THE ROLE OF DEMOCRATIC FAMILY AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT IN URBAN AND RURAL CHINESE ADOLESCENTS’ ATTITUDES ABOUT CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Graduate Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto

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Abstract

This study examined the significance of perceived parent and teacher support for autonomy and responsiveness, along with perceptions of democratic social organization, in the development of conceptions of children’s rights. Relations between these family and school environments and adolescents’ psychological well-being were also examined and a contrast between urban and rural settings within mainland China was included. Current findings suggest that Chinese adolescents display patterns of children’s rights attitudes similar to those found in Western settings. Different possible pathways of family and school environmental impact on children’s rights attitudes are found and explored. Current findings support psychological models that propose that the promotion of autonomy and responsiveness is critical to adolescents’ psychological well-being across cultures. Moreover, these findings provide strong evidence that features of democratic environments (e.g., mutual respect between parents and children, opportunities for children to express their opinions, shared decision making) are relevant to people in non-Western cultures.
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**Introduction**

According to the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, human rights are universal, inherent and inalienable. These rights are not something conferred upon an individual by an external authority but an intrinsic entitlement of “all members of the human family” (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN General Assembly, 1948) regardless of distinctions such as race, sex, religion, social origin, etc. Children, recognized as “members of the human family”, were extended these same entitlements since the ratification of the Convention of the Rights of the Child by nearly all members of the United Nations (CRC, UN General Assembly, 1989). Since then, children’s rights have received increasing attention in public policy and social science research (Ruck & Horn, 2008). The CRC outlines a broad array of different types of rights applying to children in the context of the family, school and society at large. Theorists and researchers have generally distinguished between two general types of rights believed to apply to child and adult agents (Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978; Ruck, Abramovitch, & Keating, 1998). *Self-determination rights* pertain to children’s rights to make decisions over important areas of their lives and are related to conceptions of agency, freedoms and choice. *Nurturance rights* pertain to the obligations of others (e.g., parents) to provide for children’s emotional, psychological or physical welfare and include children’s entitlements and the promotion of their well-being.

Children’s understanding of their own rights has been identified as an important research area with implications for social policy as well as for the academic field of moral development (Melton & Limber, 1992; Moshman, 2009). Until recently, most social
developmental research on the topic of children’s understandings of rights has been conducted mainly in Western cultural settings where autonomy and choice for adolescents is emphasized. In contrast, in so-called collectivistic and ‘duty-based’ societies such as China, emphasis is placed on obedience, maintaining hierarchical relationships and sacrificing individual desires in deference to the group (e.g., Miller, 1994; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). These alleged cultural differences may call into question the universality of self-determination rights in particular. Yet, despite the small amount of research conducted in non-Western cultural contexts, it has been shown that Chinese adolescents develop conceptions of rights and freedoms, as well as support democratic decision making in a variety of social contexts including the family, school, and society at large (Helwig, Arnold, Tan, & Boyd, 2003, 2007; Helwig, Yang, Tan, Liu, & Shao, 2011; Lahat, Helwig, Yang, Tan, & Liu, 2009). For example, in Lahat et al.’s, (2009) study of urban and rural Chinese adolescents’ judgments and reasoning about their own self-determination and nurturance rights, the findings largely parallel the results of studies done in Western countries. Chinese adolescents supported the rights of children to make their own decisions and pursue individual goals even in situations where their prerogatives conflicted with those in authority. This support for self-determination increased with age and the development of decision making abilities and extended beyond personal issues to encompass even democratic ideals such as freedom of speech and religion. These findings suggest that self-determination rights such as autonomy and decision-making may be universal factors in human psychological development.

Theorists who take a developmental perspective (e.g., social domain theorists like Turiel, Smetana, and Nucci), have linked the development of autonomy to universal
processes in which children are believed to increasingly claim greater areas of personal jurisdiction as they get older, sometimes in conflict or negotiation with adults (Smetana, 1989, 2011). This personal sphere is believed to be related to the development of children’s competencies and the need to establish boundaries governing what is private and within the realm of individual choice. Prior studies offer compelling evidence that a personal domain involving active claims of autonomy is formed at a young age (Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci & Weber, 1995). It was shown that even young children (preschool age) consider certain decisions (e.g., recreational pursuits, choice of friends, what they wear) as belonging to their own personal domain and not legitimately under the jurisdiction of authorities.

Much research points to the cross-cultural development of a personal domain whereby children define areas in their life that they believe to fall under their own jurisdiction and personal judgment, as claimed by Turiel (2002). This developmental perspective links the development of autonomy to universal processes in which the personal domain expands to encompass more and more freedoms as children get older. While the boundaries or definitions of this personal domain may vary slightly between different cultures, studies in non-Western cultural contexts such as in Colombia (Ardila-Rey & Killen, 2001), Brazil (Nucci, Camino, & Sapiro, 1996), Hong Kong (Yau & Smetana, 2003), Korea (Kim & Turiel, 1996) and Japan (Yamada, 2009) have consistently supported the idea that children in diverse societal and cultural settings construct their own areas of autonomy whereby intrusion, coercion or regulation by external authorities is seen as a violation of their personal choice and individual needs. These findings are significant as they indicate that concerns with freedoms, personal
choice and self-determination are not restricted to Western cultural settings, as is sometimes maintained (see Helwig, 2006; Turiel, 2007; Wainryb, 2006 for a discussion).

Related research investigating the relationship between adolescents’ perceptions of parental intrusion into various social domains and emotional well-being has been conducted in the U.S. and Japan (Hasebe, Nucci, & Nucci, 2004) as well as urban and rural China (Helwig, Yang, Nucci, & To, 2009). It has been found that perceived parental intrusion into personal domains which are seen as not legitimately regulated by parents, can result in conflict and is related to internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression. These findings are consistent with self-determination theory, which holds that autonomy is a universal human need that, when violated, can lead to negative consequences for psychological well-being regardless of cultural or social setting (Ryan & Deci, 2001). For example, Chirkov & Ryan (2001) examined parent and teacher support for autonomy among adolescents from a highly individualist culture (the United States) and those from a more collectivist cultural setting (Russia). They found that although Russian adolescents generally viewed their teachers as less autonomy supportive than those from the United States (consistent with varying cultural norms), less perceived autonomy support was associated with lower subjective well-being in both Russia and the United States. Similarly, Qin, Pomerantz, & Wang (2009) examined the role of children’s decision-making autonomy in their emotional functioning during early adolescence in the U.S. and China and their findings indicated that for both countries, children’s emotional health was directly related to increasing decision-making autonomy as children grew older.
It can be postulated that democratic environments that support autonomy may be relevant to adolescents’ well-being; however the correlates of such a relationship have rarely been investigated and hence are still unclear. Gutman and Eccles (2007) examined the contribution of family relations to outcomes in U.S. adolescents. They found that adolescents who had more decision-making opportunities also reported higher self-esteem. However, the relation between decision-making opportunities and depression varied according to the adolescents’ ethnicity. Specifically, more decision-making opportunities were associated with less depression for African American adolescents but the opposite pattern was found for European American adolescents. Gutman and Eccles (2007) concluded that there may be a curvilinear relationship between decision-making opportunities and adolescents’ outcome. Hence, neither too much nor too little autonomy would be beneficial for them.

