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## Peer Relationships among Chinese Boys

### *A Cross-Cultural Perspective*

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One cannot herd with birds and beasts. If I am not to be  
among other men, then what am I to be?

—Confucius, *Analects*, xviii

Peer interactions and relationships constitute an important social context for human development (Hinde, 1987; Piaget, 1932; Sullivan, 1953). During peer interactions and affiliations, children learn social and cognitive skills in solving interpersonal problems and achieving personal and social success. Peer relationships may also be a source of social and emotional support for children in coping with adjustment difficulties. Experiences with peers may become increasingly important during childhood and adolescence, when children strive for social recognition and social status beyond the family (Harris, 1995).

Cultural influences on children's peer relationships have received an increasing amount of attention from developmental and cross-cultural researchers in recent years (e.g., Chen & Kaspar, in press; French, et al., 1999; Krappman, 1996). Cultural norms and values may serve as a basis for social interpretations and evaluations of behaviors in peer interactions and thus determine behavioral correlates and predictors of peer acceptance and rejection. Culture may also provide guidelines for the establishment and maintenance of specific dyadic relationships and affect the nature,

function, and significance of the relationships. Finally, cultural context may affect the structure and organization of peer social networks and groups.

Whereas there is increasing interest in cultural influences on social functioning and relationships in general, little research has been conducted to examine peer relationships of boys from a cross-cultural perspective. As a result, it is largely unknown how boys experience peer relationships in different cultural contexts. In this chapter, we examine peer relationships and friendships among Chinese boys. We focus on boys in particular because in Chinese culture they have been traditionally expected to be more active than girls in engaging in social interactions and establishing social relationships with peers outside of the family.

### *Cultural Background and Socialization of Boys*

In Western cultures, a primary socialization goal is to help children achieve psychological autonomy and individuality (Larson, 1999; Triandis, 1990). This individualism is reflected in the cultural expectation for increasing emotional separation from parents and “becoming one’s own person” during development (Larson, 1999). Peer relationships may be a source of emotional support and “stimulation” that facilitate the process of separating from the family and achieving personal autonomy (e.g., Rubin et al., 1998). Since the experience of being rejected by, or isolated from, the peer group is likely to be associated with negative feelings about one’s own competence and self-worth, peer relationships are important for the development of self-confidence and emotional well-being. Accordingly, achieving individual social status, such as popularity in the group, and developing assertiveness, confidence, and feelings of self-worth in peer relationships are considered major indexes of accomplishment in social development (Hartup, 1992; Rubin et al., 1998).

Whereas North American culture represents a typical individualistic culture, collectivism is a major characteristic of Chinese culture (see Hofstede, 1980; Kim et al., 1994; Oyserman et al., 2002). Collectivism, as a value system, emphasizes the welfare and interests of the group, especially when they are in conflict with those of the individual. The dominant tasks of socialization in Chinese culture are to help children develop collectivistic ideologies, to become a part of the group, and to make contributions to the well-being of the collective (Chen, 2000a). The expression of one’s

needs or striving for autonomous behaviors is often considered socially unacceptable. Behaviors that may threaten the group functioning and the well-being of the collective are strictly prohibited.

Consistent with the socialization goals of Western culture, Chinese culture appreciates and emphasizes the functional role of peer relationships in socialization and child development in a broader manner (King & Bond, 1985; Luo, 1996). There is rich literature in China on how to interact with other people including parents, friends, and other significant figures, and how to coordinate different types of social relationships in one's life. Proverbs such as "Relying on your parents at home, and friends outside" reflect the significance of social relationships in Chinese society. There are systematic rules and principles concerning social interactions and relationships in different groups. For example, whereas "filial piety" is a Confucian doctrine dictating that children pledge obedience and reverence to parents (e.g., Hsu, 1981), loyalty and trust have been considered fundamental principles in interactions and relationships between friends (Chen et al., 1990).

