



# **Self-perception of Adulthood and Cultural and Social Influential Factors among Chinese Young Adults in China**

中国青年对成年的自我认知及文化与社会因素的影响

**Bo Wu, Ph. D**

Department of Public Health  
**Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University**  
**Suzhou, China**

**8<sup>th</sup> SSEA Conference**

Nov 2-4, 2017, Washington D.C., U.S.A



# Road Map

- Reason to do this research
- The procedure of doing research
- Research findings
- Questions & Answers



# Why did I choose this topic?

- Nelson, L., Badger, S., & Wu, B.(2004). The influence of culture in emerging adulthood: Perspectives of Chinese college students 28(1),26-36.
- Attend the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference of Emerging Adulthood (2003)
- Being impressed by Dr. Jeffrey Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory
- Personal Reason

# Significance



- It contributes to the development of Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood by incorporating life course perspective on transition to adulthood
- It is useful for the society to understand young adults' perspective on transition to adulthood in China
- It is useful for the individual young adults in China to understand their own transition to adulthood



# Theoretical Framework

## **Arnett' emerging adulthood theory (Psychology)**

- A new life stage from late teens through late twenties in the Western societies
- A period when young people leave the dependency of adolescence but have not entered the enduring responsibilities of adulthood
- A time period for young people to experiment with and explore their identities in multiple domains: work, relationship, and worldview
- A developed economy created a market in which young adults' labor was not urgently needed; social circumstances such as expanding occupation options, longer education needed for high technology jobs, more freedom for women pursuing higher education and delaying marriage, and looser sexual morals under the social change from industry based to service base.



# Theoretical Framework

## **Life course perspective (sociology)**

- Emphasize the importance of time, context, and process in human development;
- Emphasize the reciprocal interaction between personal actions and social structures:  
society gives meaning to the passage of biological time for individuals' pathways; transitions are socially structured (Elder, 1998).

**Five principles** emerge from empirical studies of interactions between contextual factors and human development (Elder, 1998a; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003).

- The principle of historical time and place
- The principle of timing
- The principle of linked lives
- The principle of human agency
- The principle of lifelong development and aging



# Theoretical Framework

- Life course perspective on transition to adulthood (Sociology)
  - Timing and trends of life transition for different cohorts
  - Understanding the effect of social structure on transition to adulthood



# The Different Approach

- **Life span psychologists** usually asked questions regarding cognitive and emotional characteristics of the individuals.
- **Life course sociologists** asked questions related to social contexts and social roles of individuals.



# Empirical Research on Emerging Adulthood in the U.S.

- Arnett's 43 adulthood criteria were theoretically categorized into 7 domains
- Through both interviews and survey, some consistent themes across different regions were found mainly among college students
- These findings include:
  - many young adults (50%+) feel ambiguous of their adult status;
  - youth perceive independence as major criterion for adulthood and actively explore identities in career, relationships, and worldview;
  - few young people (20%-) ranked life transitions (finishing school, marriage, becoming a parent) and biological markers (reaching a certain age, growing to full height) as adulthood criteria
- American young adults taking transition to adulthood as a process not an accumulation of role transitions. It is a psychological phenomenon **involving young people's agency and efforts to shape the process** of transition to adulthood.

# Studies under the Emerging Adulthood Framework Outside the United States





# China Study (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004)

- Findings:
  - Most perceived themselves adult (59%)
  - Ranked highly on both independence and interdependence
  - Ranked low on role transitions
- Weakness of study:
  - Only college students
  - Not considering variation among youth
  - Not considering the applicability of Arnett's survey questionnaire to China

# Argentina study (Facio & Micocci, 2003 )



- Findings
  - 45% ambivalent; 46% adult
  - Gender, marital & parental status, educational level: not related to youth's adult status
  - Having a job: related to women's adult status but not men's
  - Ranked highly on norm compliance, family capacity, interdependence, and independence
  - Not rank highly on role transitions
  - 25-27 yrs old
- Strength
  - The sample included wide range of young people in gender, marital status, parental status, education level, and family SES;
  - The culture-relevant items were added to Arnett's questionnaire.
- Weakness
  - Only one culture-related item was added without explaining why being selected;
  - Not discuss whether the real life experiences of Argentinean youth were different from that of American youth.