Opportunities for making decisions that affect oneself are only one aspect of the democratic environment. Prior studies examining school climate also have investigated students’ perception of their ability to express criticism at school or students’ involvement in institutional decisions (e.g., Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2009; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Some recent research has found that a democratic school climate (in the form of students’ involvement in school decisions) is associated with higher levels of well-being in Western and non-Western urban samples (Way et al., 2007). It is important to note, however, that while a democratic environment can be characterized by a high level of autonomy support, a democratic environment includes more than mere personal decision making, and is characterized by relational features such as mutual respect, shared decision making, due process, and reciprocity (Dewey, 1916;
Piaget, 1932). In comparison, autonomy support as measured in prior research, such as that from a self-determination theory perspective (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001), touches on aspects of decision-making but also includes much broader areas like parental support, helping children to “find their own way” and encouraging children to pursue their interests. These broader definitions of autonomy likely overlap with other constructs, such as parental or teacher responsiveness, and are not necessarily part of what defines a democratic environment. Correspondingly, although responsiveness in the form of parental warmth, caring, and availability has also been associated with high autonomy support and well-being (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O’Connor, 1994; Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996), responsive parenting does not necessarily go hand in hand with a democratic family. For example, parents in a highly hierarchical family can also show a high degree of responsiveness. This may be relatively common in a collectivistic society such as China where rigid hierarchical relationships are balanced by the presence of very warm and caring parents (particularly mothers) (Rudy & Grusec, 2006; Stewart et al., 1998). Hence, it is important to differentiate between the relative contributions of these different aspects of a child’s environment to their well-being.

Another important issue pertains to the sources of children’s rights concepts. Beginning with the seminal work of Piaget (1932) and Dewey (1916) through to modern constructivist theoretical perspectives (e.g., Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2007), it has been postulated that rights conceptions are formed through various aspects of social interactions. Children experience these interactions, reflect upon them, and construct their conceptions of morality and ethics from their interaction histories. Environments that provide children with opportunities for participation in decision-making and promote the
exchange of different perspectives may aid in the development of democratic attitudes and respect for human rights (Dewey, 1916; Helwig & Yang, in press). Studies in Western cultural/societal settings have largely confirmed these claims (Hahn, 1999; Howe & Covell, 2005; Perliger, Canetti-Nisim, & Pedahzur, 2006; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; Torney, Oppenheim, & Farnen, 1975). However, whereas rights conceptions have been found to be associated with more democratic family and school environments, some of the research findings have been contradictory. For instance, studies in Canada have shown that children’s support for self-determination rights, but not nurturance rights, is found in family environments that provide children with autonomy and opportunities to contribute to decision making (Peterson-Badali, Morine, Ruck, & Slonim, 2004). Contradictorily, it has been found that children’s awareness of self-determination rights was sometimes heightened in authoritarian family environments, suggesting that this awareness could be a form of opposition against forms of parenting that are perceived as intruding into a child’s domain of autonomy (e.g., Day, Peterson-Badali, & Ruck, 2006). This suggests that there are additional factors affecting children’s rights conceptions and that they may play varying roles in different contexts. A further examination of the samples in these two studies suggests the possibility that the discrepancy may have been a result of demographics. Specifically, one study (Peterson-Badali et al., 2004) included a middle to upper class sample of European ethnicity and found a positive correlation between autonomy support and children’s rights conceptions whereas the other study included a lower SES and more culturally diverse sample group (with more authoritarian parents) and showed the opposite relationship. This finding may be particularly relevant to non-Western cultural contexts that do not provide much
support for autonomy. It may be that, in settings where autonomy is more restricted, an “oppositional” perspective is more likely to be found, in which children of parents who are more authoritarian claim or desire higher levels of self-determination rights. Research in these kinds of settings can contribute to current theoretical debates about the relative importance of autonomy and democratic social structure in varied cultural settings and the different processes that may ensue when human needs for autonomy and self-determination are restricted.

**The Present Study and Hypotheses**

Taken together, the literature discussed above suggests that children’s attitudes about children’s rights are related to their experiences within the family and school. The current study examines the role of family and school environments in facilitating adolescents’ endorsement of their own rights, as well as the correlates between adolescents’ experiences in these environments and their psychological well-being. It includes a contrast between urban and rural settings within a non-Western culture (mainland China).

As mentioned earlier, no prior studies have examined children’s rights and their correlates in a non-Western, traditional, rural setting. Instead, most research has been conducted either in Western nations or other nations with Western-style political systems (i.e., Asian democracies such as Japan), where rights issues and autonomy still may be emphasized, for example, through the media or other influences. China affords a unique cultural context ideally suited to explore these issues for several reasons. Firstly, China is strongly influenced by traditions of filial piety, Confucianism and, more recently, communism, which all stress the subordination of the individual to group goals or the
authority of the ruling party elite. Discussions of rights within Chinese political ideology tend to stress subsistence rights, more consistent with a nurturance orientation rather than civil and political rights (e.g., freedom of speech or democratic participation). With the broad official constraints on information through censorship or filtering of internet sites, movies, books and other publications, discourse related to human rights and democracy is banned and hence less accessible in China. Secondly, China is a highly collectivistic country, and its people have been found to exhibit some of the highest levels of collectivism among Asians in cross-national surveys and meta-analyses (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). At the same time, China has been undergoing modernization, resulting in tremendous social and economic change. Resources are disproportionately allocated to coastal cities resulting in very large discrepancies in development between urban and rural areas. This creates a stark contrast between the massively transformed, developed, urban parts of China and the much more traditional, collectivistic, mainly agricultural and rural regions of China. Exploring concepts of autonomy, personal freedoms and rights and their correlates with well-being, in rural, more traditional areas, might provide a stronger test of their universality and importance than in prior work that has drawn on Western samples or those from modern cities.

A major aim of the present research is to advance our understanding of how conceptions of rights develop in different Chinese cultural settings, and their significance for children’s well-being. The present research examines several features of urban and rural Chinese adolescents’ experiences and perceptions thought to be related to developing conceptions of rights that have not previously been examined in comparative cross-cultural research. Specifically, the role of both parental and teacher support for
autonomy and responsiveness as well as perceptions of democratic school and family environments in facilitating adolescents’ endorsement of their own rights are examined. An examination of the correlates between these features of adolescents’ experiences and adolescents’ psychological well-being is another major goal of the study. In the current study, a new democratic environment measure has been devised. This measure includes key features often argued to comprise democracy, such as tolerance of different perspectives and dissent (e.g., freedom of speech), shared involvement in decision making (e.g., democratic participation), and due process or “rule of law”, such as a fair hearing when a child is accused of wrongdoings. We are interested in determining whether these key aspects of a democratic environment can predict well-being or support for rights, beyond existing measures of responsiveness and autonomy used in prior research. Thus, a major aim of the study is to begin to tease apart the contributions of general autonomy support, responsiveness, and democratic environment to adolescents’ well-being. We will also examine the contributions of these variables in both the school and family contexts, in order to determine the relative contribution of each of these contexts to children’s attitudes toward their rights and their well-being.

**Hypotheses**

Based on prior studies, the following hypotheses regarding children’s rights attitudes and adolescents’ psychological well-being have been generated. Comparing support for the two types of children’s rights, we expected findings to be consistent with studies conducted in the West (e.g., Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978; Peterson-Badali, Ruck, & Ridley, 2003; Day et al., 2006), i.e. stronger support for nurturance rights than self-
determination rights among both urban and rural Chinese adolescents. Since support for children’s rights and personal autonomy have been found to be affected by factors such as modernization, socioeconomic status, and urban setting (e.g., Melton, 1980; Nucci et al., 1996; Lahat et al., 2009), we expect that the urban or rural setting would impact attitudes toward children rights. Specifically, urban Chinese adolescents are expected to show stronger support for self-determination rights than their rural peers. Children from rural China have less opportunities to experience having their rights (both nurturance and self-determination rights) fulfilled, due to a lack of available resources and growing up in a more traditional societal context, and thus it was expected that their support for children’s rights would be less strong than that of their urban counterparts.

At the same time, based on prior studies conducted in Western (e.g. Helwig, 1997; Ruck et al., 1998) and non-Western cultural contexts (e.g. Helwig et al., 2003; Lahat et al., 2009), it is hypothesized that support for self-determination rights would increase with age whereas support for nurturance rights would not necessarily vary as a function of age. These expectations are based on theoretical models that assume that autonomy and related processes are universal aspects of human development found across varying cultural contexts (e.g., Erickson, 1968; Helwig, 2006; Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 2011).