Interestingly, the Chinese literature on peer relationships has traditionally focused on boys and men. This may be due to the fact that during hundreds or even thousands of years in Chinese history, social contacts for girls from early adolescence to adulthood are limited to family members (parents, siblings, husband, and children). Girls are typically encouraged to help parents with household chores, whereas boys are encouraged to go out and interact with peers and adults. Traditional Chinese families are authoritarian and hierarchical, with men being dominant (Lang, 1968). The hierarchy in the family is backed by legal and moral rules, such as the "three rules of obedience" for women (an unmarried girl should obey her father, a married woman—her husband, and a widow—her son). Men have the responsibility to maintain and enhance the status and reputation of the family (Ho, 1987). Given the importance of social relationships (*guan xi* in Mandarin) for men in Chinese society, it is not surprising that boys are taught the social skills necessary for interactions with people outside of the family. In the famous novel *Three Kingdoms*, three friends were described as so dedicated and loyal to each other that they wished to die on the same day. In the story, the old "brother" told others that his wife was his clothes but his friends were his arms. Boys in China are often expected to appreciate the value of "true" friendship from this type of story.

The traditional ideologies concerning the status of men in the society and boys in the family have changed dramatically in the past century,

largely due to the introduction of Western cultures into the country and the feminist movement. Since the late 1970s, China has implemented the one-child-per-family policy. This policy has been highly successful, especially in urban areas. As a result, over 95% of all children in urban areas are “only” children. It has been found that the only child, either a boy or a girl, in a family which often has the “four-two-one” (four grandparents, two parents and one child) structure, is likely to receive much attention and even be “spoiled” by adults (Jiao et al., 1986). Nevertheless, some traditional values such as relatively higher expectations for boys, especially in the area of social skills and status, remain evident in contemporary China in both rural and urban areas (Chen & He, in press). Despite the social and cultural changes, traditional cultural beliefs and practices still play a significant role in the lives of Chinese boys.

In the following sections, we explore peer relationships among Chinese boys. Our exploration will be based on findings from four studies that we conducted in recent years. The first study focused on the associations between peer acceptance/rejection and social and psychological adjustment, and compared samples of Chinese boys with Canadian boys. The second study focused on exploring underlying beliefs, motives, and feelings that are involved in peer acceptance and rejection among Chinese boys. The third study compared the major functions of friendship, such as the provision of emotional intimacy, companionship, instrumental assistance, and enhancement of self-worth, between Chinese and Canadian boys. Finally, to acquire a more in-depth understanding of the significance and meaning of friendships among Chinese boys, the fourth study explored the ways Chinese boys perceive and interpret their friendships. In each of these studies, we gathered information from multiple sources through “standardized” measures, interviews, naturalistic observations, and archival data, and used integrative strategies in data analysis. Moreover, to maintain ecological validity of the assessments, we engaged in informal communications and discussions with children, parents, and local experts to search for culturally appropriate explanations of our findings.

### *Peer Acceptance and Rejection*

Since the early 1980s, research on peer relationships in North America has focused mainly on peer acceptance and rejection (Rubin et al., 1998). Researchers have been interested in whether a child is popular, rejected, ne-

glected, controversial, or “average,” and how sociometric status is linked to individual adjustment such as self-regard and feelings of loneliness (e.g., Asher et al., 1990). Substantial evidence has indicated that children who have difficulties with peer acceptance are at risk for maladaptive outcomes including academic problems, delinquency, and psychopathological symptoms (see Rubin et al., 1998).

Peer acceptance is based on social perceptions and evaluations concerning how peers accept the child, that is, the collective attitude and affect toward the child. Due to the emphasis on the socialization role of peer relationships, it is the social-evaluative nature of peer acceptance, rather than personal popularity or salience, that is often stressed in Chinese cultures. The social-evaluative nature of peer acceptance and rejection suggests that peer evaluations may play an important role in child development. Specifically, peer acceptance carries with it the prescription of behaviors that are considered appropriate and acceptable in the society, and thus, is an indicator of cultural norms and values. Moreover, social evaluations and responses direct and regulate children's behaviors according to socialization goals of the culture, as children seek social recognition and acceptance (Sullivan, 1953).

