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CONFLICT STYLES AND CHILDREN'S
ADJUSTMENT IN THE CHINESE
CONTEXT: THE ROLE OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL AND
MOTHER-CHILD CONFLICT
RESOLUTION

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine how interparental conflict and conflict styles (overt, covert and avoidant) influence children's adjustment directly and indirectly through maternal psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution among Chinese children. Paper-pencil survey data were collected from 111 mother-child dyads of children aged from 11 to 14 from Shantou, Guangdong, China. Results of this research revealed that interparental conflict was not associated with internalizing and externalizing behaviors. This study also found a very weak linear relationship between overt conflict style and externalizing behaviors and between covert and avoidant conflict styles and internalizing behaviors. In addition, maternal psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution did not mediate the association between conflict styles and children's adjustment. The study supported the compartmentalization hypothesis, rather than the spillover and compensatory hypotheses. The findings from this study have implications for school counselors or practitioners who work with children's maladjustment in the Chinese setting and also Chinese families living in global settings.

Keywords: *interparental conflict, conflict styles, adjustment, psychological control, mother-child conflict resolution*

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THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL AND MOTHER-CHILD CONFLICT
RESOLUTION

by

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B.A., Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University, 2010

Thesis

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, research conducted primarily in Western countries have indicated that frequent and hostile parental interactions are detrimental to children's adjustment (see Buehler et al., 1994; Buehler et al., 1998; El- Sheikh & Whitson, 2006; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Gerard, Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2006; Gottman & Katz, 1989; Grych & Fincham, 1990, 2001; Harrist & Ainslie, 1998). Additionally, several studies have also pointed to the role parenting practices and / or parent-child relationship characteristics as mediators of the association between hostile parental interactions and child adjustment (e.g., El-Sheikh, 1997; Jouriles, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1989; Katz & Gottman, 1993; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Krishnakumar, Buehler & Barber, 2003). Although these relationships are well established in the Western context, there are but a limited number of investigations that have examined the role of interparental conflict (IPC), conflict styles, parent-child relationship, parenting behaviors, and child adjustment within the Chinese context. Hence, the goal of the current investigation was threefold: (a) to examine the direct effect between interparental conflict and child adjustment, (b) to examine the direct effect between conflict styles and child adjustment, and (c) to examine the mediating role of parenting behaviors in the relationship between conflict styles and child adjustment.

From a theoretical perspective, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) can explain the direct positive effects of IPC and conflict styles on child adjustment and family system theory can explain the indirect effects examined in the present study. Social learning theory posits that marital interactions provide modeling behaviors for children and family systems theory suggests what happens in one subsystem will affect other family relationships. There are at least three major hypotheses being derived from various theoretical explanations of the indirect influences

of marital conflict on child behavioral outcomes - the spillover hypothesis, the compensatory hypothesis and the compartmentalization hypothesis (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Erel & Burman, 1995). The spillover hypothesis portrays that affect and behavioral patterns in the marital subsystem transfer to parent-child subsystem. Conversely, the compensatory hypothesis suggests that positive parent-child relationships can be achieved even when marital conflict exists. In contrast, high quality marital relationship might create stress in parent-child relationship, because couples might consider a child as a source of interference. The third hypothesis, the compartmentalization hypothesis, predicts that parents compartmentalize their marital and parenting roles, and thus keeping their marital processes from affecting their parent-child interactions.

Empirical research has largely documented the most consistent and strongest support for the spillover hypothesis rather than the compensatory and compartmentalization hypotheses. Indeed, two meta-analyses broadly provided overwhelming support for the spillover hypothesis (Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Specifically, Erel and Burman conducted a meta-analytic review of 68 studies of the positive links between positive global marital quality and positive parent-child relationships and found an average effect size of .46. A more recent meta-analysis of 39 studies on the positive associations between IPC and parenting behaviors found an overall average effect size of -.62 (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). While the compensatory hypothesis has received few support (Brody, Pillegrini, & Siegel, 1986), the compartmentalization hypothesis has received little to no support (Erel & Burman, 1995). It is worth noting that the majority of the existing studies in the meta-analyses are using European American samples.

Understanding the familial correlates of child maladjustment, particularly internalizing

and externalizing behaviors in a collectivistic culture (e.g., Asian culture) can enhance our understanding of these associations in diverse contexts. China enjoys long unbroken history of more than 5,000 years old and has been claimed as the world's first civilization. Traditional Chinese culture is centralized on the humanist philosophy of Confucianism, which has been not only deeply rooted in Chinese families, but also influence other Asian countries including Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Singapore as well as other territories (i.e., Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan). Confucian values and child-centered socialization in Chinese families has long guided child rearing and social interaction and as such are relevant to incorporate a focus on the Chinese cultural context in studies that investigate the associations among IPC, parenting practices, and child adjustment.

In this thesis, I address some of the major conceptual and operational limitations in the study of IPC, parenting behaviors, and child adjustment. As eluded to the literature review by Buehler et al. (1994), studies of IPC (also referred to as disagreements in relationships) have not been separately examined from conflict styles (strategies used by couples to handle disagreements in relationships). Few studies have examined the nature of the association between IPC, conflict styles (e.g., overt, covert, and avoidant) and child adjustment (internalizing and externalizing behaviors) within the Chinese context directly and indirectly through psychological control and mother-child relationship. In the present study, mother-child dyad is assessed rather than father-child dyad. The primary reason is that Chinese mothers are mainly responsible for internal affairs including children's schoolwork and school-related activities. Fathers are the ones who work outside, and this is especially true for fathers from the region where the current study recruit participants.

The main reasons why this study focuses on psychological control and mother-child

conflict resolution are discussed below. Children aged between 10 and 14 years are beginning to transit from childhood into adolescence. As indicated by Steinberg (1987), this group of young people often experience heightened conflictual relationships with their parents. Given traditional Chinese parents consider parent-child relationships more important than interparental relationships (Hsu, 1985) and the child-centered family socialization goal within Chinese families, parent-child conflict deserves research attention. Within traditional Chinese families, harmonious intergenerational relationships and collectivism are highly valued, and Chinese couples view the family unit as a whole. To maintain the integration of relationships, people prefer to use subtle, avoidant, and indirect approaches of conflict resolution (Sue, 1981; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991), which might in turn be associated with parents' use of covert and avoidant conflict styles and psychological control. Hence, it becomes particularly culturally relevant and imperative to examine these constructs within the Chinese context.

