. They were invited to choose at least two issues to discuss in front of the interviewer. Each joint interview lasted between 10 and 40 minutes. After each joint interview, follow-up individual interviews with the parents and the adolescents were conducted separately to explore participants’ ideas and feelings in the joint interview. This method allows for exploration of hidden meanings, emotions, and experiences in joint interview interactions (Riley, 2014). Data triangulation is thus achieved by using a variety of data sources in time, space, and collection methods to confirm emerging themes and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
| Informant code | Gender | Parent age | Child age | Parent occupation | Parent education background | Child school standing | Child grade level | Child academic performance level |
|---------------|--------|------------|-----------|------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| Jian | Mother | Female | 40 | 15 | Accountant | High School | Average | 12 | Above Average |
| Jian | Male | 38 | 12 | Private enterprise staff | Junior College | Average | 7 | Average |
| Chaochao | Male | 44 | 13 | Driver | High School | Above Average | 8 | Average |
| Chu | Male | 46 | 15 | Medical doctor | University | Above Average | 8 | Below Average |
| Bobo | Female | 38 | 13 | Teacher | Junior College | Above Average | 7 | Average |
| Ming | Male | 45 | 16 | State-owned enterprise staff | Junior College | Average | 11 | Average |
| Pipi | Female | 43 | 16 | Housewife | High School | Average | 12 | Above Average |
| Er | Female | 44 | 17 | Self-employed | High School | Average | 10 | Average |
| Jingyi | Female | 38 | 16 | Housewife | High School | Average | 10 | Average |
| Qiao | Male | 45 | 17 | Self-employed | High School | Below Average | 12 | Below Average |
| Haohao | Male | 42 | 17 | Journalist | University | Above Average | 11 | Above Average |
| Yo | Female | 43 | 14 | Medical doctor | Master | Above Average | 7 | Below Average |
Data analysis

With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audiotaped. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis proceeded with the assistance of NVivo Version 11. Two levels of analysis were performed in the process, focusing on (a) the particular contexts of parents’ and adolescents’ resolutions to schoolwork and (b) a meta point of view to shed light on family interactions in conflict resolution (Molinari et al., 2010). Following the tradition of data analysis with the grounded theory approach, coding procedures include open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the process of open coding to identify significant points describing participants’ experiences, the transcripts were read a few times to identify important segments and to develop codes for labeling categories of text segments. Over 100 open codes were established. Examples of significant open codes include parents scolding, parents inducing guilt, adolescents arguing, adolescents remaining silent, children winning with agreement reached, parents winning with agreement unreached, suspension of disagreement, parents scolding adolescents who argue, and children remaining silent as parents scold them. Specific attention was paid to speech turns, interruptions, pauses, volume, and tone to capture the family dynamics presented in the joint interview during the process of open coding (Molinari et al., 2010). In the process of axial coding, the questions of when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences of categories were identified. Core categories were developed—namely, conflict resolution strategies, resolution outcomes, reactions to the other family members’ resolution strategies, and children’s autonomy—and the subcategories of these core categories were developed. The last step of coding is selective coding, which aims to interrelate categories in a model (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this step, the core categories were linked with one other conceptually, and these linkages were developed into themes, revealing patterns in adolescent-parent resolutions to schoolwork conflicts and Chinese parent-child relationships as well as youths’ development of autonomy in the context of schoolwork conflict resolution. The next section reports on theoretical descriptions based on the key themes developed from the joint interviews.

Results

Parent-child discussions of conflict issues in the joint interviews revealed parent-child discrepancies in views toward schoolwork. The parent-child dyad attempt to resolve their disputes and adopt various resolution strategies in the joint interviews. Parents’ resolution strategies for schoolwork conflicts include parent-centered strategies with neutral emotions, parent-centered strategies with intense emotions, and child-centered strategies; adolescents’ conflict resolution strategies consist of explicit and self-asserted strategies, avoidant strategies, and obedient strategies (see Table 2). Outcomes of schoolwork conflict resolution are that parents win with agreement unreached, adolescents win with agreement reached, and disagreement is suspended. Three major conflict resolution patterns in schoolwork disputes are identified as a result: (a) adolescents comply with parental coercion reluctantly, (b) effective communication is established, and (c) disagreement ends in a stalemate. These patterns not only depict the connections between resolution strategies and outcomes, but also reveal features of parent-child relationships in Chinese families and adolescents’ development of autonomy. In the present study, six families show the first pattern (the Yo, Ming, Haohao, Bobo, Jian, and Chu families), two families demonstrate the second pattern (Chaochaoli family and Eram family), and the other four families demonstrate the third pattern (the families of Pipi, Jingyi, Qiao,
The next sections present these three conflict resolution patterns with the support of vignettes from the joint interviews and quotes from individual interviews for illustration.