# Israeli Study (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003 )

- Findings:
  - independence and interdependence ranked highly
  - role transitions ranked low across three age groups.
  - teenagers: biological/age-related transition; young adults: independence and interdependence; parents of adolescents: norm-abiding behaviors
- Strength:
  - several culture-related items were added, based on the previous interview results
  - the Likert-scales were used, which provides richer data than a yes-no scale
  - the results from the factor analysis showed that Arnett's theoretical model was reasonable except the category of independence because of lacking high reliability
- Weakness:
  - a convenient sample. Hard to generalize the results to the population.
  - not differentiate young adults' perception by family SES, marital status, parental status, etc.
  - not investigate the gender difference on adulthood criteria in each subgroup (adolescence, young adult, and middle age).

# Strength of Using Emerging Adulthood Theory to Chinese Young Adults



- It provides a research lens to examine Chinese young adults' perspective on their adulthood.
- It investigates Chinese young adults' perception of adulthood in various domains in order to capture real life experiences.
- It could compare the perception of adulthood among young adults across cultures and societies.

# Weakness of Using Emerging Adulthood Theory to Chinese Young Adults



- The framework is based upon an individualistic view of adulthood in the Western societies, which might be different from Chinese young adults' real life experiences.
- The diversity of living conditions in China needs to be considered before applying the framework to Chinese young adults.



# Key Constructs in the Study

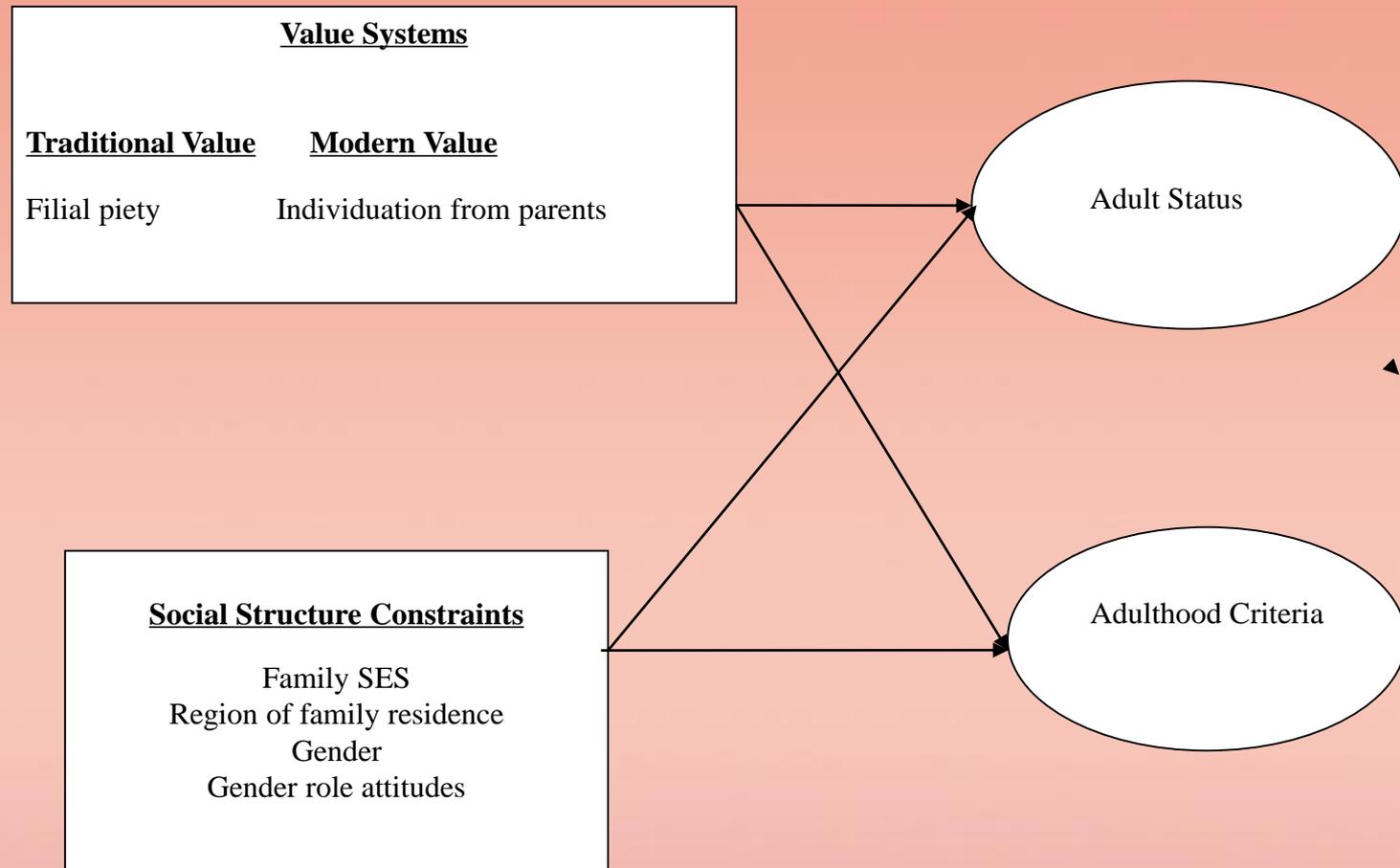
- adult status;
- subscales of criteria for adulthood;
- filial piety;
- individuation from parents;
- family socioeconomic status (SES);
- region of family residence (rural/urban);
- gender;
- family-related gender role attitudes;
- age



