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Parent-Adolescent Communication About Sexuality in Chinese Families

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ABSTRACT
Given that young people in China are faced with increased sex-related risks, it is important to understand from a communication perspective, the role of parents as a prominent sexual socialization agent for Chinese adolescents. Semistructured, one-to-one interviews were conducted with Chinese adolescents ($N = 37$) about their parents’ communication about sex and sexuality. Using a constant comparative method, four categories were identified with respect to Chinese parents’ direct/explicit communication about sexuality and in addition, four categories of indirect/implication communication (RQ1). Further, four categories regarding Chinese adolescents’ attitudes towards such communication were apparent (RQ2). Overall, Chinese parents attempted to transmit values and expectations about dating and sexual activities indirectly, implicitly, and/or nonverbally. Adolescents in the present study also expressed tendencies to avoid sex-related communication with parents. Some even explicitly stated that avoiding such communication was beneficial. The findings’ implications for the role of culture in parent-adolescent communication about sexuality and communication openness are discussed.

Parents have long been considered one of the most prominent socializing agents of sexuality for their children (Darling & Hicks, 1982; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). Adolescents may acquire from their parents sexual knowledge (Somers & Paulson, 2000), as well as values, attitudes, and norms regarding sociocultural aspects of sex, such as standards of sexual conduct (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) and behaviors in intimate relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). The majority of prior studies that investigated parent-adolescent communication about sexuality have relied on samples of western countries (e.g., Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000). A small body of research has begun to include examinations of such communication in Asian immigrant families in the United States (e.g., Chung et al., 2005; Kim, 2005, 2009). Their findings demonstrated that culture tended to play a crucial role in shaping the content and styles of parents’ communication about sexuality.

Despite the potential importance of culture when considering what and how parents and adolescents communicate about sexuality, only limited research has looked into such communication in a local Asian family context. In particular, parent-child communication about sexuality in Chinese families has been an understudied, yet important, topic. In recent years, there has been an increase in rates of premarital sex (Song et al., 2013), unintended pregnancy (Ma et al., 2008), and sexually transmitted infections (STIs; Ma et al., 2006) among Chinese young people. It is therefore of crucial importance to understand what kinds of sex-related messages Chinese adolescents received from various sexual socialization agents. Given that parents are one major source of influence, the current study sought to unveil the various forms of communication about sexuality that may have transpired between Chinese parents and their adolescent children.
The main goal of the present study is to examine, from the perspectives of adolescents, whether and how Chinese parents communicate with their adolescent children about sexuality, and how Chinese adolescents think of such communication. To extend previous research that focused on the sheer frequency of communication (e.g., Wu et al., 2013; Zhang, Li, Shah, Baldwin, & Stanton, 2007; Zuo, Tu, Lou, & Gao, 2007), one-to-one interviews with 37 adolescents in China were conducted to obtain detailed and descriptive accounts from adolescents.

**Literature review**

**Parent-child communication about sexuality**

Compared with peers, parents tend to be infrequent communicators about sexuality (DiLorio, Pluhar, & Belcher, 2003). However, parents’ influence on children’s sexual development may manifest in subtle ways of socialization. A warm and caring parent-child relationship, for instance, may protect the child from sexual risk-taking behaviors (Riesch, Anderson, & Krueger, 2006) and early sexual initiation (Gardner, Martin, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012). Also, children may internalize sexual values by observing interactions between parents (Darling & Hicks, 1982).

Even though parent-child communication about sexuality is infrequent, the literature has addressed that the amount or frequency of such communication may be less important than the content and style of communication (DiLorio et al., 2003; Lefkowitz, 2002). Indeed, mixed findings have been obtained by research that examined the effects of frequency of parent-child communication about sexuality on adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviors. Some reported positive effects (e.g., Lehr, DiLorio, Dudley, & Lipana, 2000; Whitaker & Miller, 2000), whereas others found negative effects (e.g., Moore, Peterson, & Furstenberg, 1986) or nonsignificant effects (Liebowitz, Castellano, & Cuellar, 1999). These inconsistent findings indicate the importance of understanding how and what parents talk about in terms of sexuality, in addition to the amount of such communication (DiLorio et al., 2003).

Conversations about sexuality between parents and adolescents are difficult (e.g., Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2008; Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald, 2000). Research found that compared to other topics, parents and adolescents had less turn-taking when having sex-related communication, and parents often dominated conversations about sex (Lefkowitz, Kahlbaugh, & Sigman, 1996). Rosenthal and Feldman (1999) identified four domains of topics of parent-adolescent’s communication about sex and sexuality: (a) development and societal concerns, (b) sexual safety, (c) experiencing sex, and (d) solitary sexual activity. Parents were more likely to focus on the first two domains: biological aspects of reproduction, and dangers associated with sexual activities (Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000). In contrast, parents rarely talked about issues that were considered personal (e.g., masturbation, sexual desire), or practical (e.g., how to obtain and use contraception; Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000). Additional studies showed that parents transmitted their values about dating and sexual relationships by giving advice and cautionary messages (Romo, Lefkowitz, Sigman, & Au, 2002), or by using prohibitive language (Ward & Wyatt, 1994). In short, despite the discomfort, many parents attempt to address sex-related issues in conversations with children by focusing on domains that are perceived to be less sensitive.

**Parent-child communication about sexuality in Asian context**

The majority of research on parent-child communication about sexuality used predominantly European American samples. A number of studies have focused on samples of African Americans and/or Latino Americans (e.g., Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1998; Lefkowitz, Romo, Corona, Au, & Sigman, 2000; Raffaelli & Green, 2003; Romo et al., 2002). Several studies have examined this topic using samples of Asian adolescents or parents, focusing primarily on immigrant families in the United States (e.g., Chung et al., 2005; Lau, Markham, Lin, Flores, & Chacko, 2009). Findings of
these studies suggest that parent-adolescent communication is not culture-free. Hence, parents’ sexual socialization ought to be understood within a specific cultural context. The following section contains a review of the studies about parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in the Asian context, which provides the background for why the present study is warranted and how it can make a novel contribution to the literature.

**Parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in Asian immigrant families**

Kim (2005, 2009) conducted focus groups with Asian American female college students to learn about sexual socialization of their immigrant parents. Her research showed that Asian parents rarely talked about sex explicitly, but they had an impact on their children’s sexual attitudes and behaviors through indirect socialization strategies. For example, Asian parents used prohibitive messages when talking about sexual behaviors of their daughters’ friends or siblings (Kim, 2005). Their regulation of daughters’ dressing, media use, and dating relationships also implicitly communicated the negativity of sexuality (Kim, 2009). As a consequence, Asian American girls obtained a clear idea that their parents disapproved of sexual activities, even though many of them had difficulty recalling specific occasions when parents talked about sex-related issues.

In Asian immigrant families, acculturation gaps between parents and the adolescents may lead to communication barriers regarding sexuality. Chung et al. (2005) found that Filipino American adolescents wanted to have open communication about sexuality with their parents, but their parents and grandparents were opposed to the idea of open communication because it was considered as disrespectful of parental authority. Finally, a few additional studies examined Asian immigrant families in Britain, which reported findings consistent with the aforementioned research in the United States (e.g., Yu, 2007). Conducting in-depth interviews with 20 British-born teenagers and their China-born parents, Yu (2007) found that participants reported little direct parent-child communication about sexuality due to several barriers, including parents’ language barriers and the perceived sexual value conflict that stemmed from cultural differences.

Despite these valuable insights into parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in Asian immigrant families, our understanding of such communication in Asian countries is still limited. Several reasons may lead us to speculate that parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in Asia would not be completely the same as what has been observed in Asian immigrant families. First, families in Asia are not faced with certain communication challenges that are salient in immigrant families, such as language barriers (Yu, 2007) and acculturation gaps (Chung et al., 2005). Second, the socio-cultural environment in Asia countries is drastically different from that of the United States or European countries. For instance, there are regular sexual education programs in most U.S. high schools, and thus, Asian immigrant parents may think that their responsibility to disseminate sexual knowledge to children has been shifted to schools (Chung et al., 2005). However, in Asian countries such as China, sexual education has not become part of the formal education. Socialization within families is inherently influenced by the macrosystem of culture and society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, in addition to the general need to understand parent-adolescent communication about sex in Asia better, there are reasons to believe that the particular circumstances in China would provide a unique context to inspect parent-adolescent communication about sex and sexuality.

**Parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in Chinese families**

Sex is a strictly private topic in traditional Chinese culture. Open discussion or expression of sexuality outside of marriage is deemed socially inappropriate in China. Further, public sexual discourse often promotes sexual restraints (Okazaki, 2002). During and after the Cultural Revolution, sex was considered politically wrong due to its association with “western ideology” (Gao, Lu, Shi, Sun, & Cai, 2001; Zha & Geng, 1992). Given such cultural and political heritage, Chinese people are reluctant to talk about sex-related issues in public or interpersonally outside marriage.
However, due to the economic reform and the “open door” policy launched since the late 1970s, China has gradually become a part of the global society economically and culturally. The increased exposure to western cultural values has contributed to changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors in China (Zabin et al., 2009). Studies in the past two decades showed that rates of Chinese adolescents’ sexual activities have been increasing. Earlier studies conducted among Chinese high school students in several main cities reported proportions of sexually active students ranging from 1% to 2% (Yu, 2012). However, a more recent study showed that 5.9% of Chinese high school participants have had sex (Song et al., 2013). In addition, of Chinese adolescents who did not attend high school, 21% of male and 10% of female had a sexual experience (Hu et al., 2015).

Among Chinese adolescents who have engaged in sexual intercourse, the percentage of contraception use remained low in both rural and urban areas. Specifically, according to Zhao et al. (2005), less than 30% of middle school students in rural areas have used contraception during sexual intercourse. Further, a study conducted among high school students in a large Southeastern city reported that only about half of the respondents who had sexual intercourse used condoms (Zhu, Wang, Zhou, & Li, 2009). Moreover, Chinese adolescents had limited knowledge about human reproduction, contraception, HIV/AIDS, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (see Yu, 2012, for a review). The increasing number of unwanted pregnancies and abortions among university students has also become a public concern in China (Ma et al., 2008).

Chinese adolescents and young people reported that media, peers, family, and school were sources of sexual knowledge (Zhang, Li, & Shah, 1992). Previous research has examined influences of these sources on Chinese adolescents’ sexual behaviors and sexual health, including school (Cheng et al., 2008), and the Internet (Lou, Zhao, Gao, & Shah, 2006). A growing body of research has inspected the role of parents in adolescents’ sexual development, and specifically, they investigated the frequency of parent-child communication about sexuality in China (Wu et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2007; Zuo et al., 2007, 2013). Among a large sample of Chinese unmarried youth aged 15–24 (N = 1319), about 30% and 17% reported that they have talked about sex with mother and father, respectively, but only 5% indicated that they “often” discussed sex-related issues with their mother, and 3% with their father (Zhang et al., 2007). Apparently, these results showed that parent-adolescent communication about sex was fairly infrequent in China. Further, such communication was more likely to occur in two-parent families where parents had higher education attainment (Zuo et al., 2013). Adolescents who reported having communicated with parents about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) scored higher in a test on SRH knowledge (Wu et al., 2013).

Besides communication frequency, Zuo et al. (2013) also provided insights into the topics of parent-child communication about sexuality in China. Based on a survey of individuals aged 12–24 (N = 5709), they found that in China, parents’ communication about sexuality were primarily about (a) appropriate behaviors, (b) friendship or romantic relationship and marriage, and (c) knowledge of physical development. Taken together, Chinese parents were unlikely to touch upon topics such as contraception and STI prevention.