### Adolescents complying with parental coercion reluctantly

The first conflict resolution pattern identified in the joint interviews involved parents’ use of parent-centered strategies presented with either neutral or intense emotions. Parent-centered strategies with neutral emotions were indicated as one-way advising, while strategies with intense emotions included scolding and guilt induction. In this pattern, although adolescents initially argued with parents, they finally gave up their standpoints and complied with parents reluctantly.

#### Parents presenting parent-centered strategies with neutral emotions and adolescents having no choice

Parent-centered strategies presented with neutral emotions, typically categorized as one-way advising, were shown in the families of Yo, Ming, Bobo, and Haohao. These parents were concerned more about their own opinions and barely made efforts to understand children’s perspectives. The adolescents argued at the start, but later remained silent or uttered a few
words complying with their parents. In the follow-up individual interviews, these adolescents claimed that they thought there was no other choice provided for them, so they had to follow their parents’ advice.

In Yo’s case, Yo’s father used one-way advising, stating that his son should put more energy into the subject of Chinese and spend less time playing mobile phone games. Though the son had different opinions and argued a bit, he finally acquiesced to the father’s ideas without expressing many of his own views.

[Joint interview.] Yo’s father: You used to play basketball once a week, but recently it seems that you spend more time on online games. It is problematic, isn’t it?
Yo: No. I need to balance my work and rest. And actually, I didn’t spend much time on it.
Yo’s father: The problem is that it leads to a decrease in the time you spend on reading. I think you’d better make a change.
Yo: Okay.

(Then the father stated his suggestions one more time. The son did not express his opinions over the father’s advice further.)

Yo’s father: Would that be okay for you?
Yo: It would be okay.

In the follow-up individual interview, the father said that he was satisfied with the outcome of their dispute resolution. As for Yo, the boy felt that the father’s opinions were overwhelming, as he was not given a chance to fully express his ideas, and that such a situation often occurred between them in daily life. As a result, he had no other choice but to obey his father’s views, revealing the father’s parent-centered consideration in a subtle way:

[Follow-up individual interview.] Yo: Every time, I can only say a few words before he talks for more than an hour. He says everything, which leaves me nothing to say.

Similarly, in Ming’s family, the mother’s parent-centered strategies were also exhibited with neutral emotions. To ensure her son’s grade performance in sports subjects on Zhongkao, the mother suggested that Ming should ride a bicycle to school every day accompanied by his father or herself. Ming agreed to bike riding, but he did not want his parent to be with him. Thus, he tried to argue with his mother. In the end, Ming complied with his mother, as she did not offer an alternative choice.

[Joint interview.] Ming’s Mother: I will buy a bicycle for your father in the next semester, and your father will ride with you.
Ming: Riding with me every day? That will bother my father. What about my father’s car?
Ming’s mother: He will not drive. Is that okay for you?
Ming: Okay. Okay. But can’t I just go by myself? I am a big boy now!
Ming’s mother: You choose; either it’s me that will be with you, or it’s your father.
Ming: Umm (sigh) ... Then I will let my father go with me. I guess this is my only choice.

As shown above, parents’ one-way advising strategy is parent-centered and presented in neutral emotions. These parents hardly considered their children’s views or the possibility of a joint decision, and they did not provide children with an alternative option. Given such a
situation, though adolescents argued with their parents at the start, they eventually let the parents have the final say, even though they did not agree with their parents.