### Peer Acceptance and Social and Psychological Functioning—Study #1

An important question in the research on peer relationships concerns how social, behavioral, and psychological factors may be related to peer acceptance and rejection. Researchers in North America have paid particular attention to how social behaviors in peer interactions may predict peer acceptance and rejection in boys (e.g., Cillessen et al., 1992; French, 1988; Hinshaw & Melnick, 1995). In general, the findings suggest that sociability and assertiveness are associated with peer acceptance and that aggression and disruption are associated with peer rejection. Thus, whereas sociable and cooperative boys tend to be popular among peers, aggressive, impulsive, and disruptive boys are likely to be rejected in the peer group (e.g., Cillessen et al., 1992). In addition, it has been found that shy, anxious, and submissive boys may experience problems in peer acceptance (French, 1988). Regarding psychological adjustment, the findings indicate that rejected boys are likely to report negative self-perceptions of self-worth and social competence and high levels of loneliness and social dissatisfaction (e.g., Cillessen et al., 1992).

Yet it is unclear how social behaviors such as sociability-cooperation, aggression, and shyness-anxiety are associated with peer acceptance and rejection in Chinese boys. Are patterns of associations between emotional functioning such as feelings of loneliness and depression and peer acceptance/rejection similar in Chinese and North American boys? To address this question, we conducted a cross-cultural study in samples of Chinese and Canadian boys on the social and psychological correlates of peer relationships. Based on the argument that peer acceptance may reflect cultural norms and values, we expected that social and psychological functioning would be associated with peer acceptance in similar as well as different ways across cultures. For example, since sociable and prosocial behaviors are generally encouraged and aggressive and disruptive behaviors are discouraged in both Chinese and North American cultures, we hypothesized that, in both samples, sociability would be positively associated with peer acceptance whereas aggression would be positively associated with peer rejection. However, given that shy-anxious behavior is often considered an index of social maturity in Chinese culture and that children are encouraged to be cautious and restrained in social situations in Chinese culture (e.g., Chen, 2000b; Ho, 1987), we expected that unlike their counterparts in North America, shy-anxious Chinese boys might not experience difficulties in peer interactions. Indeed, we expected that whereas shyness-anxiety would be positively associated with peer rejection in Canadian boys, it would be positively associated with peer acceptance in Chinese boys.

#### PARTICIPANTS, PROCEDURES, AND MEASURES

The Chinese sample consisted of 284 boys in Shanghai, People's Republic of China, and the Canadian sample consisted of 249 boys in Southern Ontario, Canada. They were in grades 3 to 7. The boys were mainly from middle-class families in terms of social, educational, and economic status according to the standards in the country. Peer acceptance and rejection were assessed based on *sociometric nominations* ("Nominate up to three classmates with whom you like to play, and up to three classmates with whom you would rather not play"). The nominations received from all classmates were totaled and then standardized within each class to permit appropriate comparisons. Positive and negative nominations by peers provided indexes of peer acceptance and rejection. Data on children's social functioning were obtained from peer assessments (based on the measure of *Revised Class Play*, Masten et al., 1985). In the *Class Play*, children were

requested to nominate up to three classmates who could best play each of the 30 roles (e.g., "Someone who is a good leader"). Subsequently, nominations received from all classmates were used to compute each item score for each child. Factor analysis revealed three orthogonal factors in this measure: sociability-cooperation, aggression-disruption, and shyness-sensitivity in each sample. Sociability-cooperation included items tapping several aspects of social competence (e.g., "makes new friends easily," "helps others when they need it," "is a good leader"). Aggression-disruption included items assessing overt physical and verbal aggressive behaviors (e.g., "gets into a lot of fights," "teases others too much," "picks on other kids"). Shyness-sensitivity consisted of items assessing shy-inhibited behavior in social context ("very shy," "feelings get hurt easily," "usually sad").

Teachers completed, for each participant, a *Teacher-Child Rating Scale* (T-CRS, Hightower et al., 1986). Items in the scale tapped school-related competence, including frustration tolerance, assertive social skills and task orientation, and learning problems. Teachers were asked to rate, on a 5-point scale, how well each of these items described each child, ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very well"). The students were asked to complete a self-report measure on *loneliness and social dissatisfaction* (adapted from Asher et al., 1984). They were requested to respond to 16 self-statements (e.g., "I have nobody to talk to," "I am lonely," "I don't have anybody to play with at school") on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all true; 5 = always true). In addition, data on leadership and academic status were obtained from the school records for the Chinese sample. The Western-based measures were translated and back-translated to ensure comparability with the English versions. These measures have been used and proven reliable, valid, and appropriate in Chinese cultures (e.g., Chen et al., 1992; Chen, Rubin & Li, 1995).