Existing research conducted in China has primarily used survey methods (e.g., Wu et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2007; Zuo et al., 2007, 2013). Zhang et al. (2007) utilized a single-item measure that read “whether you have ever discussed sex-related issues with your father/mother”. Zuo et al. (2007, 2013) did report the topics/areas of communication; however, the categories were predetermined by the authors rather than being inductively developed from participants’ responses. Such findings may miss some elements of the content and style of the actual communication, because survey questions may not capture the subtle communication processes. For instance, as reviewed here, research in Asian immigrant families (e.g., Chung et al., 2005; Kim, 2005) suggested that Asian parents approached sex-related issues indirectly, implicitly or even nonverbally. Thus, qualitative research methods, such as one-to-one interviews, would be a better fit than survey methods in term of capturing such subtle forms of communication. Given that it remains unclear how parents and adolescents in China talk about sexuality, the following broad research question was proposed:
RQ1: Based on the perception of Chinese adolescents, what is the nature of communication about sex and sexuality with parents?

Adolescents gradually develop a sense of autonomy and independence, which may lead them to challenge their parents when disagreement emerges (Smetana, 1988). In the context of Asian immigrant families, Asian American adolescents often view their parents’ sex-related talk as awkward, naïve, or even ridiculous (Kim, 2005), but many of them admitted that Asian parents had an important influence on their sexual beliefs and behaviors (Kim, 2005). However, it was common for Asian American adolescents to have romantic and/or sexual relationships without knowledge of their parents (Kim, 2005). Chinese adolescents’ attitudes toward parents’ communication about sexuality may be different from attitudes of Asian adolescents in immigrant families, because they are socialized in different cultural systems. Filial piety is highly promoted in the Chinese society (Ho, 1986), whereas western cultures tend to value independence and freedom from social constraints (Cahoone, 1996). Hence, adolescents in China may be more compliant or receptive to parents than those who have been raised in Asian American families residing in western countries. Thus, it is important to also investigate what Chinese adolescents think of their parents’ communication about sexuality, and specifically, how they feel about such communication and whether they want to have such talks with parents. To explore the perspectives of Chinese adolescents, a second research question was advanced:

RQ2: What are Chinese adolescents’ attitudes towards their parents’ communication about sex and sexuality?

Method

Participants

Semistructured, one-to-one interviews were conducted with 37 Chinese adolescents recruited from a high school in a city located in Southeast China. All students were in their second year of high school when the study was conducted. On the basis of those who reported demographic information, 54.1% of the participants were male (n = 20) and 45.9% were female (n = 17). The age of participants ranged from 16 to 18 years (M = 17.41, SD = .60). The majority of the participants self-identified as Han ethnicity (i.e., the major ethnicity in China, 91.9%, n = 34), and only 3 were of ethnic minorities. Participants reported the ages of mother (M = 44.03, SD = 4.75), and father (M = 46.47, SD = 4.36). Most parents had education levels lower than high school (64.9%, n = 23 for mothers; 64.9%, n = 24 for fathers), and some had high school-level education (24.3%, n = 9 for mothers; 21.6%, n = 8 for fathers).

Study design

I contacted the principal of the aforementioned high school and submitted a project summary. A signed approval for the study was obtained from the principal. Approval was also obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university. During recruitment, I visited four classes to announce the study and described the voluntary and confidential nature of the study. Then each student was provided with an envelope, which contained two copies of the assent form, and two copies of the parental permission letter. Students who were interested in participating were instructed to bring the parental permission letter to one parent and have him/her sign the letter, and sign the assent form themselves. Students were given 1 week to obtain parental permission and complete the assent form. I visited the same classes again 1 week later to collect the permission letters and assent forms. To prevent students who wanted to participate from being identified by
classmates, students were asked to put the signed or unsigned documents in the envelope and return on the collection date. Students who wanted to participate and had parental permission provided contact information at the end of the assent form. Each student was contacted within 1 week after collecting the envelopes to set up days/times and locations for the interviews.

I conducted all the interviews in Chinese during break time either between the morning section and afternoon section of school (from noon to 2 pm), or after the end of afternoon section (from 4:30 pm to 6 pm). Interviews took place in an empty classroom designated by the principal. At the beginning of each interview, I restated the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and noted that the whole process would be audio recorded. Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts without worrying about being right or wrong. They could skip questions or topics they did not feel comfortable talking about. A protocol was used to guide the interview process, but I constantly probed participants to elaborate or explain points of interest they raised. The length of interviews ranged from 20 to 45 minutes. After the interview, participants completed a short survey aimed to collect demographic information. Given the potentially sensitive nature of this topic, a contact number for support and counseling services was provided to each participant in the event that s/he needed to talk to someone after the interview.

Data analysis

After each interview, I went over the notes taken during the interview, reflected on the process and wrote memos about key points of the conversation. I also reflected on questioning skills and modified the interview protocol by adding, dropping, or changing the wording of questions. Considering that sex may be a sensitive topic in contemporary China, to mitigate the sensitive nature of the topic, “intimate physical behaviors” was originally used to refer to “sex” in the questions. However, this term did not work well with participants in the first few interviews, so I decided to directly ask about “sex” for the rest of interviews. After about five interviews, I started to write memos about emerging themes. Memos created during data collection assisted analyses of the interview transcripts.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself and three undergraduate research assistants, who were also native speakers of Chinese. All transcripts were checked for accuracy. I read through the entire set of transcripts and memos. Interviewees’ responses that were relevant to the two RQs were identified and highlighted. Open coding focused on only the relevant responses, which I coded line-by-line. Upon finished coding about one third of the relevant transcripts, I analyzed the codes using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and integrated or reintegrated the codes into more general categories. Using these categories as a rough coding scheme, I continued coding the remaining transcripts and constantly refined the categories into discrete types. Because communication about dating/romantic relationships emerged from participants’ spontaneous responses, consistent with prior research (Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000; Zuo et al., 2013), “sexuality” in the current study included romantic feelings and intimate behaviors. Finally, the discrete categories were further grouped into two meta-categories organized around the two RQs. Exemplary participants’ quotes were identified for each category. I translated the quotes from Chinese into English. A fellow graduate student who is Chinese-English bilingual checked the accuracy of translation.