The relationship between gender and children’s rights attitudes is mixed in the literature. While some researchers have reported that females were more supportive of children’s nurturance rights (but not self-determination rights) than males (Day et al., 2006; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004; Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978), others have found stronger support for both types of children’s rights by females (Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2008), and others have found no gender differences (Ruck et al., 1998; Ruck,
Peterson-Badali & Day, 2002; Limber, Kask, Heidmets, Kaufman, & Melton, 1999). Thus, no hypotheses about gender were advanced in the present study.

In terms of home and school environment, we expect responsiveness to be associated with support for nurturance rights whereas autonomy support and perceptions of democratic family and school environment would be associated with support for self-determination rights. This prediction is supported by theory and prior research suggesting that children’s experience of autonomy, participation in family and school decision-making, and the ability to express criticism at school are related to their support for self-determination rights (but not nurturance rights) (Peterson-Badali et al., 2004; Smetana, 1995; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2008). On the other hand, perceptions of maternal responsiveness were found to be associated with support for nurturance rights (Peterson-Badali et al., 2004), as it is argued that the experience of being cared for by responsive parents contributes to support for nurturance rights (Ruck et al., 1998). It remains unclear, however, how parental and teacher responsiveness, autonomy support and democratic environments individually and jointly predict children’s rights attitudes.

As far as our current literature search indicates, the relationship between adolescents’ psychological well-being and support for their own rights has never been explored. Nevertheless, based upon self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and social domain theory (Hasebe et al., 2004; Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 2011), we expect that the satisfaction of needs for autonomy and responsiveness from parents and teachers as well as perceptions of democratic family and school environments would benefit both urban and rural Chinese adolescents’ psychological well-being.
Method

Participants and Research Sites

The total sample consisted of 395 Chinese adolescents from two research sites (in urban and rural China). Among them, 195 participants were from the urban China site (age of Junior High group, $M = 13.90$, $SD = .78$, range = 12-15; Senior High Group, $M = 16.99$, $SD = .82$, range = 16-19) and 200 participants were from the rural China site (age of Junior High group, $M = 14.51$, $SD = .82$, range = 13-16; Senior High group, $M = 16.81$, $SD = .81$, range = 15-19). These age groups were chosen as prior research conducted in China and Canada has revealed important developmental changes in support for children’s rights between early and late adolescence, especially regarding autonomy-related rights (e.g., Lahat et al., 2009; Ruck, et al., 1998).

The sample was drawn from schools in the two research sites in China. These sites were selected to provide a contrast between a modern, economically-developed city and a much more traditional, agriculturally-based, rural community with far less exposure to Western influences. The urban schools were located in the city of Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province. In terms of occupation and education level, 19% of Chinese urban participants’ parents were employed in professional, sales, managerial, or other technical occupations, 28% were employed in service occupations, trades, or manufacturing, 26% were employed in family-run businesses, and 22% (mostly mothers) were homemakers or unemployed. Nine percent had completed university or had some post-secondary education, 75% had completed high school only, and 14% had competed grade school only. Whereas the participants from the urban school sites came from predominantly middle-SES backgrounds, the vast majority of parents of Chinese rural
participants were farmers by occupation. The rural sample came from two schools located in the more isolated area of Renhua County in the city of Shaoguan in Northern Guangdong Province. The region from which the sample was drawn was chosen to be representative of a typical rural and agricultural region in China, and thus substantially less developed economically and more traditional in character than the larger urban centres. The majority (55%) of parents of Chinese rural participants were farmers by occupation, with the remainder working in industry (12%) or running small businesses in the area (13%). Two percent of parents had completed university or had some post-secondary education and 14% had completed senior high school, most had only completed junior high school (49%) or grade school (28%). One percent of parents had never received any education and six percent did not report their parental education level.

Assent was obtained in the classroom setting before the data collection session took place and all students participated on a wholly volunteer basis. The session took approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete. No compensation was offered to the students.

**Materials and Procedure**

A number of self-report measures were used in this study. Whereas two of the psychological measures were available in Chinese, wordings were slightly changed to improve the readability for the participants. The rest of the questionnaires were translated from English into Chinese by a native Chinese bilingual translator and were translated back into English by another bilingual translator to assess the accuracy of the translation. Moreover, in order to ensure cultural appropriateness, all of the measures were pilot tested with adolescent focus groups in China and any items that were found not to be
culturally appropriate (see below) were replaced.

**Children's Rights Attitude (CRA) questionnaire.**

In order to measure participants' attitudes toward children's rights issues, the first part of the study used an adaptation of the Children’s Rights Attitude (CRA) questionnaire, an instrument developed by Peterson-Badali et al. (2003), based on the Children’s Rights Attitudes Scale originally developed by Rogers and Wrightsman (1978). In the CRA, eighteen items correspond to children’s nurturance rights issues, and generally deal with children’s entitlement to care and protection from harm (e.g., *Children should have the right to a quality education*). Twenty-two items correspond to self-determination rights, i.e., rights for children to exercise control over various facets of their lives (e.g., *Children should have the right to decide which recreational activities they will participate in*). Two questions were modified in order to suit the Chinese cultural context. The item “*Children should have the right to quality child care*” was changed to “*Children with special needs should have the right to receive adequate education and assistance*”. This was because of the general lack of availability or widespread use of paid day care arrangements in China, in contrast to caregiving by extended family members. For the same reason, the item “*Money from taxes should be used to ensure that children receive quality child care*” was changed to “*Money from taxes should be used to ensure that children with special needs receive appropriate education*”.

Participants indicated their degree of support to these 40 statements on a 6-point Likert-type scale. An average score for each type of right was computed, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of each type of children's rights. Cronbach's alphas
for the nurturance rights items, after removing three items, were acceptable (.73 for urban and .65 for rural students) and good for the self-determination rights items (.73 for urban and .78 for rural students). The complete scale may be found in Appendix A. Whereas the CRA scale was never applied to the Chinese adolescents population before, the internal consistency reliabilities were generally comparable to that found in Western adolescent samples (e.g., in Peterson-Badali et al. (2004) study, Cronbach’s alphas were .76 for nurturance scale and .81 for self-determination scale).

**Perceptions of Parental (PAS) and Teacher (TAS) Autonomy-Support and Control Questionnaire.**

In order to assess autonomy support in family and school settings, participants were given the Parental (PAS) and Teacher (TAS) Autonomy Support and Control Questionnaires (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001, originally derived from Robbins, 1995). These measures provide conceptually similar scales for assessing the dimensions of controllingness and autonomy-support in both family and school settings. In accordance with recent calls to examine the unique role of mothers and fathers in socialization (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), the dimensions of autonomy support and responsiveness were assessed separately for both mothers and fathers in this research. This scale consists of nine statements about mother's autonomy support (e.g., *My mother allows me to decide things for myself*) and twelve items about mother's responsiveness (e.g., *My mother puts time and energy into helping me*). Father autonomy support and responsiveness subscales contain the same items as the mother subscales, and are all assessed on a 9-point Likert-type scale. A parallel instrument was also created to measure teachers’ autonomy support and responsiveness. For autonomy support, after
removing one item, Cronbach’s alphas were .84, .81, and .87 for urban and .73, .81, .78 for rural Chinese students for mother, father and teacher subscales respectively. For responsiveness, Cronbach's alphas were .85, .88, .86 for urban students and .81, .86 and .83 for rural students for mother, father, and teacher subscales respectively. The complete scale may be found in Appendix B.

**Democratic Environment Questionnaire (DEQ).**

In order to examine the unique role of democratic school and family environments, a new democratic environment measure was devised. There were six items for each setting assessing the same democratic dimensions. Each item was assessed on a 9-point Likert-type scale. Items included in this measure were derived from prior research on democratic school and family environments (e.g., Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arie, 2009) and assessed particular democratic dimensions of these environments, such as children’s involvement in decision making and parents’ and teachers’ tolerance for children’s expressions of dissent. Principal component analysis revealed that all items (except one) loaded on a single factor. One item in the family democratic scale and the corresponding item in the school democratic scale regarding tolerance of dissent, “it is possible to criticize my parents’ (teachers’) decisions”, was found to load on a separate factor and hence was removed from the scales. An average score for each setting was computed; higher scores were indicative of adolescents perceiving a more democratic environment. Cronbach's alphas for the family subscale were .82 for urban and .78 for rural Chinese participants. Cronbach's alphas for the school subscale were .72 for urban and .69 for rural Chinese participants.