# Study Aims → Research Questions

- 1<sup>st</sup>: to understand Chinese young adults' self-perceived adult status and criteria for adulthood
- 2<sup>nd</sup>: to explore how traditional vs. modern Chinese values were related to self-perceived adult status and criteria for adulthood among Chinese young adults
- 3<sup>rd</sup>: to assess whether social structure factors, including *socioeconomic status (SES) of family origin, region of family residence (rural/urban), gender, and gender role attitude* were related to their self-perceived adult status and criteria for adulthood
- 4<sup>th</sup>: to evaluate whether Arnett's model fits China data
- 5<sup>th</sup>: to understand differences and similarities on the perception of adulthood from the perspective of college students and noncollege youth in China

# Conceptual Framework





# Research Questions

- RQ1: the self-perceptions of adulthood among Chinese college students, including:
  - (1) self-perceived adult status;
  - (2) the criteria for adulthood
- RQ2: the relationship between Chinese college students' perception of adulthood and attitudes on filial piety and individuation from parents.



# Research Questions

- RQ3: Relationship between perception of adulthood and their parental highest education level; parental highest occupation; the region of family residence; gender; and family-related gender role attitude.
- RQ4: the appropriateness of Arnett's approach of emerging adulthood for Chinese young adults, including
  - (1) its applicability;
  - (2) comparison of perception of adulthood between Chinese and American young adults
- RQ5: Similarities and differences on the perception of adulthood among college students and noncollege youth in China

# Method

- Mixed method: Focus group study & Survey
- 8 focus groups in order to
  - Generate the culture-relevant items
  - Compare perceptions on adulthood between college and noncollege youth in China
  - Help interpreting the following survey results
- 600 survey questionnaires
  - Explore the categories of adulthood criteria and comparison with Arnett's model
  - Investigate the hypothesized correlations

# Focus Group Study



- Epistemology: constructionism
- Theoretical Approach: symbolic interactionism
- Groups based on gender, education level, and areas of family origin (rural/urban)
- Locating the participants
- The procedure
- Transcribing data
- Trustworthiness
  - data triangulation
  - Thick description



# Result 1 from Focus Group Study

## **Developing 7 culture-relevant adulthood criteria**

- (1) Being able to think from different angles for one issue;
- (2) Being able to endure pressure;
- (3) Having certain life experiences;
- (4) Having one's own opinions (towards one's major, relations, career, and social events), and being open to different opinions;
- (5) Being filial to parents with providing supports financially and emotionally;
- (6) Formed meaning or goal of one's life;
- (7) Being responsible to people around oneself



# Result 2 from Focus Group Study

## **Not adulthood criteria**

### **by Chinese young adults:**

- (1) completed military service (for males);
- (2) driving an automobile;
- (3) avoid use of profanity/vulgar language;
- (4) allowed to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes;
- (5) avoid using illegal drugs;
- (6) have no more than one sexual partner;
- (7) committed to a long-term love relationship;
- (8) reaching age of 18