## RESULTS

The results concerning the associations between social behaviors and peer acceptance and rejection are presented in Table 9.1. The relations between sociability and aggression and peer acceptance and rejection were largely similar in the two samples. A careful examination of the results, however, indicated that the associations between sociability and peer acceptance and rejection were stronger in the Canadian boys. In contrast, the association between aggression and peer rejection was somewhat stronger in the Chinese boys. The differences between the samples may reflect differential

TABLE 9.1  
*Correlations between Social, School, and Psychological Adjustment and Peer Acceptance and Rejection in Chinese and Canadian Boys*

|                            | Peer Acceptance |          | Peer Rejection |          |
|----------------------------|-----------------|----------|----------------|----------|
|                            | Chinese         | Canadian | Chinese        | Canadian |
| Sociability                | .51***          | .76***   | .05            | -.43***  |
| Aggression-disruption      | -.04            | -.05     | .78***         | .52***   |
| Shyness-sensitivity        | .14**           | -.43***  | .23***         | .27***   |
| Teacher-rated competence   | .23***          | .30***   | -.22***        | -.45***  |
| Teacher-rated learn. prob. | -.18**          | -.10     | .37***         | .30***   |
| Loneliness                 | -.27***         | -.24***  | .19***         | .28***   |
| Leadership                 | .31***          | -.03     |                |          |
| Distinguished studentship  | .22***          | -.04     |                |          |

*N* = 284 and 249 in Chinese and Canadian samples, respectively.

\*\* *p* > .01

\*\*\* *p* > .001.

emphasis on social initiative and self-control in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. According to the cultural model developed by Chen (2000b), social initiative or level of social participation represents the tendency to initiate and maintain social interaction, whereas self-control or self-regulation serve to regulate or modulate behavioral and emotional reactivity in order to perform in social situations in an appropriate manner. Since sociability is based on a relatively high level of social initiative, it may be more valued in Western cultures than in Chinese culture. As a result, sociable boys are more likely to be accepted by peers in Canada than in China. Moreover, since aggressive-disruptive behavior is based on relatively low self-control or regulation, this behavior may be more strictly prohibited in Chinese culture than in Western cultures and thus more strongly associated with peer rejection in Chinese boys.

The results regarding the association between shy-sensitive behavior and peer rejection and acceptance suggested cultural differences as well. As expected, shy-sensitive behavior among the Canadian boys was positively associated with peer rejection. However, shy-sensitive behavior was positively associated with both peer acceptance and peer rejection among Chinese boys. A further analysis based on sociometric classification revealed that shy-sensitive Chinese boys were “controversial” among peers, that is, they were liked and disliked by peers at the same time. The controversial status of shy-sensitive Chinese boys may be related to the recent “psychological health education” in Chinese schools. According to Chen and Su (2001), China has been experiencing rapid changes toward the “market economy” system. During this process, Western values and ideologies have

been introduced into the country. Many schools in China, especially in urban areas, have started to include psychological health classes in which students are encouraged to develop “better” social skills such as social assertiveness. Perhaps the mixed attitudes of peers toward shy boys in China today indicate the cultural conflict between imported Western values on social initiative and assertiveness and traditional Chinese values on shyness and social restraint. Our results suggest that how children’s social behaviors are perceived and evaluated by others may be influenced by these societal and cultural changes. It is important for future research to examine the long-term effects of the influx of Western values on individual development in Chinese children.

The patterns of relations between school performance and psychological adjustment and peer acceptance and rejection were largely similar in Chinese and Canadian children. However, teacher-rated learning problems were found to be negatively associated with peer acceptance in Chinese boys, but the association was not significant in Canadian boys. The results suggest, perhaps, a greater emphasis on academic performance in the friendships of Chinese boys (e.g., Stevenson et al., 1990).