To verify the findings, I obtained feedback from peers and individuals from the recruitment site (Merriam, 2009). I invited two fellow graduate students who were not involved in the current study, and had extensive experience with qualitative research methods, to scrutinize my data and the analytic procedure. They were both native speakers of Chinese. Positive feedbacks were obtained from the two peers who confirmed that the analyses and results were valid. In addition, I received feedback from four individuals who graduated from the high school where the current study’s participants were recruited. Specifically, they were studying in the same school, and were on the same grade level as participants in the current study during the time of data collection. They read a
two-page summary of the study topic and findings written in Chinese, and were instructed to evaluate each category by indicating whether it was plausible/reasonable or not, based on their experience of parent-child communication about sexuality when they were at high school. No apparent discrepancies between the findings and their evaluation were identified.

**Results**

Analyses of the interview data revealed two categories pertaining to RQ1 and four categories for RQ2. In this section, I present the main findings by explaining each category with examples and direct quotes of the participants for illustration.

**RQ1: Based on the perception of Chinese adolescents, what is the nature of communication about sex and sexuality with parents?**

Explicit or direct communication about sexuality

The first broad category encompassed adolescents’ retrospective recall of their parents’ direct address on sexuality. Communication was considered explicit or direct to the extent that certain meanings were delivered verbally without ambivalent meanings. Under this broad category, there were four subcategories of parents’ direct communication aiming to influence Chinese adolescents’ sex-related attitudes, values, and behaviors.

**Communicating the “no dating” rule.** Over half of the participants have received messages from their parents related to the “no dating” rule. For instance, one participant recalled that before she went to high school, her father sat her down to declare several “don’ts”, which included “don’t date”: “my dad told me that in high school, you can do anything, but there are some rules—you cannot go out with guys, go to a cybercafé, or spend your night out” (Female, 18, ID: 802482). In a few instances, participants recalled that their parents directly enforced the “no dating” rule using extremely prohibitive or even threatening messages: “when I was in junior high school, once my mom told me that if I dare to date anyone, she would break my leg and kick me out of the house” (Female, 17, ID: 931280).

One major reason for Chinese parents’ disapproval of dating was that dating was detrimental to study and grades, and getting good grades and getting into college were the most important tasks for high school students. According to the participants, it was common for parents to enforce the “no dating” restriction by emphasizing the absolute priority of study: “the issue of dating often came up when we talked about my study…my dad’s words were, ‘if you want to study, you should not hit on girls; otherwise, you should just drop out of school’” (Male, 18, ID: 610972).

Moreover, parents communicated the idea that dating was not an age-appropriate behavior for adolescents. Participants were told by parents that only “grown-ups” should have romantic relationships, and that adolescents were too “immature” to handle such relationships because they were not yet financially independent, and they were too young to understand what “love” or “responsibility” is. For example:

My parents often said that it was useless to have a girlfriend now, and you should wait. When you go to college, graduate, and have a job, you will have a stable life with an income, then you can take your time to find a girlfriend. (Male, 18, ID: 391160)

**Addressing sexual morality.** This category was specifically about parents’ negative opinions towards premarital sexual activities. A few female participants have had communication with parents about virginity. For instance, one recalled that at one time, her mother found a few condoms in her older brother’s suitcase, but her mother did not mention anything about contraception or safe sex; instead, she got really upset and condemned her older brother’s behavior:
She said that, if you gave your ‘first time’ to your boyfriend before marriage, or after you marry someone and he finds out that you are not a virgin, what would he say? Or maybe he doesn’t care if you are a virgin, but how would you feel when you are facing your husband?...she thought that my brother started to date at such a young age, his future girlfriend will have a problem with that. If he continues doing that, no good girls would want to marry him. Also, my mom judged the girl as well, saying that she trusted people too easily. (Female, 17, ID: 656315)

**Acknowledging sexual development but addressing the need to “control”**. A few male participants mentioned that their parents told them sexual development (e.g., sexual impulse) was natural during puberty, but they addressed the necessity to keep it under control. “I remember that my dad told me...during puberty, it is normal to have impulse sometimes, but I should learn to control that” (Male, 18, ID: 702755). Parents also told their children that experiencing romantic feelings toward the opposite sex was common for youth. However, they ought to conserve such feelings and not express them: “[my mom] is against dating [at high school]...any affectionate feelings should be contained in my heart....until college...or she thought college was still too early” (Male, 17, ID: 628453).

**Terminating child’s romantic relationship**. This category described conversations parents had with adolescents after parents found out that their children were involved in some sort of romantic activities. Some participants’ accounts showed that parents tried to obstruct such activities by direct communication strategies. For example, parents initiated a serious talk with the adolescents to restate the “no dating” rule:

(they) tried to talk me out of it, telling me to imagine that when you graduate from high school, then you won’t be in the same school anymore, so you would...[breaking up] will affect your mood and all that...probably, if you break up during the last year of highschool, your emotion will be disrupted and your exam score will also be affected... (Male, 18, ID: 056759)

Another participant recalled that her mother was enraged when she became aware of her daughter’s dating activities:

I was sitting there watching TV. Out of nowhere, she [my mom] hit me with a stick and asked me what was going on...I knew she was talking about dating...she wanted me to break up with the guy, and also gave me a piece of paper where she wrote a message that I should send to that person...basically we should put study ahead of anything else...it was inappropriate to date now... (Female, 16, ID: 066308)

**Indirect or implicit communication about sexuality**

The second broad category involved messages from parents that were conveyed indirectly, but were interpreted by the adolescents as related to sex or sexuality. This category also included conditions where parents’ nonverbal acts were perceived to be attempts to affect adolescent children’s behaviors. Four subcategories were identified for indirect or implicit communication about sexuality.