# Result 3 from Focus Group Study

## **Diverse opinions**

### **on these adulthood criteria**

- (1) no longer living under parents' household;
- (2) not being emotionally tied to parents;
- (3) finished with education;
- (4) establishing a relationship with parents as equal adults



# Commonalities: College and Noncollege

- Financial independence
- One's responsibility towards family, friends, coworkers, and the society
- Thinking from different angles for one issue
- Making independent decisions
- Not being self-centered and developing greater consideration for others



## Differences: College and Noncollege

- Noncollege youth choose “not emotionally tied to parents” as an adulthood marker, but college students disagree
- Noncollege youth believe acquiring skills and keeping updated knowledge for one’s job is important; but college students do not mention
- Noncollege youth emphasize gender difference in adulthood criteria more than college students
- College students emphasize the endurance for hardship, but noncollege youth do not
- College students have more concerns on cognitive maturity than noncollege youth; noncollege youth focus on the issues related to surviving daily life



## **Commonalities: Western and Chinese**

- Both emphasize “financial independence” and “making independent decisions” as adulthood criteria;
- Both do not take life transition events of “marriage”, “having at least a child”, and “purchasing a house” as important adulthood criteria;
- Both take deciding one’s own beliefs/values as important adulthood criterion.



## Differences: Western and Chinese

- Emphasis on independence vs. interdependence
- Different relationships with parents
  - equal relationship with parents vs. hierarchical
- Different emphasis on cognitive maturity when transiting to adulthood

# Survey Study



- 573 surveys were returned; 567 effective cases; response rate 94.5% (567/600).
- The resources of survey questions
  - Demographic information;
  - Adulthood Criteria Questionnaire;
  - Filial Piety Scale;
  - Individuation from Parents Scale;
  - Gender Role Attitudes Scale

# Survey Questions



- 108 close-ended questions
  - 18 questions on demographic information,
  - 50 questions on adulthood criteria,
  - 21 questions on perception of filial piety,
  - 14 questions on perception of individuation from parents,
  - 5 questions on family-oriented gender role attitude (traditional vs. egalitarian)



# Operational Definition of Key Constructs

- adult status;
- criteria for adulthood;
- filial piety;
- individuation from parents;
- family socioeconomic status (SES);
- region of family residence;
- gender;
- family-related gender role attitudes; and
- age.



# Data Analysis Plan

- 1<sup>st</sup> step:
  - Run confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for Arnett's 43 adulthood markers;



# Data Analysis Plan

- 2<sup>nd</sup> step:
  - Run exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for 50 adulthood markers to explore the best fitting model in terms of number and characters of subscales for adulthood criteria



# Data Analysis Plan

- 3<sup>rd</sup> step:
  - Examine the reliability (indicated by Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for each subscale of adulthood markers in the fitting model.
  - Assess the reliability of the composite index scores of filial piety, individuation from parents, and gender role attitude.

# Data Analysis Plan



- 4<sup>th</sup> step:
  - Run regression models to examine the correlations between Chinese college students' perception of adulthood and their attitudes towards cultural values and social structural constraints.

# The Regression Model



## Dependent Variables

### (1) adult status

- coded as continuous variable:

  - not adults as 1;*

  - somewhere in between as 2;*

  - adult as 3*

### (2) subscales of adulthood criteria

- generated from the best fitting factor analysis

- model; coded as continuous variables

# The Regression Model



## Independent Variables (8)

- (1) one composite score of **filial piety** coded as a continuous variable;
- (2) one composite score of **individuation from parents** coded as a continuous variable;
- (3) one composite score of **gender role attitudes** (tendency towards traditional gender role attitude or egalitarian gender role attitude) coded as a continuous variable;
- (4) region of **family residence** (either rural or urban areas) coded as a dummy variable;
- (5) **gender** coded as a dummy variable;
- (6) **age** of the respondents coded as a continuous variable; and
- (7) 2 continuous variables of **parental education level** and **parental occupation level** (as estimation for one's family SES)



# Validity of Adulthood Marker Scale

- 1<sup>st</sup>, whether Arnett's 7-subscale model was evident among the 43 adulthood markers in China data.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>, how many and what types of subscale among 50 adulthood markers could be categorized into
- 3<sup>rd</sup>, comparing the set of subscales in China data with 7 subscales in Arnett's model
- 4<sup>th</sup>, explore whether the newly added Chinese culture-relevant 7 items formed new subscale(s) or could be grouped into Arnett's 7 subscales
- 5<sup>th</sup>, examine the reliabilities of the chosen set of subscales in China data



## Data Analysis—missing data

- Handling missing values: double coding; pairwise deletion
- Missing values were acceptable (6 out of 50 item has 10-12% missing values; the rest items has less than 5% missing values).