There is only one published study examining the links between both overt and covert conflict styles and Chinese adolescents' adjustment difficulties, such as antisocial behaviors and depression (Bradford et al., 2004). Although there is a dearth of research using Chinese samples, the extant studies show that IPC is inversely correlated to Chinese children outcome which is consistent with the finding among Western populations. For example, IPC is positively associated with Chinese children's internalizing symptoms (Yu & Seligman, 2002), externalizing behaviors (Chang, Lansford, Schwartz, & Farver, 2004), and impaired academic performance (Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1995). In a longitudinal study, Chen et al. found that IPC had detrimental influences on Chinese elementary school children' school performance and psychological wellbeing (e.g., depression). However, research on the direct or indirect links between IPC and conflict styles and adjustment of Chinese children is limited. The findings can have implications

for school counselors or practitioners who work with children's behavioral outcomes in the Chinese setting and also Chinese families living in global settings.

Chinese Context

Overview of Chinese Culture and the Traditional Chinese Families

Before proceeding to investigate the association between interparental conflict and children's adjustment in China, it is worthwhile to know its culture because literature indicates that cultural differences exist in terms of what is normative in the expression and management of conflict. Although IPC is commonly existing across cultures, it is the culture and values set each region's IPC management apart. The Chinese family has intrigued social scientists because of its distinctive cultural traditions and considerable industrialization and Westernization (Li & Lamb, 2015).

Prior to further discussion, it is worth pointing out that the working definition of "Chinese" used in this paper refers to people of the Chinese ancestry residing in mainland China, rather than Greater China or Greater China Region including Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. The major difference between mainland China and other parts of Greater China Region is a strong Western influence. Given the difference, it is possible that the findings would differ for mainland Chinese families. The present study focuses on mainland Chinese children and their families living in mainland China, home to the largest and fastest growing subgroup among the Chinese population, totaling over 1.4 billion ("China Population 2016," <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/china-population/>).

The Chinese culture has been considered as one of the oldest in the world and influenced by Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism and collectivistic values, as well as by a variety of regional cultures and customs from ethnic minorities (Tang, 1992). It is believed that many of

the core traditional values have been retained in contemporary Chinese communities and continue to influence the everyday lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese (Sim, 2005).

Chinese Parenting and Socialization: Cultural Traditions

One must admit the importance of values, which can not only help shape the culture, but also guide parents to choose how to raise their children. The day-to-day parenting in Chinese families is executed within the context of a hierarchical yet highly intertwined parent-child relationship. Living in a collectivistic society like China, people view the interests of the individual as shame and subordinate to them. Therefore, the main purpose of children's socialization is to help them develop socially desirable and culturally appropriate behaviors that promote social harmony and welfare of the collective, rather than the individual (Chen et al., 2001). It is clear that the Confucian tradition and cultural collectivism have a clear impact on Chinese families. People from the collectivistic Chinese culture tend to suppress disagreement and conflict with an aim of protecting the smooth and proper functioning of an in-group, which is highly valued in collectivistic cultures (Leung, Koch & Lu, 2002). In other words, Chinese people might prefer to use avoidance in handling conflict or disagreement, as it is commonly considered as a threaten to group cohesiveness and collectivism.

While China has always been characterized by a diversity of religious beliefs, filial piety, a central Confucius doctrine, has historically influenced Chinese families (Chao, 1994). Filial piety is reflected in a widespread idiomatic expression of *bai xing xiao wei xian*, meaning "among hundreds of behaviors, filial piety is the most important one." The virtue of filial piety (*xiao*) connotes that the way Chinese children behave towards their parents (Yeh & Bedford, 2003) and serves as the traditional basis for harmonious intergenerational relationships within Chinese families (Ho, 1994; Yang, Yeh, & Huang, 1989). Specifically, children are expected to

reciprocate parental love and affection by acting in an unconditionally obedient, loyal and respectful manner, which has been recently regarded as reciprocal filial piety, emphasizing on maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationship (Yeh & Bedford, 2003). The other component of filial piety is called authoritarian filial piety, which is generally characterized by obedience to normative authority (such as parents) and self-oppression (Ho, 1994). That being said, the core mechanism that train filial piety is “the maintenance of parental authority and children’s obedience through harsh discipline” (Wu, 1981, p. 151). Parents are in turn responsible for “governing” (guan, i.e., teaching and disciplining) their children to be socially and morally responsible (Ho, 1994) and at the same time encouraged to perform daily interactions with their children with a warm and concerned, yet proper, demeanor (Hwang, 2001). Generally, Chinese parents are immensely devoted to their children; they often sacrifice much to meet their children’s needs and provide ample affection and warmth. Furthermore, in contemporary Mainland Chinese society, parents consider parent-child relationship more important than interparental relationship and parenting overrides the spousal role (Hsu, 1985).

Literature Review

Conflict Styles and Child Adjustment

Interparental conflict has been defined as “disagreements between parents about various issues in family life” (Buehler et al., 1997, p. 409). Normally, IPC also refers to marital conflict or marital disagreements between marital couples about issues of family life which are a normal part of family life but how marital couples handle or deal with their disagreements (conflict styles) have been associated with poor child adjustment (Buehler et al., 1994). In the current study, conflict styles are used to represent these forms of conflictual styles and to express the

mode of expression utilized to handle the disagreements between parents. The focus in this paper are on three types of hostile conflict styles: (a) overt, (b) covert, and (c) avoidant.

