

**An Exploration of the Social  
Construction of Child Abuse in  
Mainland China: a Qualitative Study of  
the Perceptions of University Students,  
Young Parents and Social Workers**

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# Abstract

In Mainland China, there is neither an official definition nor a dominating perception of child abuse. A culturally responsive definition of child abuse is influenced by differences in child-rearing practices and deviant abusive disciplinary behaviours (Korbin, 1997). To explore this definition, the present study focuses on the social construction of child abuse in China.

Qualitative methods were applied with fourteen focus group discussions and four in-depth interviews with vignettes conducted in both urban and rural China with young parents, university students and professional social workers to explore child physical and emotional abuse within the family.

Three major findings were revealed. First, the boundaries and grey areas between appropriate family discipline and unacceptable child abuse for various specific family-discipline behaviours are explored. There were two layers in this perspective: firstly, all participants considered child abuse as a behaviour which might cause significant physical harm (leaving serious scars or marks). Secondly, the contested territory between discipline and abuse in China lies in the use of instruments to beat children or slapping them on the face, which is different from the current mainstream western academic argument on the need to ban all forms of physical punishment including spanking (Leviner, 2013). Second, emotional abuse has not yet been recognised in China. Nevertheless, participants understood and paid more attention to emotional harm than has been found in previous studies (Qiao, 2012). Third, parents tended to identify child abuse as severe and continuous harmful physical behaviour inflicted with bad intentions, and students shared a similar perception but paid more attention to emotional harm.

For a brief conclusion and policy implication, a clearer and more practical application of child abuse definition should be provided by legal regulations, it is suggested to begin with prohibition of physical discipline with instruments and slapping on the face in current China.

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# **DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

*for my dearest families*

# Chapter 1: Introduction

How to raise children and how to educate them during their childhood are controversial topics throughout the world. Anyone who opens an authoritative website or newspaper in China will find a series of news items related to violent child-rearing practices, and the parenting behaviours in the news range from scolding and beating children to using needles to pinch children or cigarettes to burn them. These harsh parenting styles have aroused heated discussion in many countries, especially in Mainland China. These discussions and debates motivated my thinking and research interest in why these parenting practices result in so many arguments among Chinese people worldwide, and that some of those behaviours would principally be regarded as child abuse from western perceptions.

## 1.1 Thinking inspired by the concept of Tiger Mother and Wolf Father

In 2011, the introduction of the term ‘Tiger Mother’ followed by ‘Wolf Father’ in news coverage showed Chinese parents being portrayed by the media in a series of animal-related codes, which stirred up a wave of comparisons, discussions and even arguments about parenting styles in Mainland China.

This heated ‘wave of naming’ was sparked off by ‘Tiger Mother’ Amy Chua, a Chinese American professor at Yale University. She published a controversial piece in *The Wall Street Journal* (2011) in which she referred to her strict ‘traditional Chinese’ way of parenting. This harsh philosophy of educating children, such as asking her children “to spend hours studying and practicing piano or violin and not to watch TV, not to play the computer games, not to engage in play dates and sleepovers” (p.10), and especially calling her child “garbage” in public, all attracted western attention to Chinese parenting.

After the introduction of the notion of the Tiger Mother, the debate spread to a strict father named Xiao Baiyou who made waves across China as a Wolf Father who imposed a series of strict restrictions on his children and beat them almost every day, especially when they failed to meet his requirements. He believed that his parenting method was very successful because three of his four children were admitted into Peking University, one of the two top universities in China (Chinahush, 2011). In his book *So, Brother and Sisters of Peking University*, he advised parents to “Beat your children every three days. They’ll definitely get into Peking University” (p.4). In the same year, *Qingdao* newspaper reported that a father, inspired by wolf

father, had followed this strict parental ideology to punish his child with needles. He used needles to pinch his child's body (arms, hands or ears) whenever the child was not focused on study (*XinhuaNews*, 2012). In 2012, another 'Eagle father' came to public attention because he had forced his son, only four years' old, to run in ice and snow without clothes (only wearing his underwear) to build up the child's body and strengthen his mind to pursue a better study and life appearance (*Sina.com*, 2012).

These cases raised the important question of whether such behaviour could be considered as emotional and/or physical abuse according to international definitions and when does strict parenting behaviour or harsh discipline become abuse or violence. Features of those parenting styles are that parents emphasise academic achievement above all else and treat their children with the most stringent requirements to ensure academic success. Alarmingly, all the parents described above believed that this is a type of good education, and this has resulted in heated debates and discussions about whether their behaviour is appropriate and what is a proper parenting style.

Although controversial and violent, the Wolf Father concept appears to be popular in China. For instance, an unofficial online questionnaire on SOHU Website (completed voluntarily) showed that more than 80% of respondents admitted they had seen a Wolf Father (constantly beating children in daily life or treating them even harder), whereas more than a quarter of them said they had met 'too many cases' of the Wolf Father educational model in real life. The questionnaire responses also showed that approximately a quarter of the respondents believed that parents could beat their children if the children would benefit from this treatment and succeed in their academic endeavours (*Sohu.com*, 2011). Even though this was only an online survey which had limited the sample size to particular internet users and the lack of an interviewer to clarify questions might have affected the reliability of the data, it nevertheless revealed that harsh discipline, to some extent, exists in China. In other words, many Chinese people agreed that the behaviour of Tiger Mother and Wolf Father does exist in Mainland China; those behaviours range from smacking to scalding and have even sometimes led to serious damage to children; however, most of them did not associate it with the practice of child abuse.

Even though there are number of differences between different western countries in response to physical punishment, some of the behaviours described above, such as constantly hitting a child with an implement or pinching with needles, from the western point of view was close

to child abuse. Some Chinese scholars, however, have summed it up as ‘physical discipline’ or considered it to be the normal behaviour of an authoritarian parenting style (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). This education model has been questioned by some scholars and parents but it has been welcomed by other parents. How to educate children and how to treat children have become tough questions. It is essential today that the boundary between what is child abuse and what is normal parenting should be recognised and explored.

## **1.2 Problems with the Under-Researched Social Understanding of Family Discipline and Child Abuse**

Child abuse, or child maltreatment, takes many forms (for example, physical, emotional, sexual and neglect) and is a grievous source of distress and harm for the children who experience it (WHO, 2006). Not surprisingly, it is a topic of great concern in many countries, but this has not been the case in China, where developments have been slower to materialise (Qiao & Chan, 2005). The main reason for this might be that the term ‘abuse’ (or ‘maltreatment’) is a harsh word in China. Some scholars have pointed out that Asian culture seems to condone punitive parenting behaviour, emphasizing parental control and valuing their children’s academic success (K. Chan, 2012; Ross *et al.*, 2005). This can be attributed to the fact that Chinese people do not share western definitions of abuse; the majority of people do not agree or even recognize that child abuse exists in China, and may even have become accustomed to some abusive forms of behaviour (Qiao, 2005). On the other hand, there are also no legal definitions of child abuse in China (SSDPP, 2017).

Owing to the different factors stated above, including culture and policy, research to establish the extent of child abuse in China has only recently been undertaken (Dunne *et al.*, 2008). There have been no national assessments of child abuse and no nationwide statistically significant data on it in any academic field in China. Even so, this does not necessarily mean that there are fewer cases of child abuse in China. Even though in China research in this field only has a short history, there have nevertheless been several provincial studies in this field; for example, in 2005, a UNICEF study researched seventeen forms of abusive experiences (four of physical abuse, seven of mental abuse and six of sexual abuse) among 4327 middle school students (from 12-14 years old) in six provinces in China, and found that 22.6% of the students responded that they had experienced three to four forms of abuse, and 11.3% of them had experience at least five to six forms of abuse (Chen & Dunne, 2005). Preliminary indications, however, are that levels of child abuse in China may well be comparable with

those documented in other countries (WHO, 2002). This result is similar to that of Stoltenborgh *et al.* (2013) who used an international meta-analysis study to explore 157 samples from six continents (Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America and South America) and found that the worldwide prevalence of child physical abuse was 22.6% in general. These studies have shown that there is high prevalence of child abuse in China just as in other countries, but for the reasons discussed above, especially the absence of any definitions of child abuse in policy and laws, child abuse is still not recognized as an important social problem which needs to be assessed and resolved at government level (SSDPP, 2017). Only the most serious cases would be noticed by the government, and intervention strategies are limited even when cases of abuse are noticed.

Although the general public in China tends to refuse to acknowledge child abuse inside the family (Qiao, 2008), child abuse behaviour still exists right across Chinese society. The burden of child abuse can have a great impact on economic loss in China; there are significant associations between abuse and poor mental or physical health (Gershoff *et al.* 2012; Hoeve *et al.*, 2009). Fang *et al.* (2015) found that “11.3 million disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) lost were attributable to child physical abuse in 2010” (p.179). They also evaluated 68 research studies and reports in order to “estimate the non-fatal health burden posed by child maltreatment” (p.180) in China based on the 2010 DALYs-lost data, and calculated the economic loss (the value lay between the costs of treating diabetes mellitus and ischaemic heart disease) from child maltreatment in China. The results from 2010 revealed that the economic loss from physical abuse would have formed 0.84% of the entire GDP in China, equal to \$50 billion US dollars, and this huge economic loss did not include the short- or long-term medical costs resulting from child abuse. It is therefore important to pay more attention to solving the problems of child abuse not only to avoid harm to children, but also to reduce the country’s economic loss. In order to address this issue, it is crucial to establish appropriate policies and laws. In a number of other countries, including Britain, child abuse has led to a history of state interventions and the rapid development of legal, policy and social work/social welfare practices (May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005).

In many countries, social welfare practice interventions to protect children from abuse have been established as the responsibility of local government and non-governmental social work professionals and services. They also involve commitment from professionals and social researchers to improve the safety and protection of children from harm caused by child abuse. This represents a relatively new development in China. The current researcher is a Chinese

social worker with an interest both in the protection of children and in pursuing a relevant research agenda. The researcher is also determined to explore social workers' perceptions of the construction of child abuse in order to extend the current statutes of the child protection system in relation to aspects of child abuse.

In China's socio-cultural context, the very first step before establishing relevant policies and laws is to explore what child abuse actually is in Mainland China, but little is known about how people recognise or define it. Further research is required to explore whether the term 'child abuse' is even appropriate for the Chinese cultural tradition. In the current stage of its reform and opening-up, China is influenced by western-centric globalisation, but it still has its own local characteristics. Compared with the western emphasis on human rights, Chinese culture pays more attention to 'human harmony'. In comparison with the western values of individualism, Chinese culture emphasises collectivism and social values as a whole. The Chinese scholar Dongping Qiao (2012) believed that the values of localisation and globalisation are interconnected and changing, sometimes blending. It is therefore significant to know whether Chinese people are influenced by the effects of this reform and whether the different values and blending of Chinese and western cultures affect the choice of parenting behaviours and the understanding of the concept of child abuse.

To address this problem, the aim of the present study is to analyse child abuse and harsh discipline in order to explore the construction of the concept within the cultural situation in China by asking the following questions:

- Is the western mainstream concept of child abuse applicable to China?
- How large is the difference between harsh discipline (violent parenting) and child abuse in Mainland China?
- How is this concept of child abuse within Chinese culture constructed? Is the concept applicable to the protection of children's rights in China?

These questions are not easy to answer. It was necessary to investigate the traditional parenting style in China, such as *gunbang dixia chu xiaozi* ('Spare the rod and spoil the child'), violent beatings combined with mental damage by way of scolding and so on, to study the origin of parenting practices from the Chinese cultural perspective. This thinking led me to elaborate my detailed research questions.

## 1.3 Research Subjects, Purpose and Significance of the Research

### 1.3.1 Research Subjects

The present study explored the views of university students, parents and social workers regarding family discipline and child abuse in Beijing in order to understand their perceptions of child abuse and parenting practices in Mainland China. The research focused on physical and mental child abuse in the context of Chinese social culture as well as exploring effective ways to intervene in the behaviours of child abuse. It should be noted that the terms “abuse and maltreatment are often used interchangeably” in the literature (Hamburger *et al.*, 2008: 11). The child abuse described in the present study mainly refers to physical and mental abuse inside the family. It is a controversial problem in this specific situation and is the first step to explore.

James *et al.* (1998) stated in *Theorizing Childhood* that sociology emphasises that problems should be put into a specific context in order to study them. Although western scholars have studied parenting styles and child abuse for decades, there is a lack of empirical and theoretical research on the boundary between acceptable family discipline and unacceptable child abuse in the Chinese social context. It is therefore appropriate to utilise the present study to explore this constructed boundary in the current Chinese social context.

The researcher collected several sources of data from focus groups and in-depth interviews using vignettes to explore the culturally-based perceptions of contemporary Chinese people regarding parenting practices and child abuse in China and to expose the field surrounding it from the perspective of the cultural norm. The focus group method was implemented using such questions as:

- What does each group consider to be appropriate and inappropriate parenting practices, and why?
- What are the differences and similarities in each group about their perceptions of parenting practices in China, and why?
- What cultural norms affect Chinese people’s perceptions of family discipline?
- Do age, gender, the number of children and professional working background contribute to Chinese people’s child-rearing perceptions and influence their definition



of ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ parenting behaviours?

- What types of physical and emotional punishment (harm) are considered as abuse in China?

### ***1.3.2 Research Significance and Research Approach***

The present study contributes to existing knowledge regarding the concept of child abuse as it relates to the controversial field surrounding family discipline and child abuse in China. In addition, a deeper understanding of the social construction of child abuse in China might contribute to the theoretical field by developing a widely accepted general definition of child abuse. Further research regarding appropriate child protection methods in China might be developed from the present study.

In terms of research from the perspective of social culture, the present study is designed to raise awareness of child abuse and provide useful recommendations for the government by exploring effective ways to protect children’s rights and interests.

The researcher explored the diversification of parenting practices in Mainland China, then interpreted the different views of children’s rights and protection within Chinese culture and explored the social construction of child abuse. From the research findings, the public’s changing understanding of child abuse was analysed in order to present suggestions for the improvement of legal regulations for the Chinese authorities responsible for child protection. The findings of the present study could also benefit social workers and the general public in terms of recognising the time to intervene in child abuse and the appropriate boundary of legal implementation.

To achieve these aims and conduct effective research, the present study adopted a qualitative research method to address the research questions. Qualitative research is conducive to “understanding social phenomena through direct communication with participants” (Berg, 1995: 32). The method stresses contextual and subjective accuracy over generality and is therefore appropriate for exploring people’s understanding of the perspective of family discipline and child abuse.

Focus groups and in-depth interview techniques are effective forms of qualitative research which can offer more flexibility during the process of data collection to gather rich and varied

descriptive data from participants, which is more suitable for exploring the diversity and complexity of an issue to understand the concept of child abuse from different groups. These research techniques are also appropriate for studying sensitive topics. They were performed with three groups of participants with the principal purpose of examining their perceptions regarding child abuse and discipline in Mainland China.

Beijing was selected as the research site. Fourteen focus groups and three individual interviews were designed involving a total of ninety-one participants. The participants comprised university students, young parents and social workers who were mainly from universities, social work agencies and various communities in Beijing. The researcher designed two vignettes for discussion within the focus groups to offer distance from the discussion of their personal experiences because of the sensitive nature of the research topic. Details of the data collection process, data analysis and presentation are presented in Chapter 3.

#### **1.4 The Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis comprises five parts. This introductory chapter (Chapter 1) offers an explanation of the reasons for the selection of the topic and introduces the background to the research, the research subject, the purpose and significance, the research methods and the structure of the thesis. In this chapter, the inspiration from the discussion of Tiger Mother and Wolf Father encourages thoughts about the need for such research. From the thinking to identifying the contemporary status of child abuse in Mainland China and exploring the literature on western societies, the main objective of the research is set out and the selection of an appropriate research method is explained.

The second chapter is a literature review of the existing literature and presents a comparison between western-related theories or literatures and Chinese culture or cognition on child abuse and parenting. First, it identifies the key concepts and their relations between children and childhood, children's rights and child abuse, parenting style and child abuse within the background of a changing China and Chinese families. Related family policy, law and social work in China will be explored. By this means, the underlying issues will be clarified to support the research objectives. After the clarification of the definition and the relationships between the concepts mentioned above, the cultural influences involved in understanding child abuse and children's rights will be further explored from the socio-cultural aspect. Because of different socio-cultural contexts, the up-to-date situations related to social workers and the

child protection intervention system in China will be introduced and discussed.

Chapter 3 offers a discussion of what methodology is appropriate to be applied during the present study based on various scholars' experiences and theories. An explanation is given for the choice of qualitative research methods which included focus groups with vignettes as well as in-depth interviews. In addition, explanations are provided of the selection of participants, the division of groups, the meeting places for the focus groups, the selection of specific vignettes for the interviews and focus groups to collect appropriate data, the handling of sensitive topics and the ethical and legal issues necessary to enable participants to express their views freely, and the arrangement and management of the details of the research process. In this chapter, data analysis and presentation, and the researcher's standpoint and introspection, are interpreted. Child abuse is still a sensitive topic and the concept of a connection between child abuse and discipline is still unclear to the public in Mainland China; the research therefore had to be carried out prudently and sensitively.

Chapter 4 presents a data analysis based on the perceptions of the parents, young adults and social workers interviewed in the focus groups on parenting behaviours in Mainland China. In this chapter, through discussion about the cause, purpose, effect and attitude regarding appropriate or inappropriate parenting behaviours, the researcher explored the controversial field surrounding disciplinary practices and child abuse in Mainland China from the perspective of the cultural norm. The researcher studied the reasons why Chinese people consider some behaviours to be appropriate or inappropriate parenting practices, how Chinese people construct the concept of child abuse, and what the relationship is between the concepts of harsh discipline and child abuse in Mainland China. The analysis includes the background of the 91 participants in fourteen focus groups and four individual interviews who comprised university students, young parents and professional social workers. Based on the findings of the data analysis, the research revealed the previous state of child protection in Mainland China, which will benefit the exploration of some unclear understandings of child abuse and awareness of the factors influencing Chinese perceptions of child abuse.

Chapter 5 discusses the key factors in the social construction of the parent/children relationship in traditional China and the transitioning perceptions in the rapidly changing modern Chinese society. In this chapter, through discussions on Confucianism, the reasons for the current parent/children relationship are revealed and an analysis of the historical influences of Confucian ideology is conducted.

In conclusion, because the ultimate purpose of the research was to benefit child protection, the study explored and discussed whether the Chinese public can understand the western concept of child abuse and how they construct child abuse in their own culture. According to Korbin (1991), there is no universal understanding of child abuse. An effective way for a cultural group to develop its response to child abuse definitions begins with the exploration of cultural differences in child-rearing practices. We should therefore respect the differences in social culture as well as rethink our own culture to determine which parenting practices should be carried forward or improved. Effective ways to intervene in child abuse should then be concluded to help social workers in their future work.

Child abuse is a social problem acknowledged worldwide and China is no exception. The concepts, definitions and classifications of child abuse vary among different countries. The issue has a broader, different approach in terms of how to treat and deal with the problem of child abuse. The present study has limitations and there are many related fields worthy of further research.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research into child abuse in Mainland China started later than in western countries. This was because child abuse has only gradually been recognised as a social problem in Mainland China since the 1990s (Liao *et al.*, 2011). From then on, Chinese scholars began to study the issue by adopting western definitions and theories; however, China has its own deep-rooted culture about parenting and family. There are continuing arguments in Chinese academia on what constitutes child abuse in China and how the concept of child abuse fits with Chinese culture and local conditions (Pan & Li, 2005; Yang *et al.*, 2007). So by applying the social constructionist approach, this chapter will construct a theoretical framework to explore the conception of child abuse in China.

First, through an exploration of the key concepts gathered from reviewing the theoretical and empirical research related to children and childhood, children's rights, parenting styles, child discipline and child abuse, this chapter will discuss how social construction theory is an appropriate lens through which to explore child abuse. Second, this chapter will explore and construct the relevant theoretical framework by identifying the contested territory between the concept of violent discipline and the concept of child abuse. Finally, this chapter will explore the cultural influences on understanding child abuse in Mainland China by focusing on this theoretical framework; furthermore, background information on the Chinese child protection policy and the present situations of changing Chinese society and Chinese family structures will also be provided.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework: Social Construction Theory

Social constructionism is a theoretical perspective which explores the ways in which “reality is negotiated in everyday life through people's interactions and through sets of discourses” (James & James, 2004: 22). This means that ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ are socially constructed; realities emerge through individuals’ “ongoing making of everyday life and meanings” throughout their social activities rather than through objective knowledge. In this way, the construction of knowledge cannot be separated from its societal, cultural and historical contexts.

Through a range of interactions and negotiations, individuals and social groups create shared

meaning (reality), which can appear as ‘common sense’ when particular understandings are ‘universalised’ and accepted by the majority of groups in a society. Each society or group of people constructs its culture in a specific way. For example, language is socially constructed as a series of sounds and symbols with particular meanings. Different countries and populations have different languages, and language itself has evolved over time.

This approach is useful for interpreting and reinterpreting taken-for-granted social phenomena in everyday life. According to the social constructionist approach, the concept of child abuse is also socially constructed (Gibbons *et al.* 1995; James *et al.*, 1998). There are still arguments about what constitutes child abuse among countries. Each society has its own rooted culture which significantly influences the social acceptance of appropriate and inappropriate child-rearing practices (Ben-Arieh *et al.*, 2014). For example, the current view of children in western societies is that children are active actors who have control over their own lives (James & Prout, 2015); but in most parts of China, children are regarded as the property of the family and need to be controlled by their parents (Qiao, 2012). There is therefore no universal standard of child-rearing and no universally accepted understanding of child abuse. The social constructionist perspective argues that it is essential to analyse child abuse from a societal, cultural and historical standpoint.

Although societal cultures differ according to constructed realities, the increasing influence of globalisation, especially for contemporary China, means that eastern and western cultural values are more open to external influence than hitherto. Concepts of child-rearing are constantly being shaped by these changes. It is not possible to understand child abuse and child-rearing without looking at the social transformation and generational differences within society and how these issues influence various perceptions of and attitudes towards children. This current study was therefore designed to explore the social understandings of appropriate family discipline behaviour and unacceptable child abuse in the currently transitioning China.

There are still many ongoing debates related to child-rearing, child development, children’s needs and children’s rights (Archard, 2014; Ben-Arieh *et al.*, 2014; Walker & Crawford, 2014). Although these theories are useful for understanding the concept of child abuse, theories alone are not sufficient to underpin an understanding of the construction of child abuse and why child abuse exists as a social problem (Kitsuse & Spector, 1987). Considering the impact of different cultural and social norms on child-rearing, it is not possible to simply apply western theories of child development or children’s rights to societies other than those within the

western culture. Based on the social constructionist perspective, it is assumed that children's needs and development in any specific socio-cultural context might vary.

As stated above, the argument presented in this thesis is that child maltreatment or child abuse is socially constructed, and is defined and shaped by different cultures' "value and norms about children, child development and parenting" (Wattam *et al.* 1997: 133). Different cultural backgrounds affect people's understanding of childhood and children's rights and their attitudes and behaviours in terms of parenting (Korbin, 2002). Jill Korbin (1997: 37) held the view that a culturally responsive definition of child maltreatment is not only influenced by "cultural differences in child-rearing practices", but is also linked directly to specific deviant discipline behaviours "considered to be abusive from the cultural appropriate parenting practices" (Korbin, 1991: 67).

This current study is based on a social constructionist theoretical perspective to explore how child abuse within the family has been perceived in the specific Chinese cultural context by means of an exploration of perceptions of childhood, children's rights and appropriate and inappropriate parenting techniques. Those ideas and their correlations with child abuse will be explored in the following section of the literature review

### **2.1.1     *The Construction of 'Child' and 'Childhood'***

This chapter will begin with a brief discussion on the concepts of 'child' and 'childhood'. The argument will be that these elements are socially constructed and that different constructions might affect a society's attitudes towards its children.

The term 'child' can be defined differently in different contexts depending on a variety of factors. Under the influence of physiology and psychology, people usually define childhood as a specific stage of age based on objective factors such as biological age, physical and psychological maturity and competence. Based on this understanding, age is identified as the index of 'children' in legal documents, because age is clear for legal practice such as in criminal law, Provigil or civil law; however, it is evident that across various countries, there is no common legislative definition of the term 'children'. Article 1 of the 1989 *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989: 2) provides us with a clear definition of 'child' based on age; it states that "For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". However, in South Korea, for example, 'child' refers to a person whose age

is under nineteen years (Wu, 2009: 15) and in the US, the definition of the adult age differs according to varying laws in different states, ranging from eighteen to twenty-one years. In Colorado, for instance, the age of majority is twenty-one, but there are different ages for different transitions; for example, the age of the 'Ability to Sue' is eighteen and the age of 'Consent to Medical Treatment' is fifteen if the individual is "living apart from parents and paying own expenses" (*Colorado Age of Majority Law*, 17(c)).

Chinese official documents and Chinese academics have no uniform definition of 'children', so the concept is not consistently used. 'Children' are sometimes equated with 'minors', but this is not contingent. According to the General Principles of the Civil Law of the People's Republic of China and the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors (Standing Committee Congress, 2012), a person under the age of eighteen is a minor who cannot bear civil liability independently. Although this definition of a minor is widely recognised in Mainland China, children are also defined as being under fourteen or sixteen years of age in other regulations. According to the Criminal Law Regulation, article 17, children under fourteen years of age cannot be held responsible for criminal activity (National People's Congress, 1997). Considerable social welfare policies for children are limited to minors younger than fourteen years, such as the Standards of Social Welfare Institution for Special Children, which were issued in 2001. Children are defined as minors under the age of sixteen in the Provisions on the Prohibition of Child Labour, article 2 (Council, 2002), which was issued in 2002. This legislation ensures that no child can work under the age of sixteen.

The above explanation makes it clear that the term 'child' is used differently in different circumstances, so it is important to reflect on a child's age as a 'social' rather than a 'natural' variable, that is to say, the implications of a child's age follow the influence of local socio-cultural or political factors.

According to sociologists and anthropologists, children have been treated and recognised differently in different eras and places. The new sociology of childhood challenges the understanding of 'child' and 'childhood' from the viewpoint of traditional physiology and developmental psychology. The main argument is that childhood is shaped by socially structured relations. In *Centuries of Childhood*, Ariès (1962: 128) stated that children were often perceived as small adults who had to enter the adult world to live independently when they reached a particular age, "seven in medieval society", for example. This concept is distinct from the contemporary and mainstream concept of modern childhood which believes that



“children should be cared and protected from the cruel world” (Jenny *et al.*, 1999).

Ariès also stated that the idea of childhood is the product of modern society and that ‘children’ is a relatively new concept. He believed that the modern concept of childhood first appeared in the seventeenth century and that only then did children become an important component in the family: “In medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist”:

*... it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society. (Ariès, 1962: 128)*

Ariès’s statement has been substantially critiqued, with Pollock (1983) criticising the idea of childhood as an invention of modernity and Shahar (1992: 1) arguing that “a concept of childhood existed” in medieval society and stating that medieval children were perceived as different from adults and that parents made an emotional investment in their children. Even so, Ariès nevertheless expanded the understanding and challenged the traditional concepts of the child and recognised childhood as a social construction and a specific life-stage separate from adulthood.

Sociologists (for example, James *et al.*, 1998) who support the social constructionist standpoint oppose the idea of childhood as a universal social phenomenon. Chris Jenks (2005) defined childhood as a matter which can be understood as a social construct related to social identity. Over time and in different societies, the boundaries of childhood itself have also constantly changed and become embedded in social structures in ways that create specific forms of behaviour which define social identity. In different social and cultural environments, different social forces act on childhood to construct various understandings of the ‘child’. That is to say, childhood is imbued with a range of cultural assumptions within the impact of class, gender and ethnicity.

Prout and James (1997) contended that western psychology has been overly dependent on stage-based, biological explanations for understanding children. They believed that the status of childhood could be different from biological immaturity, which is a natural and universal human feature, but is also constructed by a specific structure and cultural factors in society. The seventeenth century Romantic view, which saw children as innocent ‘little angels’

coexisted with the Puritan view of children as innately sinful. With the development of the western sociology of children and childhood, there are pluralistic images of childhood, for example, children are seen as victims or threats in the family, as investments, or as a 'scared being'. In the twentieth century, however, the Romantic view came to predominate in the west, holding that children are innocent 'little angels' in need of play and of protection from the world into which they are born (Ansell *et al.*, 2005). For example, Boyden (1997) argued that the notion of children as holy and pure and safe, happy and protected is a Judeo-Christian belief which developed alongside the rise of capitalism. So to maintain the image of childhood in this way inevitably becomes an urgent aspect of social policy and a priority of capitalist nations such as the US and European countries. This dominant understanding of childhood and child-raising practices has led to a position in which different understandings come to be regarded as harmful to children and linked to delaying their normal development. It should, however, be remembered that childhood is essentially socially constructed. The American historian Steven Mintz (2004) stated that the history of childhood is inevitably related to wider political and social events in national life, including colonisation, revolution, slavery, industrialisation, urbanisation, migration and war. In short, the concept and experience of childhood has been constantly changing throughout human history. Childhood has never been an uncontroversial concept and people have discussed its specific meaning during every historical period.