Parents presenting parent-centered strategies with intense emotions and adolescents’ strategies shifting from arguing to compliance. In some cases, parents presented intense emotions, such as scolding and guilt induction through yelling, in schoolwork conflicts with their adolescent children. These were especially predominant when children conveyed their disagreements through arguing, as in the cases of Jian and Chu. Parents were coercive and emotional, which made adolescents find their own arguments useless when discussing conflict issues. Reacting to such situations, adolescents gave up arguing and eventually complied with parents’ opinions.

In another joint interview, Jian’s mother became angry when Jian talked about his dissatisfaction with his mother’s previous conflict resolution strategies for daily study conflicts. She interrupted Jian, yelled, and induced guilty feelings in her son. When Jian realized that his mother was angry, he went quiet so as not to irritate her.

[Joint interview.] Jian: When I had quarrels with you, you said, “Get the hell out of here. I don’t want to see you anymore.” Then I left. A few seconds later, you asked me to come back. It’s like I shouldn’t have gone away, though you asked me to do so.
Jian’s mother: This is mother. Why don’t you understand? This shows that you are simply a white-eyed wolf (bai yan lang) and you do not understand me at all (yelling)! (Long silence.) I feel that you are picky on me.
Jian: No. I didn’t mean it, really.

(Silence.)

Jian’s mother called Jian a “white-eyed wolf,” a term often used by Chinese parents to blame children for being unfilial. When the mother expressed her disagreements by yelling these guilt-inducing words, Jian responded to her anger immediately by yielding.

In another case, Chu did not want to attend tutorial schools over the weekend because it left her insufficient time to finish homework. However, her father insisted that his daughter had to take tutorials and yelled at her. The daughter tried to argue with the father, but finally complied when she found arguing was useless. The father’s rage was quite obvious in the joint interview, while Chu cried a lot:

[Joint interview.] Chu’s father: The homework should be done, and the tutorials must be taken as well.

Chu: It is very likely that in the eighth grade, we will need to go to school on Saturday. Then I can only do homework on Sunday. If I need to take tutorials on Sunday, how can I (being interrupted) …
Chu’s father: You have the same amount of time as everyone else (loudly)! Why can’t you complete your homework on time like the others? (Remaining silent for five seconds.) Taking tutorials is a must because you should improve your grades!
Chu: Okay. I will. I will go to the tutorial schools (sobbing).

In the follow-up individual interview, Chu claimed that she was able to understand her father’s perspective while her father could not understand hers:

[Follow-up individual interview.] Chu: There must be a generation gap between my father and me…. Anyway, I can understand my dad, but my dad can’t understand me. So, I barely talk with him to avoid misunderstandings.
The above two cases also reveal the intense emotions of parents and children, which are likely to arise from blurred boundaries between parents and adolescents. In Jian’s case, the mother believed that her controlling behaviors over her son came from her love. This indicated the mother’s weak boundary awareness, as she regarded her son’s life as an essential part of her own life.

[Joint interview.] Jian’s mother: I know that you have grown up and you get your own ideas…. But if doing something will obviously make you get hurt, why do you still want to do it? Why don’t you just follow my suggestions?

Jian: I feel that instead of following your advice, I’d rather get hurt.

Jian’s mother: But I feel upset when I think that you will get into difficulties and get frustrated because of it! There are fewer and fewer opportunities for me to involve myself in your life (choking).

The blurred boundaries in Chu’s family were revealed in the father’s expectation of give-and-take and the daughter’s belief that she should study for her father to pay her father back. It is noticed that Chu’s father tended to emphasize what he had done for Chu in order to motivate her, which might induce guilty feelings in the child.

[Joint interview.] Chu’s father: Your mother and I are never stingy with money spent on your studies. We have spent a lot of money for you, like the sponsorship fee. We are even willing to sell blood for your studies (both the father and the daughter remain silent). My health condition is not good, and I need to take medicine. If you can’t get good grades and find a good job in the future, how can you support me in the future?

Chu: I will take the tutorial. I will study hard from now on.

In the follow-up individual interview, the father’s thoughts of reciprocity were shown further. He believed that the daughter should use her good academic performance to pay her parents back. Such thoughts obviously had effects on Chu. She mentioned that she studied for her parents rather than for herself, and she was not able to study for her own sake autonomously.