Overt conflict style refers to parents' verbally and / or physically hostile interactions (Buehler et al., 1994). Specifically, it is composed of hostile behaviors, such as slapping, hitting, screaming and threatening. Covert conflict style involves both hostile behaviors affect, which are displayed indirectly by triangulating children (e.g., having the child carry messages to the other parent because one does not want to relay the information) and global covert behaviors (e.g., withdrawing love or affection; resentment) (Buehler et al., 1998). Avoidant conflict style refers to behaviors and emotions that reflect manifestations of an unwillingness to address issues of disagreement, such as speaking abstractly about issues and using humor to sidetrack discussions of disagreements (Fitzpatrick, 1988).

Buehler and colleagues have confirmed the association between hostile conflict styles and youth problem behaviors (Buehler et al., 1997; Buehler et al., 1998). Buehler et al. (1998) further investigated the specialized associations between conflict styles and youth problem behaviors and substantiated that overt conflict style was uniquely associated with youth externalizing behaviors, while covert conflict style was uniquely associated with youth internalizing behaviors. These specialized associations were also further substantiated in a recent study using Latino and European American youth samples (Stutzman et al., 2010). However, there is only one study examining the links between both overt and covert conflict styles and Chinese adolescents' adjustment difficulties, such as antisocial behaviors and depression (Bradford et al., 2004). Although more research attention has been placed on the overt and covert conflict styles, there are few studies that have examined the links between avoidant conflict style and child outcomes (Buehler et al., 1997), and none in the Chinese context.

Interparental Conflict and Child Adjustment

Despite abundant empirical research has been exploring child developmental behaviors, which reflects a “remarkable invigoration of theoretical and empirical work” (Jessor, 1998, p.1), most of them has been conducted in the Western countries (Alsaker & Flammer, 1999).

Although there is a dearth of research using Chinese samples, the extant studies show that IPC is inversely correlated to Chinese children outcome which is consistent with the finding among Western populations. For example, IPC is positively associated with Chinese children’s internalizing symptoms (Yu & Seligman, 2002), externalizing behaviors (Chang et al., 2004), and impaired academic performance (Chen et al., 1995). In a longitudinal study, Chen et al. found that IPC had detrimental influences on Chinese elementary school children’s school performance and psychological wellbeing (e.g., depression). That being said, research on the direct or indirect links between conflict styles and adjustment of Chinese children is limited. Without careful testing in China, our understanding of the association between conflict styles and child adjustment outcomes remains limited.

Conflict Styles, Mother-child Conflict Resolution and Child Adjustment

Dramatic physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes initiate at the onset of children’s transition to adolescence. These changes are associated with transformations to family relations and with the emergence and increase of conflict between parents and children aged from 10 to 15 years old (e.g., Steinberg and Morris, 2001). The potentially heightened conflict become both parents and children’s unique challenges during this transition, because they tend to deal with the changing nature of their relationship. At such, mother-child conflict resolution deserves research attention.

Although conflict is an integral and inevitable component in all social relationships, mother-child conflictual interactions during the transitional years of early adolescence can serve as both positive functions (i.e., fostering children's independence and psychological autonomy) (Steinberg, 1990) or exert negative impact on children's developmental function. Substantial amount of studies has substantiated the association between parent-child conflict and children's long-term deleterious developmental outcomes, such as physical aggression and deviant behaviors (Margolin & Gordis, 2003). Exposure to frequent parent-child conflict also partially mediated the links between IPC and children's global adjustment in a cross-sectional study of families from the NSFH data (Buehler & Gerard, 2002). This association between IPC, parent-child conflict, and child maladjustment has also been substantiated in a longitudinal study by Acock and Demo (1999) using the same NSFH database. From the theoretical model of spillover hypothesis, parents who involved in conflictual and distressful relationship are likely to transfer this disharmonious relationship to their children and display a negative parenting relationship. Parents who experience IPC tend to be emotionally drained and irritable and therefore become less sensitive to their child's needs and less involved with their children (Buehler & Gerard, 2002).

Although there is few research, or none, on conflict styles, child adjustment outcomes and mother-child conflict resolution among Chinese children, the extant studies as mentioned previously show negative association between IPC and child outcome on Chinese children, which is similar to those found among Western children. Apart from the studies exploring the direct association between IPC and youth problem behaviors, I can only locate two studies which includes examination of the mediating mechanism using Chinese samples (Bradford et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2004). Chang et al. (2004) reported that harsh parenting reported by mothers

mediated the association between IPC and children's externalizing behaviors which were assessed by peer nominators and teachers. That being said, how Chinese children's behavioral problems are correlated with overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles remains unknown.

Conflict Styles, Psychological Control and Child Adjustment

Parenting behaviors and discipline techniques may serve to shape children's behavioral outcome. Psychological control refers to a parental strategy that parents use to intrude into the psychological and emotional world of the child, which involves intrusive or overprotective parenting practices that negatively affect the child's psychological world and thereby inhibit the child's psychological development (Barber, 1996; Ryan, 1982). Parents normally adapt this strategy to control their child's behavior and to change the way the child thinks and behaves via negatively manipulating the parent-child relationship (Barber, 1996; Barber, Bolen, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994, Barber, Stolz & Olsen, 2005; Soenens and Vansteenkiste, 2010). Psychological control is a type of parenting strategies, which includes "manipulation and exploitation of the parent-child bond (e.g., love withdrawal and guilt induction), negative affect-laden expressions and criticisms (e.g., disappointment and shame), and excessive personal control (e.g., possessiveness, protectiveness)" (Barber, 1996, p. 3297).

Psychological control has been considered as a destructive form of parental control, because research suggests that parental psychological control predicts unique variance in children's adjustment (Barber, 1996; Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994). Psychological control has been associated with various adjustment problems, ranging from internalizing symptoms, externalizing behaviors, academic underachievement, school adjustment to substance use (e.g., Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Barber et al., 1994; Coln, Jordan & Mercer 2013; Fauber et al., 1990; Herman, Dornbusch, Herron, & Herting, 1997; McCoy, George,

Cummings & Davies, 2013). Particularly, psychological control has been strongly associated with internalizing behaviors. For example, researchers have found that psychological control is positively related to anxiety (Loukas, Paulos & Robinson, 2005) and depressive symptoms (e.g., Barber 1996; Soenens et al. 2005; Soenens et al. 2012). Likewise, psychological control has also been shown to be positively correlated with externalizing behaviors (e.g., Stone et al. 2013). Furthermore, there are several studies showing a positive association between higher levels of psychological control and higher rates of aggression and delinquency (Barber and Olsen 1997; Conger, Conger & Scaramella, 1997).