### ***2.1.2 Exploration of Children's Rights Theory***

Based on the discovery of the concepts of children and childhood in western culture, the children's rights movement started to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century (Gadda, 2008). Ultimately, this movement led to the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 and also contributed to the development of the child protection system which is established in and outside western countries to protect children from abuse.

The following questions are explored in this section:

- What are children's rights?
- Is there a universal standard on children's rights or are there different standards depending on different cultures?

- How do those concepts influence the definition of child abuse?

### 2.1.2.1 Moral and Legal Conceptions of Rights

To understand child rights, the notion of ‘right’ needs to be clarified. In western societies, the word ‘right’ is a combination of ‘justice’ and ‘right’. It is the basis of social order (Epstein & Walk, 2012: 194) According to Kant (1949: 354), the nature of right is a human being’s freedom of will: “Right is the restriction of each individual’s freedom so that it harmonises with the freedom of everyone else (in so far as this is possible within the terms of a general law)”. “The ‘right’ referred to here is the concept of ‘negative freedom’” (Berlin, 1969: 121), a kind of value judgment in an ethical sense, associated with the moral subjectivity of human experience. It reflects the value and qualification of the human as a social subject and people’s basic needs for survival and development. *Right* means that people are entitled to do something which will not harm the interest of others or the public norms.

The previous paragraph briefly illustrates the philosophical meaning of *right*, whereas the children’s rights referred to in the Convention on the Rights of the Child are legal rights. As a global gold standard against which countries are monitored for compliance, any government which signs up to children’s rights should be consistent with UNCRC. A legal right means that a particular right has been accepted by the mainstream values in society and recognised by the legal system, and therefore has legal authority and effectiveness (Raz, 1984: 368). Legal rights are more objective and operational. Due to the constraints and influences of other social factors, not all moral rights can be converted into legal rights. This might hinder the full embodiment of an individual’s values and harm individual dignity, value and needs.

On the other hand, not all legal rights can be fully enjoyed by all members of a society since the realisation of a right requires the protection of explicit provisions and enforcement of this right by law. However, there is no such law in China at present. Based on studies by Qiao and Chan (2005) and Shang and Katz (2014), the ignorance of child abuse and child rights (dues) arises from the lack of definition and legislation regarding child abuse in China. It is therefore difficult to guarantee children’s rights. There is also an historical reason for China’s lack of such laws on children’s rights, because in classical Chinese, the word ‘*right*’ refers to an individual’s social status, influence and interests, which is not the same as the meaning in western societies. With the influence of western culture and the growing awareness of democracy and legality in China, the concept of rights in contemporary China is tending to show more consistency with that in the west.

To understand the concept of children's rights, the following section will present a review of the development of this concept in western culture.

### **2.1.2.2 The Development and Critique of Children's Rights Theory**

Awareness of children's nature and child protection can be traced back to early human society. Pleck (1987) believed that children were not regarded as separate from adults until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but this idea has now been critiqued and it is generally agreed that all societies have had some conception of childhood as distinct from adulthood but that how and to what extent varies. The concept of children's rights was introduced and children became a subject of academic research in the late nineteenth century. The historical progress of children's rights theory shows that the main concerns in western societies have changed over time.

Before the nineteenth century, the theoretical model developed by early western scholars deemed rational ability as the principal characteristic, actually denying the possibility of children's rights. In the early western legal system, although normative instructions were provided regarding the relationship between parents and children, the main provisions focused on respect for parents and ignored parents' care and parenting obligations for children (Steven, 2004).

In the early twentieth century, with the launch of the Child-Saving Movement, governments adopted a remedial model of children's rights to protect children in difficulties. However, based on the perspective of "children's lack of rationality" (Locke, 1841) and the notion of 'troublesome children', childhood was considered an especially difficult stage of the life-course. The top priority then was to solve children's anti-social behaviours (Barter & Renold, 1999). Governments relied on social welfare or judicial mechanisms to intervene in child-related issues and incorporated many matters which were traditionally within the scope of family autonomy into the scope of national regulation, and emphasised the protection of children's rights through the combination of parents' parental power and government's role as *parens patriae*. Parents and families were therefore the natural protectors of children and the government's responsibility was to eliminate exploitation and slavery and to prohibit child trafficking, the use of child labour and other acts which could do serious harm to the interests of children. For children living in a family environment, governments stressed family responsibility and autonomy and deemed that families were the best place where children's rights could be realised and protected. During this period, although the concept of children's

rights had been introduced, children were usually treated as objects of social discipline and care rather than subjects who had rights and were under protection since they were not granted independent rights as individuals. Therefore, the protection of children's rights during this period focused on negative rights such as the rights to life and to protection.

In the UK in the late 1940s, a series of child death cases led to legislation changes and the establishment of the *Children Act 1948*. After that, a great shift started from 1950, with Marshall (1950) noting that citizens' fundamental rights included not only property and political rights but also social rights, which had a huge impact on western societies. Social welfare turned into a fundamental right of citizens. As a result, government protection and welfare were gradually recognised as a fundamental right of children.

At the same time, in addition to theoretical hypothesis and speculation, scientific methods were utilised in the study of children. Systematic and scientific theories were developed to explore the nature of children, such as Piaget's (1977) theory of cognitive development, Bruner and Garton's (1978) learning theory and Mead, Wreidt and Bogan's (1910) socialisation theory. These theoretical studies took a new perspective, namely that child psychology is important, and child development consequently became a subject of research and government policy, which brought the children's initiative to much wider attention.

However, the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959 showed that children were still deemed the object rather than the subject of rights. It was still believed that children had a limited capacity for reason and could in no way know their own best interests; therefore, children's legal guardians or agents were the subjects of their rights and professional authorities or parents would determine children's best interests. Children were still the object of protection rather than the subject of self-determination. This can be clearly seen from the formulation of the expression that 'Children are ...' in the CRC Articles (UNCRC, 1959).

The debate between protectionists' and libertarians' contested territory was very meaningful and greatly spurred the development of children's rights in the 1960s. Libertarian theorists (Harris, 1996; 1982; Postman, 1981; Schrag, 1975) did not think that age and competence should be the criteria for access to civil rights. In their view, to draw an age boundary between adults and children was very arbitrary, a form of discrimination, not different from discrimination based on colour, race or gender. They believed that such an arbitrary boundary between adults and children was only for the purpose of easy management. However,

paternalists who held a view that children are potentially 'fragile' believed that although the age standard might be potentially arbitrary, it is in fact associated with particular competence. In their view, children lacked many capabilities, which made them unable to deal with some issues. Libertarian theorists further argued against this approach and pointed out that some adults were also incompetent and fragile and should therefore also be exempted from civil rights as children are.

For both libertarian theorists and paternalists, the premise was a 'competence-based right'. Libertarian theorists advocated that all children should have access to rights, even before they reached adulthood. However, they supported children's access to those rights that they were capable of exercising. Paternalists firmly believed that access to rights should be based on competence. Modernists represented by Archard (2003) clearly defined the age range for access to rights which libertarian theorists and paternalists deliberately avoided. According to Archard (2014), teenagers should at least be granted access to rights, namely, the teenager segment should be further defined and should enjoy civil rights. Buckingham (2000) shared a similar opinion to Archard's. However, libertarian theorists' call for unrestricted children's access to civil rights was not pragmatic, although parents making decisions for their children can hardly make sense in many cases. Furthermore, both factions tended to be vague about age, which will affect the promotion of children's civil rights. Although children's rights have been widely recognised through international conventions, the critique and refutation of child's rights theories is still contested, particularly in relation to how a universal standard relates to cultural diversity.

In this review of children's rights development, two clear facts have emerged. First, that the concept of child and 'child rights' are defined by adults or are relative to the concept of adulthood. Second, that the concept of childhood and the concept of children's rights have changed over time in western societies' history. Current debates about children's rights depend on different adult assumptions regarding children's needs and development, which may differ depending on the beliefs and values as to what is best for children, the role of children in the family and child-rearing perceptions. This has raised a question as to whether western notions of child development and child rights can be seen as a normative application outside western cultures. It is therefore necessary to conduct field studies to determine whether the western concept of child rights is applicable in Mainland China. As stated in the previous section, the concept of child rights has a direct impact on the definition of child abuse and, therefore, how to study the applicability of the concept of rights in China. This will be further clarified in later

sections.

It is therefore important to understand the current main international policy of children's rights based on the UNCRC.

### **2.1.2.3 The UNCRC and the Best Interest of the Child**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (hereafter, the Convention) is the most comprehensive international document for the protection of children's rights. In addition to a preamble, the UNCRC has a total of 54 articles, of which the first 41 emphasise that the rights of every child under the age of eighteen must be valued and protected and that these rights must be fulfilled on the basis of the guiding principles of the Convention. Articles 42 to 45 detail governments' obligations, such as making the Convention's principles widely known, putting the Convention in place and supervising the exercise of children's rights so that the public can become familiar with the specific responsibility of government authorities. Articles 46 to 54 describe the process for the Convention to be signed and approved by governments, and designate the Secretariat-General of the UN as the depositary of the Convention.

The Convention advocates comprehensive children's rights, which fall into two categories: (i) fundamental rights, including the rights to life, personal liberty, equality and privacy, which are substantially the same as adults' basic human rights; and (ii) special rights, including the rights to parenting, education, health, growing-up in a family environment, preferential help, criminal liability relief, engagement and games, to meet the needs of children's physical and mental development. In terms of their scope, these rights fall into three categories: (i) the right to life, such as plenty of food, shelter, clean water and basic health care; (ii) the right to protection, such as freedom from abuse, neglect and exploitation as well as priority access to protection in times of crisis and war; and (iii) the right to development, such as a safe environment, namely access to education, games and good health-care as well as social, religious and cultural engagement, so that children can have healthy and balanced development.

One of the main differences between children's rights and adults' rights is that adults can waive the right to protection but children cannot. The Convention is still criticised by many scholars (for example, James, 2004) but it is by far the most significant agreement of its kind engaging all countries except the US.

The main argument against it was noted by David Archard (2003), who claimed that although the Convention provides for children's rights, no solutions were offered to problems which raised moral doubts. In particular, attention and discussion should be given to Article 3 "Maximize the interests of children" and Article 12 "Children's right to engagement". In some cases, children will make a decision that can harm their interests. This leads to a conflict between children's right to engagement and their best interests. Even so, it is still necessary to listen to the views of children because only after listening to their views can judgment and determination about their best interests be made. In this way, the price of a decision against children's will to achieve their best interests can be estimated.

From a socio-cultural perspective, even though there can be shared agreement across cultures that adults should try to do their best to address their children's 'best interests', there may be considerable debate about what constitutes those 'best interests'. As noted earlier, the consensus about the nature of childhood and how children do and should develop has varied over time within specific cultures and also simultaneously among different cultures. This means that to some extent children's rights are also socially constructed across time and culture.

The Convention is therefore seen as a gold standard for global child protection and also a general framework of children's rights. The interpretation and understanding of specific children's rights need to be combined with the particular cultural and social background of the country. The present study will therefore take China as an example to explore how the concept of children's rights, influenced by Chinese culture, has had an impact on child abuse recognition.

### ***2.1.3 Approaches to Parenting, Child Discipline and Child Abuse***

As discussed previously, the concepts of childhood and children's rights have gradually been discovered and developed in western countries. Currently, in regard to the abuse/neglect standardisation in terms of a definition, there is still a large gap (Korbin *et al.*, 1991). The following section will focus on literature which examines parenting practices in order to explore several key concepts related to parenting and to look at the nuances of the controversial field between child discipline and child abuse.



### 2.1.3.1 Parenting: Key Concept

First, it is necessary to understand how ‘parenting’ can be defined in addition to how the concepts of child discipline and child abuse are understood. Kendziora and O’Leary (1993: 175) defined parenting as “anything parents do, or fail to do that may affect their children”. Parents construct and provide the initial and critical environment for children’s development, especially in the early years, in everyday life, and the influences of parenting practices and the potential risks for children from within the family have been the key focus of many family studies. Darling and Steinberg (1993: 493) defined parenting practices as those techniques which have “a direct effect on the development of specific child behaviours ... and characteristics”. So parenting practices are often linked to the evaluation of specific child-rearing behaviours and the frequency with which they occur.

Parenting practices include the dimension of child discipline, which involves educating children about “appropriate behaviours, social norms and values” (Baumrind & Thompson, 2002: 580), and “discouraging inappropriate behaviours” (Smith, 1967: 29). In fact, child discipline is believed to be an art of child-rearing in many cultures and different countries. Child discipline is an integral aspect of child-rearing but related debates and discussions about violent physical and psychological disciplinary practices indicate that approaches to child discipline vary considerably across the world and over time. In the 1920s, Margaret Mead’s studies of enculturation in the South Pacific represented the effective beginning of systematic studies of child disciplinary behaviours in a multi-cultural context. Mead’s research (cited in UNICEF, 2010) demonstrated how the interaction of culture and caregiving influenced the practice of discipline and the approach to children’s development. Since that time, a large number of researchers have focused on child discipline. These studies, however, have primarily been conducted in high-income countries. For instance, Fingerman *et al.* (2012) suggested that in the US during the twentieth century, much of the psychology research was concentrated on the study of parental attitudes to child discipline, among which, discipline was constructed to contain severe punitive behaviours, including physical and psychological punishment and neglect.

Early studies of parenting emphasised the different roles of parents in a family, such as being a positive role model for children or raising more negative disciplinary actions in shaping their children’s development. Baumrind (1966) made it clear that the research purpose was to understand the nature of parenting behaviours and the relationship among these different

behaviours as well as how these behaviours contributed to the development of children. Even though there was no comprehensive child-rearing theory to clarify how to shape and influence the development of children, O'Connor (2002) found a clear correlation between particular parenting strategies and different outcomes for children. For example, over-harsh parenting had a serious impact on the development of children whereas tender parenting had a good influence on child development. However, these studies were mainly based on middle-class white Americans, and may not have represented all cultures and classes (Douglas & Straus, 2007).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, child disciplinary research focused on two dimensions for several years: parental warmth and parental control (Baumrind, 1991). **Parental warmth** refers to the degree of support, response and family love that parents show to their children. Warm parents praise and encourage children. By contrast, parents who are less responsive and accepting tend to criticise, punish or ignore their children's reactions and give less support to their children. Belsky (1981) argued that parents' warmth and the education of their children have the deepest influence during children's pre-school period and lay a foundation for their healthy development. Parental warmth and responsiveness will lead to their children's positive development, such as security of emotion, good peer relations, high self-esteem and strong morality (Dix, Gershoff et al. 2004).

**Parental control** (or parental demandingness) refers to a series of requirements from parents towards their children, such as treating them as "independent individuals and the rules and restrictions" which parents set for their children (Qiao, 2006). The relationship between parental control and development results is not as simple as for parental warmth discussed above. Whereas some parents limit their children's freedom and monitor their behaviour, others give their children more freedom and autonomy.

According to Darling and Steinberg (1993), these dimensions of warmth and control produce four main parenting styles:

- *Authoritative parents are warm and use firm control.*
- *Authoritarian parents exert firm control but do so in a rejecting or unresponsive manner.*
- *Permissive parents are warm but exert little control.*

- *Rejecting/neglecting parents not only set few limits but are also unresponsive.*

According to several researchers (Chao, 1997; Qiao, 2012; Shang, 2017), Chinese traditional parenting style appears more harsh and punitive, and Chinese parents are most likely to use violent discipline. They argued that this traditional parenting practice seems close to the authoritarian parenting styles. From the above definitions, we can see that authoritarian parenting is characterised by “strict rules, harsh punishments and little warmth” (Baumrind, 1996: 37). Authoritarian caregivers are often quick to choose punishment rather than to discuss misbehaviours with their children. According to Baumrind (1978; 1991), children raised by authoritarian parents often make fewer achievements, have more hostile and aggressive behaviour and are less popular among their peers. In contrast, “authoritative parents monitor their children closely and have high expectations” and clear requirements of their children; however, if they use supportive ways to rear children and maintain mutual communications, those acts are recognised as non-violent child disciplinary practices. As Chen *et al.* (1997) suggested, in China, the authoritarian parenting style does not represent restriction, but is rather a way in which parents show their concern and are highly involved in their children’s lives and in the Chinese family. Several researchers have disagreed; Dornbusch (1987), Kelly (1992) and Lin and Fu (1990) observed that Chinese parents are significantly more controlling and authoritarian than western parents owing to the features of traditional Chinese culture, which places an emphasis on parental authority and children’s obedience. They pointed out that parents in Europe and the US emphasise self-discipline and harmonious interpersonal relationships, whereas Asian and Asian-American parents appear to take a more arbitrary attitude to this, more so than parents of any other race do. This may be because an arbitrary concern in this case may have different meanings from those understood by European-American children. Several researchers have compared the parenting styles of Chinese parents and US parents, trying to draw a pattern of parenting style in a non-western context. Some scholars (Leung, Lau & Lam, 1998; Wu, 2002) also pointed out that Chinese parents were more authoritarian than US parents.

There is a great amount of literature discussing the social and cultural influences on parenting style from different perspectives. For example, cross-cultural studies (Buss, 1995) have shown that parents’ attitudes will largely influence the development of adolescents. In the US, the pro-education attitude of parents can cajole children and teenagers to be active, friendly and stable. Disruptive parenting attitudes tend to cause children to form resistance. In Japan, if parents adopt protective, non-interfering, reasonable, democratic and lenient attitudes, their

children appear to be full of enthusiasm and are sociable. Contrarily, if parents choose to refuse, interfere, dote, dominate, dictate or oppress their children, the children will have poor ability to adapt to different environments and poor mental stability and will become rebellious (Buss, 1995). Several studies spanning Hong Kong, Australia (Leung, Lau & Lam, 1998), the US and Chinese Americans (Chao, 2001) found similar outcomes by examining the relationship between the academic achievement of adolescents and parenting.

Despite the extant literature on Chinese parenting studies listed above, there are some obvious insufficiencies, for example:

- The research is old; China's transition is rapid and parents' understanding of parenting is also changing rapidly;
- There is a lack of research on the border between parenting and abuse in China.

This current study is therefore intended to fill the gap which has been identified and explore the relationship between child discipline and child abuse. The following sections explore the literature related to child discipline as well as child abuse in order to enable a detailed understanding of the differences between western and Chinese parenting.

### **2.1.3.2 Child Discipline and Child Abuse**

Similarly, in terms of parenting style, the definition of the general recognition of disciplinary practice and child abuse is also controversial globally. The biggest argument is whether it is feasible to construct a universal definition of maltreatment. The main criticism of western mainstream ideologies is that the majority of current definitions are based on the status of western developed countries and the different social and cultural aspects of countries elsewhere in the world are neglected (Korbin, 2002).

Increasing numbers of researchers have recognised that differences exist in different national cultures (Finkelbor & Korbin, 1998; Kemp, 1998; Korbin, 1981; 1997) and have argued that there is no uniform standard for appropriate parenting or for child abuse. The cultural conflicts in the definition of child abuse originate from cultural differences (Korbin, 2013), so some activities associated with particular parenting practices/discipline (such as corporal/physical punishment) remain controversial. 'Culture' here is a very broad term. The definition of culture given by the famous British anthropologist Tylor (1871) is still widely accepted. He believed

that culture is the overall complex of human experiences, including knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs, laws, abilities and habits which have developed in a society over time.

Cultural differences are inevitable, not least because of the socially constructed – and therefore culturally particular – nature of core perceptions and understandings surrounding the treatment of children. For example, compared with western parents, Chinese parents are more likely to use smacking and scolding (Kelley & Tseng, 1992). Chan *et al.* (2002) showed that Asian parents prefer stricter disciplinary practices for their children, which is related to Asian cultural norms, than western parents. Several studies of the families of Chinese immigrants in western countries have discovered that the definition of child abuse among foreign citizens of Chinese origin is different from the concepts of westerners (Kwok & Tam, 2005). Professional concepts and attitudes towards child abuse in China are also different from those of the general public because of the influence of knowledge and experience of professional groups (Chan *et al.*, 2002).

Studies of child abuse in China often follow definitions provided by western researchers. The definitions are mainly adopted from the WHO, the UK or the US (Chen, 2006a; Liu, 2008; Meng, Liu & Zhang, 1994). Since there is no agreed standard definition of child abuse in China within the legal framework, in general, many Chinese researchers (Asmussen, 2010; May-Chahal, 2005; Xia & Guo, 2002) have adopted “an often-cited definition developed by the World Health Organization” (Xia & Guo, 2002, p.27), which constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse and neglect. Other Chinese scholars, however, have argued that neglect should not be considered as a type of child abuse in China. They insist that abuse and neglect are two different concepts and that maintaining distinct categories would be more culturally appropriate (for example, Guan & Zhou, 1994; Liu, 2008).

Owing to the different customs in each country or even inside one country, the definitions of child abuse are different. These definitions are not only influenced by different goals of and attitudes towards child-rearing, but are also linked directly to specific deviant disciplinary behaviours “considered to be abusive from the cultural appropriate parenting practices” (Korbin, 2002: 37). To understand the prevailing goals and attitudes towards parenting, and how these might lead to child abuse, it is therefore necessary to define some terms which will be referred to throughout this thesis, especially to clarify the relationship between child abuse and parental discipline. The following section offers a framework for exploring how far child discipline is from child abuse in this research.

### 2.1.3.2 Relations between Child Discipline and Child Abuse

Graziano (1994) explored violence and hypothesized that there is “a continuum ranging from low to high violence” (p.415). According to Graziano’s findings, from the aspect of specific behaviours, child discipline is considered to be “a full range of disciplinary behaviours from non-violent to violent” (p.13), which might form a continuum of child abuse (*see* Figure 2.1). This definition is adopted from the UNICEF (2010) report regarding violence towards children worldwide.

**Figure 2.1. Continuum of Child Abuse and Violence**



According to this framework, violent child discipline may be psychological or physical and these two approaches to child discipline can in some instances take place together, which can aggravate the short-term or long-term harm to children (Erickson & Egeland, 1987). ‘Violent physical discipline’, which is also referred to as physical punishment, means the “control of children by physical means, such as spanking, beating their palm or forcing children to do something” (such as punished by standing) (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1995). ‘Violent psychological discipline’ involves “the use of guilt, humiliation, the withdrawal of love, or emotional manipulation to control children” (*see* Table 1). In a study of Chinese families, for example, a father who preferred physical discipline tended to attack his peers physically; however, a mother who preferred psychological discipline was inclined to be more aggressive both physically and psychologically (Nelson *et al.* 2006).

**Table 2.1. Child discipline Case Variations**

Category	Items included in the Case Variations
<b>Violent Discipline</b>	
<b>Psychological Discipline</b>	Shouted, yelled at or screamed at the child.
	Called the child dumb, lazy, or another name like that.
	Threatened to abandon the child.
	Silent treatment or withholding love.
	Told the child that others are better.

<b>Physical Discipline</b>	Shook the child.
	Spanked, hit or slapped the child on the bottom or arms with bare hand.
	Hit or slapped the child on the face, head or ears.
	Caned or beat the child with an implement (hit over and over as hard as possible).
	Pinched the child with needles or burned him/her with cigarettes

As discussed above, however, harsh/violent child discipline is acceptable in some cultural norms (Collier *et al.*, 1999). Many scholars (for example, Chilamkurti & Milner, 1993; Crouch & Behl, 2001) have shown that the concern of parents about the acceptance of violent discipline is correlated with their child abuse tendency.

When it comes to the fundamental issues of child discipline research, what type of parenting could lead to harming children and is considered to be child abuse behaviour? The findings of a study by Straus and Paschall (2009) showed that violent discipline resulted in harmful consequences, and that the degree of harm depended on the nature, the scope and the extent of violent discipline. The consequences included direct short-term hurt or a long-term impact on later adult life. The results showed that even slight physical discipline was harmful to the child and might reduce the child's capacity for sensory perception and increase the child's violent tendency in the future. Psychological violent discipline, such as threatening, slandering, intimidating and mocking, has also been proved to have a series of negative influences on a child's behaviour and in later adult life (Sroufe *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, some research has suggested that under long-term serious unpredictable pressure, normal brain development in infancy and childhood will be impacted, affecting the child's social cognitive, emotional and physical development (Butchart *et al.*, 2006). Given these harmful effects, violent disciplinary practices, including violent psychological discipline and physical punishment, can be seen as a significant form of maltreatment which can give rise to serious consequences to the individual and to society.

As long as violent discipline will cause harm to the child, then it will naturally produce a problem. So should there be a total ban on violent discipline? Or in the Chinese context, where a certain degree of violence is acceptable, is this even feasible, or is violent corresponding harm also constructive in nature? The significant damage which can be caused by violence beyond a particular level is what should be explicitly prohibited.

The core of this section is a discussion of exactly how far from harsh discipline it is to child abuse in the view of contemporary different groups under the construction of Chinese culture.

Based on the previous exploration of these key terms, the relationship between the normal variations in parenting and deviant parenting as child abuse in the present study is displayed in Figure 2.1. This research will explore the grey area between violent discipline and child abuse.

There will be a detailed discussion about Chinese traditional culture and its relations to Chinese parenting style under the influence of the social and cultural situation in China in the following section.

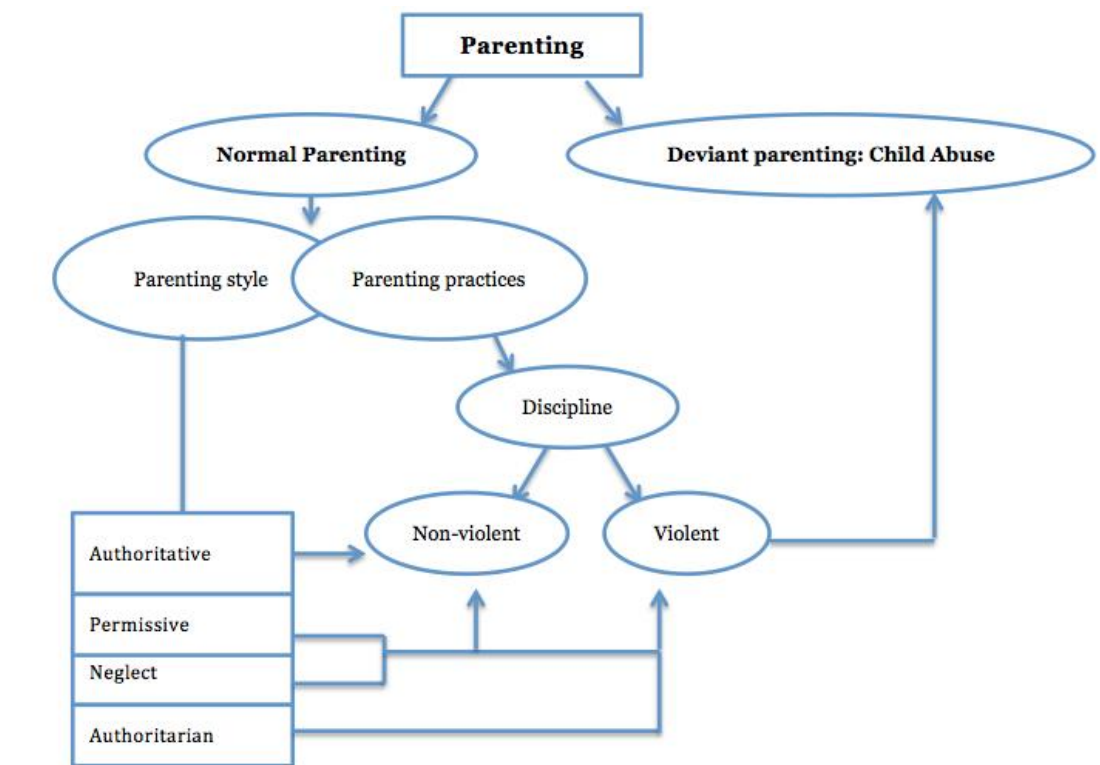


Figure 2.2. The relationship between parenting style, discipline and child abuse

## 2.2 Child Abuse in China

This section will review the child abuse literature in China. First, the background of the socio-economic policy of rapid changes in contemporary China will be introduced. Second, an exploration of child abuse and parenting style literature in China will be undertaken in order to study the contesting of child abuse in Chinese society. Then, a detailed investigation will focus on Chinese culture related to parenting and family, including the impact of Confucianism



and power relationships in the Chinese family. The final part will briefly introduce the current child protection system and status of social workers in Mainland China.

### **2.2.1 *The Changing China and Chinese Families***

To explore the topic of child maltreatment from the social construction perspective, the *status quo* of Chinese society and the family must be explored. First, it is necessary to understand the dramatic transition from the traditional family form to the modern expression of family. Chinese families are undergoing this transition and it has influenced the way that children are raised today. There were two policy initiatives which directly affected Chinese households: the attempts to broaden the participation of women in the labour force and the institution of the one-child policy.