#### Underlying Motives for Peer Acceptance and Rejection—Study #2

The study described above was based largely on a Western conceptual framework, using “standardized” measures such as the *Revised Class Play* (Masten et al., 1985), to address the research questions. Whereas the results are interesting, it is possible that the behavioral dimensions in the Western measures are not particularly relevant to peer interactions and relationships among Chinese boys. There may be social and behavioral characteristics that are important in Chinese culture but are not tapped in Western measures. Moreover, “standardized” assessments and conventional quantitative analyses that often require adequate variability of responses may not be sensitive in detecting behaviors that may be low in prevalence in Chinese culture but culturally relevant.

To achieve an in-depth understanding of peer acceptance and rejection in Chinese boys, we conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of adolescent boys in China. The purpose of the study was to investigate why a child likes or dislikes another child, without placing any restraint on the child’s responses. The information obtained from these interviews may help us understand the nature of peer relationships from an “insider’s” perspective.

## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

A random sample of 67 boys in grades 4, 6, and 8 from three schools in Beijing, People's Republic of China, participated in the study. They were individually interviewed by trained research assistants who were graduate students or senior undergraduate psychology students at a Chinese university. During the interview, after two "warm-up" questions about his extracurricular activities, the participant was asked to describe who he would like to play with and who he would rather not play with in the class and why. He was asked to provide specific reasons for his acceptance and rejection of a particular child. The interviewer attempted to obtain as many responses as possible by continuing to ask "Are there other reasons?" until the child said no. Clarification was sought when any of the child's statements were unclear to the interviewer.

The interview data were first coded by using a coding scheme developed specifically for the study. The coding scheme tapped various aspects of social, academic, and personal characteristics.

## RESULTS

It was found that main reasons for "why do you like to play with or be with that person" include (1) high academic achievement (e.g., "he is smart," "working hard on schoolwork," "having good grades") (24%); (2) cooperative and prosocial behaviors (e.g., "helping me with assignments," "polite," "helping others when they have difficulties") (30%); (3) common interests and mutual understanding (e.g., "both like to play with computers," "get along with each other") (22%); and (4) desirable personal qualities (e.g., "always nice to me," "funny") (9%). In contrast, reasons for "why would you not like to play with or be with that person" mainly included (1) poor academic achievement (e.g., "very poor in academic performance," "not interested in schoolwork") (19%); and (2) aggressive-disruptive behaviors (e.g., "fighting with others," "hitting me," "disturbing others in class") (72%).

The main themes in the boys' interviews were academic achievement and prosocial and aggressive behaviors, which was consistent with the emphasis on social-behavioral qualities and academic achievement in Chinese culture (Chen, 2000a; Stevenson et al., 1990). The primary goal of education in Chinese schools is to help students develop in three aspects: moral-behavioral, intellectual, and physical. Interestingly, however, few of the boys in our sample indicated physical ability as a main reason for ei-

ther liking or disliking a peer. In addition, inconsistent with the results based on the Class Play in the previous study, few boys mentioned shyness, reticence, or sensitivity as reasons for peer acceptance or rejection. The results suggest that whereas shy-sensitive behavior may be interesting in cross-cultural comparisons, especially between Chinese and North American children, its significance for peer relationships may be somewhat limited within Chinese culture from boys' perspectives.

### *Friendship*

In Chinese culture, friendship (*you yi* in Mandarin) has traditionally been regarded as one of the five most important social relationships in human life (the other four relationships are between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, and elder brother and younger brother). Friendship is often viewed as a phenotype of the sibling relationship (King & Bond, 1985). "Having a true friendship" is ranked as a number one value by contemporary Chinese children and adolescents (Sun et al., 1989). As indicated earlier, traditional Chinese culture emphasizes the importance of friendship for the development of social competence and adaptation, particularly in boys.

Nevertheless, little empirical research has been conducted on the significance and functions of friendship in Chinese boys. As a result, it is virtually unknown how friendships play a role in individual social and psychological adjustment in Chinese boys. For example, what functions do friendships serve in Chinese boys? Are there cross-cultural differences in the functions of boys' friendships? To address these questions, we conducted a cross-cultural study of friendship in China and Canada.