**Communicating the negativity of sex and dating by talking about others**. Based on participants’ perceptions, Chinese parents rarely talked about sexuality explicitly, but participants had a clear idea that their parents were prohibitive about sex and dating. One primary way they learned that was from parents’ communication about others. Specifically, parents expressed their opinions or judgments when telling stories of other people. Parents may talk about people they knew or heard about, who typically have suffered from some tragic consequences related to sex or dating (e.g., teen pregnancy, abortion, sexually transmitted infections, etc.). The following quote illustrates this type of communication:

She [my mom] used to tell me a story about some girl, who did not listen to her parents and went out with guys. Then those things happened to her...got pregnant, had an abortion and could not have kids anymore. She would tell me all those things. Then I was very scared. (Female, 17, ID: 542139)
For some participants, the only sex-related messages from parents were about sexual crimes; in particular, about innocent girls being raped. Participants also noted that their parents drew upon others’ experience to stress the negativity of dating. For example, a participant (Male, 17, ID: 432382) remembered that his mother, who was a teacher, told him stories about “good kids” who should have got into top colleges, but failed because they were engaged in dating relationships.

Another frequently mentioned situation where parents judged or commented on other behaviors occurred when they co-viewed television. It was salient in the data that television served as an important source of “negative exemplars” to address the risks of sex and dating. Participants received warning messages from parents when they were watching TV shows where adolescents or young people got into trouble because of dating or sexual relationships (e.g., cheated by men, got pregnant, dropped out of school, or even committed suicide). They recalled that parents either warned them that they should not model “those people,” or talked negatively about their behaviors. For example:

When we were watching TV, news, or reality shows…about girls…on the Internet…got fooled because of some romantic issues…their study was ruined, and some even committed suicide. She [my mom] expressed her opinions about those girls, saying that, how come those people were so stupid…things like that…and you cannot do the same… (Female, 17, ID: 542139)

Less often, parents talked about the “good people” they should model: “my dad always talked about my cousin, saying that, ‘you see, he has graduated from college, is now working in a national company that pays very well…he even travels abroad. He has not found a girlfriend yet, but you can see how good he is now…no hurry finding a girlfriend…”’ (Male, 18, ID: 391160). Regardless of using negative or positive exemplars, the main message parents tried to get across was the negativity of dating and sex.

**Using ambiguous messages.** A number of participants identified some fairly ambiguous messages from parents, which they perceived to be related to sex. For example, in two separate interviews, the participants recalled that their parents asked them not to do “bad things”: “Related to sex…we did not talk about much…but there is one sentence that covered really broadly, which is, ‘don’t do bad things’. This has some broad meanings, probably including sexual behaviors” (Male, 18, ID: 056759). “My mom is very kind to me. She is very supportive, as long as I do not do bad things.” (Male, 18, ID: 879962). Other ambiguous messages included: “just study and do not think or do other things,” “be careful of ‘bad people.’” Participants thought parents were talking about dating and sex (among other things) when using such ambiguous messages.

Participants also mentioned that parents enforced the “no dating” rule in an ambiguous way. One repeatedly mentioned indirect strategy was to ask “check-in” questions. Participants interpreted such questions as euphemistic ways to state the “no dating” rule. “One time I was in my bedroom, and my mom was in the living room. She suddenly asked me if I was dating anyone at school. I said no. She wondered if that was true, and I said it was true” (Male, 18, ID: 459986). Some parents liked to frame these questions in a vague fashion, orienting towards cross-sex friendships: “one time I shared a bed with my mom…she asked, in a joking-type-of tone, if there were boys chasing after me at school, or did I hang out with guys at school” (Female, 17, ID: 656315). The participant thought that by so asking, her mother was trying to “gently” remind her of the “no dating” rule.

**Regulating/monitoring peer relationships.** Participants got strong signals from parents that dating and sex are “minefields” when parents tried to interfere with their peer relationships. Some participants said that their parents seemed extremely concerned about their cross-sex friends. “One time I borrowed a cell phone from a guy friend to call my mom. She called back and found that it was a guy. She asked me who the guy was right after I got back home. I could see that she was very sensitive about this stuff” (Female, 18, ID: 594736). Male participants encountered similar situations: “in my junior high school, I helped a friend buy some apples. She [mom] wanted to know whether the friend was a boy or a girl. I said boy, and she was fine” (Male, 18, ID: 459986).
Parents could be extremely upset when their children were friends with peers they thought were on the “wrong paths.” For example, one female participant described that her father was irritated when she was with another girl who quit school and had a baby:

She [the friend] visited my home, holding her baby. Then my dad said...I don’t know...he was very irritated; his reaction was huge. He said that he did not like this and he would not let the girl in our home next time. I was extremely irritated too. I said why, she’s my friend... (Female, 18, ID: 802482)

Participants also recalled instances where parents interfered with peer relationships by monitoring their cell phone use. In particular, they often wanted to know whether their children were contacting girls or boys over the phone, such as described in the following quote:

My dad...every time when someone called me, after the call he would ask me who that was...At first when he asked me I did not think too much, so I said that was a guy. Then he asked me to not use my cell phone too much, and I guess what he really meant was that I should not contact those people. Later I knew he would be... so sometimes I would instead tell him that it was a girl... (Female, 17, ID: 702038)

Avoiding any communication about sexuality. Several participants could not recall any type of sex-related exchange with parents. For example, two girls noted that their mothers have never talked with them about menstruation. Some participants realized that their parents intentionally avoided this topic: “I joked with my parents that if I date someone, how are they going to handle it. Then they were like, not impatient, but did not feel like talking about it...they are too conservative” (Male, 17, ID: 308891). Participants who expressed feelings of embarrassment usually referred to sex as a taboo topic. A number of participants noted that their parents’ indirect ways of talking about sexuality showed parents’ discomfort about this topic, and thus, has strengthened the sense of embarrassment in them: “I think they are...they are even more embarrassed than I am [about this topic], so we are all not going to talk about it” (Female, 18, ID: 607173).

RQ2: What are Chinese adolescents’ attitudes towards their parents’ communication about sex and sexuality?

Four categories were identified regarding adolescents’ attitudes toward parents’ communication about sex and sexuality. These categories describe how adolescents thought of parents’ direct and indirect communication about sexuality and the experience of such communication from the perspective of adolescents.