One significant transition in the family parenting style from the traditional to the current Chinese society was the role of women in families. H.B. Levine (1982) argued that the methods and beliefs behind a child's upbringing, developed from a conservative culture, will always be handed down from generation to generation unless the society changes significantly, at a time when Chinese society was undergoing a significant change in the role of women. In traditional Chinese society, women stayed 'inside' the family and were responsible for the housework whilst men were linked with the 'outer' world of labour and public affairs (Hershatter, 2007). From the perspective of women's issues, paid employment became a landmark feature of female life in cities between 1949 and 1976 (Wang 2003, as cited in Hershatter, 2007). According to statistics from the UN (2000), China has one of the highest female labour participation rates of all nations. Short *et al.* (2002) conducted a survey in eight Chinese provinces and found that Chinese women tended to put work as a priority even after they had children. In China, even if a mother works, she is still the principal responsible party with the obligation to look after the child/ren. Traditional Chinese culture imposes greater requirements and pressure on a mother who is working. Working mothers may not have enough time and energy to meet the requirements of both work and family life. In other words, they must play the dual roles of both a professional woman and a good, caring mother. Such pressure and conflict directly affect their parenting patterns, such as the inclination to adopt physical punishment as part of the parenting style, which can influence children directly (Tang & Tang, 2001).

The other remarkable change in Chinese society was the imposition of the one-child policy. In

1978, China implemented the one-child policy, which changed family life and parenting patterns in China, especially in urban areas. The fertility rate decreased from six children per woman in 1970 to 1.8 per woman in 2003 (UNICEF, 2005) and to 1.44 by 2010. Chow and Chen (1994) discovered that parents with only one child were more likely to see their child as their only hope in life, and they put more emphasis on the importance of having children than other parents. Goh and Kuczynski (2010) also pointed out that “this child-centred orientation calls for family members, including grandparents, to channel and pool resources so as to ensure that only-children receive the best possible care”. The average number of family members in China decreased to 3.1 per family by 2010 (China Data Online, 2010). According to the sixth population census in 2010, the percentage of nuclear families among urban families rose from 55% in 2000 to 65% in 2010. At the same time, so-called DINK (‘double income, no kids’) families made up 3% of the total in 2000 and six times the number in 2010.

In addition to these two policy changes, another important dimension to consider is the dramatic change in the economic structure. Within less than three decades, China moved from a planned economy to a market-oriented one. Prior to economic reform in 1978, China did not have a labour market in the conventional sense (Xin, 2000). Instead, the central government exercised total control over every aspect of labour arrangements. Much has been written about the inherent problems of this job placement system; however, despite its problems, it provided workers with a sense of stability and security, such as housing, pension and medical care, and even children’s schooling was linked to a person’s work-unit. As the economic reform efforts intensified, the central government had to downsize state-owned enterprises to defer to a competitive labour market. Workers no longer benefited from the security of the ‘iron rice bowl’ once promised to them and they were forced to face the uncertainty and anxiety of unemployment (Price *et al.*, 2007). The rapid and otherwise unsettling transition of the economic reforms created powerful demands on individual workers and their families who had to cope with economic stress and uncertainty. One consequence of this was a heightened sense of anxiety in the working generation. Adult children used this unstable job market to justify enlisting help from the senior generation for child-care and household chores.

China is still experiencing rapid change at the macro level. These changes need to be taken into consideration when researching child-rearing and parenting. It is a good time to re-think child-rearing and parenting in China as the rapid changes in the macro environment discussed above are reshaping the dynamics of the family within individual households.

## 2.2.2 *Child Abuse and Maltreatment in the Context of Chinese History*

Child abuse/maltreatment is translated into Chinese as *ertong nuedai* (儿童虐待). As discussed previously, these two terms are used interchangeably in the literature, especially when they are translated into Chinese. The key Chinese term is 虐待 ('abuse'), which is a something which Chinese people are reluctant to mention. It is therefore necessary to make clear the implication of the two Chinese words which translate into 'abuse' in English from the perspective of Chinese culture.

The explanation in *Cihai* (a well-known Chinese dictionary) is that *nuedai* refers to a harsh and brutal act towards other people or animals. It assumes the existence of a subject and an object, which means dynamic behaviour from one party to the other. The word 虐 ('abuse') in the word group *nuedai* is the main one and 待 ('towards') is a subsidiary (a neuter word). Chinese characters consist of composite hieroglyphs. The upper part of 虐 is the upper part of 虎 ('tiger'), just like the claws of a tiger; the lower part refers to a human being. Therefore, the image of the word 虐 implies a state in which the tiger's claws hurt a person, meaning fierceness and inhumanity as a noun whose synonyms are brutality, cruelty and ferocity. However, with the development of Chinese characters, the word 虐 has been given other new meanings, including 'violent' and 'perilous' as an adjective, and 'abuse' and 'mistreat' as a verb.

It is evident that in the ancient Chinese cultural connotation, the word 'abuse' refers to excessive damage, which has been described as a state or behaviour of subjective hurt to others. The vicious connotation will not be accepted by Chinese people because the core idea of Chinese traditional culture is Confucianism, the golden mean, which advocates that man was born kind and honest. When abuse is associated with a child, people in Mainland China are less likely to accept that strict discipline to children is an act of cruelty.

The term 'child abuse' in the west is a broader concept, which includes any act or failure to act which harms a child. The WHO defines child abuse and child maltreatment as:

*all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.*  
(WHO, 2002, as cited in Qiao, 2005)

It is evident that the understanding of child abuse or child maltreatment as a Chinese traditional cultural concept is different from the definition accepted in western countries, which might still influence Chinese perceptions of child maltreatment and abuse nowadays.

### **2.2.3 Cultural Factors in China**

It is important to consider the cultural context in the previous research regarding parenting styles in a society. An example is a study by Lin and Fu (1990) who examined Caucasian-American, Chinese and immigrant Chinese parents. Their results showed that, in terms of parental control and academic achievement, the lowest rating was among the Caucasian-American mothers, the highest rating was among the Chinese mothers, and the immigrant Chinese mothers were in the middle. This finding shows that traditional values “deeply rooted in Confucian principles still have a great influence on Chinese child-rearing practices” (Lin & Fu, 1990).

Ruth Chao (2003) showed that in spite of the strictness of parents, children in China have good behaviour and achieve good grades. In Chinese culture, strictness means love and it has been regarded as the best parenting style. In addition, children showing respect to elders and to the family glory is deeply ingrained in Chinese cultural tradition.

Lei Lin and Huichang Chen (2005) showed that most societies contain huge cultural differences in parenting style. A nation’s cultural traditions, specific period of social characteristics and other social factors will affect the level of education. Wenxin Zhang (2001) compared the two types of parenting styles between urban and rural cultural backgrounds and found that parents’ educational background was different between urban and rural areas. The fathers in cities tended to have more emotional understanding and warmth towards their children. In regard to love and understanding, however, no discrepancies were found between mothers in urban areas and those in rural areas; however, they were found to be more severe, interfering, protective and punitive towards their children than the fathers were.

Leung (1998) found that Chinese mothers were rated as having a higher authoritarian style than Chinese fathers. This finding might help to prove what had been found during a Social Economic Status (SES) study in which a mother with a professional or business occupation background had a higher risk of assaulting her children (Wong *et al.*, 2009). Other scholars

have held different opinions. Yang *et al.* (2004) found that mothers seemed to be less compulsive or desirous of psychologically controlling their daughters than fathers, and various forms of aggression were linked with these differences in parenting.

### **2.2.3.1 The Influential Factor of Family Members' Relationships**

As previously discussed, the scale of the Chinese family is becoming smaller and smaller, and multi-child families have mostly been replaced by one-child families. Especially in China, the relationships between parents and children and one-child problems have been major social concerns for some time. It was believed that the one-child would be self-concerned as a consequence of being spoiled by parents and elders.

Interestingly, several studies (for example, Chen, 1994; Chen & Kaspar, 1997; Ho *et al.*, 1986) produced new findings: (a) on average, the one-child has a greater sense of self-respect and motivation to achieve motivation; (b) the one-child is more obedient and has a higher IQ than children who have siblings; and (c) the one-child is more likely to establish good relationships with peers. In China, there has been considerable controversy over the parenting of the one-child, but so far, no evidence exists to show that the one-child generation has become the self-centred and self-concerned little emperors that many people thought they would be (Chen & French, 2008).

Furthermore, the one-child in China and in western countries has better school results and a higher IQ than those who have siblings, and they are no different from those who have brothers or sisters in terms of personality. In addition, the one-child is less likely to feel anxious and depressed than those in multi-child families (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010).

### **2.2.4 Power Relationships inside the Family**

The family is the most common basic social organisation in human society and it is also an indispensable life-field for members of any society. Unequal power relationships exist within a family. Feminists pay close attention to the inequality between men and women within families, whereas those interested in children's rights are concerned about the unequal phenomenon in the inter-generational relations. This inter-generational inequality will directly affect the child's life and the protection of children's rights.

In modern society, although the father within a family no longer holds power over other member's lives and property, the power of adults to control their children still widely influences children's everyday life and their long-term interests.

The word 'parents' in Chinese represents the power of parents. 'Parent' (家长) refers to the ruler of the family, the governor of children's fate. The system in which parents own the governing power is a patriarchal system. In traditional Chinese society, the parent (specifically the father) is basically a dictator.

Parental power is often legally expressed as 'parental rights'. Although there are different definitions of parental rights, most definitions look on parental rights as a set of rights and obligations based on parents' status to control their offspring's childhood, including the rights and obligations for parents to look after, educate, control and protect minors.

From the perspective of the historical process of human society, family law has undergone a change from family-oriented family law to parent-based family law, and then to child-centred family law.

The relationship between parents and children in ancient Chinese society was that of family-oriented family law. The traditional Chinese family system was based on the patriarchal family, so that the power in a family was concentrated naturally in the hands of the male parent. This form of ownership showed its family ownership controlled by the male parent, rather than private ownership reflecting individual will. The *Book of Rites* says that "When parents are alive, the son (children) must not think the body is one's own and he should not maintain it as private property" (X. Zheng, 2003).

In traditional Chinese society, a father must be his son's model following the three cardinal guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife). Through the culture of **filial piety**, children were educated and encouraged to offer filial obedience to their parents. Un-filial behaviour was seen as a kind of sin, for which a severe punishment system was formed in earlier times. This kind of filial piety culture requires that children should give absolute obedience to their parents. The so-called filial culture is represented in the maxim that a "father need not be loving, but a son must not be un-filial; if a father asks his son to die, the son must follow the request", which shows that a father possesses an autocratic right to control his children (Z.G. Chen, 2005). The old filial piety culture became the main link for

maintaining family integrity and settling any conflicts within a family. At the same time, a patriarchal kinship system was established based on the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and sincerity), and the ethical relationship of filial piety was not only the main link for maintaining the internal relationships within a family, but also became an important means of maintaining a stable social order. This arrangement of the family's internal pecking order became the logical starting point for the class differences and mechanisms of rule in society. This patriarchal concept of integration of nation and family has been dominant in traditional Chinese culture. Because an individual does not have exclusive property, including his/her own body, it is not hard to understand why ancient China could not produce individualism (Guo, 2006).

Today, with the development of civil rights thinking and the introduction of the ideas of freedom and equality from modern western society, modern family ethics has many differences from traditional society. It has become the main target of a family to achieve personal happiness. From the perspective of forming the family unit, parents' love is the foundation of the family and the relationship between the parents and children is based on equality. The parents therefore enjoy the ownership of family property together and perform common parental rights which have transferred from solely the father to both parents and from dominant right to protective right. Parental rights are now not based on power but on the combination of rights and obligations.

With the increase of individual freedoms, modern western society's family structures gradually became equal. Parents share the rights of management and decision-making in family affairs and children have greater awareness and participation in the family. Domestic power has tended to be more diversified and decentralised. The traditional family internal form of power and authority in accordance with the principle of a fixed patriarchal clan relationship has lost its basis for existence and its moral basis in reality. Personal character and knowledge have become a source of family internal power and authority to develop a new pattern of the family. Father, mother and even children are likely to share jointly the authority of a modern family. The legislative purpose of the parental power system is turning to protecting the interests of minors. Parental power has shifted from the patriarchal towards an equal relationship of rights and obligations between parents and their children, which is the system of child-centred parental rights.

In traditional Chinese culture, however, the historical tradition and the influence of children as parents' private property still exists. In some families, parents still play a dominant role in decision-making over their children's affairs. The parents abuse their traditional rights, with the abuse often manifesting itself in two situations. One is to directly dominate and discipline their children, even to deprive them of living their life by imposing authority over them, and the other approach is to intervene and arrange children's everyday lives in the name of love (Sun, 2006). These two situations are slightly different, but both violate the rights of children and also influence a child's entire life (Sun, 2006).

Child abuse is one form of abuse of parental rights, which not only does the children physical damage at the hands of their parents or other adults by way of violence, but also causes mental trauma. Some parents, however, do not agree that their behaviour is responsible for damage to their children and have even claimed that their behaviour was motivated by love. Essentially, behind this kind of behaviour is the notion that they look on their minors as their own private property without being aware of a child's independent personality. So in the process of educating their children, they inadvertently cause harm to their children's bodies and hearts, which is in fact a kind of child abuse (Sun, 2006).

The 24 filial piety stories in ancient China promoted the traditional filial piety culture by which many protagonists damaged their children's interests and even sacrificed the lives of their children for the benefit of the parents themselves or for perceived morality and justice.

For a long time, children were treated as a creation of their parents' lives and as accessories in the minds of many adults, so that children are parents' private property and they can therefore freely hit, scold, insult and abuse their children. Hence, child abuse and damage still occurs again and again in Mainland China today.

For many parents, their love for their children is unconditional and needs nothing in return. If we give them a label of child abuse, the parents will certainly show their strong opposition. In many cases, it is this excessive intervention and doting which deprives children of their basic human rights and even makes them become parents' accessories in a relationship in which the parents and children are like Siamese twins (Chao, 2007). Excessive intervention will result in a parent-child integration, which will give parents a strong alternative sense of accomplishment. In fact, this behaviour will deprive children of their independent rights to participate in social life. Some parents impose their own values, standards and experience on



their children, give them too much protection or intervention, and design various activities or study contents for them. This way of parenting has always been described as intentionally ‘good’ for the child (a kind of ethical good); however, it does not consider the needs of the children. This abuse of rights will damage a child’s development physically and mentally.

### **2.2.5 Policy and Law in China**

The following articles from the Constitution relate to various Chinese laws in relation to child abuse protection.

**Article 49** of *The Constitution of the Peoples Republic of China* (1982) stipulates that “Marriage, family, and mother and child are protected by the state ... . Maltreatment of old people, women and children is prohibited”.

The Chinese government signed the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child and Child Survival, Protection and Development of the World Declaration* in September 1991. In the same year, the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Minors* was implemented.

**Article 10** of the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Minors* (1991) states that “The parents or other guardians of minors shall cultivate the minors in sound ideology and conduct by appropriate methods, guide them to undertake activities that are conducive to their physical and mental development, prevent and stop them from smoking, excessive drinking, leading a vagrant life, gambling, drug-taking or prostitution”.

At the same time, the law clearly stipulates the government’s obligations in relation to the abused child, and clearly defines its responsibilities.

**Article 43** is concerned with minors who wander about and go begging, or those who run away from their homes: “The civil affairs departments or other departments concerned shall take the responsibility for sending them back to their parents or other guardians; with regard to those whose parents or guardians cannot be located for the time being, the welfare organizations for children, established by the Civil Affairs Departments, shall accept and take care of them”.

**Article 70** is concerned with: “Where teaching and administrative staff members in schools, nurseries or kindergartens subject minor students or children to corporal punishment or

corporal punishment in disguised forms, and if the circumstances are serious, disciplinary sanctions shall be given by their units or the authorities at higher levels”.

This policy also mentions punishment methods in **Article 52**: “Whoever maltreats a minor family member in a vicious manner shall be investigated for criminal responsibility in accordance with the provisions in **Article 182** of the Criminal Law”.

“Judicial personnel, who, in violation of the rules or regulations for prison management, subject imprisoned minors to corporal punishment or maltreatment, shall be investigated for criminal responsibility in accordance with the provisions in **Article 189** of the Criminal Law.”

“Where a person has the obligation to support a minor but refuses to do so, and if the circumstances are flagrant, criminal responsibility shall be investigated in accordance with the provisions in **Article 183** of the Criminal Law.”

It is important to note that China in December 2015 passed the *Anti-Domestic Violence Law*, which formally took effect on 1 March 2016. In **Article 13**, it stipulated that the victim, his legal representative or near relative or any organizations and citizens have the right to report if they witness the domestic violence.

**Article 14** stipulates the mandatory reporting duty for some agencies. In **Article 35**, it stresses that if these organisations or agencies fail to report and cause serious consequences, “the person in charge directly responsible and other directly responsible personnel will also receive punishment”.

This law caused wide public awareness after it was established, as it makes a significant contribution to improving the child protection system in China. However, the operational steps need to be further refined and established, such as selection of the regulatory authorities and clarification of the specific method(s) of punishment.

From the policies set out above, which differ from the *Working Together* policy in the UK, the problems which emerge as being crucial for child abuse research are essential because they remain unacknowledged in China even though they state very clearly what the problems are for investigating child abuse protection, and it can be seen that nothing in this form exists in China.

## **2.2.6     *The Development and Organisational Context of Social Work***

Xia and Guo (2002) identified the three stages which social work has undergone since its introduction in China in the 1920s: introduction, abolition and reinstatement. The second stage (a consequence of the civil war and the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China) destroyed almost everything in Mainland China which had been established before 1937 (that is, before the Second World War), which included social work.

In 1979, the Ministry of Education in the People's Republic of China decided to resume the construction of Sociology as a subject for education, and social work courses were offered as Applied Sociology in several universities. The history of the development of social work in China is therefore only almost forty years old. In 1988, the Ministry of Civil Affairs gave one million yuan (£113,303) to Peking University to establish the first professional social work courses; however, they only provided academic qualifications at that time. In 1993, the China Youth University for Political Sciences established the first Department of Social Work. The Ministry of Civil Affairs approved the establishment of the Chinese Association of Social Work Education in 1994.

Since then, social work education in China has been progressively professionalised. In 2005, Chi (2005:371) wrote that there were “more than 150 registered programmes teaching social work in various universities and colleges in China”. However, few graduates from these courses worked in a social welfare setting due to there being specific routes to such posts and the fact that they did not have professional qualifications, merely academic ones. This situation continued until 2008, when the first Social Worker Qualification Examination was established and, as the government started to highlight the qualifications of social work practice, social work graduates began to find their positions in society. Even so, there were still many barriers to be faced along the way.

In China, most social services come under a government organisation. Chi (2005: 372) provided a list of departments, “the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Youth League, the Women's Federation, work units, street organisations and the Rehabilitative Federation”, but also stated that those organisations always “hire non-social-work trained people”. This was due to the fact that the government still had no clear awareness of the importance of professional training for social workers. It preferred to provide its own training but still could not assure the qualifications of the people doing the training.

Moreover, no particular department arranges and manages social workers; therefore, in China the number of social workers cannot meet the demands of society. The organisation needs professional social workers, but social work students have problems finding a relevant job.

Chi (2005) stated that government organisations needed to pay more attention to social stability and economic development in Mainland China, which meant that civil organisations and non-government organisations had the perfect opportunity to progress in different service fields. Actually, non-government organisations in China are still strictly controlled by the government, which means that few of them have the right to conduct money-raising events, but the government gives little funding to support them, which has led to it being hard for these civil organisations to exist.

Additionally, child abuse in China is not a popular topic and few people choose to research such themes; therefore, the relevant organisations required to solve the issues of child abuse are lacking and few social workers focus on this area. This present study will also explore social workers' perspectives on child abuse in the hope that from this research the findings will be able to influence current child protection policy and improve child protection services in China.

## **2.3 Conclusions**

In this chapter, based on the existing literature, the definition and relations between key concepts such as parenting, children and childhood, children's rights and child abuse have been explored. I have addressed the background to the changes in parenting patterns and families in China, examining a number of western theories on children's rights and empirical studies of parenting and child abuse in China. The aim of the present study is to explore the social construction of child maltreatment in China and to fulfil this aim the research will explore the culture-based perceptions of contemporary Chinese people on parenting styles, disciplinary practices and child maltreatment in China and will throw light on the controversial field surrounding it from the perspective of the cultural norm.

In conclusion, in this chapter, the underlying issues have been clarified and the implications for the research objectives have been established and justified.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

The overall aim of the present study is to make a unique contribution to existing knowledge on the concept of child abuse related to the controversial field of discipline and child abuse discussions in China by exploring what Chinese people consider to be appropriate and inappropriate parenting behaviours. To achieve this aim, data were collected from focus groups and in-depth interviews with vignettes.

Focus group meetings were held with the three groups of participants to examine their perceptions regarding child abuse and discipline in Mainland China. In addition, separate in-depth interviews were carried out with social work agency leaders to avoid them having any influence on the social workers' focus groups.

## Methodological Approach

As discussed in the previous chapter, child abuse is a continuum and a social constructed concept. So by exploring and analysing different perceptions from diverse groups in China, it was intended to determine how the concept of child maltreatment was regarded against the cultural background of Mainland China.

To fulfil this aim, the following concepts and research questions were explored.

First, the research explored the culturally based perceptions of contemporary Chinese people on parenting style, disciplinary practices and child maltreatment in China and clarified the controversial field surrounding it from the perspective of the cultural norm.

1. What do Chinese people consider to be appropriate and inappropriate parenting practices, and why? What would each group consider to be inappropriate parenting behaviours and why?
2. What are the differences and similarities in each group about their perceptions of parenting practices in China, and why?
3. What cultural norms affect Chinese people's perceptions of family discipline? Do age, gender, having child/ren or not, and professional working background contribute to

Chinese people's child-rearing perceptions and influence their definition of appropriate and inappropriate parenting behaviours?

4. What kinds of physical and emotional punishment (harm) would be considered as abuse in China? How do Chinese people understand the concept of child abuse?

The present study was situated within a social constructionist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Guba (1990), the purpose of the constructivist paradigm is “neither to predict and control the ‘real’ world nor to transform it but to reconstruct the ‘world’... in the minds of the constructors”. Lincoln and Guba (1985) further acknowledged that this philosophy was “idealist” that is, they assumed that the ‘real’ is a “construction in the minds of individuals”. The constructivist ontology is relativist and pluralist, “meaning there are multiple, often conflicting constructions and all are meaningful”. In utilising a constructivist epistemology which is subjectivist (Guba, 1990), this inquiry “begins with the issues or concerns of the participants and unfolds through a dialectical process” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This process involves interaction between the inquirer and respondent and includes analysis, critique, reiterations and re-analysis, which eventually lead to a joint construction of a case. Qualitative methods appear the most complementary and best fit to the constructivist paradigm, which espouses relativism, subjectivity and a dialectical process (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

As Bryman (1984) stated, “a researcher decides to approach the problem, and the problem at hand will determine the method”. Qualitative methods were the best choice to meet the research aim of the present study. First, qualitative methods “allow the researcher to listen to the views of the participants” and offer a comfortable space for the participants to express their thoughts freely, such as their office. Creswell (2002) commented that qualitative research methods are extraordinary for exploring under-aware research problems. As explained above, there has been little research carried out into the concepts behind parenting practice and child maltreatment in Mainland China. Furthermore, there has been limited research on different youth groups in China based on cultural background; this current study is therefore an exploratory study which uses the qualitative method, which is more suitable for exploring the understanding of these concepts of different groups, and for discovering the diversity and complexity of their understanding. Furthermore, qualitative methods allow the researcher to study the selected topic in depth and detail in order to conduct a detailed and profound qualitative inquiry; it also allows the researcher to “approach fieldwork without being

constrained by predetermined categories of analysis” (Parton, 1990).

Kerry Daly (1992) argued that qualitative research is more appropriate for studying sensitive topics. Liamputtong (2005) also stressed that the ‘flexibility’ and liquidity provided by qualitative research methods are very suitable for sensitive topics. The concept of child abuse and child maltreatment is sensitive for the majority of parents in Mainland China. One purpose of the present study was to listen to the viewpoints on child maltreatment among different groups and to compare and analyse these perspectives. Quantitative research methods would make it difficult to deliver the goal of the study. Also, we do not know whether some participants who “may experience real or potential harm and require special safeguards to ensure that their welfare and rights are protected” (Stone, 2003) would be willing to become involved in specific research of this kind. There may be participants who have experienced child abuse themselves. In a study related to child maltreatment, the necessary direct connection and deep understanding require the researcher to use qualitative methods, especially when there is the possibility of encountering some participants who may be harmed when faced with potentially upsetting questions.

The best method for an exploratory study of this kind is therefore qualitative research. Because of the cultural context, the time issues and the immediacy of going into the field, this study required a qualitative research methodology in the form of focus group discussions as well as in-depth interviews with vignettes.

### **3.1 Fieldwork (Focus Groups and Interviews with Vignettes)**

Vignettes and focus groups were the principal methods adopted in this research to collect data. Multi-method research is usually referred to as “data triangulation” (Patton, 2002) and it can increase the credibility of research and enrich its description.

#### ***3.1.1 Focus groups***

For the present study, the focus group methodology was chosen because it has several advantages which other qualitative data collection methods cannot provide. This method is not only more convenient than other research methods, but it also pays more attention to the contribution of knowledge construction made by the participants. First, in focus groups, the participants are encouraged to communicate with each other, not just to talk to the researcher. According to Berg (1995), focus groups can offer researchers information on specific topics

of interest and the discussion can also be led by the group members' interactions to completely different topics. In this way, researchers can participate in these discussions and observe the different interaction models which are used by group members when they are talking about different topics. Second, Latane, Williams and Harkins (1979) stated that focus groups provide an understanding of the range and depth of opinions, attitudes and beliefs. When group members meet to undertake impromptu discussions on issues, the results are often beyond the presuppositions made in advance by the researcher. Focus group discussions can make full use of the interactive relationship between group members to explore and discuss topics more deeply than individual interviews can because the participants can mutually complement and correct each other. The present study focussed on young adults regarding their perceptions of disciplinary strategies: whether they thought that behaviours are appropriate and whether they needed to seek help when experiencing problems. Group members might foster interesting discussions based on the differences and similarities in their thinking about the vignettes presented to stimulate the discussion.

Group discussions not only provide researchers with the personal opinions of each participant, they also provide collective explanations of specific things by specific people in a particular situation (Morgan, 1988). Many researchers therefore use focus group interviews to explore a more collective view of a problem from different groups. Houghton, Carroll and Odgers (1998) used focus groups to explore children's perceptions of alcohol and their awareness of the consequences of its use. Maiter, Alaggia and Trocmé (2004) also adopted focus groups with vignettes to measure Indian parents' perceptions of child maltreatment.

Although focus group interviews have all the advantages listed above, compared with other research methods, they also have their drawbacks. First, compared with an individual interview, optimising the opportunity for equal participation and controlling dominant participants are two of its critical weaknesses. Focus group interviews might inevitably attract outgoing and confident participants, which could lead to tensions between participants which might block the free flow of ideas within the group. So when participants are involved in discussions in such situations, they might not express their real ideas and some of them might even become nervous and upset. Also, misconceptions might occur if a participant is reluctant to argue with other people and express his or her own thoughts, or while discussing the topic requirements, disclosure might cause embarrassment to some participants if they feel pressured to share personal information (Berney *et al.*, 2005). Finally, Webb and Kevern (2001) suggested that if the intention is to discuss a simple 'pure' personal experience, focus groups are not appropriate



because the collective interactive seminar context can ‘contaminate’ personal experiences.

In short, focus groups can provide depth and a variety of opinions from different subgroups, especially relating to the interpretation of child abuse and understanding the Chinese way of parenting, which is appropriate for this current study considering the limitations of time and human involvement. Even so, it is not appropriate to discuss personal experiences inside focus groups especially related to sensitive topics. To compensate for the disadvantages related to focus groups, the vignette technique is the best supplementary format for sensitive topics and carefully prepared vignettes can be used to provide distance for participants and avoid the need to ask any direct questions regarding personal experiences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

### ***3.1.2 In-depth Interviews***

For this current study, four managers from social work agencies were interviewed independently. It was decided to employ the semi-structured interview approach to avoid revealing their influence on other general social workers. This technique was chosen to elicit the interviewees’ ideas and opinions more effectively (Fielding 1998b: 212).

The semi-structured interviews used the same vignettes as the focus groups. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), semi-structured interview can help interviewers to tailor their interviews freely to the context and to the people whom they are interviewing. At the same time, they also allow the interviewee to answer the questions in a relaxed and open way. The four interviews were pre-arranged to ensure a high response rate. Three female and one male social worker manager were recruited who had worked for a total of fifteen years in child protection, an average of four years per interviewee. In the following section, I shall explain the vignettes used for both the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews.

### ***3.1.3 Using Vignettes***

Barter and Renold (1999) maintained that the vignette technique is an approach which can arouse and explore people’s cognitive conception, attitudes and beliefs by means of “stories depicting vignettes and situations”. According to a large number of previous studies, researchers have utilised vignettes to explore different definitions of child maltreatment by assessing participants’ attitudes towards various parental behaviours (Dubowitz *et al.*, 1998; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Hong & Hong, 1991; Shor, 1998; 1999). For sensitive topics, researchers have applied the vignette technique to avoid the potential pain which can be caused

by discussion of direct experiences (Morris, Wheatley & Lees, 1994). Vignettes have also been used to compare the perceptions of diverse groups in previous studies. According to the research aims and questions of the present study to explore diverse groups' perceptions of parenting discipline and child maltreatment, vignettes were deemed to be the most suitable qualitative approach to be combined with focus groups. Wilkinson (1998) stated that vignettes have been a popular method used within focus groups by social researchers. Maclean (1999) recommended that vignettes encouraged even the quietest group members to discuss their opinions in focus groups. For a sensitive and cultural based research programme, using vignettes in the focus groups was the most appropriate method to adopt here. Designing vignettes which match a specific research purpose is one of the most challenging and important parts of any study, including the present one.