#### Functions of Friendship—Study #3

According to the ecological view of social support (e.g., DeRosier & Kuipersmidt, 1991; Tietjen, 1989), the functional roles that children's social relationships fulfill may vary across cultures. It has been argued that the main functions of friendship include companionship, intimate disclosure, and enhancement of self-worth (e.g., Bukowski et al., 1996; Rubin et al., 1998). Among these functions, the enhancement of self-worth is regarded as particularly important for individual social and emotional development (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). This function has been viewed as

deriving from human social and psychological needs, and reflecting a high level of social development (e.g., Weiss, 1974). Since individual psychological well-being has often been considered relatively unimportant in Chinese culture, the function of friendship in the enhancement of self-worth may not be highly appreciated among Chinese boys. In contrast, given that the primary task of socialization in Chinese culture is to help children become part of the group and to integrate into the collective, social relationships including dyadic friendship may be valued mainly in terms of their functions to help children cooperate with others. Thus, mutual understanding and care may be a more important function of friendship than the enhancement of self-esteem in Chinese children. We attempted to test these hypotheses in a friendship study.

#### PARTICIPANTS, PROCEDURE, AND MEASURES

Participants in the friendship study were 248 boys in Shanghai, People's Republic of China, and 178 boys, in Southern Ontario, Canada, in grades 3 to 7. In the study, the boys completed a friendship function measure, which consisted of sets of statements about the functional roles of friendship. The statements tapped six typical functions of social relationships including security-protection (e.g., "I would like to be with this person when I feel uncomfortable or scared in a new place"), instrumental assistance (e.g., "I can count on this person when I need help"), companionship (e.g., "When I want to do something for fun, I can usually find this person"), intimacy (e.g., "I share my secrets and private feelings with this person"), understanding and care (e.g., "This person cares about me"), and enhancement of self-worth (e.g., "This person makes me feel important and special") (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Weiss, 1974). To avoid problems that often exist in rating scales, such as high overlap among different functional dimensions (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), and to reduce the influence of "response style" on cross-cultural comparisons (Chen, Lee & Stevenson, 1995), an "ipsative" approach was used (i.e., the descriptiveness of the items were evaluated relative to each other *within* the particular individual) in this measure. The participants were requested to select and rank three statements in each set that were most descriptive of their friendships. Total scores for each function were computed based on the selection and ranking ("most descriptive" = 3; "second most descriptive" = 2; "third most descriptive" = 1) of corresponding statements.

## RESULTS

A repeated-measure MANOVA first revealed a significant interaction between cultural groups and the within factor of the friendship function variables,  $Wilks = .86$ ,  $F(5, 457) = 14.33$ ,  $p < .001$ . Follow-up univariate analyses were conducted to detect cross-cultural differences and within-cultural patterns. The descriptive data and t-tests are presented in Table 9.2. It was found that, in general, the boys in both Chinese and Canadian samples selected companionship and intimacy as primary functions of friendships. Scores on companionship and intimate disclosure were significantly higher than those on other variables within each sample. Canadian boys, however, had higher scores than Chinese boys on companionship, and no differences were found between the samples on intimacy. Consistent with our expectations, Canadian boys had significantly higher scores on enhancement of self-worth, and lower scores on understanding and care than Chinese boys.

In addition, the Chinese boys had significantly higher scores than the Canadian boys on instrumental assistance, suggesting that Chinese boys were more likely than Canadian boys to appreciate the instrumental value of their friendships. Relative to scores on companionship and intimate disclosure, however, scores on instrumental assistance were significantly lower in both Chinese and Canadian samples. This later result was clearly *inconsistent* with Smart's (1999) argument that, in general, the Chinese tend to stress the instrumental or "mutual usefulness" rather than expressive or emotional facets of friendship. Regardless of the cross-cultural differences, both Chinese and Canadian boys indicated that playfulness and emotional intimacy were more important than the instrumental "usefulness" in their friendships.