## Data Analysis—CFA results

- M+ for CFA (confirmatory factor analysis)
- All indicators show that Arnett's model does not fit 43 items of China data.



# Data Analysis – Expletory Factor Analysis (EFA)

- 50 items
- Limiting the number of factors in the model
- Rotation Method (promax vs. varimax)
- 3 criteria for the best fitting EFA model
  - interpretability
  - explicability
  - parsimoniousness
- 9-factor model
  - low to moderate intercorrelation among 9 factors



# Data Analysis--CFA

- **Factor 1: Independence**
- **Factor 2: Norm compliance**
- **Factor 3: Role transitions**
- **Factor 4: Family role transitions**
- **Factor 5: Biological transitions**
- **Factor 6: Family capacity**
- **Factor 7: Age norms**
- **Factor 8: Responsible relationship**
- **Factor 9: Chronological transitions**



# China Model and Arnett's Model: Similarities

- (1) both models separated independence and interdependence (responsible relationship) as two subscales, although the variables in each subscale were not exactly the same;
- (2) both models had the subscale of norm compliance containing the same variables;
- (3) both models entailed the subscales of family capacity, role transitions, biological transitions, and chronological transitions by sharing the same variables.



# China Model and Arnett's Model: Differences

- 2 new subscales in China data, family role transitions and age norms;
- 11 out of 50 variables were not grouped to any subscale in China data;
- the items in the subscales of adulthood criteria among two models



# Frequencies (567 cases)

- Age: 77.7% (18-22)
- Gender: 51.9% female; 48.1% male;
- Region of Family Origin: 22.9% urban; 77.1% rural;
- 79.8% parental highest job belongs to farmer and working class, 20.2% with professional and business class;
- Highest parental education:
  - 9.1%: elementary school,
  - **32.4%**: middle school,
  - **44.0%**: high school,
  - 3.0% vocation school,
  - 7.0% associate degree,
  - 4.3% college degree,
  - 0.2% beyond college

# Age



Age	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
18	4	.7	.7
19	24	4.2	4.9
20	83	14.6	19.6
21	168	29.6	49.3
22	161	28.4	77.7
23	85	15.0	92.8
24	37	6.5	99.3
25	4	.7	100.0
Total	566	99.8	
Missing	1	.2	
Total	567	100.0	

# Gender



Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Female	294	51.9	51.9
Male	273	48.1	100.0
Total	567	100.0	

# Place of Family Origin



## Place of Family Origin

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Urban Area	130	22.9	22.9
Rural Area	437	77.1	100.0
Total	567	100.0	

# Highest Parental Job



## Highest Parental Job

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	434	76.5	79.8
1	110	19.4	100.0
Total	544	95.9	
Missing	23	4.1	
Total	567	100.0	

# Highest Parental Education

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	51	9.0	9.1
2	181	31.9	41.5
3	17	3.0	44.5
4	246	43.4	88.6
5	39	6.9	95.5
6	24	4.2	99.8
7	1	.2	100.0
Total	559	98.6	
Missing	8	1.4	
Total	567	100.0	



## Top 5 ranking adulthood criteria from survey

- (1) Being able to think from different angles for one issue (98.1%);
- (2) Being able to endure pressure (96.8%);
- (3) Learn always to have good control of your emotions (96.6%);
- (4) Make independent decisions (96.3%);
- (5) Formed meaning or goal of one's life (96.3%)

# Frequencies of Adult Status



- 4.3% not adults (4%, 2004)
- 22.5% adults (59%, 2004)
- 73.2% somewhere in between (35%, 2004)

# Data Analysis



- Reliability
  - Filial piety (21 → 12 items)
  - Individuation from parents (14 → 10 items)
  - Gender role attitudes (5 → 3 items)