### **3.1.3.1 Design of the vignettes**

Two long and multi-staged developmental vignettes were constructed so that the interviews could become less personal and the focus was taken off child abuse to investigate the way that people perceived different cases in detail and to determine how much and in what ways people understood the behaviour of the two children or their parents in the vignettes and how they might deal with such situations themselves (*see* Appendix E). Brief case variations about potential abuse behaviours were used flexibly with questions about 'mitigating circumstances' during a pilot test to determine whether it was a good way to explore the participants' understanding of the controversial cases.

In these vignettes, there were two stages to a story related to controversial cases. They illustrated a range of dilemmas or decisions which parents or professionals had to make when difficulties arose. At each stage, the moderator asked a series of specific questions about what the participants thought that the parents (or others) should do when particular issues arose.

This invited some subjectivity regarding child-rearing practices in relation to child development and there was plenty of scope for choice by the participants themselves. The objective was to provide a basic description of the daily life of children and their behaviours and to identify what was most important to parents, their discipline strategies, their perception about harmful behaviours on child-rearing or their potential to report violent cases, if possible, and any particular areas of conflict or tension.

In this way, it was possible to explore a number of different elements which interact in the

discipline and upbringing of children, and thus the choices of discipline were close to the kind of situation that people would face in reality. Underlying the vignettes were a variety of issues: the choice of disciplinary methods, the child-rearing goal, the parents' role in a family and how parents think their reactions to their children affect children's behaviours (*see* Appendix C). They were constructed to "attract the interest of the respondents" and "stimulate their imagination" (Alexander & Becker, 1978; Finch & Mason, 1993). In addition, the characters and the story described were believable and contained realistic elements adopted from the media to elicit, in turn, participants' true feelings and an honest and frank response.

### **3.1.3.2 Case variations within the vignettes**

A series of short case variations regarding examples of potential abuse behaviours were also used in conjunction with the vignettes. These variations were developed to determine what behaviours Chinese people today might think are abusive to children and what are thought to be acceptable disciplinary strategies. These items were adopted and modified from previous studies in China and worldwide (Chan *et al.*, 2000; Chan *et al.*, 2002; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Hong & Hong, 1991; Tang, 1998). The researchers in these previous studies gave very detailed accounts of how they had set about locating public and professional views on child abuse or discipline. They asked a series of questions about what behaviour parents and professionals considered abusive and what they considered as normal and acceptable. In addition, they explored people's views on any circumstances which might be considered as mitigating the abusive quality of the behaviour (*see* Appendix C, Part 2). Questions regarding mitigating circumstances were tested during a pilot study in the present research to assist participants to respond clearly, with three categories for responses provided: 'discipline', 'can be abuse' and 'abuse'. According to the Child Discipline Module (UNICEF, 2010), the two categories of discipline which directly link with the two major categories of child abuse, namely physical abuse and emotional abuse, were represented in the case variations and participants were asked to judge specific behaviours (for an example, see Appendix C and Table 2.2).

After the pilot test, the study was modified and used with the main studies. In addition, it was decided that in the study it would not be appropriate to attempt to quantify the findings from the data, even in the case of the general public. The sampling numbers were too small to make any reliable statistical generalisation. The analysis results will therefore simply indicate where there were majority or minority views for descriptive purposes only.

### ***3.1.4 Methods: Data Collection***

#### **3.1.4.1 Selection of Participants**

The aim of the present study was to explore the perceptions of different sub-groups of young adults, young parents and professional social workers in Beijing on disciplinary practice and child maltreatment. The population for the study, therefore, had to consist of young adults, young parents and social workers.

#### **3.1.4.2 Definition of Sampling**

**Young adults:** There is no precise universal definition of a young adult (or ‘youth’). The General Assembly of the UN defines a young adult as a person in the age range of 15 to 24 years (including 15 and 24). The study of ‘child maltreatment’ or ‘harsh discipline’ is still an unfamiliar topic for the majority of Chinese people. As it is a sensitive topic, the present study explored people’s perceptions which might reflect personal experiences of negative parenting. Youth is an extremely stressful period for younger participants, such as teenagers under eighteen who still rely on their parents. The researcher therefore had to consider the ethical issues related to the ways in which this research might influence the emotions of high-school students.

College and university students are typical groups which were appropriate for inclusion in the study. Students, as young adults in colleges or universities, have just become freed from the discipline of their parents. Their experiences and concepts of parenting have undergone little influence from other social experiences. Furthermore, the decision to focus on this group was made to ensure a better understanding of the research purpose of the study. These students’ experiences of their childhood were very recent, since they had been growing up in China since the last years of the twentieth century. These groups, representing future parents and citizens, are likely to influence future social policies and norms (Flynn, 1998). The majority of college and university students are young and unmarried, with no child/ren as yet, and therefore are suitable to be considered in the hypothesis that people’s views on child-rearing might change after they become parents (Flynn, 1998).

For practical and ethical reasons, it was therefore decided to interview young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 in China. Table 3.1 shows the details of the Chinese educational levels.

#### **Educational level**

**Table 3.1 The General Education System in China**

<i>Education System</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Years of education</i>	<i>General age (years)</i>
<b>Pre-education</b>	Kindergarten	1–3 years	Under 6
	Pre-school	1 year	5 or 6
<b>Primary education</b>	Primary School	5–6 years (depends on provinces)	6–12
<b>Secondary education</b>	Junior Middle School	2–3 years (depends on provinces)	12–15
	Senior Middle School	3 years	15–18
	Secondary Vocational and Technical School	2–3 years (depends on school)	15–18
<b>High education</b>	College/Higher Vocational School	2–3 years (depends on school)	18 +
	University	4–5 years or more	18 +

**Young parents (with a child under twelve years old):** The under-twelve criterion was specified because of the Chinese educational system in which children over twelve go into junior middle school where they are generally considered adolescents in Mainland China. On the other hand, parents with children under twelve could participate in the discussion on the basis of their own parenting experiences, instead of on changed or lost memories. The study did not include any families in which the children were already teenagers because, based on the researcher’s own experiences and related research on child development, interaction between parents and teenagers is dynamic in an entirely different way and requires exploration in independent further studies.

**Social workers:** Social workers who had a connection with the child protection system or had worked closely with children were interviewed in order to understand their attitudes to the current system. Community social workers are the most basic level government officials in China. Their main job is to help to solve family issues in the community. Their perceptions are therefore significantly important because they will influence them in dealing with related cases because they are more likely to encounter harsh discipline and child maltreatment during their work. They are also first-line child protection providers in China. However, social workers only currently work in major cities. As they are more professional in child protection, their attitudes might differ from those of the general public.

**Number of focus groups:** The number of focus groups was determined primarily by the funding available and time constraints. The aim of the present study was to assess sub-groups in China to explore different perceptions of parenting practices, discipline and child maltreatment. In a family, the father and mother take on different responsibilities; therefore, to offer the participants a more comfortable, free-speaking environment, the focus groups with parents and university students were divided by gender. In addition, to take the gender diversity into account, the researcher recruited six focus groups of parents, comprising three groups with mothers and three with fathers (two from urban areas and one from rural areas). The young adults group was also divided into different genders, two focus groups of males and two of females. There were four focus groups with social workers and four in-depth individual interviews with their agency managers in order to avoid any influence by the managers on their staff. Each group contained six to eight people. In total, fourteen focus group meetings were held and four in-depth interviews were held with four participants. The participants' categories are shown in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2 Participants' Categories**

<b>Interview Participants</b>	<i>Social</i>		Manager	4 (in-depth interviews)	
	<i>Workers</i>	Working in child and teenager disciplinary areas	Staff	4–6 (four focus groups)	
<b>Focus group participants</b>				<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
	<i>University students</i>	18–24 years old		6–8 (two focus groups)	6–8 (two focus groups)
	<i>Young parents</i>	Children under twelve	Urban	6–8 (two focus groups)	6–8 (two focus groups)
			Rural	6–8 (one focus group)	6–8 (one focus groups)

**3.1.4.3 Location of the Research**

According to previous relevant studies in Mainland China, two factors have to be taken into consideration by a researcher when selecting a study region: “first, the place has to have typical Chinese features; second, it should be easy to recruit the target group in order to select the samples conveniently” (Wang, 2010). Although the current study could have involved respondents from various locations throughout China, this was not feasible owing to financial and time limitations, and would have been beyond the ability of a single researcher. Beijing city was therefore selected as the research site for a number of reasons:

- (1) The researcher had studied for her bachelor's degree in Beijing for four years and was therefore familiar with the universities, society, culture and other broader background knowledge there, which made it very convenient for her to collect research data.
- (2) Beijing, as the capital of China, has a long history and a brilliant cultural tradition. Many immigrant families of different backgrounds from all over the country work and live in Beijing. These advantages could help to collect rich and varying research data.
- (3) Moreover, Beijing has well-established community and social worker services; it would therefore be more convenient to find social workers involved in family issues.

In China, geographical differences can lead to significantly different results during a research programme. It must be remembered that China is a large country in which southern and northern cities have great differences in lifestyle.

### ***3.1.5 Sampling and Recruitment***

The approach taken to sampling did not specifically require the recruitment of young adults nationally. Rather, the aim was to recruit samples of young adults and social workers from different backgrounds to facilitate the exploration and representation of a wide range of perceptions. The study therefore employed a convenience sampling strategy of qualitative research and non-probability samples.

According to the initial plan, there were two guiding access methods for recruiting participants. The first method was to recruit appropriate participants from community Youth Clubs in Beijing. The Youth Club is a newly established service centre in each community in Beijing City. Currently, 350 Youth Clubs have been established. The aim of these clubs is to support young people aged from 16 to 35 within the community. Each club has at least two community officials in charge. The average population in each Beijing community is approximately 4,500 to 5,000 and contains people from different backgrounds, ages, regions and social levels. Each community has an officer who focuses on children's issues, and these officers helped the researcher to contact families with children younger than twelve.

Initially, letters explaining the purpose of the research study were sent to ten communities to inform them about the study and ask whether they had an interest in becoming involved in the field research. These ten communities were randomly selected from lists of government-updated Youth Clubs on the Beijing government website. The researcher then telephoned the



relevant community officials to discuss further what facilities would be needed (such as sending letters or emails with a consent form or information form to the youth group members and child protection officers), and whether the researcher would be allowed to use community activity rooms for the focus interviews. Once the communities had agreed to facilitate the study, the community officials were asked to help in distributing information packs to their residents in each community by email or by post to reach young people aged from 18 to 24 and parents who had children aged under twelve. The officials were then asked to contact these groups before they distributed the consent forms. This was easily undertaken because the officials had the contact numbers and general information of all residents in each community. Each pack contained an information sheet describing the study and a consent form which needed to be signed (*see* Appendix A). Each consent form was attached to a brief questionnaire asking the participants to provide basic social demographic details such as age, gender, educational background, whether they had a child and their preferred time-slot for attending a focus group.

The participants who agreed to participate in the research had to return the signed consent form to the researcher directly by email along with the completed demographic questionnaire. The researcher then categorised the participants using different characteristics to organise the focus groups into different communities. After the group and time had been decided, the researcher then contacted the participants who were willing to attend and informed them about the time and place. It should be noted that all the participant families had complied with the birth control regulations (one-child policy) and only had one child at home.

A second method was used to recruit the social workers. In China, no particular department arranges or manages social workers, so the number of social workers is still unclear and cannot meet the demands of society. Additionally, child abuse in China is not a popular topic, so the related organisations or positions required to solve the issues of child abuse are lacking and few social workers work in this area (Xia & Guo, 2002). Thus, to recruit social worker participants required selection by means of snowball sampling. Through connections such as friends, colleagues and other social workers, additional appropriate participants could be contacted.

The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and all groups of participants went through the same consent procedure: the information sheet was emailed or posted to each participant by the researcher or the community officer to introduce the basic ideas of the research study and the general process for carrying out the research. If any recipients were willing to take part

in this research, they were told that they could contact the researcher directly by mail with a completed demographic questionnaire or by telephone so that the researcher could question them orally about their information and fill out the form on their behalf. It was clearly stated on the information sheet that the researcher would respect the confidentiality of all participants, that they would not be named and that their permission would be sought before recording their discussions during the focus group anonymously as data for future analysis. Participants were asked to contact the researcher if they had any questions. For both approaches, the recruitment of participants was based on email and postal distribution of the information sheet and demographic questionnaire. The participants who responded to the researcher with their willingness to participate and who met the criteria were contacted and asked about the most convenient time for a meeting. The topics to be discussed were communicated to the participants and their consent was obtained in advance.

The main fieldwork was conducted between February and March 2015. Gaining access to the potential participants was more difficult than I had anticipated, and several changes were made to the recruitment strategies during the fieldwork process. The following sections outline these difficulties and changes to the methodology.

### **Young Adults**

The community officer was not able to recruit enough young people to attend the focus groups. My backup plan was to contact three universities to gain access to young adults. The recruitment message was sent out by teachers during undergraduates' lessons. Students who were willing to attend the focus groups contacted me directly after their lessons by telephone or email. In addition, the student service centres at the universities provided activity rooms as venues for the focus group meetings.

### **Parents**

Tapping into the networks of two key liaison persons to recruit parents, I outlined the criteria for my sample population and requested their help in recruiting potential research participants. They lived in very different communities. The residents of the first community were mainly university faculty members. The second community was a middle-class residential area. After the recruitment, I found that the participants from these two communities were all highly educated and from middle- or upper-class backgrounds in Beijing. Under these circumstances, I decided to add two parents' groups taken from rural areas. Through my personal network, I

was able to make contact with a village committee to help me to recruit parents in the village as participants for the additional focus groups.

### **Social Workers**

Because of my existing contacts and experience, it was not anticipated that it would be difficult to access professional social workers. Through five social work service agencies, I recruited 27 social workers in Beijing. During the first social work focus group meeting, I discovered that the social workers did not feel able to answer the questions freely when their manager was a member of the same group. After a discussion with my supervisor, we decided to interview the managers individually and retained the other social workers together in the focus group. I therefore conducted four social work focus group meetings and four separate manager interviews.

In total, I conducted fourteen focus group meetings and four individual manager interviews with a total of 91 participants. Each interview lasted approximately two to two and a half hours for the focus groups and one to one and a half hours for the individual interviews and they were all tape-recorded with the respondents' permission.

The times and places for all of the focus group meetings were discussed between the participants and the researcher, which made the research open to the participants' own agenda.

The four student focus group meetings were conducted in the university activity room, whereas two of the parents' focus group meetings took place in the village office, two were held in the office of a community residents' committee and the final two were held in the homes of their friends who had introduced them to me. The four social workers' focus group meetings and the four individual interviews were conducted at the social work agencies.

### ***3.1.6 Research Process***

During the focus group meetings, an introduction was made before the discussion started to ensure that the participants were fully aware of the research purposes, significance and expectations, as well as the anticipated trajectory and challenges of the research. Participants were asked to sign a consent form which provided them with basic information about the research and a reassurance that the discussion would be entirely confidential. They were told that the data used in the research report would be anonymised and that no individual identities would be revealed. The participants were given sufficient time to ask questions about the

process and the research before they signed the participation consent form.

### **(1) Research Consent Form**

Qualitative research attaches great importance to the informed consent or informed disagreement of the participants. A Research Consent Form for the current study was prepared beforehand and contained a brief introduction to the researcher's background and identity, the research focus, research purpose, research procedure, an interview invitation, the researcher's duty of confidentiality and the participants' rights (including the right to refuse to be interviewed or to leave the interview at any time without having to explain their reasons) (*see* Appendix B).

An English version of the consent form was prepared for and approved by the University's Ethical Review Committee. It was translated into Chinese to ensure that the participants were able to understand what they were agreeing to when they signed it.

An interview outline was used to guide the discussions, and the whole discussion was audio-taped and later transcribed. In addition, the focus group moderator took notes to collect interview data as a supplement to the tape recording, and the researcher recruited an assistant from a social work department at a university in China to facilitate the focus group data collection.

### **(2) Interview Outline and Themes**

The interview outline was designed for use with both the general public and the social workers; it was directly connected with the vignettes and also reflected the research questions and research purpose. Neither these questions nor the order of the questions were fixed. On the contrary, there was great flexibility for readjusting them during the interview process. The aim of the present study was to learn about how young adults and social workers explained particular behaviours and to elicit some concepts based on their thinking modes and attitudes.

Each focus group primarily focused on the following six themes: (1) appropriate parenting, inappropriate parenting and controversial cases, discussion about the behaviour choices in the vignettes, and their opinions on these cases to help them to express their true ideas; (2) the causes of the parenting behaviours and what influenced their reflection; (3) the sanctions of the community and help-seeking behaviour, discussing the expectations of social intervention or support from the community; (4) contextual and cultural issues of understanding childhood

and child/parent rights; (5) attitudes towards harsh parenting and the definition of maltreatment in the Chinese perception; and (6) anything else that the participants wanted to add or any other questions were discussed at the end of the focus group discussions (*see* Appendix E).

### **3.1.6.1 Procedure of the focus groups**

The meetings started with a brief introduction to each participant about the research purpose. The research consent form was given to them and each item was carefully explained orally. After obtaining their approval and permission to record the discussion, the participants were asked to sign the research consent form and the recorder was prepared to start the focus group. A vignette was used to explore their perceptions and also as an icebreaker for the subsequent discussion. The vignette was shown on PowerPoint slides and a printed version was also given to each participant. Then the moderator began the discussion from stage 1 of vignette 1. Each part of the vignette was discussed and questions were asked following the topic guide. Throughout the discussion, the moderator tried to elicit more information and to discuss and clarify questions raised by the participants. After the discussion of the vignette items, the final questions were discussed.

Each focus group discussion lasted for approximately two to two and half hours, which was long enough to probe and explore the questions raised by the participants. After approximately 65 minutes, there was a ten-minute break with refreshments. In the present study, participants could only take part in one focus group. The process undertaken is shown in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3 Focus Group Process**

<b>Process</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Timing (minutes)</b>
Introduction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To introduce the research purpose and the researcher</li> <li>2. To inform participants and obtain their agreement to the audio taping</li> <li>3. To prepare name badges showing a nickname or surname</li> </ol>	5
Vignettes	PowerPoint presentations	
Discussion 1: vignette 1	Physical discipline	30
Discussion 2: vignette 2	Psychological discipline	30
Refreshments	To relax the participants	10
Discussion 3	To explore the culture issues and the definition of child abuse in China	40
Ending	To thank the participants and to give follow-up contact details and any other related issues	5

The moderator helped to obtain the co-operation of each group by (a) allowing participants to choose the most appropriate time for group discussions, (b) providing name badges and

encouraging them to write down their surnames or pseudonyms and (c) providing simple refreshments. At the end of each group's discussion, the moderator gave each participant a thank-you card to express her gratitude.

The focus groups were primarily conducted in Mandarin. Apart from having the same cultural background as the group members, the researcher made careful preparations for her role, such as deciding how to choose an ethically appropriate manner when managing the different focus groups. As a social work student, the researcher was taught during her undergraduate and master's level courses how to conduct focus groups as well as how to be a group moderator who can lead a discussion without being overly dominant (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). At the suggestion of her supervisor, the researcher took part in a one-day focus group training session before the pilot study. In this way, the researcher learnt how to be a more effective group moderator.

Using the participants' descriptive demographic data, qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the focus group data with the vignettes. Data were then imported into the NVivo software program and different coding levels were applied to enable a detailed qualitative analysis. This will be further discussed in the data analysis section.

### ***3.1.7 Data Analysis and Presentation***

For the data analysis, the qualitative thematic analysis method was adopted to analyse open issues, especially the discussions of the focus groups based on the vignettes. Simple data analysis, such as importing data into SPSS software, was also conducted on the demographic data, which supplemented the qualitative data.

For the qualitative research, the researcher transcribed all the recordings into text and then translated them into English. This translation was then checked by a linguistic PhD student as a second independent person to identify any possible researcher bias or subjectivity. The data analysed in qualitative research are often a continuous and iterative process of data collection and suggested theories (Babbie, 1992). For data analysis, Qiao (2006) advised that "a researcher has to rely on existing theories to guide the description, understanding and interpretation of the phenomena being studied" (p.35). The presentation of the data therefore followed a descriptive framework rather than a theoretical framework.

Grounded theory, in terms of its value as a methodology, can not only produce theory, but also

roots data in the theory. Theory and data analysis involve interpretation; however, they must be laid on the systematic implementation of in-depth data obtained during the inquiry interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 2001). A central feature of grounded theory is the “constant comparative analysis” method. According to Glaser (1978), the method of constant comparison of data analysis generally consists of four stages.

The first stage is to code each occurrence (coding) and the researcher has to be able to encode the occurrence in the data to the same concept or create a new category or place the data into an existing category. Second, by constant comparison, the researcher has to integrate different conceptual categories and their properties. Third, by means of data analysis, the researcher removes the concepts and properties which are not related to the recently developed theory to focus on the central attributes of the theory. Fourth, from the coded data and memos, the researcher has to clear up the core subject and develop it into a new theory. This is an ongoing and long-term process. NVivo, a supplementary software program for qualitative research, was used during the research.

### **3.2 Ethical and Legal Issues**

As already explained, child maltreatment is not a familiar term to the Chinese and it is rarely used. Parents in the present study were likely to think that the term has nothing to do with them. It would be easy to cause participants, especially parents with children, to feel that they were being judged, and even to make them antipathetic. The fact that parents were informed that the research was focused on perceptions might have tended to link the behaviours which they were expected to discuss with their everyday parenting and as a result they might refuse to participate. The researcher had to maintain a very tactful manner when asking questions. This research study was designed in great detail, even including the tone of voice, in order to uncover discipline practices through how they understood the vignette cases, what they thought to be appropriate or inappropriate behaviour and so on, in order to avoid offending the participants.

This research study adhered strictly to the principle of voluntary participation. Interviews and recordings were only made after the signed consent of the participants had been obtained.

The subject of ethics has always been essential to research, especially in practical research. Ethical issues are a “paramount concern” (Barnes, 2008), especially given the extremely sensitive and emotive nature of the topic in the present case.



The way that the research data were handled had to conform to the *Data Protection Act*. In addition, the researcher consulted her supervisors, Dr Carol-Ann Hooper and Dr Andrew Hill, in regard to any ethical issues which arose.

The researcher strictly observed the commitments made to the participants and agreed to by their written consent:

- (1). The maintenance of privacy. The real names of the participants do not appear in the written report. The collected data will be kept strictly confidential.
- (2). The researcher took no initiative to touch on private issues. If the participants believed that the issue was a little offensive or private, they had the right to refuse to answer.
- (3). The focus group content was only for academic use.
- (4). At the end of the study, the researcher might request permission to destroy recording tapes and other data.
- (5). Participants were entitled to withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide any explanation.

### ***3.2.1 Informed Consent***

“Informed consent must be obtained when the risks of research are greater than the risks of everyday life. Where modest risk or harm is anticipated, informed consent must be obtained” (Bryman, 2008).

In the present study, the prospective participants were given as much information as might be needed for them to make an informed decision about whether or not they wished to participate. All the information was translated into Chinese and written clearly without the addition of any technical terms. An information sheet was handed out before the interview and covered the following aspects: the main aims of the research, the likely length of the interview, the sensitivity of the topic and what would happen to the data acquired. The participants were asked to sign a consent form to verify that they had read the information sheet, understood the research aims and were willing to take part in the study.

This consent form emphasised the participants’ rights as follows:

1. It was entirely their choice to take part.
2. They were free to refuse to answer any question without saying why.
3. They were free to withdraw at any time without saying why.
4. Whether they took part or not, the services which they received would not be affected.

The consent form had to be signed before the focus groups and in-depth interviews started in order to ensure that the participants understood the purpose of the interview and were willing for their answers to be recorded.

Each interviewee was allocated a code (English alphabet A-Z) so that none of the information gathered from the research could be linked with any participant's identifying data (such as name, date of birth or address).

All the acquired information, including interview notes, surveys, transcripts and contact details, was stored separately in a locked cabinet in a locked office. All details and documents were available only to the researcher and her supervisors. The information was not and will not be reported to anyone else. The participants were made aware of this on the consent form.

The consent form included the contact details of the researcher so that participants could contact her if they had any questions or concerns (*see* Appendix A).

### ***3.2.2 Measures to Eliminate or Minimise Potential Risks to Participants***

**Confidentiality:** A focus group has higher risks than other qualitative research methods in terms of confidentiality. The researcher therefore took the following steps to reduce the risks to participants. All of the participants were informed about the need for confidentiality before the focus group meetings began and were asked to promise not to share with others any part of the conversations that they had in the group unless this was agreed by all the other participants. The 'ground rules' of a focus group were discussed and written down on the activity room blackboard before the discussion commenced, especially the importance of confidentiality. They were reminded of this at the end of the focus group meetings. No personal details beyond a telephone number and email address were acquired from the members of the focus groups. These contact details for participants were kept confidential from people outside the group and from others within the group.

It was possible that participants might experience levels of stress, guilt, damage to self-esteem or anxiety as a consequence of discussing upsetting or sensitive topics, which might affect their consideration of their own personal experiences, including their awareness of child maltreatment and even their own childhood experiences. To minimise the risk of this, all questions were approved in advance by the University's Ethical Committee in York and they only focused on the perspectives of the Chinese participants and did not ask any questions about their personal experiences. Even so, the researcher understood that some sensitive topics might be raised during the discussions within the focus groups. The researcher guaranteed to respect the rights of the participants not to disclose information or answer questions which they deemed to be sensitive. If the researcher judged that a particular topic was causing distress, she moved on to another area of discussion.

As another precaution, the researcher was ready to provide contact numbers and information on appropriate agencies to the participants to avoid them suffering possible harm. If more serious cases were to occur, the researcher was able to contact Professor Jia at the Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT), who is a specialist in family therapy in Beijing. She was willing to help with any local cases which arose.

### ***3.2.3 Potential Benefits to Participants***

#### **(1) For young adults, parents and social workers**

Through the discussions, participants were able to learn new information about different parenting perceptions and the influences of and reasons for those perceptions in Chinese parenting.

By their participation in a group discussion, the participants could directly obtain relevant knowledge about Chinese children's parenting and child maltreatment, understand the different points of view on the problem held by different groups of people, and accept the differences between similar and different ideas by means of the brief report offered after the research. In terms of the indirect benefits for the participants, the researcher also explored their opinions on what kind of behaviours they would want to report and who they preferred to contact in such circumstances. They could contribute to an important debate and perhaps improve community services and protect their children's or their own safety and rights.

#### **(2) For social workers specifically**

Through the discussion among the community social workers and the brief report of the findings, the social workers obtained a better understanding of the different youth groups in the community, which would help them improve their knowledge related to work so that as social workers they would have an advantage when they might have to step in and help children and families. At the same time, the social workers should be able to have a better understanding of different perceptions of disciplinary practice to actively communicate with the residents of the community in order to be able to obtain their support and reach a real understanding of each other. This would then benefit the community social workers who could gather more knowledge to effectively guide their daily work dealing with families' maltreatment issues.

Generally speaking, the research participants were volunteers and came from Beijing city, so they were not expected to ask for any reimbursement of expenses. The research was based in the community, so there were no travel expenses incurred by the participants. Furthermore, in order to show my thanks to them I took various gifts such as thank-you cards for all the participants. If there were any child-care needs for young parent participants, they were met by the community child-care service situated close to the activity room in which the discussions took place.

In return for the community involvement, the researcher undertook to do one to two hours of volunteer service in each community. The researcher paid attention to the community service process, which was not related to the research topic or the research content.

### ***3.2.4 Protection of Personal Data***

During this research, a tape recorder was used to record the focus group discussions. The recordings were transferred to computer and deleted from the recorder immediately after the backup process. The tape recordings were saved to the University of York Server with a secured password lock to protect the data from being accessed by others. Only telephone numbers and email addresses were collected from the participants for the purpose of contact and communication. Records of personal details were kept securely in a locked drawer in Research Centre for Social Science (ReCSS) at the University of York when they were not in use.

Data were stored as both hard and soft copies. When the researcher was carrying out fieldwork in Beijing City, field notes and other hard copies of data were kept in manual files, which were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Only the principal investigator had the

keys to the locks. The soft copies were sent to and stored in the University of York Server through remote access. They were also securely stored on a USB stick, which was locked with a password to prevent unauthorised access to the field data. If the manual files had to be transferred from one place to another, they were wrapped carefully with wrapping paper and envelopes.

Back at the University of York, hard copies were stored in a box file which was securely stored in the researcher's locked drawer in a locked office in ReCSS at the University of York.