Because previous findings (e.g., Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arie, 2009) have
indicated that these “tolerance of dissent” items may have unique predictive power, they were analyzed separately from the rest of items in the democratic environment questionnaire. The complete scale may be found in Appendix C.

**Psychological well-being**

Finally, participants completed three measures of psychological well-being. Given the hypothesized relations between parental and teacher control of autonomy and internalizing symptomology (e.g., Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Hasebe et al., 2004), participants were given the 10-item versions of the Children’s Depression Inventory (CDI short) and the Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS-2 short). As a more general measure of well-being, participants were also given the Student’s Life Satisfaction Scale (Terry & Huebner, 1995) along with an item from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). With a 4-point Likert-type scale, participants indicated how true each of the eight statements was of them (e.g., “My life is going well”). These measures have been determined to be valid for mainland Chinese populations in prior research (e.g., Yang, Ollendick, Dong, Xia, & Lin, 1995; Qin, Pomerantz, & Wang, 2009).

**Analysis Plan**

First, several procedures were used to assess for assumption violations. Then, t-test and univariate ANOVAs were performed to test for mean differences of the study variables (i.e., adolescents’ attitudes toward children’s rights and their psychological well-being) by gender, setting, and age group. Pairwise correlations among the family and school environment measures, support for children’s rights measures, as well as
adolescents’ psychological well-being are reported next. Hierarchical regression analyses were then conducted to examine the individual and joint contributions of the family and school variables hypothesized to predict attitudes toward nurturance and self-determination rights. Two sets of regressions were conducted (each) for the overall sample, and for the urban and rural settings separately. Another three sets of regressions were conducted to examine the relations between the aforementioned variables (i.e., family and school environment variables, as well as children’s rights attitudes) and adolescents’ psychological well-being in the overall sample, and in the urban and rural sample separately. Specifically, both parent and teacher support for autonomy and responsiveness, home and school democratic environment, and tolerance of dissent at home and school were entered simultaneously as predictors, followed by adolescents’ support for nurturance and self-determination rights entered simultaneously as predictors in the next block, and with adolescents’ self-report of their psychological well-being as outcome.

Results

Data screening

Several procedures were used to assess for assumption violations. Univariate and multivariate tests of normality and outliers were conducted. Mahalanobis distance \((D)\) statistic was used to detect cases with multivariate outliers. There were twenty-seven cases (less than 7% of the total sample) in which the probability of their \(D^2\) was less than .001 and hence these cases were eliminated from the rest of the analyses (Kline, 2010). To evaluate linearity, normal probability plots, partial regression plots, and plots of
standardized residuals with predicted scores were examined. Standardized residual plots were used to evaluate homogeneity of variance. The results suggested no violations of linearity and homogeneity of variance.

**Adolescents’ Support for Children’s Rights and their Psychological Well-being**

Rural adolescents perceived significantly less tolerance of dissent at home \((M = 3.50, SD = 1.70)\) compared to their urban counterparts \((M = 4.2, SD = 1.69)\); \(t(366) = 3.98, p < .001\). Other than this difference, no other family and school environments reported by urban and rural adolescents differed significantly from each other.

Participants’ support for children’s rights and their reports of psychological well-being were analyzed with 2 (gender) X 2 (age group) X 2 (setting) ANOVAs. As expected, analyses for support for children’s rights revealed significant age group and setting main effects. Older adolescents endorsed higher levels of both nurturance, \(F(1, 360) = 8.97, p < .005, \eta_p^2 = .02\), and self-determination rights, \(F(1, 360) = 6.80, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .02\). Also, adolescents from the urban setting endorsed higher levels of both nurturance, \(F(1, 360) = 28.05, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07\), and self-determination rights, \(F(1, 360) = 13.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04\). A significant gender effect was found only for endorsement of self-determination rights, \(F(1, 360) = 4.27, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .01\), with male adolescents showing stronger support for self-determination rights compared to their female counterparts.

Regarding psychological well-being, a significant main effect of setting \((F(1, 360) = 10.25, p < .005, \eta_p^2 = .03)\) was found for the general well-being measures (collapsing across scores of depression and anxiety reversed and life satisfaction). More specific
patterns were revealed by looking into the components of this general well-being measure. While symptoms of depression were not found to vary with gender or setting, female participants ($M = 2.48$, $SD = .42$) reported a higher level of anxiety symptoms compared to the male participants ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .51$); $F(1, 360) = 21.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$. In addition, adolescents from the urban setting ($M = 3.30$, $SD = .66$) reported a higher life satisfaction compared to their counterparts in the rural setting ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .65$), $F(1, 360) = 26.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$.

Given the presence of these significant main effects, gender, setting, and age group were included as covariates (first step) of the hierarchical regression analyses reported in a later section.

**Relationships Among Study Variables**

Bivariate correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. Different components of home and school environments measures were highly correlated with one another. Specifically, adolescents’ report of autonomy support was positively related to their report of responsiveness ($r = .77$, $p < .01$), democratic environment ($r = .70$, $p < .01$), and tolerance of dissent ($r = .14$, $p < .05$). Similarly, their report of responsiveness was also positively related to democratic environment ($r = .64$, $p < .01$).

Regarding children’s rights attitudes, nurturance rights attitudes were positively related to support for self-determination rights ($r = .37$, $p < .01$), maternal autonomy support ($r = .22$, $p < .01$) and tolerance of dissent at school ($r = .12$, $p < .05$). Adolescents’ report of their psychological well-being was positively related to their perceived level of autonomy support ($r = .43$, $p < .01$), responsiveness ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), and democratic family and school environments ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). Whereas results generally indicated associations
in the expected directions, there were three exceptions. Contrary to the hypotheses, support for self-determination rights was found to be negatively correlated with responsiveness ($r = -0.17, p < .01$), democratic environment ($r = -0.11, p < .05$), and psychological well-being ($r = -0.16, p < .01$).
Table 1

Mean (M), standard deviations (SD), Pearson correlations and internal consistency of study variables in Urban and Rural China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
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<td>.43**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
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<td>.27**</td>
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<td>7. H Democratic Environment</td>
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<td>.56**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
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<td>9. H Tolerance of Dissent</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.11*</td>
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<td>10. S Tolerance of Dissent</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.80</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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<td>.19**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Self-Determination Rights</td>
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<td>.57</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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</tr>
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<td>12. Nurturance Rights</td>
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<td>.11*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>13. Wellbeing</td>
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<td>1.12</td>
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<td>.38**</td>
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<td>.42**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M=mother; F=father; T=teacher; H=home; S=school. *p ≤.05, **p ≤.01, ***p ≤.001.
Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Several hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to identify possible main and interactive effects between the study variables. The analyses were separated into two phases. Phase 1 was devoted to examining the relationship between family and school environment (i.e., parental and teacher support for autonomy, responsiveness, and democratic environment) on adolescents’ support for nurturance and self-determination rights. Phase 2 was devoted to examining relations between the family and school environment variables as well as adolescents’ support for nurturance and self-determination rights on adolescents’ psychological well-being. For each phase of the analyses, demographic variables (gender, age, and in the overall analysis, setting) were entered in the first step as controls and also to allow evaluation of the predictive power of the family and school environment variables over and above that of the simple demographic variables. Adolescents’ perceived maternal, paternal, and teacher support for autonomy and responsiveness, democratic family and school environments, and tolerance for dissent were entered in the second step. Finally, in order to test for the interaction effects, variables that were involved in the interaction analyses were centered and the interaction parameters were entered in the third step.