Communication about sexuality is embarrassing
Many participants indicated that they felt embarrassed when parents talked about dating or sex. Some actually actively avoided having such conversations. “I think it is very embarrassing to talk about this with parents. I don’t want to talk about this, and I don’t want to talk about this with parents...they are too conservative” (Male, 17, ID: 308891). Participants who expressed feelings of embarrassment usually referred to sex as a taboo topic. A number of participants noted that their parents’ indirect ways of talking about sexuality showed parents’ discomfort about this topic, and thus, has strengthened the sense of embarrassment in them: “I think they are...they are even more embarrassed than I am [about this topic], so we are all not going to talk about it” (Female, 18, ID: 391160).

Communication about sexuality is unnecessary
Interestingly, a number of participants considered parents as unimportant in terms of sexual development. These participants gave two types of reasoning. First, some thought that sex was not yet relevant to them because they were still too young. Second, a number of participants viewed it unnecessary to have such communication with parents because they already learned enough about sexuality from peers and the Internet, which were thought to be better sources of sex-related information than parents. For example, a male participant noted: “I think this is irrelevant to me...even if I want to know more, I won’t ask them at the first place. I will search for the information by myself” (Male, 16, ID: 992211). Another participant brought up a similar idea: “...if I have to say, I don’t want my parents to talk to me [about sex], because nowadays, even a random website on the Internet has those things” (Male, 17, ID: 702755).
Ambivalent feelings and tendency to avoid communication about sexuality

Some participants articulated a dilemma between wanting to chat about sexuality openly with parents and the desire to protect the image of a “good kid” they had been presenting to parents. They worried that sharing “real thoughts” about sex with parents would tarnish their parents’ image of them:

I don’t want to communicate this with them, because even if they say something about sex, I don’t know how to respond…my image in their minds has been…if they asked me and I talked to them honestly, they would think I have become a completely different person. Not to say that I am not real in front of them. Just saying that I reserve some aspects in front of them. (Female, 17, ID: 112424)

Another dilemma was between children’s wish to have open-minded, or “cool” parents who would talk to them about sexuality, and the concern of being too embarrassed to handle such communication. For example, one participant hoped that his parents could be like “western parents,” who were “not as conservative about sexuality as Chinese parents” (Female, 18, ID: 455111). Another stated that she wished to have a relationship with her mother that resembled a friendship, in which they could be comfortable talking about sexuality (Female, ID: 352988). Yet, given the worry that their parents were not open-minded enough to accept this topic, they preferred avoiding such conversations, despite the wishes to have more open and egalitarian communication with parents.

Further, some thought that being communicatively open about sex and dating would actually lead parents to worry more and interfere more. Several participants even stated that parents’ reticence was an indicator of their “trust” in them, whereas talking about it showed that their parents did not believe “they won’t do it”:

Probably don’t hope to…I already understand these things. I think about this more than they do, so I don’t need them to speak up. If they say more, they worry about me more…they’ve always had trust in me. They believed that I would not go out with guys. (Female, 17, ID: 222866)

Finally, some participants noted that talking about sex would likely lead to confrontational conditions with parents, assuming that their parents would not agree with them. In other words, avoiding such communication was desirable because it helped avoid getting into conflict with parents.

Preferences of communication styles

Even though many participants did not like the idea of talking about sexuality with parents, they mentioned some preferences for parents’ communication styles. First, some disliked parents’ focus on sexual morality and restriction, hoping that they could talk about basic facts about sex, including safe sex: “They could have told me some…some measures…should talk to me how to handle if I do it, or how to resist doing it. They should have told me these, but they did not” (Male, 18, ID: 610972).

Second, with regard to the directness of communication, there was a divergence among participants. Some participants appreciated the implicit, indirect, and impersonal ways parents used to talk about sex-related issues. For example: “It depends on the degree of explicitness. If implicit, I’d like to converse about it. If too straightforward, it would probably be too embarrassing” (Female, 18, ID: 368977). Nevertheless, a few other participants preferred more direct communication with parents on this topic. A participant noted that whenever her parents “said it in a veiled, obscure way,” she immediately knew what they were trying to get at the “don’ts” related to sex, so she did not feel like listening to what they wanted to say (Female, 17, ID: 931280). Another adolescent did not appreciate his mother’s intentionally joking tone; rather, he thought that sex could be discussed in a serious and value-free way: “for this aspect, she’d be serious. It was unnecessary to have joking-type-of discussion” (Male, 17, ID: 628453).
Discussion

Parents are one prominent socialization agent of sex (Darling & Hicks, 1982), and an important source of sex-related knowledge for Chinese young people (Zhang et al., 1992). The present study aimed to explore the communicative processes involved in parents’ sexual socialization of Chinese adolescents. Through one-to-one interviews, the current research obtained Chinese adolescents’ accounts of how their parents communicated about sexuality and their attitudes about such communication. The following section highlights the main findings and their implications for parent-child communication about sexuality in different cultural contexts. Particularly, it is suggested that meanings of “open communication” should be reconsidered in research about parent-adolescent communication of human sexuality. Finally, the study’s practical implications for facilitating the positive role of parents in Chinese adolescents’ sexual development are discussed.

Chinese parents’ communication about sexuality: From the perspectives of adolescents

Prior research (Zhang et al., 2007; Zuo et al., 2007) found that parent-child communication about sexuality in China was infrequent, especially when parents have low educational attainment (Zuo et al., 2007, 2013). Among participants in the current study, none of their parents had education higher than high school. Hence, it was not surprising that participants’ parents rarely engaged in conversations about sexuality with children. Yet, participants did recall parents’ communication that directly addressed sexuality. More importantly, they received sex-related messages from parents that were conveyed indirectly, implicitly or nonverbally (RQ1).