During the interview transfer, each interview note was allocated a code so that none of the information gathered from the research could be linked with any participant's identifying data. All information such as interview notes, surveys, transcripts and contact details were stored separately in a locked cabinet in a locked office. All details and documents were available only to the researcher and her supervisors. The information was not reported to anyone else.

Qualitative analysis involved direct quotations from participants when necessary. Use of data in the research report was anonymised using pseudonyms or symbols as explained above. Information which might reveal the identity of any of the participants was removed.

Publication of data did not allow the identification of individuals. Use of the data in the research report was anonymised using pseudonyms or symbols. Information which might reveal the identity of any of the participants was removed, except for cases when the use was authorised by the participant(s).

In short, the collected data were only used for the purpose of this research, and all the related data will be destroyed after this research has been finished.

### **3.3 Researcher's Standpoint and Reflections**

The validity of qualitative research refers to the acceptability and reliability of the research results. A number of factors which might influence the results need to be taken into consideration, of which the most important is researcher bias. As exploratory qualitative research should avoid personal bias, the researcher needed to constantly reflect on her standpoint during the entire research process.

In terms of child maltreatment (child abuse), it is common for parents in Chinese families to

beat and scold their children. They believe that this is so-called strict education. In westerners' definition of child abuse, however, this type of parenting style is precisely child abuse. According to this definition of the way that westerners interpret Chinese childhood, most adults in China have experienced child abuse as children. Some Chinese adults cannot forget the experience of the child abuse all their life. The present study therefore paid great attention to exploring the different perceptions of parenting practices and child maltreatment and it was concerned more with the Chinese cultural norm and its influence on people's perceptions.

According to some researchers (for example, Leung *et al.*, 1998; Wu *et al.*, 2002), the majority of Chinese parents are dictators when rearing their children. However, when the media publicised a series of cases of Tiger Mother, Wolf Father and Eagle Father, they triggered arguments at home and abroad. Many scholars and parents doubt whether this method of rearing children is child abuse or physical punishment. At the same time, many cases of inappropriate supervision have also emerged in China with children being injured as a consequence of being left alone at home. So how to rear children and help them to grow up healthily has been debated among parents. Whether it is harsh parenting, inappropriate parenting or child abuse/neglect, it has a significant influence on society.

The interviewees and the researcher lived during the same time. A researcher must be concerned with how to deal with reality and history, subjectivity and objectivity, all of which need the outlook and method of dialectical materialism so that we can treat history objectively, face up to reality scientifically and introspect in a correct and reasonable way.

The researcher stood on the same side as the younger generation to explore their perceptions on the issue under consideration. However, not only college students but also young parents were the objects of this study. As a single female with no child-rearing experiences, the researcher was closer to the college students but she tried to understand and study the young parents' standpoint gradually.

What was the researcher's own point of view? Can the researcher reproduce and understand the young adults' ideas objectively?

The debate on subjectivity and objectivity in social science research has gone on for many years. Positivism stresses the objectivity of research, which means that researchers should try to put aside any influence of their own beliefs. This idea, which has been dominant for a long time, has been criticised by many schools, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism

and constructivism (Vidieh, 1994). The view that researchers cannot be objective and wholly neutral is gradually being accepted. A researcher's personal condition, including life experience, gender, age, education background and values, is bound to affect the research process. A researcher's description, understanding and explanation of facts have some degree of subjectivity. Research is not only the cognition of facts but also a process of interaction and mutual understanding. In some respects, research is the intermediary between objectivism and subjectivism because it emphasises the empirical inquiry into social phenomena and the individual understanding and explanation of social phenomena as well (Chen, 2000). The understanding can neither be objective nor subjective. Both the listeners and the researchers must be alert to their experiences, values and explicit knowledge. The understanding of child abuse cases in western countries and Chinese child maltreatment knowledge led to the current researcher's prejudice. On the one hand, this 'prejudice' enables the researcher to have purpose in the process of cognition and to have the ability to accumulate knowledge and predict unknown information, which makes understanding possible (Ying, 1988); on the other hand, it might disturb the researcher's understanding and investigation. Although prejudice cannot be completely excluded, the possibility that the researcher's view might replace the interviewees' ideas had to be avoided so that the research would not lose its original meaning. The researcher was therefore vigilant and respected the views of the respondents, and searched for the results of the research with them together.

### **3.4 Credibility and Transferability of the Research**

How to judge the credibility of qualitative research has always been a fiercely debated issue in the academic world. Qualitative research attempts to explore people's cognition and definition of specific issues. It also describes and attempts to understand the interviewees' thinking, understanding and feeling. As a result, compared with quantitative research, the researcher who adopts qualitative research must judge the credibility of the research according to the standard of reliability (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility here refers to the research findings as well as the level of explanation and analysis.

The first concern is the credibility of the research data. For qualitative researchers, it is not only acquiring adequate research data that matters, but also important are the ways of obtaining them as well as their credibility. The collection of data in the present study varied in several

ways and through those different ways the data which were acquired complemented and tested itself, which in turn assures its credibility.

The second issue is the credibility of the way in which the research materials were analysed. As was discussed in the previous section, the researcher was objective in the process of collecting materials as well as analysing the data comprehensively, trying to avoid imposing her personal will, understanding or views on the participants.

At the same time, some participants might have noticed the intention of the researcher and therefore might have responded to that need and answered the questions in the way that they thought was expected of them. However, what qualitative research is concerned about is not whether the participants are telling the truth or not, but focusing on why they speak like this and what is the subjective intention and meaning behind what they say. The researcher bore this in mind during the process of collecting and analysing the data and exploring the reasons for those contradictive contents to reduce their influence on the quality and results of the research.

As an exploratory qualitative research study, this research used convenience sampling and the sample size was small; therefore, the results are very difficult to generalise based on the significance of the qualitative research. At the same time, in terms of the generalisability from a small sample to a large population, a statistical situation is created. However, this is not the goal of qualitative research. In this qualitative research study, the key goal was to explore the data from specific research groups in order to obtain an in-depth picture of their perceptions on parenting practices and child maltreatment, on which it provided accurate in-depth description or gave details and features, instead of providing 'typical' reasons or general results.

Therefore, transferability rather than generalisability will be discussed in this qualitative research study. Basically, we believe that our results may be relevant or applicable to other conditions and backgrounds. Of course, this statement requires some specific justification which is beyond our own research sites and the participants' cognition, and it always contains particular reasoning and speculation. The transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of qualitative research requires us to clearly describe and present the research content, process, study groups and so on. By interpreting and presenting the existing data, the researcher in this current case gave herself the right of explanation to all the people thinking about similar problems, so as to be able to make her own judgments about the context of the subject (Wallerstein, 1997).



Considering the discussion above, the results of the present study should not be generalised to all Chinese people or even to all social workers; however, the research results do have a level of transferability within the same kinds of group in the Beijing area. Furthermore, the experience of this research has laid the foundation for further research into the contemporary beliefs of young people and the definition of child maltreatment in China.

### **3.5 Limitations of the Research**

After the discussion of transferability, we come to the limitations of the present research study, especially considering the area and population of China as a whole.

Undoubtedly, due to the capability and experience of the researcher as well as the timing and environment of the research materials, any research has limitations. Even though the present study was a qualitative research study and the location selected was typical, it was still impossible to avoid deviations when the aim of the research is to explore the perceptions of young adults and social workers on parenting practices and maltreatment in China. There are conceptual differences between northern/southern and eastern/western China, and diversity between the Han nation and other ethnicities. Although the Han nation form 91.51% of the entire Chinese population (China, 2010), in the autonomous regions in Western China, such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet, the ethnic minorities form the major part of the population. The ethnic variations in the family concept and parenting attitudes may be very different from those of the Han nation; however, such differences were not taken into consideration in this research.

This research study explored Chinese cultural concepts and the modern western human rights concept. The field research methods were guided by these streams of theories. However, from an historical perspective, in addition to the preceding theories, there are many other concepts which have an influence on Chinese society in terms of parenting and child protection, such as religions (for example, Taoism and Buddhism). These concepts were not included in the theoretical framework and the design of the field research.

### **3.6 Reflections on the Fieldwork**

Before the interviews commenced, I discussed with each participant my research topic and my own background. I also reminded each participant that they should keep all the information confidential, especially when someone shared personal stories during the discussion.

It is important to develop trust and confidence between the researcher and those who are being researched when carrying out focus group discussions. Relationships are crucial in Chinese culture, particularly in terms of gaining access to and conducting focus groups. To have access to someone, a contact person whom the participants already know or whom they are likely to respect or accept as an authority should be identified. For that reason, an interview could not be set up without the intervention of a third party (a contact person) acting on the researcher's behalf. I tried to establish a rapport with the participants and to develop relationships characterised by openness and trust.

To this end, I first had an informal chat with the parents, exploring their relationship with the contact person and their family composition. I was often asked about my relationship with the contact person as well as my age, my career and my marital status. It is essential to make small talk with people before a detailed conversation can occur to establish trust, rapport and confidence with those with whom interviews are conducted.

Second, the focus on relationships was invariably underscored by the sharing of refreshments. Eating together is a sign of trust and friendship in Chinese culture. I prepared refreshments for each focus group because this is the Chinese way of building relationships.

Two vignettes were used to make the focus groups less personal and to put the focus on child abuse to investigate the way in which people perceive cases in some detail and to find out how much and in what ways the people understood the behaviour of the two cases depicted in the vignettes and how they might deal with them. This method was helpful for the participants to express their own views because these cases did not involve themselves, which meant that the parents expressed their opinions on child abuse more easily.

In relation to the professional participants, I thought that they could talk about 'real' situations based on their working experiences with children and their families. The focus group questions for them included an additional section about their work experiences and any relevant cases which they might have been faced with.

In addition to the tape recording, I also took notes during the focus group discussions, which helped me to make records of the participants' performance. A researcher should observe the performance of the participants during the entire focus group process. Their non-verbal presentation is as important as the words which are spoken. Some participants, especially parents, tried to hide their emotions, such as embarrassment or sadness, with laughter when they were describing their own battering behaviour or their battered experience in their childhood. Some young adults remained silent and appeared a little angry during the focus group discussions. The meanings which were expressed needed analysis and interpretation.

### **3.7 Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have explained at length the methodological approach chosen for this research study. I have explained the rationale for choosing the qualitative method with vignettes and focus groups. After that, the location and selection of the participants, their recruitment, the data collection process, ethical and legal issues, data analysis and presentation, the researcher's standpoint and introspection, the credibility and transferability of the findings and the research limitations have also been presented. Issues which arose during the fieldwork have been considered in the final part of this chapter as a reflection on the research method. The following three chapters will present the findings from the data analysis in detail.

# Chapter 4: The Meaning of Child Abuse

The focus of this chapter is an exploration of the culturally-based perceptions of parents, young adults and social workers on what types of behaviours constitute child abuse in China (physical and emotional). The meanings of child abuse constructed by each group are closely related to their understanding of appropriate and inappropriate parenting behaviour. Discussion of the cause, purpose, effect and attitude in terms of appropriate and inappropriate parenting behaviour will help us to interpret the controversial field surrounding disciplinary practices and child abuse in China from the perspective of cultural norms.

This chapter will be divided into three parts to answer the following questions. First, what did the participants consider to be appropriate and inappropriate parenting practices, and why? The perceptions of young parents, university students and social workers are presented in detail. The similarities and differences between and within these three groups' perceptions will also be discussed. Second, I shall explore how Chinese people construct child maltreatment and also explore the relation between the concepts of harsh discipline and child maltreatment. Third, based on ecological theory and by comparison of their perceptions, I shall further discuss how perceptions of child abuse are influenced by the surrounding environment in China, and finally I shall make a summary of those findings, and try to resolve the controversial field surrounding disciplinary practices and child abuse in China.

## 4.1 Profiles of the Participants

Before discussing the focus group data, a brief introduction of the participants and their background will be given as the context for their views and the research findings in this and the following chapter.

The main fieldwork was conducted between February and April 2015. In total, fourteen focus group meetings and four individual interviews were conducted involving 91 participants. Three types of participant were interviewed: university students, young parents and professional social workers.

## ***4.1.1 Characteristics of the Parent Participants***

### **4.1.1.1 Occupations of the Parent Informants**

The parent informants lived in very different communities. The residents of the first community were mainly university faculty members. The second community was a middle-class residential area. After the recruitment, it was discovered that all of the participants from these two communities were parents in Beijing who belonged to the middle or upper classes and had higher education. A separate group of parents from rural areas was then recruited and their information is also shown in the tables below.

Because of the particular characteristics of the first community, ten parent participants were teachers in a university. As can be seen from Tables 4.1 and 4.2, the remainder of the participants came from different occupational backgrounds. The occupational background of the parent participants from urban areas included police officers, managers, government officers, accountants and employees in service industries; however, from rural areas the participants were agricultural workers, farmers, company employees and housewives.

### **4.1.1.2 Educational Background of Parent Participants**

The educational backgrounds of the parent participants are shown in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. The non-urban parents were mainly primary school and secondary school graduates, whereas the urban parents were all above college level. The urban parent participants came mainly from my personal connections, since one of the two co-operating researchers was a teacher and the other a civil servant. They recruited participants from their own communities, one of which consisted of university teachers, the other, in terms of their economic background, belonged to the middle class. I had no broader choice as it is not easy to interview Chinese parents and, because of the sensitive topic of this research, parents with a higher education background are more likely to cooperate and share their experience of child education. Since child abuse is still a rather unfamiliar issue for Chinese parents, I personally expected that the more highly educated parents would have a better understanding of it. Being aware of the limited scope of my survey, I did use my personal connections to extend my research base to a number of non-urban parents, hoping to learn more about different views on the issue. However, I only managed to interview two non-urban groups for the reasons mentioned above.

The educational level of the parents from rural areas was mainly under junior high school. The

majority of parent participants were born in the 1970s and their ages ranged between 26 and 42. Only one father was already 50 years old.

In total, 36 parents were involved in the focus group interviews. Of these parents, nineteen were males and seventeen were females (*see* Tables 4.1 and 4.2).

**Table 4.1 Father Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education level</b>	<b>Child's age</b>	<b>Child's gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Urban/rural dimension</b>
A	38	PhD	4.5/2.5	Female	Teacher	Urban
B	50	PhD	12	Female	Teacher	Urban
C	37	MA	5	Male	Teacher	Urban
D	36	PhD	6	Male	Teacher	Urban
E	36	BA	5	Male	Manager	Urban
F	36	MA	3	Female	Teacher	Urban
G	41	BA	12	Female	Librarian	Urban
H	32	MA	5	Female	Policeman	Urban
I	33	MA	2.7	Female	Journalist	Urban
J	32	MA	2	Female	Technician	Urban
K	33	MA	3	Female	Doctor	Urban
L	33	BA	2.5	Female	Policeman	Urban
M	32	BA	5	Male	Researcher	Urban
N	28	HS	4	Female	Farmer	Rural
O	30	U MS	5	Male	Worker	Rural
P	33	U MS	2/12	F/M	Farmer	Rural
Q	34	U MS	12	Female	Self-employed	Rural
R	26	U MS	1/3	M/F	Worker	Rural
S	31	U MS	5/9	Male	Farmer	Rural

*HS =High School/ U MS=Under Middle School*

**Table 4.2 Mother Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education level</b>	<b>Child's age</b>	<b>Child's gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Urban/rural dimension</b>
A	34	MA	3.5	Male	Teacher	Urban
B	33	MA	5.5	Female	Civil servant	Urban
C	42	MA	9	Female	Teacher	Urban
D	33	College	2.5/4.5	Female	Librarian	Urban
E	41	BA	11	Female	Teacher	Urban
F	42	MA	14	Female	Teacher	Urban
G	36	MA	4	Female	Policeman	Urban
H	32	MA	3	Male	Researcher	Urban
I	36	PHD	5	Male	Military	Urban
J	36	PHD	5	Female	Civil servant	Urban
K	32	BA	5	Female	Doctor	Urban
L	31	U MS	4/12	F/M	Worker	Rural
M	27	U MS	7	Male	Farmer	Rural
N	25	U MS	2	Female	Housewife	Rural
O	40	U MS	14	Male	Worker	Rural
P	28	U MS	0.8/4	M/F	Housewife	Rural
Q	25	U MS	5	Female	Worker	Rural

*HS =High School/ U MS=Under Middle School*

### **4.1.1.3 Characteristics of the Young Adult Informants**

During the fieldwork, the community officer was not able to follow my initial plan to recruit enough young people to attend a focus group. My backup plan was to contact three universities to gain access to young adults. The recruitment message was distributed by teachers during undergraduates' lessons. Students who were willing to attend a focus group were invited to contact me directly after the lessons by phone or email. In addition, the student services centres at the universities provided an activity room for me to use as the focus group venue.

The 29 young adults who participated in the study were aged between eighteen (first-year undergraduates) and 24 (Master's students) (*see* Table 4.3).



**Table 4.3 Young Adult Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Community</b>
A	20	Male	BA	No	CTGU
B	18	Male	BS	No	CTGU
C	21	Female	BA	No	CTGU
D	22	Female	MA	No	CTGU
E	22	Male	MA	No	CTGU
F	23	Female	MA	No	CTGU
G	24	Male	MA	No	CTGU
H	24	Female	MA	No	CTGU
I	19	Female	BA	No	CTGU
J	23	Male	BA	No	CTGU
K	20	Male	BA	No	BTJU
L	22	Male	BA	No	BTJU
M	21	Male	BA	No	BTJU
N	19	Female	BA	No	BTJU
O	23	Male	BA	No	BTJU
P	22	Male	BA	No	BTJU
Q	20	Female	BA	No	BTJU
R	19	Male	BA	No	BTJU
S	20	Male	BA	No	BTJU
T	18	Female	BA	No	BTJU
U	18	Female	BA	No	BTJU
V	24	Male	MA	No	BIT
W	20	Female	BA	No	BIT
X	22	Male	BA	No	BIT
Y	20	Male	BA	No	BIT
Z	19	Male	BA	No	BIT
1	20	Female	BA	No	BIT
2	19	Male	BA	No	BIT
3	19	Female	BA	No	BIT

#### 4.1.1.4 Characteristics of the Professional Informants

To address the research questions, a total of 26 professional social workers were interviewed. Five social work agencies were chosen from which to recruit participants for the study (see Tables 4.4 and 4.5). These agencies focused on different disciplines related to child/teenager protection, such as community support, school counselling support and the judicial field.

**Table 4.4 Social Work Agencies**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Main Focus</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Area</b>
Miyun Social Work Agency	School support child/teenager cases	6	Miyun District
Qicaiyun Social Work Agency	Community family support (low-income families)	6	Chaoyang District
ZYHS Social Work Agency	Community youth club support	8	Daxin District
ZD Social Work Agency	Community support (homeless children)	4	Fengtai District
Chaoyue Social Work Agency	Teenagers involved in crime Judicial assistance	2	Haidian District

Before the formal interviews started, we had a chat for a while to get to know each other. The participants frequently asked me why I had decided to study abroad, particularly in England. Usually they told me that they wanted to be helpful for my research, asking me what I wanted to know. Because of our similar backgrounds, the majority of the participants were likely to feel able to trust me as the researcher, to relax when involved in a conversation and to share their ideas freely. After the focus group meetings were completed, I was asked about the situation regarding child protection and what issues were given attention in social work areas in Britain. They wanted to learn about the latest developments in Britain relating to child abuse issues. After finishing the focus group discussions, I often spent time discussing this with some of the informants.

For the professional social workers, the same vignettes as were used with the other groups were used to explore the participants' understanding of harsh discipline and child maltreatment. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, I also added several questions designed to explore their working experiences and the related child protection cases which they might have

experienced.

**Table 4.5 Social Worker Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
A	34	Female	BA	Yes	Miyun	Social Worker
B	37	Female	BA	Yes	Miyun	Social Worker (counsellor)
C	38	Female	BA	Yes	Miyun	Manager
D	26	Female	BA	No	Miyun	Social Worker
E	35	Female	BA	Yes	Miyun	Social Worker (counsellor)
F	26	Female	BA	No,	Miyun	Social Worker
G	22	Female	BA	No	Qicai	Social Worker
H	27	Female	MA	No	Qicai	Social Worker
I	27	Male	BA	No	Qicai	Social Worker
J	31	Female	BA	Yes	Qicai	Social Worker
K	XX	Female	BA	No	Qicai	Social Worker
L	XX	Female	College	Yes	Qicai	Social Worker
M	25	Female	BA	No	ZYHS	Social Worker
N	24	Female	College	Yes	ZYHS	Social Worker
O	24	Female	BA	No	ZYHS	Social Worker
P	28	Female	BA	No	ZYHS	Social Worker
Q	27	Female	BA	No	ZYHS	Social Worker
R	21	Female	BA	No	ZYHS	Social Worker
S	27	Female	BA	No	ZYHS	Social Worker
T	30	Female	BA	No	ZYHS	Social Worker
U	26	Female	BA	No	Chaoyue	Manager
V	26	Female	BA	No	Chaoyue	Social Worker
W	34	Male	BA	No	ZD	Manager
X	45	Male	BA	No	ZD	Manager
Y	39	Female	BA	Yes	ZD	Social Worker
Z	23	Female	BA	No	ZD	Social Worker

## 4.2 The Perceptions of Violent Parenting Behaviour

As discussed earlier in the literature review chapter, based on the influences of culture and environment, the meaning of ‘child abuse’ can be perceived differently in different countries (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Korbin, 2002). The word ‘abuse’ in the Chinese context contains extremely harsh and brutal meanings such that people in China do not wish to use this word to describe parenting behaviour. To explore the Chinese perceptions of child abuse, I shall start with a discussion of behavioural patterns (both physical and psychological) to determine what the participants considered appropriate and inappropriate parenting behaviours in China.

### 4.2.1 Physical Behaviour

Different behaviours which could be perceived as child abuse were presented in vignettes for the participants to discuss (*see* Appendix A). The following table shows the various behaviours which were discussed during the field research and the responses of the different participant groups.

**Table 4.2.1 Recognition as Physical Discipline or Abuse**

Discipline Behaviours	Students	Parents	Social Workers
Burning or more severe behaviour	Abuse	Abuse	Abuse
Smacking and hitting on the bottom	Could be abuse or discipline	Overwhelming majority of parents accepted as not abuse	Could be abuse or discipline
Caning	Abuse without hesitation (except for one participant)	Uncertain or even contradictory attitudes; all had experienced it themselves	Unacceptable; abuse
Slapping face/head	Some found it acceptable if done with good intention and not in public	Not disciplinary but shaming someone	Abusive behaviour regardless of any circumstances

Shaking	Uncertain	Uncertain; acceptable if done with good intention and not too hard	Uncertain
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### **Burning or severe physical behaviours**

All of the participants (students, parents and social workers) clearly identified ‘burning a child with cigarettes, hot water or other hot things’ as abusive behaviour without any hesitation:

*Serious physical injury is.... (child abuse), such as that case [a media case], the father showered the hot boiling water onto his daughter’s head. (Mother P)*

*There are some behaviours that may lead to child death. In kindergarten (they) use needles to prick the kids if they do not obey. (Father B)*

Only one mother from a rural area presented a different idea that:

*To burn a kid with a cigarette is (abuse), but to use a needle to prick a kid, it is not that harmful (to kids). (Rural mother M)*

However, other participants voiced disagreement with her opinion; they thought that these behaviours were too harsh and cruel.

This illustrated the bottom line for the participants of acknowledging child abuse behaviour that burning or other clearly severe physical harm was certainly abusive. The recognition of this bottom line of child abuse might change over time, and this is discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Smacking or hitting on the body with the bare hand**

Almost all participants considered smacking or hitting children with a bare hand as a discipline strategy, with no parents considering it as abuse. No significant difference was shown between mothers and fathers or urban and rural participants. Only one student disagreed with it, and categorised this behaviour as abuse. Interestingly, the social workers shared similar ideas to those of the students on this point.

According to the findings, all but three of the urban parents (two mothers and one father) declared that they battered their children. Some of them confessed that they had done it several times, with a rather high frequency. Similarly, rural parents admitted that they had done the same. It was clear that ‘hitting on the body’ was a common practice among the focus group participants. It was worth mentioning that many parents (especially urban parents) preferred to use euphemisms in the cases which they discussed, such as saying ‘*teaching him a lesson*’ or ‘*showing some muscle*’ instead of ‘battering’. The urban parents interviewed were more likely to feel embarrassed when talking about this issue and some of them laughed anxiously as they recalled battering their children and their own experience of being abused as a child. The rural parents were obviously less sensitive about word choice and felt more comfortable using words such as ‘hitting’, showing that they had to some extent rationalised the behaviour and considered the issue not to be embarrassing.

Mother F said that ‘*Being beaten and scolded as a child is actually our memory*’. Because most of the parents had had similar experiences, they would be more inclined to distinguish this into a reasonable spectrum and an unreasonable spectrum even if they did not agree with such parenting behaviour. Maybe to name it as abuse would change their relationship with their parents and the psychological attribution of this point is explored in the discussions chapter.

There were different parenting attitudes related to gender among the participants from rural areas. Rural parents shared a similar attitude that ‘boys should be treated more strictly than girls’. Mother N from a rural area stated that:

*Girls are obedient, and especially a dad always spoils his daughter. Boys are far naughtier. Every time when we are trying to teach him, he is always disobedient. Then we get angry and beat him.*

Most of the rural parents, especially fathers, said they would not beat their daughter: ‘*Even if she is not obedient, let her mum discipline her,*’ was said by rural father R. These causal factors behind the urban/rural gap and the gender gap on the attitudes towards beating a child are worth exploring.

Previous studies have explored the features of inter-generational transmission of severe physical violence in China and concluded that childhood witnessing of family violence may exert greater influences on the inter-generational cycle than experiencing childhood abuse personally (Liu & Wang, 2015). Even though the rural sample was quite limited, it appeared that the abuse experience might deter men from violence; however, witnessing violence appeared to foster acceptance in the women from rural areas. This will be analysed more deeply in the discussion chapter.

The vast majority of the students also believed that smacking and hitting by hand was a form of discipline strategy, not abuse. However, one of them strongly disagreed with this behaviour:

*I think all damage to children, no matter whether it is physical or mental, is abuse, therefore hitting and smacking also belong to it [abuse]. (Student W)*

The majority of the social workers shared similar ideas to those of the students, except for the social workers from the Miyun Centre who were also psychotherapists at a middle school. They discussed many child abuse cases which they had experienced, and emphasised the potential harm of hitting and smacking:

*I remembered once, a father brought his daughter to our Centre and asked us to educate her. He was really angry with the child and hit her in front of me. I stepped forward to dissuade him and also to protect the kid. I felt that the father struggled to control his anger to avoid hurting me (a stranger); he shouted at me to get out of his way. At that moment, I could feel the kid's fear and the mood that this father couldn't control. I think that when parents beat a child, they normally have strong emotions. Even though they do not use an instrument, they still find it hard to control their strength sometimes. (Social Worker C)*

From the discussions on this topic, it was discovered that the attitudes towards parents smacking or hitting a child with their bare hand varied between parents and young adults, which might relate to their position in the parental relationship and the generation difference caused by education or other general social developments which shaped their understanding. The attitudes of the social workers were similar to those of the young adults and whether this can be considered as progress in the social understanding of this behaviour will be discussed

in the next chapter.

### **Caning or kicking**

Whether caning or hitting the body with an instrument should be considered a form of abuse was argued intensively by the interviewees. As was previously illustrated, an overwhelming majority of the parents accepted that hitting a child with their hand on the buttocks, legs or palms was family discipline. However, this raised uncertainty or even contradictory attitudes towards whether it is child abuse to beat a child with an implement rather than the hand. In total, more than half of the participants (parents, social workers and students) considered this behaviour abusive regardless of any circumstances such as children's age, the seriousness of the injuries or parents' intention. However, there were still distinctions between groups.

Approximately two-thirds of the urban parents believed that caning was definitely child abuse, which is harmful to children:

*It is acceptable to smack children with the bare hand. Other means of hitting are unacceptable. We should not use an instrument to beat children. (Mother C)*

*It is too harsh in the example [the vignette]. (I only) smack them at most. We could not bear (to hurt them). (Father D)*

Even so, there were still approximately one-third of the urban parents who did not consider it as abuse, and two urban parents strongly argued that this behaviour was discipline, not abuse:

*There is no child abuse in my house. For the most, I would hit them on their bottoms or kick them. Abuse is what the guys did in the news reports. They kill kids. That's what they did. They punished naughty kids with needles in kindergartens, or they gave them sleeping pills, that's child abuse. .... It is not abuse educating your kids. And when I beat him, I don't torture him, I only let him feel a little pain, physically but not mentally, and that's for his own good. I love him with all my heart, and I feel sorry for it. I wish I could apologise to him but I cannot, otherwise the beating won't work. (Father M)*

It seems that Father M believed that serious abuse did not exist in everyday life, it was only in the extreme cases reported in the news or in the brutal damage inflicted on children by others.



If parents kick their children for their own good, with love in their hearts, according to this father, there would be no mental abuse at all.