[Follow-up individual interview.] Chu’s father: I think she owes me….. I do laundry and cooking for her. I rejected the opportunity to take business trips for her. But in the end, her grades do not improve but deteriorate. I am definitely not comfortable with it.

[Follow-up individual interview.] Chu: I think I study for my parents. I cannot study autonomously. When my father talks about how he has sacrificed for me, I feel so stressful. The stress actually makes me not want to study. But anyway, I have to study because of his coercion.

To summarize, the findings reported in this section indicate a pattern in which adolescents realized arguing was useless and compliance was the only choice when parent-centered conflict resolution strategies were adopted by parents. It is noteworthy that even though adolescents showed obedient behaviors to parents in this pattern, they did not identify parents’ views as personally meaningful and actually disagreed with their parents. In this resolution pattern, especially when intensive emotional parent-centered strategies were displayed, enmeshed parent-child relationships with blurred boundaries between parents and
adolescents were identified. Blurred boundaries justified parents’ coercive behaviors and contributed to children’s use of compliance in resolving conflicts with their parents.

**Effective parent–child communication**

The second pattern of conflict resolution identified in this study is exemplified in the families of Chaochao and Er. Adolescents in these families spoke their minds by arguing when they had disagreements with parents. These parents adopted child-centered conflict resolution strategies, such as active listening and facilitating mutual communication, as they reflected on their own behaviors and remained aware of adolescents’ development of autonomy. Finally, parents accepted the adolescents’ views, adolescents asserted themselves, and agreements were reached between the two parties.

Chaochao’s father suggested that his son take a recitation class for traditional Chinese studies. The father actively listened to Chaochao’s disagreements and engaged in mutual communication by asking the child’s opinions, responding to his needs, and showing respect to his thoughts. As a result, the father accepted his son’s views, and the child asserted himself with his father’s support.

[Joint interview.] Chaochao’s father: When the vacation is over, you have less time to do reading. You need to read a hundred times before you understand it. There is a recitation class for traditional Chinese studies….

Chaochao: (Responding quickly.) I don’t want to go.
Chaochao’s father: Why? You don’t want to go because you think it won’t be helpful?
Chaochao: Anyway, I don’t want to go. This holiday is very precious to me, and I have to go to the tutorial schools. After the vacation is over, I have to do my homework every day. I think taking such a class is a waste of time.
Chaochao’s father: So you think there’s no sense in taking this class… Alright, I know. When you feel that there is a need, we will take the class then.

In the follow-up individual interview, Chaochao’s father shared his reflections on how his behaviors might create negative effects on his son’s psychological well-being. This contributed to the father’s use of child-centered resolution strategies.

[Follow-up individual interview.] Chaochao’s father: I reflect that I scolded him too much. My expectations for him were too high. My behavior might have made him less confident about his studies. I hope that I will get an opportunity to discuss this issue with him. If it is my fault, I will change.

Similarly to Chaochao, Er disclosed and explained her disagreements with regard to her mother’s habit of frequently talking about her schoolwork regardless of the context. Er’s mother actively listened to her child’s views and considered the girl’s perspective, and they finally reached an agreement.

[Joint interview.] Er: I have my own plan about my studies. Could you please… Just don’t always scold me and criticize that my plans are not good. Anyway, you need to respect my own ways of studying. Can you trust me?
Er’s mother: Okay, if you have your own study plans, it will be unnecessary for me to involve myself too much in your studies. Since you have your study plans, then work hard on your own.
Er: I hope you can understand me. And sometimes when we have meals or go shopping together, you keep talking about my schoolwork. I feel very embarrassed about that. You know?
Er’s mother: Okay. I will pay attention to it.

In the follow-up individual interview, Er’s mother explained why she accepted her daughter’s opinions. The mother’s reflections on and respect for her child’s development of autonomy are shown vividly in the quote below:

[Follow-up individual interview.] One is never too old to learn. Now, since she has come up with her own ideas, I will respect her thoughts. I seriously consider her opinions and reflect on my behaviors.

Overall, effective communication between parents and children was shown in this second pattern of resolving schoolwork conflicts. As the parent informants claimed, they reflected upon adolescents’ need for independence and adjusted their conflict resolution strategies to be child-centered. In response, parents and children reached a consensus, and adolescents were able to assert themselves, revealing the autonomy they obtained in such occasions.