Predicting Attitudes Toward Rights

Nurturance rights. Support for nurturance rights was used as the criterion variable in this Phase 1 analysis. Since no interactions with other variables were found for the setting (urban vs. rural), results of the combined urban and rural sample are presented (see Table 2). Significant main effects were found for age and setting, which accounted for 10% of the variance in support for nurturance rights. After controlling for
the demographic variables, maternal responsiveness was found to be the only significant predictor in the second step. This model accounted for another 5% of the variance in the regression analysis. In the third step of the regression analysis, interaction parameters were entered into the equation. Addition of interaction terms to the regression equation yielded a significant change in $R^2$, and hence the interaction model improved the prediction of adolescents’ support for nurturance rights from the main-effect-only model. However, none of the individual interaction terms were significant. Together, all the predictor variables and interaction terms accounted for 20% of the variance in support for nurturance rights in the overall analyses.

Table 2.

*Multiple Regression Effects of Family and School Environment on Support for Children Rights (Urban and Rural Combined)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Nurturance Rights</th>
<th>Self-Determination Rights</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta F$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>13.85***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (Setting)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
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<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Paternal</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy Support</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal</td>
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<td>Paternal</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>.098</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Environment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance of Dissent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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<td>--------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>MAS X MRES</td>
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<td>MAS X DEF</td>
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<td>MRES X DEF</td>
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<td>FAS X FRES</td>
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<td>FAS X DEF</td>
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<td>FRES X DEF</td>
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<td>TAS X TRES</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAS X DES</td>
<td>.287**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRES X DES</td>
<td>-.176</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total $R^2$ .20 .21

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

**Self-determination rights.** Endorsement of self-determination rights was also used as the criterion variable in this Phase I analysis (Table 2). Again, significant main effects were found for age and setting. Together, the demographic variables accounted for 6% of the variance in support for self-determination rights in analyses. Paralleling the analysis strategy for nurturance rights reported in the previous section, adolescents’ perceived maternal, paternal, and teacher support for autonomy, responsiveness, democratic environment, and tolerance of dissent, were entered in the second step of the regression analysis. This model accounted for another 10% of the variance in support for self-determination rights, which was a significant increase from the variance accounted for by only the demographic variables. Whereas tolerance for dissent at home was found to be a significant predictor in the positive direction, family democratic environment significantly predicted self-determination rights attitudes in a negative direction. In the third step of the regression analysis, interaction parameters were entered into the equation. Addition of interaction terms to the regression equation accounted for another
5% of the variance in the regression analysis. A significant interaction was found between teacher autonomy support and school democratic environment. Together, the regression model accounted for 21% of the variance in self-determination rights attitudes.

To interpret the significant interaction effects, we looked at and compared those scores that fell in the upper quartile (high) and lower quartile (low) of both variables. The interaction between teacher autonomy support and school democratic environment is depicted in Figure 1 ($t = 3.08, p < .005$). The interaction was disordinal. Adolescents who reported high democratic school environment but low teacher autonomy support reported weaker support for self-determination rights, compared to those who reported high democratic school environment and also high teacher autonomy support. The converse set of relationships was observed for those who reported low democratic school environment. Those who reported low teacher autonomy support reported stronger support for self-determination rights than those who reported high teacher autonomy support. This interaction indicates evidence of a “reactive” pathway operating when adolescents perceive their environment as having low levels of support for both autonomy and democratic environment. This pathway was further explored in the later section.
Figure 1. Interaction between school environment variables on self-determination rights attitudes.

Predicting Adolescents’ Psychological Well-being

Phase 2 of the analysis used hierarchical regression analyses to test whether family and school environment as well as adolescents’ support for nurturance and self-determination rights predicted their psychological well-being. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

In terms of demographic variables, a significant main effect was found for setting in the overall sample. Teacher responsiveness, family democratic environment, and tolerance of dissent at school were found to be significant predictors in the second step of regression analyses, and together accounted for 32% of the variance in adolescents’ psychological well-being. When support for children’s rights were added to the
regression equation in the third step, a further 2% of the variance was predicted in the full sample model. Whereas neither of the children’s rights attitudes variables were significant predictors of the psychological well-being variables, predictive power of the model improved substantially when these variables were included in the model with the rest of the family and school environment variables. Hence, support for nurturance and self-determination rights seem to act as suppressor variables in this model, explaining variance in the psychological well-being outcome. The interaction parameters did not account for a significant increase from the variance accounted for by the main effect-only model.

When urban and rural samples were analyzed separately, family democratic environment was a significant predictor of psychological well-being in both urban and rural sample. Whereas tolerance of dissent at school was only significant in the urban sample, perceived teacher responsiveness was only significant in the rural sample. Moreover, support for self-determination rights became a significant predictor in the urban sample. Yet, it predicted adolescents’ psychological well-being in a negative direction. On the other hand, the addition of children’s rights attitudes variables was not significantly better than the family and school environment-only model in predicting the rural adolescents’ psychological well-being. Together, the predictor variables accounted for 40% (urban) and 26% (rural) of the variance in adolescents’ psychological well-being.
Table 3

Multiple Regression Effects for Family and School Environment, and Children’s Rights Attitudes on Well-being.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Overall</th>
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<th>Urban</th>
<th></th>
<th>Rural</th>
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<td></td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta F$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta F$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
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</table>

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Exploratory Analyses

The relations between support for self-determination rights and the environment variables (i.e., responsiveness, autonomy support, and democratic environment measures) were examined in a scatter plot, in part to shed light on the surprising associations.
between these variables noted above. It was found that several participants endorsed very high levels of support for self-determination rights but also consistently reported very low parent and teacher support for autonomy (Figure 2), responsiveness (Figure 3) and had very low ratings for democratic environment (Figure 4). Although this is contradictory to our hypothesis and some of the previous findings (e.g., Peterson-Badali et al., 2004), this finding is, however, consistent with an unexpected finding in Day et al.’s (2006) study that young people who perceived their mothers as authoritarian or uninvolved endorsed stronger support for self-determination rights than those who perceived their mother as authoritative. In interpreting this finding, Day et al. (2006) argued that strong endorsement of self-determination rights within authoritarian and uninvolved households may emerge as a reaction against the lack of appropriate parental sensitivity toward children’s developmental needs. Likewise, we also postulated that strong endorsement of self-determination rights may have emerged as a reaction to the lack of support for autonomy and responsiveness that these participants in our study reported receiving from their family and school environments.

Given this alternative (“reactive”) pathway to strong support for self-determination rights, these cases were examined further in a separate analysis. We also wanted to know whether the unexpected negative relations between self-determination rights and the other study variables were entirely driven by this unique subset of participants. Among the twenty cases so identified as outliers, fourteen were from the urban sample and six were from the rural sample. When examined separately, these cases showed very high negative correlation between responsiveness and self-determination rights attitudes (r = -.482, p < .05). After deletion of these “reactive” cases with extreme
values from the total sample, the three sets of pairwise correlations that were unexpected (i.e., the negative relations between endorsement of self-determination and responsiveness, democratic environment, and psychological well-being) were no longer significant (see Table 4; since the same pattern of results were found across the father, mother, and teacher components of these measures, averaged scores were used to facilitate reporting and clarity).

When the “reactive” cases were excluded from the hierarchical regression analyses, all the unexpected predictors were no longer significant. In the regression analyses predicting self-determination rights, democratic family environment was no longer a significant negative predictor after the exclusion of “reactive” cases. Instead, maternal autonomy support, along with family tolerance of dissent, became significant positive predictors of self-determination rights attitudes (see Table 5). Similarly, in the regression analyses predicting adolescents’ psychological well-being, the significant negative association between the support for self-determination rights and adolescents’ psychological well-being disappeared after removing the “reactive” cases from the analyses (see Table 6).

Figure 2. Scatterplot between Support for Self-determination Rights and Responsiveness.
Figure 3. Scatterplot between Support for Self-determination Rights and Autonomy Support.