There was also another opinion to explain why caning was not considered as abuse by Mother L:

*Biological parents would not maltreat their own child. Parents who actually do so are often mentally disturbed or abnormal. (Mother L)*

She tried to distance child abuse behaviours from 'normal' 'ordinary' families by distinguishing the biological parents from 'abnormal parents' who are often mentally disturbed parents, stepmothers and foster parents. It appeared that this helped her to justify her own parenting behaviours.

Although most of the interviewed parents stated clearly that they would not use a stick or a leather belt to beat their children, they did not think that this type of behaviour belonged in the category of child abuse; however, they placed hitting a child with an implement into the '*could be abuse*' category. Father W said:

*I don't think that it belongs to child abuse to beat one's child not heavily with a stick or a leather belt.*

It was clear that parents showed hesitant attitudes towards light physical punishment with implements, which might be because of their understanding that physical punishment with implements was acceptable and that it was an ordinary family discipline method. When the interviewed parents recalled their own childhood experiences, they all said that they had had experiences of being hit with a stick or a broom by their parents. Mother M said:

*My mother's education way was 'spare the rod, spoil the child'. My lasting impression is that my mother once hit me with a metre-long bamboo pole. The beating made the pole break into three pieces; (it was) only because I had stayed in the kitchen to take one more look at delicious dishes while my mother was cooking after work and she thought that my behaviour was ungracious. I was very young at that time and only a child before going to school. (Mother M)*

However, during the interviews parents also admitted that they would avoid using a stick or other implements to educate their own children, which suggested that the social construction of acceptance of physical punishments with implements was in transition.

More specifically, rural mothers illustrated higher acceptance of hitting a child with an implement than other groups of people. For example, one rural mother stated that she usually “*chao jia huo*” (*picked up an instrument*) to hit her child at home, especially when she was angry at the child. However, she pointed out that such behaviour should not directly be recognised as abuse: “*I am always violent and it is not just a one-day thing*” she said with an ironic smile.

This particular behaviour (hitting with an implement), however, was not accepted when it applied to girls in rural areas. In the focus group discussions, the majority of the rural fathers had had childhood experiences of being beaten with bamboo canes or sticks. Most of them stated that they would not treat their children in the same way unless they were too angry to control themselves. Conversely, the mothers from rural areas said that they had never or rarely been beaten in their childhood. The gender and urban/rural gaps here suggested the track of the transition of this social construction in that rural areas were often more conventional about physical punishments and that boys had had a higher chance of being punished with implements in the past.

From the perspectives of the young adults, half of the interviewed students put ‘beating with a tool’ into the category of abuse without hesitation, which was a clear difference from the older generations:

*I think it is child abuse. I have seen children beaten with a leather belt which was really very, very painful and it made me feel terrible. (Student 3)*

However, other students chose the ‘can be abuse’ option and one male student explained that:

*I made this allocation because when I was young, my father always beat me with a leather belt, but gave me only a few taps. The punishment was only a discipline, I think, but it can also be abuse, so I chose ‘probable’ because abuse should be defined according to the degree of being beaten. (Student V)*

Caning and burning a child seemed definitely to be considered unacceptable by the social workers. These actions were considered to be abusive by eighteen social workers regardless of any circumstances.

Two social workers, however, shared their worries and thought that caning or even kicking was a way to educate a child if it did not cause serious injuries or it only occurred occasionally. The following case cited by a social worker reveals that the frequency of abusive behaviour was a dominant consideration:

*I think, for [the difference between] child abuse and disciplinary action, child abuse takes place over a long period of time. I think if the act is a repetitive behaviour, it would be classified as child abuse. (Social Worker S)*

In conclusion, from the parents' perspective, being physically punished with implements but avoiding applying this method in family education personally showed a transformation of perceptions. From the perspectives of the young adults and the social workers, the young adults were more opposed to it because of their personal feelings and their education, whereas the social workers considered it unacceptable because of their professional ideology.

### **Shaking a child**

Over half of the students and parents were uncertain about whether shaking a child was abuse. For them, this behaviour was acceptable if the parents had good intentions, if it was not severe and if they could control their own temper, furthermore, whether the child was disobedient should also be considered. One parent said that:

*Shaking a child hard should not be done, but it's not abuse. It's usual for the parents to shake a child if he or she is being disobedient. (Mother F)*

In contemporary western societies, an understanding of the effects of shaking babies has developed. Several studies have pointed out that "head injuries from shaking are invisible" and that "babies can suffer permanent brain damage" (Carty & Ratcliffe, 1995; Shepherd & Sampson, 2000; Wheeler, 2003) Interestingly, only one female university student in the field research pointed out that shaking a child could have different results depending on the age of

the child.

The social workers showed little difference from the parents or the young adults on the recognition of the risks of shaking a child. Social workers should understand and recognise behaviour that can damage a child. Most of the social workers' attitudes towards this action were affected by the severity, frequency, parental or adults' intentions, the age of child or the level of controlled parental emotion:

*Whether it is abuse is judged on the age of the child or the frequency of its occurrence, but if possible, shaking a baby shouldn't be allowed. (Student F)*

In summary, it seems from the comments made by the interviewees that current Chinese society has little understanding of the harm of shaking a child, irrespective of whether they were parents, young adults or social workers. It is clear that more education about this issue and the promotion of care regarding children in this respect are required.

### **Slapping on the face or head**

Slapping was considered to be a harmful behaviour compared with shaking a child because marks were often caused and children were often ashamed of these marks. In traditional Chinese culture, slapping on the face may "not be considered to be a disciplinary measure but a method of shaming someone" (Qiao & Chan, 2005). The participants expressed similar views and believed that this behaviour might have greater potential to cause emotional damage than other actions.

One female student said that:

*It's quite bad, especially for a girl. She would feel so embarrassed. (Student T)*

Another young female adult had a similar idea:

*Hitting a child on the face, especially slapping, should not be done. It would hurt the children's feelings badly, and also could leave a mark on the face. (Student H)*

Despite these examples of views opposed to slapping, some of the young adults thought that

slapping could be acceptable when the parents had good intentions, when it happened infrequently or when the child was disobedient, but it should not happen in public:

*If they slap me in front of others, I would be mad, I think. (Student N)*

*I still remember that feeling of shame. (She was slapped in front of the extended family)  
(Student Y)*

The students and parents interviewed regarded slapping or caning as a reasonable way of administering discipline; they regarded it to be more acceptable if the child is disobedient, if it happens infrequently, if it is not too hard, if the child knows the reason why he/she is being punished, if the adult is not under stress and if the adult has good intentions.

Only two of the students stated that their parents had never beaten them and both were girls.

In terms of slapping a child on the face, the findings from the focus groups showed that different respondents tended to understand it differently, especially related to the social worker's number of working years, educational background and position. Most of the front-line social workers, especially those who were involved in cases related to family issues, believed it to be abusive behaviour regardless of any circumstances, whereas for other social workers there were several mitigating circumstances ranging from when it happens infrequently to when it is not severe:

*I think that slapping is child abuse. Compared with shaking, slapping brings a greater psychological harm to children. It's never acceptable. It hurts children's feelings badly, makes them ashamed, or it may even cause physical harm. It could be done with uncontrolled parental anger or temper so I think it would be abuse. (Social worker R)*

*It lowers a child's self-esteem. This is not good for the child. But it happens between parents and children in everyday life. Sometimes parents slap their child's face, as they are only human. It happens accidentally, in error or as a result of parents losing control. I think if the child has no mark on her/his face, it is forgivable. (Social worker U)*

In conclusion, most of the interviewees considered that slapping on the face was not an

acceptable family discipline method since it was more humiliating than educating.

### **Other methods**

In addition to the behaviours discussed above, all of the social workers, parents and young adults mentioned or made accusatory comments about teachers' punitive actions in schools.

*Some teachers beat their pupils' palms with a ruler. (Father L)*

*When I was in elementary school, my teacher once punished me by making me frog jump fifty times, which was a serious punishment. (Mother Q)*

*I remember when I was a child, the teacher asked me to run round the school for a long time as a punishment (I cannot quite remember how long it was), which, I think, is an abuse. In addition, I once was punished by [being made to do] writing, writing many times, about 100 times. This was what my teacher did. (Student I)*

*Our teacher punished his pupils by pulling them by the ear. (Student C)*

Common methods of discipline reported by the respondents included punitive measures such as standing in the corner and being hit on the buttocks, legs or palms with an object or with bare hands. The vast majority of young adults accepted these as basic disciplinary actions. Almost every male participant had been caned at least once. However, although it was regarded as culturally acceptable under certain circumstances, it was considered abusive if it occurred for a long time, with no good reason or no good intention.

There was also a belief among the interviewees that children must be trained to obey. Qiao and Chan (2005: 293) found that Chinese children are trained to "accept their parents' beating as necessary and beneficial to them". In this way, they are taught that parents show love and affection to their children by using physical punishment. Understanding this is important because it means that parents are not blamed for meting out physical punishment. Especially in rural areas, many of the parents interviewed endorsed these traditional values. They reported that physical punishment was used to teach children to be good and was often quite severe:

*The younger one [aged 30 months] is being very stubborn these days, so I smack her from time to time. I do it whenever I feel that she is being too much, but most of the time I try to resolve the situation with verbal communication. (Father D)*

Very recently, however, there has been some public debate questioning this attitude (The Wall

Street Journal 2014). There is growing concern about what level of punishment is seen as acceptable or unacceptable, especially in urban areas.

The social workers also mentioned other serious cases during the focus group meetings, such as parents authorising teachers or other members of the school staff to beat their children heavily, and sometimes this might lead to a child’s death. Even though such cases are beyond the research scope here, this is an issue which merits deeper exploration in the future.

#### **4.2.2 Psychological behaviour**

There was a huge difference in the attitudes towards actions related to emotional abuse between the parents and the young adults. In general, the social workers had similar perceptions to those of young adults. However, for the group of social workers themselves, there were definite differences within the group, so I shall discuss them separately. I shall start by discussing the views of the parents and young adults.

**Table 4.2.2 Recognition of Psychological Discipline as Abuse**

<b>Discipline Behaviours</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Social Workers</b>
<b>Cursing/Calling names</b>	Not acceptable; can be abuse	Not acceptable, but sometimes they scolded their child	Not acceptable; can be abuse
<b>Tell him/her that others are better</b>	Strong dislike but not abuse	Practised frequently; reluctant to acknowledge it was abuse	Comparisons would motivate children to do better
<b>Constantly screaming or threatening physical punishment</b>	Mixed attitudes	Mixed attitudes	Acceptable if they happen infrequently or with good intentions
<b>Threatening to abandon</b>	Unacceptable	Most serious; more than half considered it as abusive	Unacceptable

Silent treatment/ withholding love	Unacceptable	Disciplinary strategy	A problem which is not responsive to children's emotional needs
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#### 4.2.2.1 Parents and Young Adults

The first overwhelming impression of the findings was that the young adult group considered emotional harm to be far more serious than the parents' group did. Compared with physical actions, the young adults were strongly opposed to the infliction of psychological harm.

*Emotional abuse is far worse than burning a child.* (Father N)

*Caning only hurts our body, the pain can be endured; but the wound in our heart is actually difficult to heal.* (Mother D)

The terms 'silent treatment', 'withholding love' and 'threatening to abandon' were seen as unacceptable by most of the young adults because these three actions would easily cause children to feel distanced from their parents and children may worry about 'whether their parents still love them'.

An interesting comparison was made between a child and a potted plant; Student I explained that "*if I bought a potted plant but did not water the flower, after a long time, the flower would die; it is the same for children: even though children might not die, if you do not show them your love, it would cause huge damage to the children*".

Parents did not share the same opinions. 'Silent treatment' was seen as a disciplinary strategy by most of the urban parents. They tended to interpret their 'silent war' with good intentions, such as showing their children the difference between right and wrong. Student S said that "*It just a way to let a child know that I am angry about his mistakes*". In addition, he said that he would choose silent treatment to replace harsher physical discipline.

Parents from rural areas, however, seemed to prefer to scold their children rather than give them the silent treatment. They frequently used the word *shanghuo* ('get angry') which indicated that they might have less control over their temper and would like to choose a more



direct punitive method for their children.

‘Withholding love’ was another issue which received significant differences of opinion between the parents and the young adults. The parents explained that to ‘withhold love’ does not mean ‘not to love’ the child; it is simply a different form of expression. Most of the fathers especially considered this behaviour to be ‘acceptable’. In Confucian ethics, the father normally is *yi jia zhi zhu* (‘head of the household’). Perhaps, due to the influence of traditional Chinese culture, the father appears as a powerful traditional male authoritative figure in family education, and the male social image also encourages fathers to show less emotion and to maintain a distance from family members (Fei, 2003). This might lead fathers to consider that withholding love is acceptable.

The rural parents appeared less concerned about psychological harm than the urban parents:

*Giving too many hugs is not right, emotionally. It could become too tough for the parents. It makes the child too sensitive. They grow too attached to people, and become anxious when they are alone. They should be left alone to play on their own, and their parents can play with them from time to time. People are not used to hugging. They could pat the child’s head maybe instead of hugging. Not showing any affection at all is abuse. (Rural Mother Q)*

In the parents’ perceptions, the most serious term in the emotional category was ‘threatening to abandon’: over half of the parents considered this to be abuse. Some parents explained that they might “*make a joke with their children about abandoning them sometimes, but never take it seriously*” (Father K).

### **Comparisons**

When confronted with ‘comparisons’ (meaning comparing their children with other children), the parents had a dilemma because they recognised this as a form of behaviour which they themselves practised frequently and they were reluctant to acknowledge it as a form of abuse. They attempted to minimise the action by making light of it when they discussed it:

*Comparison comments are normal in a Chinese family. (Mother M)*

*Sometimes I feel that some words are quite normal, because I perhaps really said these words sometimes, such as 'You know how well the other children have done!' (Father A)*

Some parents explained that comparison is 'just a person's normal reaction' and they tried to normalise this behaviour: "*Many Chinese parents will speak like that, so I think it is discipline*" (Father B; Mother D).

Only one parent talked about his own personal experience regarding comparison during his childhood. Father C said that,

*During my childhood, my mother said once to me, 'How good the children in that family are!' I told her, 'You may go over to be their mother'. Since then, my mom never said anything like that again. So I generally will not use someone else's child to compare with my child.*

After he told us this, you could feel the embarrassment among the focus group members, so much so that the parents changed the topic immediately. In my opinion, I think that the parents felt embarrassed because they had had the experience of being compared with others and they themselves did not agree with the behaviour of comparison. However, comments like this are still made unconsciously and frequently by Chinese parents to discipline their children.

Almost all of the younger participants said that they had experienced being compared with others, because when they are disciplining their children, Chinese parents always comment on how good the children in other families are. In Chinese slang, a new expression has been added: 'other people's children', which means a child's natural enemy, the child often used by the parents to compare with their own child. It is clear that comparing children with others as part of parenting in China is a very common phenomenon.

Although most of the students did not place this form of behaviour into the category of abuse, they showed a very strong dislike and contradictory emotions regarding such behaviour during their discussion:

*I think it is child abuse. It is a kind of psycho-pathological for someone to compare his or her own children with others. Anyway, I especially dislike it. As long as my mother*

*compared me with others, I would absolutely quarrel with her because it will create a mental state of being compared with others, so that it seems that anything I do is not as good as others' (mentality). This will harm a child's development and self-confidence. (Student B)*

*I think it may be abuse. If someone occasionally says it once, it is OK. If you always speak like that, a child will feel inferior, which is particularly bad. (Student A)*

### **Threatening physical punishment**

The biggest division was found to be the choice of making a threat to beat children. Half of the students in the groups believed that this is not good, and half of them could accept it because they thought that, after all, parents would not actually go through with the threatened action.

The difference of opinion over this item was very obvious in the two parents' groups. More than half of the mothers thought that it was child abuse to often shout at children or to consistently threaten to beat them, and two-thirds of the fathers thought that this behaviour belonged in the disciplinary behaviour category. It could be argued that they had such a big difference mainly because a father in a family would take action to beat children or would threaten to smack them. Therefore, the fathers tended to rationalise the behaviour more than the mothers.

### **Cursing/calling names**

The only similar choice between the young adults and the parents was the use of vulgar language (such as cursing children or calling them names). Even though the parents sometimes scolded their child, they considered it unacceptable to use extremely harsh words or for it to happen frequently:

*Calling children a fool or stupid is definitely abuse. It would hurt the child's pride very badly, and it is really bad for the development of her/his character. (Father C)*

#### **4.2.2.2 Social Workers**

As with the young adults group, over two thirds of the professionals regarded three actions as

abuse: 'silent treatment', 'threatening to abandon' and 'using vulgar language'. However, some of the professionals held different views about whether such behaviour was abusive depending on the basis of the parental intentions and the age of the child.

Apart from the three actions listed above, however, most of the participants did not rate any of the other actions as being clearly abusive. There was a great deal of variation in how the various actions were judged.

With regard to threatening physical punishment and calling a child useless, some mitigating circumstances were suggested by most of the professionals. These actions were considered acceptable if they happened infrequently or if parents had good intentions for education and discipline:

*Basically this (threatening) is a very effective way of educating children. Of course, I agree that there can be some exceptions. For example, if it happens too often, or if it is done with a bad intention it would be considered to be child abuse. (Social Worker L)*

Although many of the professionals agreed with the assumption that the Chinese are not in the habit of showing love to their children, never hugging them and withholding love were seen as problems by these participants. It was believed to show unresponsiveness to a child's basic emotional needs.

During the discussion of the second vignette, most of the professionals believed that making a child study for a long time was acceptable if the parents had good intentions or if the child was older. Such discussions are perhaps not surprising given the fact that, as discussed in the young adult interviews, parental concern is mainly about their children's academic performance. The professionals seemed to accept the legitimacy of parental concern about their children's academic performance and were therefore unlikely to regard demanding study schedules as abusive.

Similarly, the respondents might have felt that comparisons would motivate children to perform better. It appeared that making a child feel inferior to others and calling a child useless were understandable if they were employed infrequently and if they were done out of good intentions:

*Many parents do it frequently. Generally, it is used to encourage and motivate their children and sometimes it works. (Social Worker M)*

Only social workers from the Miyun and Caoyue agencies were deeply concerned about making comparisons. They mentioned a series of cases which they had been involved in and they had found that children would “suffer from the comparisons and will have low self-esteem”.

Overall, even within the professional groups, there was no consistency in their responses to the actions explored and they held a variety of opinions on behaviour suggesting emotional abuse. To some extent, these actions described as emotional abuse were regarded as a reasonable means by which undesirable behaviour might be controlled.

## 4.3 The Attributes of Child Abuse

### 4.3.1 Introduction

According to the literature review, there is no consensus definition of child abuse established in China. The word ‘abuse’ in China contains extremely harsh and brutal meanings such that people in China do not wish to use this word to describe parenting behaviour. During the focus group meetings and the interviews, the participants had only a very vague and unclear concept about what constituted child abuse. Mainly, the participants found it hard to offer definitions or explanations; some participants thought that child abuse behaviour was difficult to generalise because it depended on the specific situation. Through analysing the collected data, it was discovered that the participants tended to distinguish whether or not a behaviour was child abuse from the following two aspects: by judging the motivation or intention of the behaviour, and by the result or harm of the specific act. Those two major attributes emerged from all transcripts; however, there were still subtle differences in each group. In the following sections, I shall discuss the similarities and differences of these two attributes in different participant groups.

### 4.3.2 Distinguished by Intentions

#### Parents’ perception

Nearly 60% of the parents believed that when the purpose and motive of parenting behaviours were reasonable, for example, to teach a child right and wrong, then the behaviour was not abuse. They judged parenting behaviours on the basis of the purpose, motive and reasons. In a focus group meeting, Father G presented a typical view:

*There is no child abuse in my house. For the most, I would hit them on their bottoms or kick them. .... It is not abuse educating your kids. And when I beat him, I don't torture him, I only let him feel a little pain, physically but not mentally, and that's for his own good. I love him with all my heart, and I feel sorry for it. I wish I could apologise to him but I cannot, otherwise the beating won't work.*

So if parents smack their children for their own good, with love in their hearts, according to this father, there would be no mental abuse at all. A distinctive perception of parents shown

was that no child abuse would occur if parents disciplined their children with good intentions.

In contrast, it was believed that if parents had a bad purpose or intention, then their behaviours might be considered to be child abuse. Bad intentions often refer to intentions to hurt, torture or kill a child. Father G also said:

*Abuse is what the guys did in the news reports. They kill kids. That's what they did. They punished naughty kids with needles in kindergartens, or they gave them sleeping pills; that's child abuse.*

From Father G's perspective, serious abuse did not exist in everyday life, it was only in the extreme cases reported in the news or the brutal damage inflicted on children by others.

Another example of perceptions related to bad intentions was provided by Mother Q when she expressed her understanding of reasons of child abuse; she had a similar opinion but added to the conditions of child abuse that

*Biological parents would not maltreat their own child. Parents who actually do so are often mentally disturbed or abnormal. (Mother Q)*

From her point of view, biological parents would not maltreat their own children; parents who hurt a child seriously are most probably mentally disturbed. She found it hard to understand maltreatment behaviour in parental mind-sets, except in the case of a stepmother or foster parents. Many parents in her focus groups agreed with her perceptions. This point of view emphasised the legitimacy of parenting. Parents had been divided into 'normal' and 'deviant' groups. They labelled the 'deviant' parent group as that having bad intentions to abuse children.

Although the majority of the parents stressed that intentions were a decisive element in determining whether behaviours were child abuse or not, they pointed out that nearly all, but not all, of the forms of behaviour discussed could be performed by any parents in their everyday life. When discussing this, there was anxiety in their voices and, in each case, they added various exceptions which might distance themselves from the label of child abuse:

*It happens all the time. (Mother P)*

*If all the parents who do these things are accused of being abusers, I don't think there would be a parent left who could be called a good parent and be innocent. (Father K)*

This ambiguity about the concept of child abuse and disagreement about what behaviour constitutes abuse may be associated with a lack of social consensus about what constitutes dangerous or unacceptable forms of parenting. Although most parents showed anxiety and wished not to be considered to be abusing their children in family discipline, the lack of social consensus on what constitutes child abuse ensured that there were no clear rules to follow but that parents only performed instinctively in distinguishing adequate family discipline from child abuse.

### **Young adults' perception**

Although the majority of the interviewed parents shared similar perspectives that if an action was based on good intentions it was not recognised as child abuse, the proportion of young adults who agreed with this was lower.

Some of the students agreed with the opinion discussed above. For example, Students O and T stated the same view that the difference between maltreatment and physical punishment lies in intention:

*Parents' beating and scolding are for the children's sake in most cases, and should not be classified as 'maltreatment'. (Student O)*

*At least, the intention is different. Children should receive punishment for doing wrong. But maltreatment happens for no reason; children are beaten whether they do things wrong or not. (Student T)*

One student provided a more detailed explanation of the difference between abuse and general discipline:

*Essential differences exist in the understanding of abuse in China and in the western world. Maltreatment is for adults' pleasant sensation. But in China, parents beating and scolding is for the children's sake. If children behave improperly, it is parents' duty to*



*help them correct (their behaviour). For example, a child is curious about fire. Unless he gets burned, he will not know that it is dangerous. Most Chinese parents share this psychology, which definitely differs from maltreatment. (Student U)*

It was found from some interviews that no distinction was made between ‘intent’ and the actual ‘act’ in parenting behaviours. The opinions were that beating or scolding is not equal to maltreatment. Whether the punishment actually hurts children or not, if the purpose is for the children’s sake, there is no intention of maltreatment. They held that maltreatment is intentional hurt. The malicious purpose produces the difference from physical punishment.

### **Similarities and differences**

In the matter of child abuse, both the young people and the parents paid attention to the purpose and intention. However, their key points varied: the parents tended to focus on the subjective intention as being for children’s own good, whereas the students were more concerned about the objective fact being whether children had done something wrong or not. Comparatively speaking, it is difficult to judge subjective intention when fault is relatively objective. In addition, parents and children have different understandings of fault. For example, what parents consider as ‘talking back’ is just a child’s way of expressing his or her own opinion. So even the understanding of fault can lead to different judgments on what constitutes child abuse. From the comments made in the interviews quoted above, it was found that even in the spectrum of telling child abuse from intentions, this particular cohort of parents and young adults showed different understandings of the word *intention* from their own subjective perspectives.

The perception that child abuse can be distinguished by intentions also led to the belief among the participants that there would be no child abuse if physical punishment was in the family discipline spectrum, no matter how excessive it was.

One student who had been beaten and scolded as a child refused to agree with the negative interpretation of this behaviour; Student G, a young adult believed that beating and scolding children in China was part of the traditional culture and is not physical punishment: “*In childhood, we think that our parents are too excessive, but when we grow up, I think it is a good way for us to discipline them and prevent them from walking down the wrong path*”. Here, he not only disagreed with the idea of abuse, but was also unwilling to regard it as being in the

category of physical punishment. From this conversation, it was shown that Student G might tend to regard it as rationalisation and as a way of self-protection.

Furthermore, this point of view was not only expressed by the students. Many of the parents in the interviews also mentioned this kind of experience in their childhood and believed that their later success in life resulted from their parents' discipline and scolding. With this belief, scolding and harsh education behaviour is likely to be passed on to the next generation.

### ***4.3.3 Distinguished by the Seriousness and Frequency of the Physical Discipline Behaviours***

The second approach to distinguishing whether a particular behaviour was considered child abuse or not was by the seriousness and frequency of the behaviour. The participants held two different views on distinguishing the severity of specific behaviours. First, whether an implement was used and, second, whether it caused serious harm to the children. The minority of the parents and some of the students considered the constitution of child abuse from the seriousness and frequency of the abusive behaviour. As already discussed, some of the parents and students were more sensitive to the use of tools, with most of the students believing that serious harm was likely to be caused to children by using tools against them. They therefore thought that beating with the hand did not count as abuse but that using tools, which might cause harm to the children, did. This is also the reason why some of the parents thought that their behaviour did not amount to abuse because they did not use any implements to beat and scold their children.

Some of the students thought that it should be judged by the extent of the children's hurt. In their opinion, even though parents may have a good purpose or motivation, children are likely to get hurt as a result of their harsh discipline. Therefore, this also constitutes child abuse. As can be seen from the discussion in the previous section, although the students paid more attention to the damage caused by beating and scolding children, their level of patience over this type of harm was quite high, especially when physical damage was caused.

Some of the students rated psychological trauma more seriously than physical damage. For example, Student S thought that "*damage to self-esteem tends to leave a greater shadow for a*

*person than physical damage*". That is why young adults called the second vignette a child abuse case because the parents of the girl in the vignette set an unattainable academic goal for her and hurt her mentally by scolding or criticising her when she failed to achieve it. Student H said that most parents' activities may not have any intention to abuse or to cause harm to their children, but that some of their behaviour is likely to cause the same consequences as abuse.

In conclusion, this section has explored the two major ways of distinguishing child abuse from acceptable family disciplinary techniques discovered during the interviews and group discussions, which were by the intentions or by the seriousness of the results of the parents' behaviour. The parents' and young adults' groups shared some similarities; however, the gaps between them revealed the continuing transitional trends in perceptions of the meanings of child abuse. Chinese people's acceptance of the harsh family discipline method is being significantly dropping by successive generations, and even though the grey area between acceptable family discipline and unacceptable child abuse behaviour will always exist, it could be found that the boundary of this grey area was moving.

Furthermore, details in the findings such as intending to rationalise one's own experiences of being abused and the parents' intention to distance their family discipline behaviour from abuses were discussed.

#### **4.4 Factors Influencing Chinese Perceptions of Child Abuse**

In this section, I shall discuss how perceptions of child abuse are influenced by the environment in China. Liao *et al.* (2011) stated that understanding child abuse in China requires "an understanding of various levels of factors that can directly and indirectly influence or inhibit maltreatment". Three factors emerged from the focus group discussions in the present study: contemporary parenting in China, the influence of the extended family and ideas about children's rights.

I shall first explore the participants' general views on parenting within contemporary Chinese society. In particular, I shall explore the responsibilities of parents, the child-rearing goals and then the current parenting style in relation to cultural influences. I shall then move on to discuss

the special phenomenon of the extended family in the Chinese child-rearing system. Finally, I shall address parents' and children's perceptions of children's rights in the socio-cultural context of China, which will impact upon attitudes towards the use of abusive parenting behaviours.

#### ***4.4.1 Contemporary Parenting in China***

##### **4.4.1.1 The Responsibility of Parents**

The parents whom I interviewed indicated that their main responsibilities were to provide daily care for their children and to help them to form good habits and characters which will be beneficial for their futures. The latter was of more importance to them than the former.

It is worth noting that the parents considered that they had lower expectations and concerns about their children's academic performance than their own parents had had. Several parents, including both a father and a mother, expressed similar views that academic achievement was not the first priority in their opinion. On the other hand, most highly prioritised attributes were pro-social qualities, such as personal moral values and the ability to get on with others.