# Data Analysis--regression results with extra items

	Adult Status	Independence	Norm Compliance	Role Transitions	Family Role Transitions	Biological Transitions	Family Capacity	Social Norms	Inter dependence
Age	.077***		-.520***	-.143+	-.264**	-.168**		-.163**	
Gender			1.100**	.469*			1.161***	-.448**	
Region of Family Residence			1.082*					.385+	.476*
Highest Parental Education									
Highest Parental Job						-.678**	-.498+		
Filial Piety		-.081***	-.101**	-.060***		-.023+	-.047**		-.060***
Individuation from Parents	-.006+	-.051**			.061***	.022+	.030+		
Gender Role Attitude									
Continue Family Line		.245**	.566**		-.190*	-.203**	-.200**	-.264***	.139+
All money they earned	-.034*	-.213**	-.342*	-.145*		-.121*			-.127+
Asking advices from friends not parents				-.238**			-.188**		
Parents more understanding		-.241*	-.410*						-.245**

# Discussion

- Percentage of ambiguity on adult status among college students
- Different life experiences of college and noncollege young adults separates their perception of adulthood
- Value interdependence more than independence
- The more they value filial piety, the less likely Arnett's model fit them
- For most Chinese young adults, to become an adult is less of establishing one's individuality and more of becoming a responsible individual with a harmonious relationship with people around them



## Discussion (cont')

- Male college students, more than female college students, are more concerned of their accomplishments, developing harmonious relationship with other people, and following social norms as adulthood criteria;
- Female college students have a higher expectation of their financial contribution to family than male college students;
- Both male and female think that men should make a greater financial contribution to families than female. However, the fact is the financial contributions of young women to family keep increasing. In other words, the actual gender roles have changed significantly, but the perception of gender roles has yet to catch up to the new reality especially for male college students;
- College students from rural areas emphasize following norms and fulfilling responsibilities as adulthood criteria more than those from urban areas
- College students with parents from farming and working class are more likely to perceive *family capacity* and *biological transition* as adulthood criteria than those from professional and business class

## Discussion (cont')

- Majority Chinese young adults between age of 18 and 23 feel ambivalent of their adult status;
- most do not explore and experiment with their identities as Arnett's model predicts.



## Discussion (cont')

- Both college and noncollege young adults perceive independence and responsible relationship as criteria for adulthood
- The differences include:
  - noncollege youth emphasizes emotional autonomy more than college students as a criterion for adulthood;
  - noncollege youth focus more on practical issues, such as acquiring skills and keeping work knowledge up-to-date, surviving daily life, and being responsible for people around them; whereas college students view “enduring hardships in life”, searching for the meaning of life, and making independent decisions as criteria for adulthood.

# The Implication of My Study



- For the practitioners, my study recommends them to be more culturally sensitive, also considering young adults' daily life experiences and family SES as factors influencing their perception of adulthood.
- For policy makers, they should provide more opportunities for young adults, especially noncollege youth, to learn of themselves and help them explore options in careers and worldviews; support research on young adults' gender relationship and parent-child relationship in the current social circumstances; mentorship, if possible, should be provided to help young adults balance their pursuit of individuality and interdependence during transition to adulthood, which parents are not necessarily capable to provide helps.



## Limitations of the Study

- A convenient sample and can not generalize to all population
- validity issue on filial piety scale, individuation from parents scale, and gender role attitude scale
- misunderstandings on adulthood markers beyond the translation



# Suggestions for Future Studies

- Transformed concept of filial piety deserves a serious re-examination; a new scale of filial piety is needed;
- The life experiences occurring in transition to adulthood need to be explored more broadly among Chinese young adults, including college students and noncollege young adults in both developed and undeveloped areas of China;
- The development of Chinese young adults' perceptions of adulthood needs further exploration at different stages of age;
- Study on parental perceptions of young adults' transition to adulthood and parental influences are needed

# Summary



- Balance traditional and modern values during transition to adulthood
- Filial piety is deeply rooted in family socialization and educational system in China
- Walk a fine line between the traditional value of filial piety and the modern idea of independence under the rapidly developing market economy in China



# Questions & Answers

Contact information:

Bo Wu, Ph.D, MD

Email: [bo.wu@xjtlu.edu.cn](mailto:bo.wu@xjtlu.edu.cn)