Despite a growing body of works examining how psychologically controlling behaviors are associated with child and adolescent adjustment problems (Barber, 1996; Barber & Harmon, 2002), there is so little existing research documenting the association between IPC and parental psychological control and thereby Krishnakumar and Buehler (2000) were unable to examine this connection in their meta-analysis. Researchers have shown both the direct and indirect effects of IPC (e.g., Stone, Buehler & Barber, 2002), yet there is research showing that IPC tend to have more indirect effects, often via parenting (Buehler et al., 1994). Bradford and colleagues' (2004) multi-nation studies further showed that overt conflict was indirectly related to adolescents' depression and antisocial behavior via psychological control among samples from China, Bosnia, Germany, Palestine and Colombia. Psychological control fully mediated the link between overt conflict and depression in the Chinese sample. Fauber et al.'s (1990) cross-sectional study also documented the mediating effects of psychological control on the association between parent and youth-reported global interparental conflict and youth-reported internalizing behaviors (i.e., depression) and mother-reported externalizing problem behaviors. However, Stone et al.'s (2002) study did not support the mediation or moderation role of psychological

support in the relationship between overt and covert conflict styles and youth problem behaviors (internalizing, externalizing or composite) in the two different samples. Given the inconsistent mediation and moderation role of psychological control, and very few extant studies investigate psychological control as a mechanism underlying the association between conflict styles and child's adjustment (i.e., internalizing and externalizing behaviors), further testing of this mediating and moderating effects is particularly needed.

As aforementioned, harmonious intergenerational relationships and collectivism are highly valued. To maintain the integration of relationships, subtle, avoidant, and indirect approaches of conflict resolution are preferred (Sue, 1981; Trubisky et al., 1991), which might lead to parents' use of covert and avoidant conflict styles and psychological control. Hence, it becomes particularly relevant and imperative to examine these constructs in China. That being said, the links among conflict styles, parental psychological control and child maladaptive behaviors should be examined to enhance the understanding of these associations and generalizability.

The Current Study and Hypotheses

The primary purpose of the current study is to advance the current literature by building on previous Western studies, by making a distinction between IPC and conflict styles and by investigating the linkage between overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles and children's adjustment directly and indirectly through psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution among Chinese elementary children. Specifically, internalizing and externalizing behaviors were assessed to indicate children's adjustment.

There are several theories have been used to account for the effects of IPC on adjustment difficulties experienced by children. Drawing on the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977),

children pay attention to parents' hostile interactions, consider these interactions as acceptable behavior guides and apply them in their own social and relational interactions. Meanwhile, children might not develop important relational and emotional regulation skills when they are repeatedly exposed to stressful events and anxious tension in their parents' hostile ways of expressing disagreements and handling conflictual situations (Cummings & Davies, 1994). As such, children might have a greater possibility of developing internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Social learning theory can explain the specialized effects of hostile conflict styles on children's adjustment, as overt conflict strategies and child externalizing behaviors are related to physical or verbal acts of aggression, and both covert and avoidant conflict styles as well as child internalizing behavior are connected to feelings of anxiety (Buehler et al., 1998).

The family systems theory helps to explain the indirect associations between conflict styles and child maladjustment. Behavior triangulation is basic to understanding the functioning of any family system (Bowen, 1971; Minuchin, 1974) and it "describes the way any three people relate to each other and involve others in emotional issues between them" (Bowen, 1989, p. 306). Family systems theorists posit that conflict styles might link to child behavioral problems through maternal psychological control and mother-child relationship. As illustrated in the introduction section, several related processes have been commonly proposed to explain these indirect effects, three of which are spillover, compensatory and compartmentalization processes (Erel & Burman, 1995). Specifically, the spillover process suggests that the affect and interaction patterns existing in the marital dyad are transferred to parent-child dyad, reflected in a positive relationship between marital relationship and parent-child relationship and parenting. A competing model is presented by the compensatory hypothesis, which proposes that parents in conflictual and unsatisfied marriages devote extra effort and time to foster close parent-child

relationships and parenting. In contrast, when parents are in high-quality marriages, children might become a source of marital disruptions, which might lead to maladaptive parent-child relationships and parenting. Another hypothesized process is compartmentalization, which posits that parents separate the marital dyad and parent-child dyad, keeping the negative / positive affect and emotions in their marriage from negatively / positively impacting parent-child relationships and parenting behaviors. In the present study, marital relationship was measured by mother-report of IPC, overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles, parent-child relationship was measured by child-report of mother-child conflict resolution and parenting was measured by child-report of maternal psychological control.

Based on the theoretical and existing empirical research mentioned previously, the following hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. IPC will be significantly associated with child internalizing and externalizing behaviors.
2. Overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles will be positively associated with child internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Specifically, overt conflict style will be associated with externalizing behaviors; and covert and avoidant conflict styles will be associated with internalizing behaviors.
3. Maternal psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution will function as mediators of the association between conflict styles and children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

Methods

Sample

Chinese children attending the fifth grade in an elementary school in Shantou, Guangdong, China were recruited for this study. Shantou is a prefecture-level city located on the

eastern coast of Guangdong province, China, with a total permanent resident population of 5.5521 million as of 2015, according to Shantou Government Office. Shantou has jurisdiction over three urban districts (Jinping, Longhu, Haojiang), three rural districts (i.e., Chenghai, Chaoyang and Chaonan) and Nan'ao County. Shantou City is a Special Economic Zones of the People's Republic of China and has always been an important transportation hub, an import and export port and a commodity distribution center in East Guangdong, South Jiangxi and Southwest Fujian, and known as the "Communication Center of South China and Gateway of East Guangdong". The average income of an urban resident in Guangdong province is about 23,260 RMB (US\$3,482.38) per year and that of a rural resident Guangdong province is about 19,352 RMB (US\$2,897.29) (Shantou Statistics Bureau, 2015). Most studies in China are conducted in first-tier cities (i.e., Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen), whereas second-tier cities like Shantou have not been the focus of research on Chinese families.