Father N, a researcher in the Beijing Centre for Science said,

*By the time we reach our age, we will know that in addition to IQ, EQ is also very important. And the most important aspect for emotional intelligence is the ability to get on with others.*

Father L, a university associate professor, who was considered to be the most diligent father within the focus group, also emphasised that

*If my son does not want to do his homework, I would just let him play and leave the homework aside. However, I insist on two principles: first, respect the elders, and second, do not do harmful things to others.*

However, there were still several parents who considered academic performance as a priority. This group of parents were of a slightly older age in the sample and their children had begun middle school. Instead of encouraging their children to be the best-behaved in their school,

these parents emphasised that their main focus was on developing good study habits in their children. Mother F was extremely remorseful about not disciplining her daughter at an early age because she felt that this had caused her daughter to fail to form a productive studying habit:

*She makes me feel wu neng wei li ('helpless'); I grew up in a village and my Mum never needed to worry about me studying when I was young. After one year of being educated in the USA, I thought I should not discipline my girl and just let her play. Until now, she has formed really bad habits and she cannot finish her homework on time. And her teacher criticised me for not being qualified as a parent and not educating my girl properly. I feel ashamed. She is already fourteen years old. It is really hard to discipline her now. I think the best time to help a child to form a good habit is from five to seven years old, but I missed the best timing. (Mother F)*

In China, *guan* ('discipline') has many different meanings, such as teaching, helping children to grow up, looking after children's daily lives, and so on, and this kind of care lasts a lifetime. Chinese parents care for and educate their children not only when they are young but also when they grow up. Once they themselves encounter difficulties in later life, their children will take care of them and help them. In China, many parents help their children by looking after their grandchildren. My findings showed that blood relationships within a Chinese family are still close and that parents have a strong sense of responsibility to look after their grandchildren.

In China, especially after the implementation of the one-child policy, parents and children formed a closer bond. The parents in the present study commonly demonstrated great responsibility towards their children. They endeavoured to deliver a good life and learning opportunities for their children and wanted to develop their children's social abilities to offer them a good future. In the face of intense competition in today's society, what concerned parents most was how their children could survive and how they themselves could adapt to current society after their children had left home in the future. Many parents stressed the need to cultivate their children's survival skills, and they forced them to attend various training courses. The parents also attached great importance to cultivating their children's sense of independence and the ability to get on with others, and to developing their children's emotional intelligence and personality. The responsibility of contemporary Chinese parents for their children is not only to train them to become mature adults, but also to help them become people

of talent. This view was confirmed during the interviews with the college students. Most of the students said that their parents had paid attention to all aspects of their life, especially their future. Even if they went to college, their parents would still care about their attitude to their studies and their work intention, and give them various suggestions.

Student Q, a college student in the interview group who obviously knew his parents' expectations well, said:

*The expectation of my parents can be divided into two stages. Before I went to university, they expected that I would go to a first-rate university and study in a satisfying major. After I had entered the university, they expected that I would further study as a postgraduate or would find a good job.*

Student T also pictured her life in the future like this: "... *make a good effort in university and find a good job so that I can support myself and my parents in the future*". Obviously, both the parents and the children all agreed that the way to success was to go to a good school, to find a good job, and finally to live a better life than one's parents.

#### **4.4.1.2 The Cultural Effect and Parenting**

In traditional Chinese families, people pay attention to the ethical relationship and think that family members should behave in accordance with their own identity and their role in the family. Different roles should assume different responsibilities and obligations. So-called obedience often depends on the degree to which the seniors love and care for the younger generation, and children are not required to be completely attached to their parents, but their elders use their senior status (strict but not cruel) in a way that can have a deterrent effect on juniors (Park & Chesla, 2007). As mentioned in the Introduction, under the controlling demands of a feudal society, the original equality was gradually weakened and replaced by a strict social hierarchy. The three cardinal guides gave high praise to qualifications and power, so that the equality between people was replaced (Zhang, 2002).

#### **Parents**

In the focus group discussions, the parents revealed tremendous differences among their

parenting practices. It is necessary to comment on the attitudes of two of the fathers, as their responses reflected two quite distinct ideologies of parenting. They can be seen as the two extreme examples of strictness and warmth in parenting styles among the parents whom I interviewed.

Father G worked in the military as a technician; he was a really strict father as he himself admitted and his values reflected the traditional parenting attitudes in several ways. He stated that *“I never wanted to be a friend to my child, I wanted to set up the formal father-son relationship, and form the traditional morals of respect for seniority in my family. Therefore, I needed to establish the dignity and inviolability of a father”*. Respect for seniority means that when people are eating or drinking, sitting down or taking a walk, they let those who are older go first; the younger ones should follow behind.

He praised the traditional discipline style highly, stating that *“I have always adhered to the concept of gun bang di xia chu xiao zi (‘the rod makes an obedient son’)*”.

When we discussed child abuse and parenting discipline, he pointed out that

*Before the Republic of China, the education of a son by his father was probably stricter than that now. For example, beating would make the child’s palm swell; they would be punished (by being made) to stand or kneel. The children would kneel down for a whole day with a book or a brick on their head. In today’s view, we can probably understand that punishment as a kind of abuse. But the parenting style may work out very well to make children successful. The children may respect the aged very well and have filial piety to their parents. I think that at least it was much better than we are now, especially that kind of self-control. So, the definition of child abuse should be associated with the overall environment. (Father G)*

Father G believed that Mainland China does not have a good social environment to discipline children now. As current society and schools have a relatively weaker force of constraint on children, the ways to discipline and educate children rest on the family.

Chinese culture has a family-centred character. From the concepts discussed above, we can understand that parents in a Chinese family take on huge responsibility for their children’s

upbringing. In China, parents have traditionally not only planned the present life, but also worried about the future life of their children. In the interviews, the parents spoke about accepting their children's future as their own responsibility and thought that it was the traditional Chinese family culture to be responsible for their children's future.

Father L believed that Chinese parents spent too much on their children. To enable children to live better in society, he said that parents should supervise their children in all aspects. Although Father L acknowledged that Chinese parents do not respect their children's choices and neglect their children's own views, he thought that parents were using their own successful experience to guide and plan for their children to avoid a child deviating from the correct path.

Father C, however, who was a lecturer at a university, seemed to have different opinions. He stated that he seldom forced his child to do anything:

*I always let him choose for himself; there is too much homework for young students. If he cannot finish it, I will not push him because I think it is not proper for children in primary school to do a huge amount of work. But his teacher always criticises me, and blames me for not cooperating with the school. (Father C)*

Father C also opposed coercion to attend extracurricular classes. He believed that childhood is a period for children to play and that parents should allow them to make their own decisions on whether they want to learn any extracurricular skills. He valued himself as having the moderate attitude to modern parenting.

However, although Father L seemed extremely strict and authoritarian, he never beat his son or even threatened to beat him. His disciplinary strategies relied more on setting up family rules, reasoning with the child and keeping a distance from his son to maintain his authority.

In contrast, Father C gave his son quite a lot of freedom. But he had several principles which could not be broken. One, respect the elders; two, do not harm others. He said that he would definitely beat his son if he did not respect his elders.

Interestingly, it seems that both of these fathers were not the type that they appeared to be. They were both influenced by traditional Chinese Confucianism as well as by western ideas



of democracy and equality. In fact, almost all the parents in the focus groups were affected by both of these cultural patterns in their parenting practices. However, some parents were influenced by different cultures and this was embodied in their conversation, such as Mother D who said:

*I have a modern side in terms of education, for example, I can allow my children to call my name directly or give me a nickname as a joke. But I also have my traditional values, for example, I would beat my child because of his academic failure. Although I know he is not willing for me to do this, I am forced to do so by reality.*

This contradiction between modern and traditional education concepts often occurred between the two parents in a family. Some of the parents said that they had contradictions with their spouses about the manner and concept of disciplining their children. Mother G stated that her husband had a different view to her ways of guiding their children in learning:

*He thought that I was too tolerant of the child and he always hoped that our child would get better grades. He didn't care about the child's ideas. My child once said that he would like to learn painting in an interest class. Although I agreed, his father did not agree, because he believed that it was no use studying painting. So, we often had conflicts because of these different ideas. Sometimes, of course, we also differed from the teacher's ideas. Although we have now been influenced by western ideas, we also have the traditional Chinese point of view, and the different ideas can lead to confusion in parenting style. (Mother G)*

#### **4.4.2 Chinese Child-rearing in the Extended Family**

In the following section, I shall explore the phenomenon of the Chinese extended family and its influence on family child-rearing. In contemporary China, there are two specific characteristics of modern child-rearing: a shared household and coordination across generations. Two-thirds of the families represented in the focus groups had at least one grandparent helping to raise their child. These joint efforts bring both advantages and challenges for contemporary child-rearing.

#### 4.4.2.1 Advantages and Challenges

Grandparents and members of a middle generation jointly caring for children constituted the largest group in the present study. Several families had handed their children's upbringing to the elder generation completely. Even so, seven parents stated that they took care of their children all on their own, but they still could not avoid the influence of and advice from the grandparents on the rare occasions when they came to visit them or when they discussed their children with them on the telephone.

During the focus group meetings, both positive and negative emotions were found from the participating parents (the middle generation). Bringing the grandparents into the household significantly reduced the burden on parents. The grandparents helped them by taking on housework, meal preparation and childcare. This benefited the parents in a number of ways, such as having more time to focus on their work and helping to reduce overall family expenses.

However, most of the parents indicated that there were many problems and difficulties in taking care of a child jointly with the grandparents. The main conflict came from the differences in child-rearing methods between generations, which is highly related to the administration of punishment.

Father O was responsible for teaching his daughter and checking her school work. It was common for him to use physical discipline as a punishment. He felt it frustrating that the grandparents overtly disagreed with his way of parenting:

*They [her grandparents] always protect her and side with her. Whenever I started to punish her for misbehaving, they would come to dissuade me, even to take her away. You had to give elders 'face'. (Father O)*

This conflict was also seen in another family. Mother J said,

*We stipulated at home that during parenting [she meant discipline], we asked the child's grandparents to go away and not to get involved. My mother could follow this request but my father could not. For example, when we were disciplining my young daughter, we had just finished criticising her and we made her stand as a punishment, then my father came*

*and moved her away. After that, it was difficult for us to parent her any more.*

The vast majority of the parents believed that grandparents spoiled their grandchildren very much. Mother I thought that the love given by grandparents to grandchildren was “irrational” and that this irrational love from grandparents caused them (the middle generation) quite a lot of problems, as seen in the examples below.

*... for example, when I asked my child to develop good habits, watch less television, have a meal and go to bed on time, and so on, the child's grandparents always stood up for her and made a pet of my child. And they often say that the child is very young, and that when he grows up he will be OK. (Mother F)*

*My child is very obedient when he is with us; he does not dare to throw anything at random or to use any coarse words. However, when he is with his grandparents, he does not listen to us. He throws all his toys in a mess around the room. Sometimes he does not wash his hands before a meal. We can do nothing about parenting because of his grandparents' favour'. (Father C)*

*As we saw on the television [in the vignette], a mother-in-law might treat the daughter-in-law as an outsider. In our family, my mom stays with us and takes care of the household; she often treats my husband as an outsider. One day, when I was not at home, my husband made my son stand as a punishment, When I returned, my mom was not happy and criticised my husband in front of me. I understand that she loves her grandson, but her words affected me emotionally. (Mother L)*

Differences in child-rearing philosophies create a battlefield on which members of the inter-generational parenting coalition seek to gain the upper hand for their power of influence. Although the conflicts revealed in the discussions were quite overt, it is interesting to find that most coordination continued to function despite these disagreements. Father O, for example, seemed to have coped with it by turning a blind eye to the opposition. Although the unhappy and ambivalent emotions were real to Mother L's mum, she still chose to stay as part of the coalition. “*She saw it as her duty to support me*”, said Mother L.

#### 4.4.2.2 The Hidden Inter-Generational Conflict

In the modern family, elders no longer have the ‘high’ position that they held in the traditional Chinese family. Most of them have to help their children to take care of the grandchildren. During the present study, it was clear that the majority of the students considered that they were close to their grandparents, especially sharing a deep emotional bond with a grandmother. This is because most of the university participants had been cared for by their grandparents when they were young. Several students stated that they had spent most of their time with grandparents in their memories of childhood and that they even slept in the same room or even the same bed with their grandparents when they were young. Therefore, grandparents have the power to influence children’s emotions or decisions at home sometimes.

*Zhang you you xu* (‘respect and observe the hierarchy of order between the old and the young’) is one of the traditional virtues of the Chinese people. During the focus group interviews, parents mentioned that it was very important to teach children to respect the elderly. However, most children also realised that their grandparents did not punish them in their everyday lives. So it was often found that in a family that children (meaning young children) did not respect their grandparents, sometimes they even bullied them. The parents were very aware that grandparents lacked authority over their grandchildren. During the interviews, Father F stated, “*If I see grandchildren not respecting their grandparents, they must be severely punished; they must be given physical punishment*”. Mother Q also said that grandparents are like a paper tiger in the home. Although they may look very stern, they do not act as a deterrent to bad behaviour.

In particular, after the implementation of the one-child policy, Chinese society evolved from an age-centred to a child-centred society (Ho, 1989). There is evidence that traditional norms of filial piety are still undergoing a process of change, and that the influence, status and power of the older generation in the family are gradually declining.

However, some parents chose harsh punishment to make sure that their children demonstrated the virtue of filial piety:

*I insist on two rules in my house, one, respect the elders, two, do not harm other people. If he does not listen to his grandma or grandpa or if he confronts the elders, I will give*

*him a slap.* (Father I)

Student G remembered one harsh beating from his father due to his lack of respect to his grandparents; he said, “*We need to show filial respect to elders absolutely. I had been a jerk to my grandma without considering her feelings in public. So, my dad slapped me in the face. I deserved it*”. This student showed respect to his elders’ face, and he also tolerated his parents’ violent behaviour towards him to value the elders’ face. This confirms the view expressed by Qiao (2005) that the “Chinese moral code of filial piety lays the ground for physical child abuse to take place”.

#### ***4.4.3 Ideas about Children’s Rights***

In the previous section, I discussed the relationship between the core family and extended family, and how they influence punitive actions. In this section, I shall discuss the factors from the societal level in the socio-cultural context.

In a family, there is a power relationship between parents and children. In Chinese families, parents are in a position of authority. Because of the influence of traditional Chinese culture discussed previously, children must obey their parents, therefore children’s rights may be compromised in the family (Qiao, 2006).

The parents interviewed during the present study were mainly born in the 1970s, a generation known for growing up together with China’s social transition. They have inherited the values of their parents and have been influenced by traditional culture. Most of them pay attention to the traditional ideals and are conservative. They have experienced China’s economic transformation and accept new ideas prudently, belonging to a pragmatic conservative generation whose children were all born after 2000.

In contrast, the students in the focus groups were mainly born after the 1990s when China’s reform and exposure to western ideals had begun to have obvious effects and were developing rapidly. The students born after 1990 can therefore be said to have better experience of the information age. They were relatively open because they had received more consultation or information. Because some of them were the second generation of being an only child, they had been raised by their grandparents and had enjoyed spoiled happiness, but they still retained

a history of strong dissatisfaction because of the lack of attention from their parents. Their parents were mostly born in the 1950s or 1960s and had experienced the Cultural Revolution. During their childhood, material life and spiritual life were relatively poor, but they were deeply influenced by the traditional Chinese education method. They had a strong consciousness of collectivism and social norms; therefore, they were a world of difference away from their children's generation. It is therefore easy to see the cause of the generation gap and the potential for contradiction in family education.

#### **4.4.3.1 Parents: What are the Rights of Children?**

With the completion and development of the legal system in China, Chinese people, especially the younger generation, have gradually improved their understanding of the law, and thus the fulfilment of their rights. However, recognition of children's rights is still focused on education rights such as nine years of compulsory education, as well as on medical insurance. The question of whether children have rights and what kinds of rights exist within family life is more obscured and almost often unnoticeable. In all the interviews which I conducted during this study, whenever I began a question about children's rights by providing some information, most parents had no clear idea of the concept. Although she was a lawyer herself, Mother G admitted to having no knowledge of children's rights in family education. Although many parents knew about the Law on the Protection of Juveniles, none of them thought about it when dealing with children's issues in the family. In addition, as I explained in the literature review, the Law on the Protection of Minors is vague and generous and has only a limited effect in everyday life.

Parents' opinions can be divided into several groups from the findings from the interviews which I held. Some thought that a child is an individual who is immature, dependent and unable to shoulder social responsibility; therefore, children cannot and should not enjoy the same rights as adults. Children are supposed to be under the protection and supervision of their parents, as Father E said when he stressed the value of traditional education methods.

Some of the parents, however, held the view that children enjoyed the same rights as adults. For example, Mother K considered that children have the rights of personal liberty, education and protection. In addition, some of the parents regarded it as appropriate to give children

rights, but they had no clear concept of what kind of rights should be given to children.

*We need to take care of children's safety. They are not mature enough to understand right and wrong. How can the children have the same rights as the adults? However, we are still quite open-minded, and also democratic, we are not interfering a lot, and we will let them make their own decisions on those things they are able to. (Father M)*

Father M's comments represented the views of a large number of parents in the focus group who considered children's rights from the perspective of nurture. They determined what was best for the children and did not realise that children had their own wills and thoughts. Even though they emphasised that they were 'democratic' in their child-rearing, they still did not see children as individuals. Therefore, on the grounds that 'children are not mature', 'they make mistakes' and 'they have limited ability', the parents restricted their children's rights of autonomy and self-determination. Freeman (1997) argued that "having rights means being allowed to take risks and make choices". To respect children's rights must start with allowing children to make mistakes.

The rural parents did not use any words related to children's rights in the focus group discussions; they were more concerned about their children's safety issues:

*There are too many cars outside right now, I am worried, when they play outside, is it safe? (Mother M)*

As was made clear in the literature review, Chinese parents regard children as dependent, immature and vulnerable beings. As a result, they tend to ask children to do things which are helpful, with the meaning of these acts based solely on their own judgment, moral standpoint and life experience. A typical example would be enrolment into extra-curricular tutorial classes, in which case, the child's right to choose this activity is seldom considered. Mother C stated that "*She [her child] is unwilling but she has to. It helps a lot for her study, so it is a matter beyond discussion*". As was pointed out in an earlier chapter, most of the parents interviewed took study as a matter of principle. Some matters can be discussed and the child's view adopted, but for important decisions such as education, children are required to submit to their parents' will.

The United Nations enacted the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989 and China issued the Law on the Protection of Juveniles in 1991. That was twenty-five years ago and still Chinese parents lack a sense of children's rights. Other studies have interestingly found that not only do parents lack an understanding of the rights of children, but that Chinese adults have no clear idea about their own rights, which makes it no wonder that they invade children's rights so unconsciously.

With collectivism at the centre of Chinese family culture, individualism is overlooked. Parents will sacrifice the rights of children and invade children's rights 'for their own good'.

#### **4.4.3.2 Students: 'We Have no Chance to Express our Views'**

The students involved in the present study were born in the 1990s and grew up deeply influenced by the opening-up policy and have a stronger awareness of their rights. They were aware of the existence of the Law on the Protection of Juveniles but could not remember its various clauses even though they had been taught the law in school.

Several students stated that they had tried to prevent parental scolding and beating in childhood by asserting, "*I am protected by law*" (Student D), but that this had received no agreement. As a result, they considered that the clauses in this law had no essential effect.

The students interviewed seldom enjoyed their rights in family life. They had to fight for their rights of privacy, play and free expression by instinct.

Student H said that he had always hoped to express his opinion freely and to win respect and recognition from his parents:

*I hope that children enjoy the right of free expression and that parents listen to our opinions. We are very different in our thinking. Although they also had their childhood, times and society have changed a lot. Nowadays, we have our own thoughts and we seek ways to express them. We hope parents can respect our opinions.*

Mother D said that her nine-year-old son had made the same appeal:



*He asks for equality. If I am playing on my mobile phone but ask him to do his homework, he will strive for his right to play too. He would question me about why he should do homework but not rest and play. Adults can do whatever they want, children should enjoy the same.*

Parents used to be children. They think they understand children but, in reality, they forget that with the passage of time differences arise and methods lose their effectiveness.

Student S had tried to fight for his right to have his own opinions during middle school, but he suffered for a long time. Eventually he failed, thus he gave up communicating with his parents: *“I have not talked with them about anything for several years,”* he said.

In the focus group meetings, I found that as they gradually grow up, children improve their awareness of their rights. Many of the young participants said that their personal thinking began to form in middle school. They would challenge their parents’ authority directly and indirectly and would doubt their parents’ opinions and advice, which can ignite parent/child conflict.

#### **4.4.3.3 Children Challenge Parents’ Authority**

Filial piety, as has already been explained at length, is regarded as the most important value in traditional Chinese society and requires that children should follow the orders of their parents without question. Parents have absolute authority over their children in traditional families, making and enforcing family laws to maintain perfect order in their homes. Any children who breach these family laws will be punished and children are expected always to listen to their parents.

Modern Chinese families have increasingly become child-centred and parents with a single child often concede to their babies without maintaining a firm hold on their own authority. When Father L talked about the importance of establishing the traditional authority of a father, many of the other fathers in the group agreed with him because they all felt that they were no longer the master of the house in reality. Some parents also said that they thought that they were not the ‘head’ of their children, but instead they were their ‘slave’:

*When we were young, what our parents said was always correct, we just followed what they said. It is ridiculous that now parents are begging their children to be educated, following behind them, and swearing to them that they do everything for their good, begging them to eat or sleep. (Father B)*

*Once I was extremely embarrassed. We were in a shopping mall, and there was a playground and my daughter was in there. When we were about to leave, I said to her, "Baby, we've got to go," but she gave me a glance and continued playing. I said to her again in a happy voice, "Baby, we've really got to leave now, there is something more interesting over there." She simply ignored me. I had to raise my voice, and all the other parents were watching me, and my daughter watched me, but still refused to leave. It is so hard to principle children now. (Father M)*

It was clear from the comments made in the group discussions that many of the parents no longer expected their children to listen to them unconditionally. I found from the interviews that parents in the past cared less about their children but enjoyed more authority over them. Nowadays, parents are taking care of their children around the clock and they have to beg their child to do things as if they were their slaves. What exactly is the reason behind this dramatic decrease in parents' authority?

The parents provided a few reasons: the first was the new family structure. After the imposition of the one-child policy, the 'four-two-one' family now prevails in which four grandparents and two parents have only one child. The child is at the centre of the family without any competitors, which makes him/her more aggressive and rebellious. The parents all agreed that they paid much more attention to their child, since he or she was the only child in the house. The new educational theory is also influential in that parents are more likely to be kind and careful with their children, fearing that harsh regulations may harm the relationship between them and the child. As Father J observed, "*After I battered her, she did not speak to me for several days and only spoke to her mother, which really hurt me*".

It is this new family structure which causes problems of children becoming 'little emperors' as once popularised by journalists. It also helps to create an impression that children today are much more spoiled than ever and that child abuse is unlikely in our society. The parents discussed how spoiled children are a more serious problem than abused children. However,

abuse can exist alongside coddling. According to Goh and Kuczynski (2010), who researched the issue of the only child in Chinese families, the ‘little emperors’ are facing many problems. Although they are paid more attention, they are also under more control and surveillance, enjoying less freedom within the family. All these problems can be easily ignored by adults.

Another reason for parents losing their authority is that, in modern families, the relationship between parents and children becomes multifaceted; as well as the role of an authoritative figure, a parent can be a friend, a playmate, a teacher or a nurse, and sometimes the boundary between the roles blurs, which again causes confusion in children and damages the authority of the parents. As Qin (2010) stated, in the new type of family relationship the parents and the child become closer and this more intimate relationship will naturally weaken the authority of the parents.

The final reason is that both parents and their children have been educated with the ideas of human rights and democracy, and the child will self-consciously ask for more liberty and freedom within the family. The parents are also more likely to listen to their children for suggestions. Quite a few of the parents said that they and their children were like friends, and a few of the students believed that they lived in an open and free atmosphere in their families. It is natural in such families that the authority of the parents will be weakened.

Although the authority of parents is declining, children are still in a position of less power, and parents still hold the controlling authority over their everyday life and education. It is true that democracy has entered family life, but it is always the parents who have the final word.

This idea was clearly expressed by the students in the interviews: *“the parents are above me; they are my parents after all. They will not think from our perspective and if I do something irregular they will certainly punish me”* (Student F).

It is common sense that parents should have the absolute power over their children since they gave birth to them. Before they grow up, children are naturally inferior to their parents in many measures – physically, mentally and socially. It is therefore a matter of fact that parents and their children are never equal in the family.

Parents have both objective and subjective rights over their children and these rights are tightly

connected to the family power structure. According to Karl Marx (as cited in Qiao, 2006), the objective right rooted in the socio-economic structure and the subjective right embedded in the intellectual construction together entrust to parents the right of education over their children. This right will change as children grow, and the power relationship within a family is never a fixed one, although the basic structure is always from the strong to the weak (Foucault, as cited in Qiao, 2006).

Because this tilted power structure is naturally embedded in the family, parents who do not take their responsibility seriously and abuse their power cause serious damage to their children. For this reason, it is not enough to rely on the self-discipline of the parents or the rules within the family to secure the protection of children. When parents fail, public authorities need to intervene, and this will be discussed further in the following chapter.

## **4.5 Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have explored the perceptions of child abuse in China from the perspectives of parents, young adults and social workers, and I have discussed the underlying cultural and environmental factors which contribute to their views. The findings from the field research showed that extreme physical punishment such as pricking with a needle and burning were unanimously considered to be child abuse. However, differences among the different groups increased as the severity declined. In general, the bottom line for whether a behaviour was perceived as child abuse or not was based on the intention of the parents. Other variables such as the degree of severity and the frequency together determined the outcome, but because of the lack of definition for these terms, the perception of child abuse still varied. With regard to psychological abuse, the young adults and the social workers showed much more concern than the parents did as the former believed the emotional hurt was long-standing and often neglected. In China, it is normally assumed that parents have to take care of all aspects of their children's lives, especially their future. They might therefore have to do what they can to educate their children and that, in turn, depends on the education of the parents. Their own experiences and the conflict between traditional and modern culture could lead to very different perceptions of what a moderate punishment should be for their children.

A less obvious but deeper concern in China is children's rights. The majority of the participants were confused about this topic as it is rarely discussed in China. The parents in general believed

that children lack the ability to make the 'right' decisions and they were born dependent on their parents. The younger generations have grown up in a more modernised environment where freedom and rights are more commonly heard and accepted.

# Chapter 5: The social constructions of child abuse in China

## 5.1 Introduction

It was explained in Chapters 1 and 2 that the research questions of this research study were focused on the following four questions to explore the construction of child abuse in China:

1. What do Chinese people consider to be appropriate and inappropriate parenting practices, and why? What would each group consider to be inappropriate parenting behaviours and why?
2. What cultural norms affect Chinese people's perceptions of family discipline?
3. What are the differences and similarities in each group about their perceptions of parenting practices in China, and why? Do age, gender, having child (children) or not, and professional working background contribute to Chinese people's child-rearing perceptions and influence their definition of appropriate and inappropriate parenting behaviours?
4. What kinds of physical and emotional punishment (harm) would be considered as abuse in China? How do Chinese people understand the concept of child abuse?

The first question has been detailed explored by categories in Chapter 4. In this chapter, the findings presented in Chapter 4 will be further analysed under the constructivism theoretical framework in order to address these three following questions.

As was illustrated in the Chapter 4, filial piety and obedience were frequently mentioned concepts in parents' understandings of family disciplinary methods. The cultural context of filial piety in traditional Confucianism plays a crucial role in the construction of a parent/child relationship in China and in the construction of appropriate parenting behaviours in Chinese families. So in the first section of this chapter, the historical context of Chinese filial piety is studied for a better understanding of family disciplinary behaviours, and specific parenting behaviours are analysed in this context to understand how they were socially constructed in China.

It was also found in Chapter 4 that the attitudes towards some parenting behaviours significantly differed between the young adults group and the parents group, and generational gaps were identified between them. The second section of this chapter will explore the reasons for these generational gaps and suggest that the gradually developing understanding of children's rights based on general social developments in China might be a probable reason. The conflicts between traditional Confucianism and modern theories on children's rights behind the attitudes towards disciplinary behaviours will also be examined in this section.

The similarities and differences between participants' attitudes towards family disciplinary behaviours will then be analysed in the third section of this chapter.

## **5.2 Chinese traditional Confucianism and the social construction of children**

### ***5.2.1 Filial piety (xiao) in Confucianism***

From the historical perspective, filial piety is one of the most dominant values in Confucian thinking. In the *Da dai zha ji* (大戴礼记), a Confucian classic work, filial piety was considered as a primary principle which cannot be questioned or changed (Dai & Wang, 1983). There is a traditional saying that '*Of all the virtues, filial piety is the most important*' (百善孝为先). Showing filial piety to the elders in the patriarchal clans was a core value in traditional Chinese society for thousands of years as Confucianism has been officially practised in China for more than two thousand years (L. Chen, 2005). It is therefore understandable that filial piety is deeply ingrained in the Chinese view of the family and was naturally considered a rightful relationship between parents and children.

To examine more deeply the meanings of filial piety in the traditional Confucian context, three layers of requirements of filial piety can be found.

The first and basic level of filial piety was to preserve one's own body, as was illustrated in another Confucian classic *Xiao Jing*: "The body, hair and skin, all have been received from the parents, and so one doesn't dare damage them – that is the beginning of *xiao*" (Hu & Chen, 1980). A probable explanation for this requirement was that Confucianism was founded during the chaotic *Spring and Autumn* war period, and the preservation of a person's own life was the basic requirement for being able to serve his or her parents.