A common theme across the four subcategories under “explicit/direct communication” was parents’ restriction on sexuality. One major issue that Chinese parents directly addressed was dating/romantic relationships (see “communicating the ‘no dating’ rule” and “terminating child’s romantic relationship”). Many participants were told once or repeatedly by their parents that no dating was permitted in high school, because all energies should be spent on studying. Parents were also fairly upfront in condemning premarital sexual behaviors (see “addressing sexual morality”) and stressing the need to control sexual desires (see “acknowledging sexual development but addressing the need to control”). These findings resonated with those reported by Zuo et al. (2013), such that the primary topics Chinese parents talked about with regards to sexuality were appropriate sexual behaviors, knowledge of physical development, and friendship/romantic relationship. The current study expands on existing research by providing illustrations of how parents might tackle these topics in actual communications with their children.

In Asian immigrant families, parents considered children’s romantic relationships as detrimental to academic achievement (Kim, 2005, 2009). Chinese parents, as described by adolescents in this study, appeared to be even more restrictive about dating than Asian immigrant parents in western countries. This may have stemmed from the different cultural norms regarding dating behaviors among adolescents. As noted by previous research (e.g., Kim & Ward, 2007; Lau et al., 2009), dating during adolescence is not considered as normative as it is in western countries, but Asian immigrant parents have to adjust their expectations according to the dominant social norms when raising their kids in the U.S. or European countries. However, in contemporary China, dating in high school is still not a norm; in fact, several participants mentioned that the school enforced strict rules against close relationships between boys and girls. Overall, when Chinese parents directly communicated about sexuality, they often aimed to set rules and restrictions.

In addition to conveying prohibitive messages directly, Chinese parents may also set rules via indirect communication. Indeed, sexuality has long been a difficult topic for parents and children in China (Zuo et al., 2007). The current study shed light on how this topic could be addressed in subtle ways. For example, according to the adolescent participants, it was common for Chinese parents to comment, or judge others’ behaviors to emphasize the negative consequences of dating or sexual activities. Chinese parents kept a close eye on their children’s choices of friends. In particular, they
showed heightened concerns about cross-sex peer relationships, and even interfered in peer interaction when they perceived the friend to be “problematic” in terms of sexual conduct. Again, such findings were in line with prior observations of parent-child communication about sexuality within Asian American families (Kim, 2005, 2009), which found that Asian immigrant parents also addressed sex-related expectations and standards indirectly, such as by gossiping about others and monitoring daughters’ social lives.

In addition to parents, Chinese adolescents get exposure to sex-related ideas from the media, peers, and schools (Yu, 2012; Zhang et al., 1992). Even though exploring these additional factors’ influence is beyond the scope of the current study, it is worth noting that adolescents’ interpretation of parents’ communication appeared to be associated with the norms adolescents learned from sources outside the family. For instance, some participants recalled that their parents were unwilling to openly speak about dating, but they asked vague questions about cross-sex friends. Because the school was against adolescents’ dating activities, parents’ vague questions were interpreted by the adolescents as messages of “no dating.” This could also explain why many adolescents were capable of meaning-making based on fairly vague messages (see “using ambivalent messages”). When such messages were delivered in a context with salient norms against dating, they became restricted or value-laden even said in seemingly neutral ways.

**Chinese adolescents’ attitude regarding parents’ communication about sexuality**

As for Chinese adolescents’ attitudes toward parents’ communication about sexuality, it appeared that parents and adolescents had a mutual tendency to avoid open and direct communication about sex. Indeed, the findings of RQ2 indicate that participants felt such communication was embarrassing and unnecessary, and some explicitly claimed that avoidance would be a desirable way to go about it. Participants’ responses reflected reasons that have been addressed in research about topic avoidance in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 2000), including managing a positive self-image (i.e., wanting to be a “good kid” who does not think about sex or dating), and protecting the parent-child relationship (i.e., avoiding this topic to prevent getting into conflict with parents). It is worth noting that several participants interpreted parents’ reticence as an indicator of “trust,” whereas talking about it may suggest parents’ distrust of them. In other words, topics related to sex usually come with an overwhelmingly negative connotation within parent-adolescent relationships.

Some participants, however, had the idea that sex is an irrelevant issue to them (e.g., it’s not their business to learn anything about sex because they are still too young), and thus, they refused to be exposed to any sources of sex-related information, including the media and peers. This was a point of divergence from what were found among Asian American adolescents, who viewed their parents’ restrictive sexual values from an “outsider” standpoint. That is, they understood the cultural backgrounds of parents, but they did not agree with their values or the way they communicated about sex (Kim, 2005, 2009).

In contrast, some participants of the present study were very receptive to parents’ restrictive messages, interpreting those as reflections of parents’ love and care for them. Further, as noted previously, some appreciated their parents’ indirect and implicit ways of communicating, because they reduced the level of sensitivity associated with the topic. Taken together, these findings reflect the far-reaching influence of traditional Chinese sexual values on sexual attitudes of contemporary Chinese youth. Like the older generations of Chinese, a number of adolescents in the current study also deemed discussion about sex and sexuality outside marriage as unacceptable. Indeed, conservative sexual attitudes were still prevalent among teenagers in contemporary China (Yu, 2012). Thus, it was reasonable that many participants in the current study expressed disapproval or reaction against parental communication about sexuality.

Another notable finding is that, even though the majority of participants resisted parents’ attempts to discuss sex-related issues, several participants did note that they wished parents to be more direct and open about sexuality. For some participants, being able to have a comfortable
conversation about sexuality with parents was indicative of an egalitarian parent-child relationship, and parents being “cool.” Indeed, previous research found that the qualities of general communication and parent-child relationship satisfaction were predictive of how frequently parents and children conversed about sexuality (Jaccard & Dittus, 2000). Hence, underlying these participants’ wish to have open communication with parents about sexuality may actually be the desire to have more open communication in general with more open-minded parents. A number of participants preferred direct communication that focused more on the factual aspects of sex, but less on restrictions. This implies that some Chinese adolescents are willing to hear from parents about sexuality, as long as parents do not treat it as a taboo.