**Disagreement in a stalemate**

In the third pattern of conflict resolution, parents and adolescents could not reach agreements and set the conflict issue aside as a result. In this pattern, parents commonly used strategies of one-way advising, while adolescents argued back or ignored their parents’ advice. Both sides expressed their disagreements, and ineffective communication was exhibited, as they all adhered to their own standpoints. Two typical cases—the families of Pipi and Jingyi—are reviewed in this section to highlight this pattern of conflict resolution.

Pipi had been dissatisfied with some of her teachers for a long time, and her mother believed that this was just the girl’s excuse for not studying hard. Pipi argued that some teachers in her class had problems with teaching methods, but her mother gave one-way advice that Pipi should work on her attitude first. They failed to focus on the same issues to arrive at an agreement.

[Joint interview.] Pipi’s mother: I still advise you not to treat your teachers like bad guys.

Pipi: …Some teachers really can’t give good lectures.
Pipi’s mother: …Why do you always assume the worst about people?
Pipi: But I think my chemistry teacher is very good. This proves that I’m not a person who tends to assume the worst about everyone.

In the follow-up individual interview, the mother stated that she could not understand Pipi’s perspective. Pipi claimed that she agreed with her mother’s suggestions about working on her attitude, but she was not able to achieve them:

[Follow-up individual interview.] Pipi’s mother: Sometimes I can’t understand my daughter’s perspective… It is impossible to change the environment. Currently, the only way for her is to adjust herself until she is able to adapt to the environment.
Pipi: The main problem is that my teachers' teaching methods are problematic. My mother's advice may be good, but I'm not able to follow it.

Jingyi's use of her mobile phone was always a major source of conflict between the girl and her mother, as the mother believed that using the phone led to the daughter's deteriorating grades. The mother wanted to confiscate her daughter's mobile phone, but Jingyi refused her mother's proposal. Jingyi insisted on her views during the discussion with her mother, arguing for the necessity of using the phone and ignoring her mother's advice.

Jingyi's mother: I will confiscate your mobile phone.

Jingyi: I refuse.
Jingyi's mother: Why?
Jingyi: I have to search for information for my homework and look up English words on the phone.
Jingyi's mother: No need. You can consult with your peers. (Silence.) Reviewing, you rarely do reviewing, right?
Jingyi: I can hardly finish the homework.
Jingyi's mother: Why?
Jingyi: Because I don't know how to do it.

In the subsequent individual interview, Jingyi's mother felt confused about why her daughter could not understand her views, and she thought Jingyi's reason for using the phone was just an excuse. Such responses explained her use of parent-centered thoughts in the disputes. This also elucidated why Jingyi thought it was impossible for them to communicate with each other effectively, as she became annoyed with her mother's parent-centered suggestions.

Discussion
The findings of this study enrich and extend the results of previous studies in relation to both conflict resolution strategies and resolution outcomes. First, consistent with existing studies, the present research findings identify three groups of adolescent conflict resolution strategies: (a) explicit and assertive strategies, (b) avoidant strategies, and (c) obedient strategies. Second, our findings on the resolution strategies of parents in schoolwork conflicts fill research gaps, as existing studies tend to exclude parents' perspectives. The present research introduces parents' resolution strategies in schoolwork conflicts systematically, showing both parent-centered and child-centered resolution strategies. Parent-centered strategies seem more...
significant in the findings, as these strategies of parents are exhibited in most of the families participating in this study. Third, regarding resolution outcomes, the present research findings go beyond earlier related findings on parent-child conflicts in Chinese families where parents win, children win, or a compromise is reached. We find that separately labeling resolution outcomes in this way is not adequate for describing the intricate resolution outcomes revealed in this study. Combining who has the final say with whether agreements are reached can depict the resolution outcomes of adolescent-parent conflicts more comprehensively. In most cases in this study, parents have the final say, but adolescents obey their parents because of parents’ coercive parent-centered strategies rather than because they agree with their parents’ opinions. Adolescents can achieve self-assertion with parents’ child-centered strategies, and agreements are achieved between the two parties in such cases. Moreover, this study presents disagreement suspension as one of the resolution outcomes in conflict interactions between parents and adolescents, showing how discrepancies in views may not be resolved right away in real life.