The second level of filial piety required absolute understanding and obedience from children towards their parents. The *Confucian Analects* said that “Mang Î asked what filial piety was. The Master said, ‘It is not being disobedient’” (Confucius). This concept was frequently reflected in the interviews when the parents sometimes complained that their children were not being sufficiently obedient, which meant that they had to use harsher methods to teach them the meaning of filial piety. This showed that the concept of filial piety on the obedience level is still a widely accepted social construction in China.

The third and more developed level of filial piety was that individuals could achieve personal success to honour their family name (Hu & Chen, 1980). Families, or rather Chinese patriarchal clans, were closely connected in the agriculture society in China and the traditional collectivism which this created required individuals to devote themselves to the good of the larger family. So honouring the family name was considered as a high level of filial piety. When the parents in the discussion groups spoke about pushing their children hard in their studies, this was an often-mentioned reason.

In the following section, I shall further explain how commitment to filial piety was practised in traditional Chinese society on both the ideological and the institutional levels, with the result that this social construction in the Chinese family parenting style was influential and long-lasting.

### ***5.2.2 The practice of filial piety in traditional Chinese society***

As was explained in the previous section, the concept of filial piety meant the absolute obedience of children to the elders in the family. During China’s long history, this concept was practised from the central government down to each single family by means of general education and as a state institution.

On the one hand, Confucianism was the only theory taught in the schools in traditional China, and as was explained in the previous section, filial piety was regarded as an utmost virtue in Confucian thinking (Chen, 2005).

On the other hand, the state authority also assured that practising filial piety was rewarded through the Chinese administrative officer selection method. For example, the recommendation of people for their filial piety was the major method for the nomination of local officers in the Han dynasty, and filial piety was also significantly emphasized in the



imperial examination in the Sui dynasty and afterwards (Zhang, 2010).

Furthermore, from the legal perspective, regulations were made to authorise family heads to rule over family members and these regulations were strongly biased against children (Ju, 1995). If there was any conflict between the older and the younger generations inside the family in traditional China, the elders had privileges and were rarely punished (Zheng & Ma, 2002).

This understanding of filial piety had eliminated children's rights against their parents and culturally endorsed the unequal status between parents and children in China. This could explain the finding that the parents group had much higher acceptance of applying more violence in disciplinary behaviours than the young adults from the social constructional perspective. This was not only because the parents were physically and mentally stronger than their children within the family, but also because social understandings guided them to believe that their harmful actions inflicted on children were legitimate.

The reason that traditional Confucianism and the traditional Chinese feudal state put so much emphasis on obedience can be found in the social structure of traditional China. Filial piety was not only an ideological virtue, the obedience which it demanded was also a vital social control method. Filial piety was a crucial connection in the state – in clans (extended families) – and an individual system for maintaining social stability in traditional China. The emperor's clan was the central pivot for all the clans and other clans were absorbed into the authority system so that the central government could be supported by the clans in the local areas. The result was that absolute obedience by the young to the elders in a family was aligned with the absolute obedience of every single individual to the state authority (Zheng & Ma, 2002). In this sense, the father/son relationship was an extension of the relationship between the emperor and his subjects.

### ***5.2.3 Children's obedience and parents' responsibility***

The absolute obedience of children required by traditional filial piety was accompanied by parents' great responsibility. From the family discipline perspective, the Chinese character for discipline (管 *guan*) has multiple meanings, including educating, administrating and taking care of. In traditional China, children's obedience was reciprocated by parents' caring for every aspect of children's life, including education, marriage and further development. Both children's obedience and parents' caring were built into Chinese culture and are still influential

in China today.

From the comments made during the interviews, it could be found that parents, especially the urban parents, had the intention of comprehensively taking care of their children, and all of the parents had a higher acceptance of enforcing control over their children, both physically and mentally. The social understanding of parents' responsibility which came along with children's obedience explained that as long as parents believed that their actions were for educational purposes, they could use more violent or harmful means of maintaining family discipline.

### **5.3 The understanding of children's rights and the social construction of children in modern China**

First, from the government's official perspective, as was illustrated in Chapter 2, although new laws and regulations have been enacted over the past ten years to ensure child protection, there is not yet an official definition of child abuse at the official level in China. The Minors' Protection Law, Criminal Law and the newly introduced Anti-Domestic Violence Law only regulated what measures should be taken in the case of child abuse (National People's Congress, 1997; Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2012; 2015).

The Minors' Protection Law was frequently mentioned by the participants in the field research, but none of them could explain how this law protects children from being abused. This was partly because this law is vague and impractical and was only introduced to meet the requirements of the UNCRC which China ratified in 1991 (姚建龙, 2007). From this perspective, although the UNCRC was the principle guide to children's rights in China, there was never any official explanation of the meaning of child abuse nor any practical legal regulation preserving children from being abused. It can therefore be found that the attitude of the authorities towards the construction of specific children's rights against being abused were often absent in child protection practice, even though it was guided in general terms by the UNCRC as a principle.

Second, from the social perspective, Chinese society has been undergoing rapid transition over the past four decades since the start of the reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s. Fei (2005) stated that Confucian indoctrination needed a stable cultural environment to be fully practised. However, social movements since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and the rapid social changes since

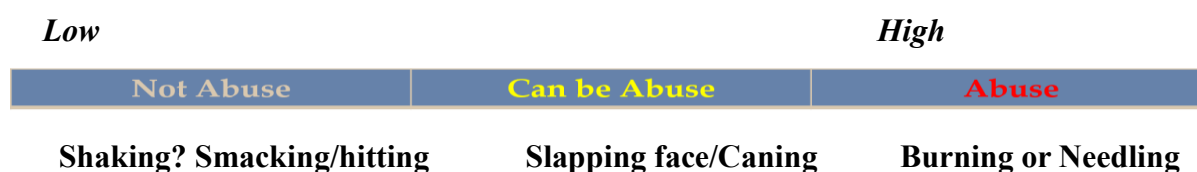
the reform and opening-up had considerably undermined the Confucianist cultural environment which had been passed on from one generation to the next for thousands of years in traditional China.

In the findings, it was found that modern liberal thinking on children’s rights was gradually being accepted by Chinese society and that the younger generations had much higher acceptance of it. In this way, the traditional cultural understandings were changing over time and the social construction of appropriate parenting behaviours has also been undergoing a gradual transition.

This transition in the understanding of child abuse could be considered as a continuum in society, including the acceptance of children’s rights and the recognition of violence and harm in disciplinary behaviours.

As was stated in the literature review, Graziano (1994: 415) hypothesized that there is a continuum ranging from low to high violence. Child discipline includes “a full range of disciplinary behaviours from non-violent to violent” (UNICEF 2010) but there has been a grey area about the boundaries of what actually constitutes child abuse, and this current study was designed to clarify the grey areas in these boundaries in China today. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show the findings from this study for both physical and psychological disciplinary behaviours.

**Figure 5.1 From Physical Violence to Abuse**



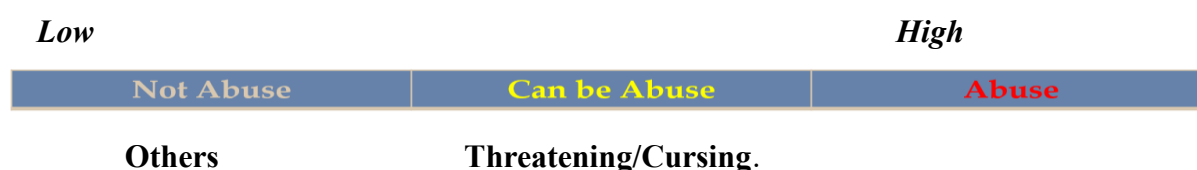
As shown in Figure 5.1 and discussed in the previous chapter, it was found that disciplinary methods such as burning and pricking with a needle were accepted by almost all of the participants as abuse. However, these two behaviours are not regulated as child abuse in the Minors’ Protection Law as it currently stands. In future legal amendments, it will be necessary to consider adding those behaviours into the law to prohibit such actions and to protect children. It was also found that other disciplinary methods such as caning and slapping, which have been clearly regulated as abusive in some countries, for instance Australia (New South Wales Government 2001), were still contradictory in China. However, more than half of the

participants considered slapping and caning as abusive behaviours, compared with Qiao’s findings in 2005, so there has been a clear rise in the awareness of child abuse in China.

Smacking, hitting with the hand on the body and shaking were considered to be disciplinary strategies by the participants and the harm which can be caused by those behaviours is still not properly acknowledged. The discussions on shaking a child clearly illustrated that the recognition of the potential harm of this disciplinary method would remarkably influence people’s perception of whether a disciplinary behaviour is child abuse or not. The members of the social workers group were most against shaking a child as an appropriate method of discipline, but the young adults group were not, which was because the professional training of social workers had provided them with knowledge of the harm in shaking a child, which was not widely understood by other groups of people in China.

The contested territory between discipline and abuse in China lies in the use instruments to beat children or in slapping them on the face, which is different from the current mainstream western academic argument about whether there is a need to ban all forms of physical punishment include smacking (Leviner, 2013). The findings of this current study suggest that China has not yet reached the point of recognising the need to ban all forms of physical discipline (corporal punishment), especially smacking. Caning and slapping, however, might be considered as activities to be banned in future legal amendments.

**Figure 5.2 From Psychological Violence to Abuse**



As Figure 5.2 shows, the findings suggest that emotional abuse has not yet been recognised in China. Although psychologically violent discipline has not been considered as child abuse, the participants had understood and paid more attention to emotional harm than was found in previous research (Qiao, 2012). There is clearly a need to raise awareness of the harm which can be caused by psychologically violent behaviour.

## 5.4 Other elements which influence the construction of child abuse

In addition to the elements discussed in the previous sections, there were more factors which emerged in the field research that are worth noting:

- The stereotype of boys and girls in parenting;
- Gender bias in family roles; and
- Different child-rearing goals between urban and rural parents.

### Gender and urban/rural differences

In the focus group discussions, the participants believed that boys are more likely to suffer from physical abuse than girls. In the focus groups from both urban and rural areas, the parents stated that they would choose to beat or scold boys rather than girls.

Combined with related genetic studies, as well as the influence of Chinese culture discussed above, it is clear that gender is one of the key factors influencing child abuse (Liao *et al.*, 2011).

According to the findings, compared with a Chinese mother, a father has higher expectations of a male child, particularly fathers from rural areas. A mother is generally acknowledged to be the core of parenting in Mainland China but it was found from the discussions in the focus groups that Chinese fathers will actively participate in school-age children's education and training. In China, a father shoulders more responsibility for correcting children's bad behaviour and for cultivating the moral character of his child(ren), but a mother is more responsible for housework, such as doing the laundry, cooking and feeding their children. So a Chinese father is likely to adopt stricter punishment for his children, especially for his male child(ren), and this behaviour might become child abuse because male children are expected to be stronger than female children and so should be trained more to become more masculine. Several studies (Li, 2017; Wang & Sang, 2009) have supported this finding: researchers have pointed out that Chinese young people generally believe that a father is more severe than a mother in terms of parenting. On the other hand, it was found from the interviews with the members of the focus groups that a mother is more accustomed to using psychological aggression in parenting compared with her husband. This may be because the mother, as the primary caregiver, believes that psychological aggression is a relatively harmless strategy compared with physical punishment or physical abuse, so she prefers to take such actions

towards her child.

There were also urban and rural differences related to the construction of child abuse. Compared with the urban parents, the rural parents in this current study had lower expectations of their children's academic performance; they stated that they would not force their children to attend any remedial classes. The urban parents were far more worried about their children's future. Some urban parents believed that 'quality education' means learning to be versatile. So they made their children take various extracurricular classes, learning skills such as piano playing, computer science and foreign languages during the weekend. This might be due to the current increasingly urban population and working pressure. More attention needs to be paid to the urban Chinese parents' working pressures, because in several research studies (Qiao, 2015; Shang, 2017), serious disciplinary violence stems from everyday parental stress and parents' inability to control their anger and behaviour.

## **5.5 Contribution, Limitations and Future Exploration**

As the previous discussion made clear, the main contribution of this research is to fill an existing knowledge gap in the concept of child abuse related to the controversial field around the discipline and child abuse discussion in China. This study has produced localized multicultural understandings of child abuse in China. This is a beneficial exploration in that it has utilised social constructionist theory to analyse and illustrate a variety of child abuse constructions in a non-western culture. The findings have explained how Chinese traditional culture and western culture have influenced people's perceptions, and also explained the different understandings of child abuse among the various participant groups in China's current socio-cultural context. The findings have provided a constructive perspective from which to look at child abuse in China. Through an exploration of the perspectives of young adults, parents and social workers, this study has presented different views between the groups and their differences have been compared with the existing western concepts. As an exploratory study, this research has thrown light onto this under-researched area in China.

Undoubtedly, due to the capability and inexperience of the researcher, as well as the timing and environment of the research materials, this research has limitations. Even though it is a qualitative study and the location selected was typical, it was still impossible to include all the differences when the researcher's aim was to explore the perceptions of young adults, parents

and social workers on parenting practices and the maltreatment of children in China. There are conceptual differences between northern/southern and eastern/western China and diversity between the Han nationality and other ethnic groups. Although the Han nationality accounts for 91.51% of the whole population (China 2010), in the autonomous regions in western China, such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet, the ethnic minorities form the majority of the population. These ethnic minorities' family concepts and parenting attitudes may be very different from those of people of the Han nationality, which is a factor that was not taken into consideration in the current study.

This research has studied traditional Chinese cultural concepts and the modern western concept of human rights. The field research methods were guided by these theoretical streams. But from an historical perspective, in addition to these theories, there are many other concepts which have an influence on Chinese society in terms of parenting and child protection, such as religions (Taoism and Buddhism). These concepts were not included in the theory framework and the design of the field research for this current study.

This study also lacks the child's voice. For obvious ethical and practical reasons, I have had to involve university students (as young people) in the research instead of younger children, and I have tried to get them to look back several years to explore their own perceptions related to child abuse. Their perceptions may be different from those of young Chinese children who are currently experiencing strict parenting.

Only two groups of rural parents were involved in this study due to the limited time available for negotiating access and recruiting more participants. I acknowledge the limited representative nature of the sample size. But those two groups of parents showed a significant difference from the urban parents. I therefore decided to keep their findings in the discussion. In the future, it might also be possible to explore more of the different urban and rural angles on aspects of child abuse and parenting.

Because both social work and social policy on child protection in mainland China are at a very early stage, they will be the research focus of the next step in exploring how the government intervenes in child protection in the family environment, and in exploring the boundary between family and national rights under Chinese culture.

During the focus group meetings, I found that the students and the parents both had a high tolerance of harm from their family, and that they tried to ignore this pain or to rationalise it.

However, some 'wounds' could not heal by themselves; social workers also mentioned that most people in China have not recognised the psychological trauma caused by violent child-rearing experiences. It is hoped that future research will be able to explore how to solve children's trauma resulting from an improper parenting practices under Chinese culture.



# Appendices

## Appendix A

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

(This consent form was read out by the researcher/moderator before the beginning of each session. One copy of the form was left with each participant; one copy was signed by each participant and kept by the researcher/moderator.)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. Before we start, I would like to say that:

Taking part is entirely your choice;

You are free to refuse to answer any question without saying why;

You are free to withdraw at any time without saying why;

Whether you take part or not, the services which you receive will not be affected.

The focus group discussions will be tape-recorded. The data will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to members of the research team. Your words and ideas may be quoted in the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics be included in the report.

If you have any questions, my tutors/supervisors who are directing the project can be contacted at: Dr Andrew Hill: [andrew.hill@york.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.hill@york.ac.uk) or Dr Carol-Ann Hooper: [carol-ann.hooper@york.ac.uk](mailto:carol-ann.hooper@york.ac.uk)

Please sign this form to show that I have read the contents to you.

*(Signed)*

*(Name printed)*

*(Date)*

(The researcher/moderator will keep the signed copy and leave an unsigned copy with each participant.)

Department of Social Policy and Social Work

University of York  
Heslington  
YORK YO10 5DD

## **Information Sheet**

Dear Participant:

My name is Tian Tian

I am a student at the University of York.

I am carrying out research on a project to determine how the Chinese public and social workers interpret/understand/think about parenting styles, disciplinary practices and the concept of child maltreatment in China.

This research is a research project of the University of York's Department of Social Policy and Social Work.

The research is designed to

- Explore the culturally based perceptions of contemporary Chinese people on parenting style, disciplinary practices and child maltreatment in China and to throw light on the controversial field surrounding it from the perspective of culture norm;
- Explore whether age, gender, having a child or not, and professional working background contribute to Chinese people's child-rearing perceptions and influence their definition of 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' parenting behaviours;
- Discuss what behaviours Chinese people consider to be harsh enough to seek help when they witness unacceptable parenting behaviour, and who Chinese people prefer to contact when they experience family problems.

To ensure that every participant understands the research; if you are interested, you are more than welcome to contact the initiating person for more details about the research, and I shall further explain the research content, expectations of participants and the basic working principles of the focus group. Contact details are written on this information sheet and given to each participating individual by email or post.

The focus group meetings will be carried out with three groups of participants separately: young adults, parents and social workers.

People who have decided to participate in this research are expected to attend a group meeting, held once and lasting approximately for two to three hours. Each group meeting will be held with six to eight participants of the same gender. The group meeting will be tape-recorded. The data acquired will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to members of the research team.

Personal contact details of participants will be kept confidential. The individual identity of

participants will not be revealed in the compilation of the research findings even when quotations are used.

The completion date of the research is March 2016. A thesis and a summary of the thesis (in Chinese) will be produced. The Chinese summary will be distributed to each research participant and collaborating organization.

**Contact Details:**

**Tian Tian**

**(Mobile) 07925868819**

**(Email) tt539@york.ac.uk**

# Appendix B

## Demographic Survey

*(This will be updated online)*

Please complete the following questions about yourself.

What is your age?

Gender:    Male    Female

Education level:

- Less than High School
- High School
- Some College
- Two-year College Degree (Associates)
- Four-year College Degree (BA, BS)
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Professional Degree (MD, JD)

Do you have a child?    What age(s)?

Which community are you living in right now?

Occupation:

Are you willing to attend a follow-up interview or focus group discussion?

If yes, leave your contact information \_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Vignettes

*Please read each vignette and then consider each response in turn. Think about each response in terms of how appropriate you consider it to be according to your culture and life.*

*There are no right or wrong answers or ratings for these vignettes. People's cultural background and parenting styles differ, and we are simply interested in what you consider is appropriate.*

### Tang's Story

Tang is eleven years old. He continues to play computer or video games until midnight without doing his homework and he will not listen to his parents. Tang's parents tried really hard to help him do well in school and form a good learning habit, but his academic performance is getting worse and now he is at the bottom of his class. Tang's father becomes very impatient and frequently beats him with a stick, a broom and a leather belt, sometimes to the extent that the broom is broken. Although Tang does not strike back and tries to explain his feeling to his father, it is sad that his father never listens to him.

*At this stage, participants will be asked the following questions:*

What do you think about this story?

What are your concerns?

Why do you think Tang behaves in this way?

Why do you think Tang's father behaves in this way?

What would you do if you were faced with this kind of difficulty?

If Tang's father chooses to act in the following ways, do you think that it is discipline, that it can be abuse, or that it is abuse?

Behaviour	Discipline	Can be Abuse	Abuse

1. Burning Tang with cigarettes, hot water or other hot things			
2. Caning Tang, physically punishing him using a wooden stick or a belt.			
3. Smacking or hitting Tang on the bottom with the bare hand			
4. Slapping Tang on the face, head or ears			
5. Shaking Tang hard			

Is there any other physical discipline behaviour which you have heard about that you think is acceptable or unacceptable?

*For each behaviour, the participants were asked to answer the question:*

What kinds of behaviour would you consider to be abusive and why do you think of it as abuse?

*The participants were required to state whether the behaviour was acceptable under the following circumstances (mitigating circumstances). The circumstances that were considered relevant were the following: (only for the pilot)*

**Age of the child** (are some behaviours wrong for children of any age?)

Acceptable only if the child is younger (age not specified)

Acceptable only if the child is older (age not specified)

Acceptable regardless of circumstances

Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

**Gender of the child** (is it the same with respect to children's gender?)

Acceptable if the child is a boy

Acceptable if the child is a girl

Acceptable regardless of circumstances

Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

**Physical or mental handicap of child**

Acceptable only if the child is handicapped

Acceptable only if the child is not handicapped

Acceptable regardless of circumstances  
-Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

***Frequency of incidents***

Acceptable if it only happens once or twice  
Acceptable regardless of frequency  
Not acceptable regardless of frequency

***Whether child is disobedient or not (is it the same whether child is disobedient or not?)***

Acceptable only if the child is disobedient  
Acceptable only if the child is not disobedient  
Acceptable regardless of circumstances  
Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

***Whether child is marked or injured or not (how severe is the punishment?)***

Acceptable only if the child is not permanently marked or injured  
Acceptable regardless of circumstances  
Not acceptable regardless of circumstances



## **Stage 2**

Tang is clearly developing an increasingly negative attitude towards his schoolwork. Their neighbour often hears Tang crying and being beaten, and discovers that Tang has obvious scars on his arms. The neighbour wants to talk with Tang's parents but he also thinks that it is someone else's family issue and that he should not intervene.

*At this stage, participants will be asked the following questions:*

What do you think about this story?

What are your concerns?

Why do you think neighbours behave in this way?

What would you do if you were faced with this kind of difficulty?

**Ling’s story**

Ling is a very bright girl of twelve. Usually she is at the top of her class but in her last exam, she was in tenth place in her class. Her parents think that she is good at maths but hopeless at English, However, she really wants to be first in her class because this is the only way to make her parents happy. Whenever she has not got a good result, her mom always criticizes Ling and calls her ‘useless’.

What do you think about this story? What are your concerns?

Why do you think Ling’s mother behaves in this way?

What would you do if you were faced with this kind of difficulty?

If Ling’s mom choose to act in the following ways, would you describe it as discipline, can be abuse, or abuse?

<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Can be Abuse</b>	<b>Abuse</b>
<i>Psychological/emotional</i>			
6. Telling Ling that others are better			
7. Constantly screaming at Ling and threatening physical punishment			
8. Calling her ‘stupid’ and ‘idiot’			
9. Withholding love from Ling			
10. Threatening to abandon Ling			
11. Acting distant and giving Ling the silent treatment for a few days.			

Is there any other psychological or emotional discipline behaviour which you have heard about that you think is acceptable or unacceptable?

*For each form of behaviour, the participants were asked to answer the following question:*

What kinds of behaviour would you consider to be abusive and why do you think of it as abuse?

*The participants were required to state whether the behaviour was acceptable under the following circumstances (mitigating circumstances). The circumstances that were considered relevant were the following: (only for the pilot)*

***Age of the child*** (are some behaviours wrong for children of any age?)

Acceptable only if the child is younger (*age not specified*)

Acceptable only if the child is older (*age not specified*)

Acceptable regardless of circumstances

Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

***Gender of the child*** (is it the same with respect to children's gender?)

Acceptable if the child is a boy

Acceptable if the child is a girl

Acceptable regardless of circumstances

Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

***Physical or mental handicap of the child***

Acceptable only if the child is handicapped

Acceptable only if the child is not handicapped

-Acceptable regardless of circumstances

Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

***Frequency of incidents***

Acceptable if only happens once or twice

Acceptable regardless of frequency

Not acceptable regardless of frequency

***Whether the child is disobedient or not*** (is it the same whether the child is disobedient or not?)

Acceptable only if the child is disobedient

Acceptable only if the child is not disobedient

Acceptable regardless of circumstances

Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

***Whether child is marked or /injured or not*** (how severe is the punishment?)

Acceptable only if the child is not permanently marked or injured

Acceptable regardless of circumstances

Not acceptable regardless of circumstances

## **Stage 2**

Because of this, Ling cannot sleep well because of worrying about exams. During exam times she sleeps even less. She has no close friends and she just studies and does not have time for anything else. Ling started to run away from school. She has been found by a passer-by shivering in a cold wind, wandering backwards and forwards in a housing estate. She is reluctant to go to school or to go home because she does not want to face the next exam.

What do you think about this story? What are your concerns?

Why do you think Ling behaves in this way?

What would you do if you were faced with this kind of difficulty?

**Vignette** (The actual sample for participants)

*Please read each vignette and then consider each response in turn. Think about each response in terms of how appropriate you consider it to be according to your culture and life.*

*There are no right or wrong answers or ratings for these vignettes. People's cultural background and parenting styles differ, and we are simply interested in what you consider is appropriate.*

**Vignette 1**

**Tang's Story; Stage 1**

Tang is eleven years old. He continues to play computer or video games until midnight without doing his homework and he will not listen to his parents. Tang's parents have tried really hard to help him do well in school and form a good learning habit, but his academic performance is getting worse and now he is at the bottom of his class. Tang's father becomes very impatient and frequently beats him with a stick, a broom and a leather belt, sometimes to the extent that the broom is broken. Although Tang does not strike back and try to explain his feelings to his father, it is sad that his father never listens to him.

*Note:*

## **Tang's Story; Stage 2**

Tang is clearly developing an increasingly negative attitude towards academics. Their neighbour often hears Tang crying and being beaten, and discovers that Tang has obvious scars on her arms. The neighbour wants to talk with Tang's parents but he also thinks that it is someone else's family issue and that he should not intervene.

### **Note**

## **Vignette 2**

### **Ling's story; Stage 1**

Ling is a very bright girl of twelve. Usually she is at the top of her class but in her last exam, she was in tenth place in her class. Her parents think that she is good at maths but hopeless at English, However, she really wants to be first in her class because this is the only way to make her parents happy. Whenever she has not got a good result, her mom always criticizes Ling and calls her 'useless'.

*Note*



## **Ling's Story; Stage 2**

Because of this, Ling cannot sleep well because of worrying about exams. During exam times she sleeps even less. She has no close friends and she just studies and does not have time for anything else. Ling started to run away from school. She has been found by a passer-by shivering in a cold wind, wandering backwards and forwards in a housing estate. She is reluctant to go to school or to go home because she does not want to face the next exam.

*Note*

## Appendix D

### ORIGIN OF CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

	<b>Case Origin</b>	<b>Modification</b>
1.	Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979	Burning Tang with cigarettes, hot water, or other hot things
2.	Child Discipline Module (UNICEF, 2010)	Caning Tang, physically punishing him using a wooden stick/a belt.
3.	Child Discipline Module (UNICEF, 2010)	Smacking or hitting Tang on the bottom with the bare hand
4.	Collier, McClure et al. (1999)	Slapping Tang on the face, head or ears
5.	Child Discipline Module (UNICEF, 2010)	Shaking Tang hard
6	Giovannoni & Becerra 1979	Telling Ling that others are better
7.	Child Discipline Module (UNICEF, 2010)	Constantly screaming at Ling and threatening physical punishment
8.	Child Discipline Module (UNICEF, 2010)	Calling her ‘stupid’ and ‘idiot’
9.	Hong & Hong, 1991: McClure, 1996	Withholding love from Ling
10.	Collier, McClure et al. (1999)	Threatening to abandon Ling
11.	Hong & Hong, 1991; McClure, 1996	Acting distant and giving Ling the silent treatment for a few days.

## Appendix E

Topic Guide for Focus Group discussion (can be used for all focus groups)

Each part of the vignette will go through the Main questions and the Stage 1 and 2 questions.

<b>Discuss based on each vignette</b>	<b>Main</b>	<p>What do you think about this story? What are your concerns?</p> <p>Why do you think XX behaved in this way?</p> <p>What would you do if you were faced with this kind of difficulty?</p>
	<b>Stage 1</b>	<p><b>Appropriate parenting, inappropriate parenting and controversial cases</b></p> <p>Are there some actions of the parents which you think are definitely acceptable and unacceptable? What would those be? And Why?</p> <p>Are there any cases you feel controversial? Why?</p>
		<p><b>Causes of some parenting behaviours</b></p> <p>What would influence your choice of the scale?</p> <p>Does this depend on the age of the child? On whether what the child does is wrong? On whether the child is a boy or a girl?</p> <p>Is there anything else you would take into account in these cases?</p>
	<b>Stage2</b>	<p><b>Sanctions of the community and help-seeking behaviour</b></p> <p>What behaviour would you report? Which authority would you report to? Who do you think is the best person to contact to help parents?</p> <p>Have you found it difficult to get the help needed to parent children? What is your expectation?</p>
<b>4.</b>	<p><b>Understanding of childhood and child/parent rights</b></p> <p>What is the difference between being a child and being a parent in a family?</p> <p>Do parents have rights over their children? Do children have rights over their parents? Why/Why not?</p> <p>What responsibilities do parents have for their children?</p> <p>Do children have any responsibilities in their families?</p>	

<b>5.</b>	<b>Understanding of child abuse and child rearing</b> What do you think would constitute harsh parenting? What would be child maltreatment in China?
<b>6.</b>	<b>Closing question</b> Is there anything else you would like to add about any of the questions or issues discussed today? (Additional thoughts, comments or opinions you may have about our discussions.)

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