Chinese children start school around ages six or seven. Upon successful completion of elementary school which includes grades 1 to 6, all students must take a junior middle school entrance examination and transit to a three-year middle school. This marks the end of a 9-year compulsory education in China.

Children attending fifth grade are likely to be between 10 and 14 years and transitioning from middle childhood into adolescence. As indicated by Steinberg (1987), this group of young people often experience heightened conflictual relationships with their parents. In a study of Chinese adolescents ($M = 12.88$), Yau and Smetana (1996) reported that parents and their adolescents engaged in conflictual interactions that are moderately intense and frequent.

Approval for all study procedures were obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University and the participating elementary school prior to conducting the study. The

elementary school did not require a formal research review board, as such the school principal reviewed the research proposal and made the decision to participate in the study. Prior to the onset of the study, letters of informed consent were sent home to parents describing the purposes of the current study, requesting consent for their children's participation as well as inviting the participation of their mothers. Each participating child had to also complete an assent form prior to completing the paper-pencil survey during school hours. They were given as much time as they needed to complete the survey. Upon completion of the survey, each child's survey was randomly given an 8-digit number as their ID number. Each mother was sent a questionnaire containing the same 8-digit number as their child in a sealed envelope. After each mother completed her survey, she returned the completed survey in sealed envelope to her child's head teacher.

One hundred and thirty-nine children and their mothers participated in the study. Twenty-eight participants who did not complete more than one scale were removed. The final sample contained 49 boys (44.1%) and 62 girls (55.9%) and their mothers. All mothers were married and in their first marriages. The mean age of the participating children and their mothers were 12.06 ($SD = .62$, range = 11 to 14 years) and 39.54 ($SD = 3.96$) respectively. Ten children (9%) were from one-child families. Sixty-two children (55.9%) had one sibling and 31(27.9%) had two siblings. About half of the mothers (41.4%) were not working or looking for work. Half of the fathers (47.7%) were self-employed and had their own businesses. According to the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, the middle class in China is defined as households with an annual income ranging from 60,000 to 500,000 Chinese yuan. Specifically, 20.7% of the sample had annual family income less than 20,000 Chinese yuan, 35.1% between 20,000 and 50,000 and

25.2% between 50,000 and 99,000. The modal educational level for both mothers and fathers was high school with 36.0% and 39.6% respectively.

Table 1. Demographics (n = 111)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Family Income	2.57 (20,000-50,000 CNY/year)	1.37	1	7
Father Education	5.02(Some college credit, no degree)	2.35	1	9
Mother Education	4.40 (High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent)	2.36	1	9
Mother Age	39.54	3.96	31	50
Child Age	12.06	.62	11	14
Sibling Number	1.37	.84	0	4

Note. 20,000 – 50,000 CNY/year is about \$ 3036.70 - \$7591.75

Measures

The current study used a multi-informant approach to obtain information about family life from children and their mothers. Children completed questions on behavioral problems, psychological control, and mother-child conflict resolution. Demographic information such as gender, age and number of siblings was also obtained from children’s reports. Mothers completed questions on their perceptions to the frequency of IPC, overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles as well as on their orientation to Chinese cultural values. Demographic information regarding parental education, marriage status, age and income was also self-reported by mothers. All measures used in this study were translated into Chinese by using translation and back-translation techniques.

Factorial validity of all constructs was performed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Principal Component extraction followed by Varimax Rotation in SPSS 23.0. Criteria included primary factor loading of .30 or higher and a difference greater than .20

between primary and secondary loadings (Kerlinger, 1986). Inter-item consistency of measures was assessed by Cronbach's alpha.

Children internalizing behaviors and externalizing behaviors. Children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors were assessed using an edited scale adapted from the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and Youth-Self Report (YSR) (Achenbach, 1991) by Liu (2003). Liu's edited scale was chosen due to its suitable scale length and cultural appropriateness for Chinese young children aged from 9-13 from rural counties (Liu, 2003). The internal reliability and mean for this edited child-reported subscale of internalizing behaviors were .82 and 2.22 respectively, .89 and 1.91 for externalizing behaviors (Liu, 2003). The reliability of this edited scale has been further tested and validated across the 3 waves of the Gansu Survey of Children and Families (GSCF) (Liu, 2008). The edited scale consisted of 34 items, 18 items measured internalizing behaviors and the rest of the 16 items measured externalizing behaviors. Each item was measured on four-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Sample items for internalizing behaviors included "I can't concentrate," and "I stay alone." Sample items for externalizing behaviors included "I don't listen to others" and "I act without thinking."

Factor analysis conducted for this study indicated that only 14 out of 18 items loaded for internalizing behaviors. Four items that assessed internalizing behaviors "I am a secretive person", "I cannot get mind off strange thoughts", "I try to get attention when I am with others" and "I stay quiet with others" did not have satisfactory loadings and were removed. Fifteen out of 16 items loaded for externalizing behaviors. One item that assessed externalizing behaviors "I argue with others" did not have satisfactory loading and was eliminated. Factor loadings ranged from .36 to .57 on internalizing behaviors scale and .45 to .64 on externalizing

behaviors. The standardized Cronbach's alpha was .72 for internalizing behaviors and Cronbach's alpha was .83 for externalizing problem behaviors, indicating good reliability. The items that loaded on each factor were averaged, higher scores indicated more behavioral problems.

Interparental conflict (IPC). Mothers' perceptions of the frequency with which IPC occurs in front of the target child were assessed using the O'Leary-Porter Scale (OPS; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). The OPS included items assessing occur and how often parents argue over topics such as discipline and spouses' personal habits (e.g., "How often has this child heard you argue about the wife's role in the family?"). The 14-item OPS has demonstrated good internal consistency (alpha = .86) and test-retest reliability over 2 weeks in prior studies ($r = .96$; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). Items on the scale were measured on a four-point Likert type scale ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (always).