Three patterns of parent and adolescent schoolwork conflict resolution were revealed, indicating the connections between resolution strategies and outcomes of parents and adolescents in schoolwork conflicts (see Table 3). In the first pattern, where adolescents comply with parental coercion reluctantly, adolescents’ resolution strategies shift from arguing to compliance with parents’ adoption of parent-centered strategies. In this pattern, parents have the final say, but adolescents do not agree with their parents’ opinions. The second is an effective communication pattern, which is revealed when child-centered strategies are adopted by parents; here, adolescents use self-assertive strategies with the outcome of adolescents having the final say and achieving agreement. In the third pattern, disagreement in a stalemate, parents’ strategies are parent-centered and children’s assertive or avoidant strategies are revealed. In this pattern, disagreements between two parties become dormant and may be resolved later or lead to conflicts again because of the underlying unresolved disagreements.

This study adopts a family systems perspective in examining the interactional dynamics in conflict situations among Chinese families with adolescents. Beyond patterns of conflict resolution of parents and adolescents in schoolwork conflicts, the following sections will discuss hierarchical and enmeshed parent-child relationships in Chinese families, highlighting the development of adolescent autonomy over schoolwork as revealed in the patterns of parents’ and youths’ resolutions of schoolwork conflicts.

Hierarchical and enmeshed parent–child relationships in Chinese families

The first resolution pattern, adolescents complying with parental coercion reluctantly, shows the hierarchical relation between the parent subsystem and the offspring subsystem within the family system (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006). Hierarchical features of parent-child relationships are especially emphasized in the Chinese cultural tradition. The Five Cardinal Relationships in Confucianism uphold unequal rights and obligations between parents and children, emphasizing children’s filial responsibilities toward parents (Shek, 2006). It has been found that filial piety continues to prevail in contemporary Chinese families across Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Yeh et al., 2013).

Two types of filial piety, authoritarian filial piety and reciprocal filial piety, are proposed in Yeh’s (2003) dual filial piety model to describe contemporary filial values in Chinese societies. Authoritarian filial piety highlights hierarchy in families and submissive children. Reciprocal filial piety encompasses emotional attendance to parents because of gratitude for parents’ upbringing, reflecting behaviors and values adapted to modernization. Our findings reveal
Table 3. Three patterns of parent–adolescent schoolwork conflict resolution.

| Patterns of schoolwork conflict resolution | Resolution strategies/outcomes | Parents | Adolescents | Beyond conflict resolution |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Adolescents complying with parental coercion reluctantly | Strategies | One-way advising | Arguing → remaining silent → complying | Hierarchical & enmeshed parent-child relationship |
|                                             | Outcome  | Scolding; guilt induction | Parents win with agreement unreached | |
| Effective communication                      | Strategies | Active listening; facilitating mutual communication | Arguing | Adolescents’ autonomy revealed |
|                                             | Outcome  | Adolescents win with agreement reached | | |
| Disagreement in a stalemate                  | Strategies | One-way advising | Arguing; ignoring | |
|                                             | Outcome  | Disagreement suspension | | |
that when parents adopt parent-centered strategies, no matter whether mild or intensive, parents do not allow adolescents to fully express their standpoints and do not provide adolescents with other choices. Such strategies are coercive in nature, disclosing parental beliefs that children should submit to parental authority. The parental coercion displayed in parent-centered strategies coerced many adolescents to refrain from questioning the rationality of parents’ views and behaviors, choosing instead to yield to their parents, indicating that the adolescents are conforming to their parents’ authority. Authoritarian filial piety and hierarchical features of parent-child relationships are revealed in these families, as the supremacy of parents is emphasized, and children are expected to obey their parents unconditionally.