Figure 4. Scatterplot between Support for Self-determination Rights and Democratic Environment.
Table 4

Mean (M), standard deviations (SD), Pearson correlations and internal consistency of study variables (excluding “reactive” cases)

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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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Note. (1)* indicates p < 0.05, ** indicates p < 0.01.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Effects for Family and School Environment on Support for Children

Rights (excluding “reactive” cases)

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### Table 6

*Multiple Regression Effects for Family and School Environment, and Children’s Rights Attitudes on Well-being (excluding “reactive” cases)*

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<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$</td>
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*Note.* *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.**
Discussion

Perspectives in contemporary debates in psychology have sometimes questioned the universality of concepts of rights and autonomy that are central to Western cultures as well as their applicability in non-Western cultural contexts (see Bao & Lam, 2008; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Miller, 1994; Shweder et al., 1987). In the present study, we examined the role of adolescents’ perceptions of their family and school environments on the development of children’s rights conceptions. Using the framework of self-determination theory, we also examined role of autonomy support and responsiveness on adolescents’ psychological well-being (along with the contributions of democratic family and school environments as well as children’s rights attitudes).

The pattern of children’s rights attitudes found in urban and rural China support the results of prior studies conducted in Western settings (e.g., Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978; Day et al., 2006; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004). The results demonstrate that Chinese adolescents, even those from rural parts of China, felt strongly about their entitlement to be cared for and they valued their personal autonomy. Overall, there was more support for nurturance rights than self-determination rights. The degree of support for self-determination rights in both settings was comparable to, or sometimes even stronger than, that found in prior Western studies (falling, on average, in the “Agree slightly” range) (e.g., Peterson-Badali, et al., 2004; Day et al., 2006). It is particularly revealing to see that Chinese adolescents endorsed rights that they have not been given (e.g., the right of children to decide which school they attend), that are not commonly available to them (e.g., the right of children to keep their room locked) and that are commonly stigmatized (e.g., the right to counseling when the child has emotional
problems). Nevertheless, adolescents from both urban and rural settings endorsed these rights and regarded them as rights that all children should enjoy. On the other hand, the present study does not suggest a stronger support for nurturance rights in Chinese adolescents, as suggested in previous literature that hypothesized relations between nurturance rights attitudes and collectivistic culture (Miller, 1994; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). In contrast, the present study’s findings showed that Chinese adolescents overall do not endorse nurturance rights quite as strongly as their North American peers. Having said that, it is important to note that two nurturance rights items in the CRA measures were modified for cultural adaptation, and hence direct comparison of our version of the measures used in other studies would require cautious interpretation.

Findings from the current study also revealed that support for children’s rights varied according to setting (urban or rural), age and to some extent, gender. As predicted by previous research on children’s rights and personal autonomy (e.g., Melton, 1980; Nucci et al., 1996; Lahat et al., 2009), adolescents in different cultural contexts were found to endorse children’s rights differently. Urban Chinese adolescents showed much stronger support for both self-determination rights and nurturance rights than the rural adolescents. In accord with prior research, older adolescents were more likely than younger ones to support self-determination rights (Melton, 1980; Ruck et al., 1998). However, support for nurturance rights was also found to increase with age in the current study. Moreover, gender-based differences were found only in endorsement of self-determination rights, but not nurturance rights, with males endorsing these rights more strongly than females. In summary, while children’s rights attitudes varied according to adolescents’ age, gender and the cultural settings that they were raised in, all Chinese
adolescents in the current study appeared to strive for autonomy as reflected in their support for self-determination rights.

In accordance with self-determination theory, the present study’s findings supported the proposition that the promotion of autonomy and responsiveness is critical to adolescents’ psychological well-being across cultures (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). Findings from the current study further revealed that perceptions of specific democratic features of family and school environments predicted a significant proportion of variance above and beyond parental and teacher support for autonomy and responsiveness. This suggests the importance of fostering a democratic home and school environment in ensuring adolescents’ psychological well-being. Key features of a democratic home and school environment incorporated into the present study’s measures include reciprocity (mutual respect between parents and children), opportunities for children to express their opinions, shared decision making, and a fair hearing when the child is being accused of wrongdoings. A prior study by Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh (2009) showed that Jewish and Arab adolescents’ perceived ability to express criticism in a school context was highly associated with their support for children’s rights. The current study went further and suggested that perceptions of teacher and school openness to criticism are also associated with Chinese adolescents’ psychological well-being. These findings suggest that the ideal manifestation of responsiveness and autonomy support may be best exercised within a generally democratic environment. While some research has suggested that lack of choice for children in cultures such as China may not be associated with detrimental effects, particularly when children maintain close relationships with parents (Bao & Lam, 2008), the current study suggests a strong relation between optimal well-
being and environmental support for autonomy and responsiveness realized in a democratic framework.

It is important to note that these family and school environment constructs were also found to be highly correlated with one another. Parents and teachers who are highly responsive are often also seen by adolescents as highly supportive of their children’s need for autonomy and often perceived to provide a democratic environment for their children. However, the current study also reveals that democratic aspects of autonomy have a unique predictive power in facilitating adolescents’ psychological health that is not accounted for by the other family environment variables. Similarly, in the school context, the current study revealed the importance of allowing adolescents to express criticism toward their teachers’ decision to promote their well-being. This is of particular interest given that China has been characterized as a strongly collectivistic society in which teachers are highly revered and obedience to authority is emphasized. As a result, expressing criticism regarding school decisions and services is often not encouraged nor generally supported. Nevertheless, the current study indicated that school environments characterized by responsive teachers who are caring, warm and available for their students as well as open to criticism are beneficial for Chinese students.

In summary, these findings provide strong evidence that features of democratic environments are relevant to people in non-Western cultures. These features may also have implications for their psychological well-being. Moreover, the finding that endorsement of children’s rights increases with age is in line with a variety of theoretical accounts that stress the increasing importance of autonomy for adolescents as they mature (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 2006). This points to underlying universal
processes associated with the development of autonomy and children’s rights conceptions. Rights are not only claimed by Chinese adolescents, but they are also functionally relevant for psychological health.

Despite all the findings that were consistent with our hypotheses, we also found patterns that were not aligned with our predictions. Children’s rights attitudes were not found to be directly related to adolescents’ psychological well-being. This suggests that adolescents’ well-being is associated with how adolescents perceive that they are treated by their parents and teachers (e.g., perceived support for autonomy and responsiveness), but not by the degree of support for children’s rights that they show in their attitudes about rights. In addition, we also found that under certain circumstances, too much claiming of self-determination rights by adolescents may have a negative association with psychological well-being. Exploratory analysis suggested that many participants who have an extremely heightened support for self-determination rights also reported very low support for autonomy and responsiveness on the part of their parents and teachers. This suggests that these participants could be considered as “reactive” cases. In other words, a high level of endorsement of self-determination rights may be a result of the perception that the amount of support granted to adolescents is very limited. It is important to note that this negative relationship between self-determination rights and well-being in the regression analysis only occurred in the urban sample and in the small portion of the sample that endorsed self-determination rights very highly.

One possible explanation of these findings is that these urban adolescents who claim higher self-determination support may be demanding for developmentally inappropriate levels of autonomy. Hence, they perceive their parents and teachers as
providing less than what they want and their emotional well-being suffers as a result. The present generation of Chinese adolescents (especially those from urban settings) have grown up in a climate of vast social and economic transformation characterized by a heightened sense of personal autonomy and increasing awareness of children’s rights that contrasts markedly with the developmental context experienced by previous generations (Naftali, 2009; Peerenboom, 2002). It is possible that the vast differences between generations in terms of life experiences may lead to conflicts and adolescents perceiving their parents to be unsupportive of their needs for autonomy and responsiveness. This possibility is supported by a reasonable assumption that urban adolescents experience more autonomy and decision making opportunities compared with their rural peers (Naftali, 2009). Nevertheless, this expected difference is not reflected in their report of perceived family and school environment (with the exception of the singular finding that urban adolescents perceived their home environment as more tolerant of dissent than did rural adolescents). This may be explained by the phenomenon of overestimation of peer autonomy (Daddis, 2011). American adolescents have been found to believe that their parents are significantly more restrictive than other parents and that they themselves are receiving a less than “optimal” level of autonomy as compared to their peers. For example, Daddis (2011) found that American adolescents who perceived their friends as having more autonomy than they did were more likely to desire increased autonomy. Similarly, in the present study, the “reactive” Chinese adolescents’ lowered sense of well-being may be driven by expansions in their expectations for autonomy. Alternatively, it is also possible that those adolescents who are depressed or reported low levels of emotional well-being may react to their psychological dissatisfaction by claiming more
self-determination rights. Further research is needed to unpack the processes that explain this association.