TABLE 9.2  
*Functions of Friendship in Chinese and Canadian Adolescents*

|                        | Chinese (N = 242) |      | Canadian (N = 221) |      | t value  |
|------------------------|-------------------|------|--------------------|------|----------|
|                        | M                 | SD   | M                  | SD   |          |
| Security-protection    | 2.33              | 1.91 | 1.64               | 1.84 | 4.47***  |
| Instrumental assist.   | 3.33              | 1.98 | 2.42               | 2.13 | 5.25***  |
| Companionship          | 6.64              | 2.44 | 7.46               | 2.92 | -3.59*** |
| Intimate disclosure    | 4.71              | 2.23 | 4.78               | 2.58 | -.38     |
| Understanding and care | 3.22              | 2.22 | 2.53               | 2.12 | 3.88***  |
| Enhancement self-worth | 2.58              | 1.74 | 3.04               | 2.43 | -2.71**  |

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Finally, security-protection was considered the least important by both Chinese and Canadian boys. However, Chinese boys emphasized this function more than their Canadian counterparts in friendships. This may be due to the fact that Chinese children including boys may be more likely than their Western counterparts to feel insecure and anxious in unfamiliar and challenging situations (e.g., Chan & Eysenck, 1981; Chen et al., 1998; Kagan et al., 1978).

#### Descriptions of Friendship—Study #4

Developmental and gender-related patterns concerning children's understanding of friendship have been revealed in Western children (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Biglow, 1977; Selman & Schultz, 1990). During childhood, children's descriptions of friendship often focus on physical proximity, common activities, and instrumental help. From late childhood to adolescence, youth pay more attention to a friend's behavioral and psychological characteristics and to the relationship itself. Similarity in personality, intimate feelings, and mutual support are the common descriptive features of adolescent friendships. Compared with girls, boys' friendships appear to be focused more on agentic needs such as self-esteem, self-actualization, power and control, achievement and autonomy, and less on communal needs such as affection and intimacy (see Buhrmester, 1996).

Yet we know little about the experience of friendships among Chinese boys. What does friendship mean to Chinese boys? How are cultural values and customs reflected in their conceptions of friendships? To explore these questions, we conducted interviews with Chinese boys about their understanding of friendships. The participants were the same 67 boys in Beijing, People's Republic of China, who participated in the interview study of peer acceptance and rejection. Similar to the interviews on peer acceptance and rejection, we asked the children to describe how they formed close relationships with their best friends and why they wanted to be friends with them.

The descriptive data first suggest that, largely similar to findings in the West, there were clear age/grade differences in the understanding of friendship in Chinese children and adolescents. Descriptions of friendships were mainly concerned with specific activities and physical proximity in the lower grades, but changed to concerns related to more social and psychological characteristics such as modesty and moral character in early

adolescence. The focus of friendship conception also appeared to shift with age from salient behavioral characteristics of the friend and benefits that friendship can provide (e.g., "He is good at math, and he often helps with my homework") to more internal and less observable personality characteristics and relationship qualities (e.g., "He is an easy-going and straightforward person, and we get along with each other very well"). The differences were particularly salient between elementary school boys (grades 4 and 6,  $n = 42$ ) and junior high school boys (grade 8,  $n = 25$ ), with mean proportion scores of .89 and .29 ( $SD = .24$  and  $.33$ ) on concrete, activity-related reasons [ $t(65) = 7.88, p < .001$ ] and .09 and .62 ( $SD = .20$  and  $.38$ ) on psychological, relationship-oriented reasons [ $t(65) = -6.51, p < .001$ ] respectively.

Several themes emerged in the content analysis of the friendship descriptions of Chinese boys. First, similar to the responses on the peer acceptance and rejection task from Study 1, most of the descriptions concerning why the child wants to be friends with another child were related to academic achievement (18%), prosocial behaviors (24%), common interests and mutual understanding (31%), and desirable personal qualities (14%). The results indicate that school achievement and cooperative activities provide an important context for the organization and development of close relationships among Chinese boys, which is likely to be due, at least in part, to Chinese collectivistic culture. Nevertheless, compared with the results concerning peer acceptance, there were significantly higher percentages of responses involving common interests, mutual understanding, and desirable personal qualities in the friendship interviews. The results suggest that Chinese boys are more attentive to factors that are relevant to the maintenance of close relationships such as mutual understanding, care, and trustfulness in friendships than in overall peer acceptance. The relationship-oriented features may represent the distinct nature of friendship, which may be similar across cultures (e.g., Bukowski et al., 1996; Rubin et al., 1998).