The blurred boundaries highlighted by this study indicate enmeshed parent-child relationships. Family enmeshment exists when internal boundaries are weak within a family (Manzi et al., 2006). Minuchin et al. (1978) define enmeshment as when “boundaries are blurred, and differentiation is diffused,” with family members “lacking the resources necessary to adapt and change under stressful circumstances” (pp. 56–57). In this study, blurred boundaries and family enmeshment are reflected in parents’ tendencies to regard children’s lives and academic successes as their own and children’s beliefs that they study for their parents rather than for themselves. According to the family systems perspective, enmeshment leads to psychological and emotional fusion among family members and potentially inhibits children from developing individuality and emotional maturity. Children who experience fusion usually make emotion-based decisions in the course of reacting to their parents’ perspectives (Kinnier et al., 1990). Hence, it is important for researchers to pay further attention to how family enmeshment is revealed in schoolwork issues. With the influence of family enmeshment, Chinese adolescents may act obediently and make emotional decisions about schoolwork-related issues.

**Chinese adolescents’ development of autonomy as revealed in patterns of conflict resolution**

In all three patterns of adolescent-parent conflict resolution reviewed in this study, adolescents’ desires for autonomy in decision-making are revealed when children disagree with their parents and make efforts to argue with their parents. According to self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008), autonomy, also known as self-determination, is the most essential basic need for individuals to experience choicefulness and self-endorsement (Soenens et al., 2007; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Cases of adolescents effectively obtaining autonomy are presented in the conflict resolution pattern of effective communication. In this pattern, adolescents endorse their autonomy when they assert themselves in conflict resolution with parents’ child-centered strategies. Parents in such cases are aware of adolescents’ individuality, so they consciously use child-centered strategies. This facilitated mutual communication, contributing to the outcome of adolescents having the final say and reaching an agreement. Our findings suggest that parental use of child-centered strategies with autonomy-supportive features helps to endorse and facilitate the development of adolescent autonomy in the academic domain.

Drawing from SDT, we have a concern that adolescents feel controlled motivation—the opposite of autonomous motivation—toward schoolwork in cases defined by the resolution pattern of adolescents feeling obliged to comply with parental coercion. Autonomous motivation is when one represents and promotes one’s own autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomous motivation emerges when people naturally follow their interests and engage in an activity spontaneously, or when they can effectively internalize activities, values, or regulations they are not interested in, identifying them as personally meaningful or congruent
with their other values (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). By contrast, when people do not or only partially internalize certain activities, values, or regulations, they engage in related behaviors with controlled motivation due to pressure to avoid feeling guilty or self-critical—but without fully accepting such behaviors as their own.

On one hand, due to the tradition of authoritarian filial piety, the parental authority expressed in parental scolding causes adolescents to acquiesce to parents’ views simply to avoid punishment. Scolding strategies, revealing controlling language and commands, can place external pressure on adolescents that prompts children’s internal contingencies and controlled motivation (Assor et al., 2004; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). On the other hand, family enmeshment contributes to parents’ use of intrusive strategies, such as guilt induction, which arouse children’s guilty feelings and pressure adolescents to obey their parents by emphasizing parents’ sacrifices and children’s filial obligations. Such strategies suggest intrusive parental psychological control, which is manipulative of children’s thoughts and feelings (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Barber et al., 2005).

Parental psychological control exerts internal pressure on children’s capabilities, conveying a conditionally approving parental orientation to their children and thus instilling controlled motivation in their children as well (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Adolescents’ controlled motivation to complete schoolwork is indicated in this study when they follow parents’ requests simply to avoid external pressure and guilty feelings rather than integrating parents’ values into their own belief systems and behaving autonomously. It has been shown that adolescents who have controlled motivation experience a lower level of choicefulness and self-endorsement (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010), reflecting adolescent informants’ relatively lower level of autonomy over schoolwork.

Limitations and implications

The first limitation is that our qualitative research findings focus on families in Yinchuan and may not be transferable to other regions in China. Future research should examine Chinese families in a variety of geographical and socio-economic regions. Furthermore, further research can draw from the findings of the present study to develop measurement scales for patterns of adolescent-parent schoolwork conflict resolution in Chinese families. This will allow for comparison across families in different regions of China using quantitative methods. The second limitation is about sampling. There are eight mothers but only four fathers in the sample, so fathers’ experiences might not be fully presented. Future research should involve more fathers and pay attention to different dynamics of mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, and father-son relationships in patterns of adolescent-parent conflict resolution. Moreover, the sample of this research was self-selected, as convenience sampling was used at the beginning and the participants attended the study voluntarily. Many parent informants were already disturbed by the frequency and intensity of conflicts with their children, which may explain why most of the families participating in this study revealed a relatively more intensive resolution pattern—namely, adolescents complying with parental coercion reluctantly, for which the resolution outcome is parents winning with agreement unreached. The resolution outcomes of the other, less intensive resolution patterns presented in this study include children winning with agreement reached and suspension of disagreement.