It is nonetheless important to interpret these “reactive” cases with caution. While support for autonomy and responsiveness were often found to be associated with adolescents’ psychological well-being, other studies (Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004) have also suggested that inappropriately high levels of autonomy, especially when it is granted too early to adolescents, may not be beneficial to their psychological health.

Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Peterson-Badali et al., 2004), maternal responsiveness was found to be the only significant predictor of nurturance rights attitudes in the regression analysis. It is possible that adolescents’ experience of responsive parenting, particularly from mothers who are attuned to their children’s needs to be cared for and protected, shape their attitudes about nurturance rights.

With respect to self-determination rights, the literature suggests the importance of experiencing autonomy and actual participation in family decision-making for children to develop stronger levels of support for these rights (Peterson-Badali et al., 2004). On the other hand, Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh’s (2009) study on school climate and children’s rights attitudes suggested that students’ ability to express criticism at school, but not students’ participation in decision-making, was correlated with children’s rights attitudes. The current study has confirmed the association between allowing adolescents’ to express dissent at home and the conceptions of self-determination rights. It also supports the need for distinguishing different aspects of children’s participation in decision-making. Specifically, it is important to distinguish the differential properties of
opportunities for children to express opinions that their parents/teachers agree with versus situations where they need to express dissent, i.e. opinions that are at variance with those of their parents/teachers. Indeed, current findings show that the ‘tolerance of dissent’ indicator statement “it is possible to criticize my parents’ (teachers’) decisions” has a unique predictive power for adolescents’ support for self-determination rights and their psychological well-being. In addition, in the regression analyses predicting self-determination rights attitudes in which reactive cases were excluded, maternal autonomy support, together with family tolerance of dissent, were significant predictors of support for self-determination rights. This suggests that the experience of having an autonomy supportive mother and a family environment that is open to criticism may shape self-determination rights attitudes.

With the detection of “reactive” cases, the current findings suggest that the hypothesized relationship between family and school environment and children’s rights attitudes is not linear. Instead, it may be characterized by and related to other environmental variables, such as social class and family/school context. For example, parental responsiveness and opportunities for decision making within the family have been found to facilitate support for self-determination rights in a mainly Caucasian, middle to upper-middle class sample in Canada (Peterson-Badali et al., 2004). It is possible that for children in this sample, the minimal threshold of autonomy support needed for healthy functioning has been met; as a result, these children do not have to use a “reactive” approach to strive for more autonomy. In this case, an environment that promotes autonomy development also fosters children’s rights attitudes. At the other extreme, in an ethnically more diverse and lower SES sample (Day et al., 2006), there is
evidence that children’s awareness of self-determination may be heightened by their experience of authoritarian parenting that is highly restrictive and relatively uninvolved. It is possible that parents in this more ethnically diverse and lower SES sample may not be providing developmentally appropriate levels of autonomy support for their adolescents. As a result, adolescents’ support for self-determination may emerge as a reaction against forms of parenting that are perceived to interfere with their development of a sense of autonomy and self-expression. Prior studies (Nucci et al., 1996; Chirkov & Ryan, 2001) have suggested that the level of autonomy support (versus restriction) children experience varies as a function of social class and cultural variables.

The positive relation found between autonomy supportive environments and children’s rights attitudes in middle to upper-middle class adolescents in a mainly Caucasian sample contrasts with the reactive relation found in adolescents from families in lower socioeconomic brackets and culturally diverse backgrounds. This was also found to be the case in the Chinese sample in the current study. As the relationship does not always follow the same pattern, these anomalous findings suggest a curvilinear relationship between environmental variables and support for children’s rights. These varying relationships may be characterized by two different pathways. In one pathway, support for children’s rights stems from adolescents’ experience of support for autonomy and responsiveness. This support is perceived or experienced by the child as sufficiently surpassing a certain threshold that is deemed to be minimally optimal. The second pathway stems from a child’s reactive need for developmentally appropriate support for autonomy and responsiveness in an environment where these variables are under optimal
levels. Further empirical research would be required to adequately explore these two pathways.

There are several notable limitations in the present study. First, data collected from the current study was cross-sectional. As a result, this limits the ability to draw inferences about temporal ordering and causality. In the current study, we have assumed that family and school environments predict adolescents’ conceptions of rights and well-being. However, it is also possible that family and school environments change as a result of adolescents’ belief of children’s rights or well-being. For example, instead of a pathway stemming from an environment that allows expression of criticism and supports the development of children’s rights attitudes, it may be the case that a child who endorses and advocates strongly for his or her rights would shape the interactions with his/her parents and teachers to allow more tolerance for dissent. This possible pathway is supported by previous studies showing that the process of autonomy development has a strong child-driven component. For example, Smetana’s (1995) research suggested that children’s active assertions of competence may provoke autonomy development by guiding parents to shift their views. Future research in this area would benefit from the use of longitudinal research designs to confirm the causal processes that underlie increases in support for children’s rights and the relations with adolescents’ well-being.

The second limitation is that adolescents’ self-report is an integral part of the current research design. Since, according to self-determination theory, it is an individual’s perception or construal of autonomy support that is important and central to how basic needs are expected to be related to well-being, and not necessarily the absolute or objective level of autonomy obtained, the self-report method was used in this study as
in prior research from this theoretical perspective (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Nevertheless, the objective level of autonomy could be equally important. Hence, future research may benefit from direct investigations of actual authority practices (e.g., parenting or teacher autonomy support) to determine more objectively the optimal level of autonomy necessary for the best outcomes vis-à-vis well-being. It would also help in future research to verify the accuracy of adolescents' perceptions, for example, through obtaining parental or teacher measures of autonomy support.

Thirdly, the findings are based on measures that were derived from theories and research conducted in Western cultural contexts, although the present study’s findings indicate that these measures and their underlying constructs do have applicability in non-Western settings. Nevertheless, these experimentally-derived scenarios may have missed unique, indigenous understandings of children’s rights. Hence, it may be useful to supplement research on rights attitudes with an open-ended interview methodology that teases out the types of issues that are salient in Chinese adolescents’ lives (Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2008).

Furthermore, China is a country that is currently going through a dynamic transformation. While it is fascinating to capture this society in transformation, it is nevertheless, important to acknowledge that the current data is a snapshot of contemporary China. As the country continues to transform rapidly both socially and economically and as its citizens gain more exposure to “Western” ideologies, attitudes toward children’s rights might change. This is an empirical question that is worth continual investigation.
Finally, although attitudes about children’s rights were explored in this study, we do not know how the adolescents might react when these rights are not manifest in their lives. It remains a mystery as to what actions adolescents would take when their rights are not granted. Prior studies with ethnically diverse samples have revealed differences in how adolescents from different backgrounds react to perceived limitations on their autonomy, with deception or avoidance of direct conflict more often reported in non-European samples (Brown, Bakken, Nguyen, & Von Bank, 2007; Yau, Tasopoulos-Chan, & Smetana, 2009; Smetana, 2011). Also, it is important to investigate how these actions (or lack of) may affect the psychological health of adolescents from different cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, the current study has provided a contrast between the environmental impact on attitudes toward rights of a relatively prosperous urban environment and a poor, traditional rural setting within China. In regard to the conceptions of rights and autonomy, the current findings echo those of Western studies, thus supporting their universality. Our findings also support psychological models (e.g., self-determination theory and domain theory) that postulate that satisfaction of needs for autonomy and responsiveness are positively associated with adolescents’ psychological health across cultures. In addition, the present study demonstrates that the significance of democratic environments extends beyond democratic societies in the Western world. Indeed, current findings reveal that perceptions of specific democratic features of family and school environments uniquely and positively contribute – at least statistically if not necessarily causally – to adolescents’ psychological well-being within a diverse, non-Western cultural setting. Despite claims questioning the applicability of rights concepts in
non-Western cultural contexts, the current findings show that Chinese adolescents
demonstrate comparable or sometimes even stronger support for self-determination rights
as compared to their counterparts from Western cultural contexts. One might question
whether support for self-determination rights during adolescence would be maintained as
a child ages. Would this support be sustained when he/she becomes a parent?
Furthermore, how would support for children’s rights be manifest in their own parenting
practices later in life? This would be an empirical question that requires longitudinal
studies to properly investigate.