Factor analysis indicated that 13 out of 14 items loaded for this factor. One item that "How often has the child heard you argue about your personal habits (for example, nagging, drinking and sloppiness) in the family" did not have a satisfactory loading and was eliminated. Factor loadings ranged from .36 to .83. The standardized Cronbach's alpha was .90, indicating high reliability. The items that loaded on this factor were averaged to calculate the scale score, higher scores indicated greater interparental disagreements.

Overt conflict style. Mothers' frequent use of overt conflict style was assessed by Buehler et al.'s (1998) measure of Overt Conflict Style (6 items). Sample items were "when you and your spouse / former spouse disagree, you call your spouse / former spouse names," and "..., you tell your spouse / former spouse to shut up." All items were measured on 4-point Likert

scale, with endpoints labeled from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*). The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale is .87 (Buehler et al., 1998).

Factor analysis indicated that 5 out of 6 items loaded for this factor. One item, “when you and your spouse / former spouse disagree, you call your spouse / former spouse names” did not have a satisfactory loading and was eliminated. Factor loadings ranged from .51 to .85. The standardized Cronbach’s alpha was .71, indicating good reliability. The items were averaged, higher scores represented more frequent use of overt conflict style.

Covert conflict style. Mothers completed Buehler et al.’s (1998) 4-item Covert Conflict Style subscale with Cronbach’s alpha .82. This self-reported subscale has also been shown good internal reliability in the Chinese families with Cronbach’s alpha of .87 for mothers and .91 for fathers (Li, Putallaz, & Su, 2011). Sample items included “when my spouse / former spouse and I disagree, I send messages to this child because you don’t want to talk to the other person,” and “..., I try to get this child to side with one of us.” Items on the scale were measured on a four-point Likert type scale ranged from (1) never to (4) often.

Factor analysis indicated that all four items loaded on one factor with loadings ranging between .62 and .77. The standardized Cronbach’s alpha was .66, indicating moderate reliability. All 4 items were averaged to yield a total score. Higher score indicated more frequent use of covert conflict style.

Avoidant conflict style. Mothers self-reported on their use of avoidant conflict style in their marital relationships by completing the avoidance capitulation subscale (8 items) of Conflict and Problem-Solving Scales (CPSS; Kerig, 1996) (e.g., “When my spouse / former spouse and I disagree, I try to smooth over our problems and do not address our disagreements,” and “..., I try to ignore problems, avoid talking about it.”). Items on the scale were measured on

a four-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (often). The scale has shown reliable internal coefficients of .70 and .74 for the sample of wives and husbands in prior studies (e.g., Kerig, 1996) and also demonstrated good validity in studies using Chinese samples (e.g., Li, Cheung, & Cummings, 2016; Li et al., 2017; Li et al., 2011).

Factor analysis showed that all eight items loaded for this one factor with loadings ranging from .38 to .78. The standardized Cronbach's alpha was .78, indicating good reliability. All these eight items were averaged to yield the scale score. Higher scores represented more frequent use of avoidant conflict style.

Psychological control. To measure children's perception of mothers' psychological control, an 8-item Psychological Control Scale - Youth Self-Report (PCS-YSR; Barber, 1996) were completed by participating children on a 3-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (not like her) to 3 (a lot like her). This measure has several subscales of psychological control: invalidating feelings (e.g., "My mother is a person who is always trying to change how I feel or think about things"), constraining verbal expressions (e.g., "... often interrupts me"), personal attack (e.g., "...brings up my past mistakes when she criticizes me"), and love withdrawal (e.g., "...if I have hurt her feelings, stops talking to me until I please her again"). The PCS-YSR has adequate internal consistency in past studies (α 's ranged from .80 to .83) and has shown to be related to observer's report of psychological control (Barber, 1996).

Factor analysis indicated that 6 out of 8 items loaded on this factor. Two items, "My mother is a person who will avoid looking at me when I have disappointed her" and "...who stops talking to me until I please her again, if I have hurt her feelings" did not have satisfactory loadings and were eliminated. Factor loadings ranged from .49 to .67. The standardized Cronbach's alpha was .59, indicated low to moderate reliability. The 6 items loaded on this

factor were averaged to yield a psychological control score, with higher scores indicating greater psychological control.

Mother-child conflict resolution. Children self-reported their conflict resolution between themselves and their mothers by completing the 17-item Conflict Resolution subscale of Mother-child Conflict Resolution Questionnaire-Child version (PACHIQ-R-CH; Lange, Evers, Jansen & Dolan, 2002) on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (always) to 5 (never). PACHIQ-R-CH is based on learning theory and structural systems theory and focused both on attitudes and the behavioral interaction between parents and children.

Factor analysis indicated that 11 out of 17 items loaded on this factor. Six items, “My mother thinks that I cannot do anything for myself”, “I call my mother names”, “when my mother tells me not to do something, I do it anyway”, “I like it when my mother explains things to me”, “when my other tells me not do something, I don’t do it” and “when my mother disallows something, I understand why” did not have satisfactory loadings and were eliminated. Factor loadings ranged from .31 to .63. The standardized Cronbach’s alpha was .75, indicating moderate reliability. The total score was calculated by averaging the item scores. Higher scores indicated better conflict resolution between mothers and children.

Mothers’ orientation to Chinese cultural values. Mother’s orientation to Chinese cultural values were assessed by the Asian Values Scale-Revised (AVS-R; Kim & Hong, 2004), a revised version of the Asian Values Scale (AVS; Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999) with improvement in measurement quality. The original AVS was designed based on Confucian beliefs about socialization goals and societal virtues to assess one’s adherence to Asian cultural values (Kim et al., 1999). The AVS-R includes 25 items to which participants respond on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 =strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree).

The AVS-R was found highly correlated with the original AVS ($r = .93$) and showed acceptable reliability estimates of .80 (Kim & Hong, 2004).