Other resolution outcomes not shown in the present study—including parents winning with agreement reached and adolescents winning with agreement unreached—may emerge when more families with relatively lower parent-child conflict frequency and intensity are involved. This implies that there might be other patterns of adolescent-parent conflict
resolution in Chinese families. We speculate that in cases in which parents win with agreement reached, child-centered resolution strategies would be used by parents to convince adolescents and facilitate mutual communication. Such strategies may coax adolescents into agreement without forcing them to do so. As for cases of adolescents wining with agreement unreached, though parents are not in agreement with their children, they may surrender to adolescents’ strong desire to make a decision in conflicts. Future studies could involve families with lower frequencies and intensities of adolescent-parent conflicts to delineate a more comprehensive picture of patterns of adolescent-parent conflict resolution in Chinese families.

This study highlights the importance of having an interactional perspective on adolescent-parent schoolwork conflict resolution. The family systems perspective adopted by this study, as well as the methods of data collection and the course of analysis based on this interactional theoretical perspective, may be borrowed by researchers in the future to examine adolescent-parent schoolwork conflict resolution from a holistic and dyadic rather than piecemeal approach. In addition, consistent with the results of previous quantitative research, the present qualitative study shows that as his or her age increases, a Chinese adolescent’s need for autonomy in conflict resolution also rises. The results show that in the resolution patterns of mutual communication and disagreement in a stalemate, adolescents insist on using assertive strategies, indicating a stronger desire for obtaining autonomy. The majority of the adolescents fitting these two patterns were senior high school students (Er, Pipi, Jingyi, and Qiao). However, most of the junior high school students and their parents exhibited the pattern of adolescents complying with parental coercion reluctantly (Ming, Bobo, Jian, and Chu). Further quantitative study could be conducted to test age differences in patterns of adolescent-parent schoolwork conflict resolution.

Turning to the implications of this study for practice, our findings may be helpful for parents, adolescents, and professionals in reflecting on parental practices. In the present study, parents’ parent-centered strategies were coercive in nature, directing both externally and internally controlling pressure on children and leading to adolescents’ controlled motivation to do schoolwork. In such cases, adolescents did not identify their parents’ views as meaningful, although they obeyed their parents with controlled motivation. It has been reported that under controlled motivation, adolescents’ obedience is superficial and unsustainable (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). SDT research also suggests that controlled motivation makes children likely to have lower levels of psychological wellbeing and effective performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Thus, based on the findings of this study, we recommend that parents carefully consider the use of parent-centered strategies. Parents are encouraged to reflect on children’s developmental needs for autonomy during adolescence and adopt child-centered strategies to facilitate mutual communication and agreement. In such cases, adolescents are more likely to effectively internalize parents’ values and regulations and hence engage in related behaviors autonomously, enhancing adolescents’ academic performance, development of autonomy, and psychological wellbeing in the long run.

Conversely, it is also necessary for adolescents to grasp communication tactics in conflicts with parents. Resolution patterns ending in disagreement and stalemate reveal the phenomenon wherein both parents and adolescents take a hard line on asserting themselves, which contributes to ineffective communication. Mastering interpersonal communication skills might be helpful for adolescents to facilitate mutual communication with parents and resolve conflicts favorably. Family life educators and counselors can support parents and adolescents in establishing and maintaining optimal boundaries within the family. When democratic and equal parent-child relationships with clear and flexible boundaries are established within a family, the autonomy of youths can be cultivated, which further boosts children’s growth and well-being.
Acknowledgment

This manuscript is based on the first author’s doctoral thesis which was undertaken at Hong Kong Baptist University.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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