As China continues to rapidly modernize, further efforts to examine the
contribution of various contextual variables in the development of children’s rights
attitudes and their associations with well-being would provide important information
relevant for the formulation of educational and social policy in this critical area of social
concern.
References


Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.


Appendix A

Children's Rights Attitude (CRA) questionnaire

(Questions adapted for Chinese sample)

1. Parents should be required to take their children for counselling when they are having emotional problems at school

2. Money from taxes should be used to ensure that children with special needs receive appropriate education

3. Children should have the right to decide which recreational activities they will participate in

4. Even if parents are extremely busy, they should always make themselves available to talk with their child if the child has a problem

5. Decisions about a child's medical treatment should be made by the child, even if the child's life is at stake

6. Children should have the right to express ideas or opinions in school newspapers, even if many teachers may not agree with them

7. Children should have the right to adequate clothing

8. Children should have the right to a quality education

9. Children should have the right to receive adequate dental care

10. Children should have to get permission from their parents before taking a job

11. Children should have the right to choose what they wear even if their parents disapprove

12. Children should have the right to decide which school they will attend

13. Children should have the right to choose which religion they practice, even if it is different from their parents
14. Children with special needs should have the right to appropriate education and assistance.

15. Parents should be able to enter a child's room without the child's permission.

16. Children should have the right to an adequate breakfast.

17. Children should have the right to choose their friends.

18. Children should have the right to keep their diary private from their parents.

19. Adequate clothing for children may be a goal of our society, but it should not be a right for every child.

20. Children should have the right to an adequate home environment.

21. Dental care should be provided to children only when their parents can pay for it.

22. Parents should be able to keep children from seeing television shows dealing with content that parents consider inappropriate.

23. Money from taxes should be spent to ensure that all children receive a quality education whether they are rich or poor.

24. Parents should be able to read their child’s diary if they have concerns about their child.

25. Children should have the right to keep their room locked even if their parents are concerned about what might be in it.

26. Children should have the right to receive medical treatment even if their parents forbid it on religious grounds.

27. Children should have the right to practice their religion.

28. The government should be required to help parents provide an adequate home environment for children.
29. Children should have the right to receive medical treatment when necessary

30. Children should have the right to wear what they want

31. Schools should be required to provide breakfasts for those children who don't get adequate breakfasts at home

32. Children should have the right to work if they choose

33. It is up to parents to decide which recreational activities are too rough or dangerous for their children to play

34. Children should have the right to choose what they watch on television

35. Children should have the right to have their emotional needs taken care of by their parents

36. Children should have the right to express their ideas and opinions

37. Children should have the right to counselling when they are having emotional problems at school

38. Decisions about a child's routine medical treatment, e.g., getting a needle, should be made by the child

39. Children should have the right to choose which school to attend, even if their parents disagree

40. Children should have the right to choose their friends even if their parents don’t approve
Appendix B

Perceptions of Parental Autonomy-Support and Control Questionnaire (PAS)

autonomy support.

questions about your mother.

1. My mother seems to know how I feel about things.

2. My mother tries to tell me how to run my life. (R)

3. My mother, whenever possible, allows me to choose what to do.

4. My mother listens to my opinion or perspective when I've got a problem.

5. My mother allows me to decide things for myself.

6. My mother insists upon my doing things her way. (R)

7. My mother is usually willing to consider things from my point of view.

8. My mother helps me to choose my own direction.

9. My mother isn't very sensitive to many of my needs. (R)

questions about your father.

10. My father seems to know how I feel about things.

11. My father tries to tell me how to run my life. (R)

12. My father, whenever possible, allows me to choose what to do.
13. My father listens to my opinion or perspective when I've got a problem.

14. My father allows me to decide things for myself.

15. My father insists upon my doing things his way. (R)

16. My father is usually willing to consider things from my point of view.

17. My father helps me to choose my own direction.

18. My father isn't very sensitive to many of my needs. (R)

Questions about your teachers.

19. My teacher seems to know how I feel about things.

20. My teacher tries to tell me how to run my life. (R)

21. My teacher, whenever possible, allows me to choose what to do.

22. My teacher listens to my opinion or perspective when I've got a problem.

23. My teacher allows me to decide things for myself.

24. My teacher insists upon my doing things his/her way. (R)

25. My teacher is usually willing to consider things from my point of view.

26. My teacher helps me to choose my own direction.

27. My teacher isn't very sensitive to many of my needs. (R)
responsiveness.

questions about your mother.

1. My mother finds time to talk with me.

2. My mother accepts me and likes me as I am.

3. My mother doesn't seem to think of me often. (R)

4. My mother clearly conveys her care for me.

5. My mother spends a lot of time with me.

6. My mother makes me feel very special.

7. My mother often seems too busy to attend to me. (R)

8. My mother is often disapproving and unaccepting of me. (R)

9. My mother is not very involved with my concerns. (R)

10. My mother is typically happy to see me.

11. My mother puts time and energy into helping me.

12. My mother seems to be disappointed in me a lot. (R)

questions about your father.

13. My father finds time to talk with me.
14. My father accepts me and likes me as I am.

15. My father doesn't seem to think of me often. (R)

16. My father clearly conveys his care for me.

17. My father spends a lot of time with me.

18. My father makes me feel very special.

19. My father often seems too busy to attend to me. (R)

20. My father is often disapproving and unaccepting of me. (R)

21. My father is not very involved with my concerns. (R)

22. My father is typically happy to see me.

23. My father puts time and energy into helping me.

24. My father seems to be disappointed in me a lot. (R)

questions about your teacher.

25. My teacher finds time to talk with me.

26. My teacher accepts me and likes me as I am.

27. My teacher doesn't seem to think of me often. (R)

28. My teacher clearly conveys his/her care for me.
29. My teacher spends a lot of time with me.

30. My teacher makes me feel very special.

31. My teacher often seems too busy to attend to me. (R)

32. My teacher is often disapproving and unaccepting of me. (R)

33. My teacher is not very involved with my concerns. (R)

34. My teacher is typically happy to see me.

35. My teacher puts time and energy into helping me.

36. My teacher seems to be disappointed in me a lot. (R)
Appendix C

Democratic Environment Questionnaire (DEQ)

Questions about your family.

1. It is possible to criticize my parents’ decisions. (“tolerance of dissent” item)

2. There is mutual respect between me and my parents even in areas in which we disagree

3. My parents take my opinion into account while making family decisions.

4. I am given the chance to help making decisions about the family that’s related to me

5. The principles/standard that my parents asked of me also applied to them

6. My parents will listen to my explanation and offer a fair hearing if I am accused of wrongdoing

Questions about your school.

1. It is possible to criticize my teachers’ decisions. (“tolerance of dissent” item)

2. There is mutual respect between me and my teachers even in areas in which we disagree.

3. Students are given the chance to help making decisions about the school that’s related to them.

4. My teachers take the students opinion into account while making classroom/school decisions.
5. The principles/standard that teachers asked of students also applied to them.

6. Teachers will listen to the students’ explanation and offer a fair hearing if we are accused of wrongdoing.