Factor analysis indicated that 10 out of 25 items loaded for one factor labeled “personal values”. One item “the worst thing one can do is to bring disgrace to one’s family reputation” loaded for “personal values” was dropped, because it did not go with this factor conceptually. As such 9 items were used to assess the construct of personal values. Factor loadings ranged between .34 and .63 on “personal values”. Five items loaded for “family recognition and conformity to norms” and the factor loadings ranged between .42 and .69. The standardized Cronbach’s alpha was .71 for personal values and .60 for family recognition and conformity to norms, indicating moderate to high reliability. The items that loaded on each of the factors were averaged to calculate individual scales, with higher scores indicating greater adherence to Asian values.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The statistical analyses were carried out using the software programme SPSS version 23.0. Prior to testing the aforementioned hypotheses, data entry and data cleaning were conducted, followed by examining the missing data. All measures were checked for validity and reliability and all scales were created as mention previously.

The normality of data was examined using Skewness and Kurtosis tests. The Skewness and Kurtosis statistics for each variable used in the analyses are provided in Table 2. The values of most variables were within the reasonable range, which were between 1 and -1 for Skewness and between -2 to infinity (Kline, 2005). Bivariate correlations among IPC, conflict styles,

psychological control, mother-child conflict resolution, internalizing and externalizing behaviors are presented in Table 2 as well as descriptive statistics for each variable.

Table 2 Intercorrelations among all Variables

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.IB	-								
2.EB	.49**	-							
3.PC	.19**	.12	-						
4.IPC	.04	-.09	-.04	-					
5.OCS	.13	.09	-.14	.14	-				
6.CCS	.08	.09	.02	.04	.51**	-			
7.ACS	-.04	.11	-.08	-.08	.33**	.33**	-		
8.AVS	-.07	-.04	.02	.12	-.14	-.09	-.005	-	
9.MCCR	-.28**	-.32**	-.44**	-.05	-.14	-.11	.01	-.005	
Skewness	.229	.548	.891	-.480	1.424	.851	.059	.867	-.402
Kurtosis	.712	-.661	.781	-.555	2.213	-.283	-.944	1.86	-.451
<i>M</i>	1.93	1.56	1.59	2.96	1.52	1.52	1.93	2.83	3.61
(SD)	.39	.39	.35	.76	.50	.51	.51	.28	.60

Note. IB = internalizing behaviors, EB = externalizing behaviors, PC = psychological control, IPC = interparental conflict, OCS = overt conflict style, CCS = covert conflict style, ACS = avoidant conflict style, AVS = Asian values scale, MCCR= mother-child conflict resolution. Correlations equal to or greater than .10 are statistically significant (* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$).

There were significant associations between mother-reported overt conflict style and child-reported internalizing behaviors and between avoidant conflict style and child-reported externalizing behaviors. The associations were small in magnitude. Mother-reported covert conflict style was not significantly related to any of the dependent variables. Also, mother-reported psychological control was significantly associated with increased child-reported internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and decreased overt conflict style. Mother-child conflict resolution was significantly associated with decreased internalizing and externalizing behaviors and decreased psychological control.

Differences of Mothers' Chinese Cultural Values among all Variables

In this sample, there is no difference between mothers' high and low adherence to Chinese cultural values among all variables (see Table 3). The current sample was divided into two groups using the mean score of mother's report on the AVS-R scale as cutoff, with one group scoring at the mean or above as high adherence to Chinese cultural values (High Group) and the other group scoring below the mean as low adherence to Chinese cultural values (Low Group).

Table 3 Differences of Mothers' Chinese Cultural Values in Main Constructs

	Low Group	High Group	<i>t</i> value
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	
Internalizing Behaviors	1.94 (.36)	1.90 (.44)	.47
Externalizing Behaviors	1.59 (.40)	1.51 (.38)	1.14
Interparental Conflict	2.90 (.66)	3.02 (.87)	-.84
Overt Conflict Style	1.55 (.54)	1.48 (.45)	.74
Covert Conflict Style	1.55 (.54)	1.49 (.48)	.74
Avoidant Conflict Style	1.89 (.49)	1.99 (.54)	-.98
Psychological Control	1.61 (.39)	1.56 (.31)	.64
Mother-child Conflict Resolution	3.59 (.63)	3.64 (.57)	-.46

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis that the current study tested is that interparental conflict is significantly correlated with child internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The data do not support the direct effects. To test this hypothesis, two separate regression analyses were conducted - one with internalizing behaviors as the outcome variable and another with externalizing behaviors as the outcome variable. Child gender, age and family income were entered in Block 1 as the background control variables. The total variance explained by the model in children's internalizing behaviors was 6%, $F(3, 107) = 2.08$, $p = ns$, Adjusted $R^2 = .03$, and in externalizing behaviors was 3%, $F(3, 107) = .95$, $p = ns$, Adjusted $R^2 = -.001$. In the model, only the controlled variable family income was significantly associated with internalizing behaviors ($\beta = -.21$, $p = .03$), but not with externalizing behaviors ($\beta = -.15$, $p = ns$). IPC was not

significantly associated with internalizing behaviors ($\beta = .01, p = ns$) and externalizing behaviors ($\beta = -.11, p = ns$).

Given that child gender and age were not significantly associated with either of the outcome variables, they were removed from the following regression models, leaving family income as the only background controlled variable.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis is that the associations between conflict styles and child behaviors are specialized. Specifically, overt conflict style is associated with externalizing behaviors; and covert and avoidant conflict styles are associated with internalizing behaviors. This hypothesis is not supported. To test this hypothesis, two regression analyses were conducted. Block 1 included family income. In Block 2 IPC was entered. In Block 3, while overt conflict style was placed for analyzing externalizing behaviors, covert and avoidant conflict styles were entered for internalizing behaviors. Overt conflict style was not associated with externalizing behaviors ($\beta = .10, p = ns$). The overall model for externalizing behaviors as an outcome variable was not significant, $F(3, 107) = 1.69, p = ns, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .01$. Covert and avoidant conflict styles were not associated with internalizing behaviors ($\beta = .07, p = ns; \beta = -.05, p = ns$). The overall model for internalizing behaviors as an outcome variable was not significant, $F(4, 106) = 1.37, p = ns, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .01$.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis the current study tested is that mother's use of psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution mediate the association between conflict styles and children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The complete mediation is not supported, which means that maternal psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution do not

completely explain the association between conflict styles and children's adjustment outcome. This hypothesis was also tested using hierarchical regression analyses. For each behavior outcome, two sets of analyses were conducted. In the first analysis, Block 1 and 2 were the same as those used in hypothesis 2. In Block 3, three types of conflict styles (overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles) were entered. The two mediators (maternal psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution) were entered separately in the final Block. In the second analysis, mothers' psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution were separately entered as the dependent variable with the other independent variables which remained the same as those entered in Blocks 1, 2 and 3 from the previous analysis.