The instrumental aspect of friendship (i.e., how friendship may be helpful or useful in a concrete manner) was evident in Chinese boys' descriptions (over 50% of the responses involving academic achievement were related to "usefulness" of the relationship). However, the descriptions need to be understood in context. For example, the "instrumental" statements were not necessarily associated with selfish motives. On the contrary, they often reflected collectivistic or cooperative values. Some examples of this type of friendship descriptions are as follows:

Li Jun<sup>1</sup> and I each have some strengths and weaknesses in different areas. I can learn from him in the areas where I am poor, and he can learn from me in the areas where I am good. This way, we can both make progress in school and enhance our achievement. This is why I would want to be a friend with him.

One day, I was working on my math assignment in the classroom. I had been working on it for a long time because I could not figure out the answer to a question. Most of my classmates had left because it was late in the afternoon. Then, Xiang Shi came to my table and asked me whether he could help. Very soon, he solved the problem. After that, we found that we could get along with each other very well and have a lot of things in common. We became good friends.

I remember in one afternoon last term, I was watching a group of students playing on the playground. I was feeling lonely because no one was playing with me. Zhang Cheng was in that group. He came to me and invited me to play with them. This was how we became friends.

In Western cultures, friendship is often regarded as personal, private, and affective (Krappman, 1996). In China, however, parents, teachers, and other adults are encouraged to be involved in children's and adolescents' peer relationships and to exert supervision and control. This control is often due to Chinese parents and teachers being highly concerned with the consequences of children's associations with "bad" friends. Moreover, it is believed that adults are more knowledgeable and competent than children in selecting "right" friends. Although several boys expressed their dissatisfaction with adult intervention, or even defiant attitudes (e.g., "What is important in selecting your friends is how you feel about them, not what your parents or teachers say"), the majority of Chinese boys suggested an understanding and acceptance of adult control over their relationships with their friends.

### *Conclusions*

Peer relationships are an important component of social development in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Since social relationships

and socialization ideologies and practices are culturally bound, however, boys' experiences in the peer context are likely to be different across cultures. The results of the studies described in this chapter suggest that peer acceptance and rejection reflect cultural values such as the encouragement of behavioral control and academic achievement in China. Findings from all four studies suggest that cultural norms and beliefs are involved in organizing social-ecological settings for child development and serve as guidance for social judgments of specific behaviors and impart "meanings" to the behaviors.

At the same time, however, our results indicate similar features and functions of peer relationships in Chinese and North American boys. The associations between peer rejection and feelings of loneliness in both samples suggest that, regardless of the culture, children who experience difficulties in peer relationships are vulnerable to developing emotional problems. Moreover, both Chinese and Canadian boys emphasize the functions of companionship and intimate communications in their close friendships. It has been argued that feelings of belonging and acceptance in the peer group and intimate mutual communications and exchanges in close dyadic relationships or "chumship" are derived from basic social needs in childhood and adolescence (Sullivan, 1953). Our results suggest that these basic needs may play a significant role in social interactions and relationships across cultures.

Finally, influences of cultural values and developmental tendencies on peer relationships are likely to occur in changing social contexts. Our results concerning the "controversial" status of shy-sensitive boys in the peer group and the small number of "deviant" responses such as dissatisfaction with adult control in China provide initial evidence of the role of societal changes in children and adolescents' experiences and adjustment. Like many other countries in the world, China is currently undergoing major social and cultural changes toward the market economy. Western values and ideologies have been introduced into the country along with advanced technology. The "westernization" may become more dramatic in the near future since China has recently joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). It is reasonable to expect that the social, political, and economic changes may affect socialization patterns including parental expectations of boys' behaviors and social relationships. It is important that future researchers investigate how Chinese boys adjust to their social circumstance during the transitional period.

## NOTES

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1. The names in the descriptions are not real, to protect the confidentiality of the participants' identity.

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