**Rethinking the role of communication openness**

A major finding of the present study was that parents in China communicated fairly limited messages related to sex. Their communication tended to be indirect, implicit and nonverbal in style, and whenever sexuality was mentioned directly, the content was prohibitive. It should be noted, however, that the lack of openness regarding parent-adolescent communication about sexuality is not unique to Chinese families. In fact, research has shown that even in western culture, sex is among the most difficult topics for parents and adolescents (Afifi et al., 2008). Nevertheless, communication openness was described by parents in western culture as a common criterion for “good” communication about sexuality. For instance, Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman (2005) showed that parents in Australia who rarely talked about sex with children still stressed that being open for communication about sex was what they intended to do. Communication openness as a standard for “excellent” family communications and communication in close relationships is often explicitly endorsed in the North American culture (Bochner, 1982; Caughlin, 2003).

In other words, it is usually assumed that parents want to talk about sexuality with their children, but the key question is “how to execute open communication about sexuality,” rather than “whether open communication about sexuality is truly good” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). Similarly, Asian American adolescents who were acculturated into western culture also seemed to prefer more open and egalitarian communication about sex with their immigrant parents (Chung et al., 2005; Kim, 2005, 2009).

Findings of the present study, however, provide a different perspective with respect to the values of “communication openness.” Specifically, some adolescents considered openness and directness as potentially disruptive to their self-images and the parent-child relationships they desired. Rather than endorsing open communication, a considerable portion of them preferred implicit communication, or even active avoidance of this topic. Since the current study was primarily descriptive, it is impossible to identify the effects of Chinese parents’ communication, or to determine how much “openness” or “directness” would be the most appropriate for this sample of adolescents. Yet, the present study showed that Chinese adolescents might believe that avoiding the topic of sexuality was beneficial for parent-child relationships. For example, not talking about sex with parents may promote a sense of trust between Chinese parents and adolescents.

**Practical implications**

Findings of the current study have several implications for facilitating parents’ positive roles in Chinese adolescents’ sexual development. First, parental influence does not only manifest in what they say about sex explicitly, but also what they say implicitly and how they act. Some Chinese adolescents may actually prefer parents’ indirect communication about sex, because they are afraid of the embarrassment involved in direct communication. Therefore, it is important for parents to take a proactive role in assuring their children that having a conversation about sexuality will not disrupt their relationships, and it is not a sign of distrust.
Second, participants of the current study almost did not recall receiving any sexual health information from their parents. Chinese parents’ sex-related messages appeared to be predominantly about restrictive rules and values regarding dating and sex. This implies that Chinese parents need to be motivated to talk about sexual health, and receive effective guidance about how to deliver sex education to adolescent children. In fact, several participants noted that they hoped parents could tell them more “facts” about sexuality, rather than telling them what not to do.

Furthermore, current findings also foreground the potentially crucial role of school and sexual health professionals in delivering sex education, which may benefit Chinese adolescents by supplying sexual health knowledge they rarely receive from parents. Prior studies have shown that community-based sexual health interventions were effective in promoting healthy sexual behaviors among Chinese youth (Wang, Hertog, Meier, Lou, & Gao, 2005). Experiences of current study’s participants lend additional support for the need of positive sexual socialization agents outside Chinese adolescents’ families.

Finally, the present study highlights that there is no one-size-fits all criterion for “good” parent-child communication about sexuality. Hence, it may be unwise for interventions in China to adopt the western criterion and promote “open communication” about sexuality in families. In the same vein, strategies proved to be useful in some Chinese families may not transfer to a different family, given that there was no clear consensus among participants of the current study with respect to what should be the most appropriate or desirable way to approach sex-related topics in parent-adolescent relationships.

Limitations and future research

Findings of the current study should be interpreted with recognition of several limitations. First, participants were recruited from only one high school in one city. Participants’ parents had comparatively low educational attainment, which has found to be a contributing factor for limited communication about sexuality (Zuo et al., 2007, 2013). Researchers should keep investigating this topic with more heterogeneous samples, especially those with more highly educated parents. A second limitation concerns the fact that only one side of the relationship—the adolescent children were interviewed in the current study. Parents and adolescents often have incongruent perceptions of communication about sexuality (Jaccard et al., 1998); thus, the results reported in the current study were likely biased toward adolescents’ perceptions of such communication (i.e., adolescents’ perceived communication with parents). Future research may collect interview data from both Chinese parents and adolescents and see if discrepancies would emerge. Finally, the present study provides only descriptive findings, meaning that it did not shed light on the effects of such communication on adolescents’ attitudes or behaviors.

Despite these limitations, findings of the present study are informative for future researchers. Future research on parent-child communication about sex should rethink the presumption that “the more open, the better,” especially when studying families in cultures with norms about dating and sex that are different from mainstream beliefs in the U.S. or European countries. Specifically, future studies may benefit from developing more precise operationalization of “parent-child communication about sexuality” in Chinese families. Specifically, research moving forward should employ content-specific measures of communication about sexuality, and to include not only items that tap direct communication, but also items measuring indirect, implicit and nonverbal (unspoken) communication related to sexuality. Finally, another future direction to go for is to systematically examine the effectiveness and relational outcomes of the communicative strategies identified in the current study; for example, whether Chinese adolescent children’s perception of parental trust, sexual beliefs, and attitudes may be related to parents’ communication about sexuality in various styles.
Conclusion

The current study took an important step toward identifying the content and communicative style of parent-adolescent communication about sex and sexuality in China. Overall, adolescents’ accounts showed that Chinese parents transmitted values and expectations about dating and sexual activities indirectly, implicitly, and/or nonverbally. Occasionally, they set rules and restrictions related to dating and sexual behaviors through direct communication. Adolescents in the present study, however, expressed tendencies to avoid sex-related communication with parents. Some even explicitly stated that avoiding such communication was beneficial to their impression management and maintenance of parent-child relationships. Taken together, the study underscores the potential value of indirect communication about sexuality in Chinese families. It will be fruitful for future studies to keep exploring the effects of parents’ direct and indirect communication on Chinese adolescents’ sexual development as well as qualities of parent-child relationships.

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