Maternal Psychological Control

Maternal psychological control reported by children was significantly associated with increased levels of internalizing behaviors ($\beta = .21, p = .03$) (see Table 4). The overall model for internalizing behaviors as an outcome variable was not significant, $F(6, 104) = 2.095, p = ns$, Adjusted $R^2 = .06$. However, maternal psychological control was not significantly associated with children's externalizing behaviors ($\beta = .13, p = ns$). The overall model for externalizing behaviors as an outcome variable was not significant, $F(6, 104) = 1.276, p = ns$, Adjusted $R^2 = .015$.

In the second analysis, overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles were not associated with maternal psychological control ($\beta = -.18, p = ns$; $\beta = .14, p = ns$; $\beta = -.07, p = ns$).

Mother-child Conflict Resolution

Children-reported mother-child conflict resolution was significantly associated with decreased levels of internalizing behaviors ($\beta = -.27, p = .005$) and externalizing behaviors ($\beta = -.32, p = .001$) (see Table 4). The overall models for internalizing behaviors and externalizing

behaviors were not significant, with $F(6, 104) = 2.669, p = ns$, Adjusted $R^2 = .083$ and $F(6, 104) = 3.133, p = ns$, Adjusted $R^2 = .104$ respectively.

In the second analysis, overt, covert nor avoidant conflict styles were associated with mother-child conflict resolution ($\beta = -.125, p = ns$; $\beta = -.07, p = ns$; $\beta = .074, p = ns$).

Discussion

Interparental conflict has been established as a potentially salient risk factor for children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors among western samples (e.g., Buehler et al., 2007). Yet few studies have examined the role of IPC in the Chinese context in relation to children's adjustment. Furthermore, even fewer researchers have separately examined IPC from conflict styles and have investigated the mediating effects of psychological control and mother-child relationship to the association between IPC and children's adjustment. Therefore, the main goal of the current study was to address these major conceptual and operational limitations in the study of IPC, parenting behaviors, and child behavioral outcomes in mainland China. Specifically, I examined how interparental conflict influence children's adjustment directly and indirectly through maternal psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution, providing a test of the spillover, compensatory and compartmentalization processes.

The results from this study look different from previous investigations mainly conducted in the Western countries. First, the study revealed that IPC was not associated with internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Second, there was a very weak linear relationship between overt conflict style and externalizing behaviors and between covert and avoidant conflict styles and internalizing behaviors. Third, maternal psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution did not mediate the association between conflict styles and child's adjustment.

Table 4 Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Conflict Styles, Psychological Control, Mother-child Conflict Resolution and Child Behaviors

	Internalizing Behaviors				Externalizing Behaviors			
	IPC	Styles	Psychological Control	Mother-child conflict resolution	IPC	Styles	Psychological Control	Mother-child conflict resolution
Independent Variables	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4	Block 4	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4	Block 4
IPC	.01	-.02	-.01	-.02	-.11	-.11	-.11	-.12
Overt conflict style		.17	.21	.14		.07	.09	.03
Covert conflict style		-.007	-.03	-.02		.003	-.01	-.02
Avoidant conflict style		-.07	-.06	-.05		.09	.10	.12
Psychological control			.20*				.13	
Mother-child conflict resolution				-.26**				-.32***
Total R ²	.055	.080	.117	.145	.038	.056	.071	.155
Adjusted R ²	.019	.017	.048	.078	.001	-.008	-.001	.089

Note: Standardized regression coefficients are reported. $n = 111$.

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

Direct Associations among IPC, conflict styles and Children's Adjustment

Direct associations between IPC, conflict styles and children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors were first examined. The hypotheses of these direct relationships derived from social learning theories (Bandura, 1977). Children pay attention to parents' hostile interactions, consider the interactions as acceptable behavior guides and adapt them to their own social and relational interactions.

It is worth noting that, I found that IPC was not correlated with child internalizing and externalizing behaviors in the Chinese context. This finding contradicts what prior researchers have found in the western samples- a weak to moderate direct effect of IPC on children's adjustment (e.g., Buehler et al., 1997). The result suggests that IPC itself does not impact children's adjustment. With regards to the specified relationships between different types of conflict styles and child maladjustment. In fact, I only found a weak and positive relationship between overt conflict style and children's internalizing behaviors and between avoidant conflict style and children's externalizing behaviors.

There are several explanations for the lack of associations or non-significant results. This lack of supporting evidence might be due to different measurement approaches. Reliance on children's self-report on child behaviors and mother-report of IPC and conflict styles may lead to lack of association or weaker estimates than when data were both obtained from mother report. Another possible explanation for this non-significant result is children might underreport their problematic behaviors due to children being afraid of being humiliated or cultural intolerance of misbehavior. Children in this sample may be less willing to report their true behaviors because most of them are coming from below middle-class living families and may have a deeper awareness of shaming, which may push them to display less of their misbehavior. In the Chinese

communities, shaming has been utilized as a principal moral training technique (see Wilson, 1970, 1981) by teachers with an aim of correcting children's misbehavior. It is also possible that Chinese children do have fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors as indicated by Hsu (1985), who detected some temperamental differences between Chinese infants and children and their counterparts in America. While Zimet and Jacob (2001) pointed out that exposure to IPC was upsetting to children and tend to evoke child maladjustment, the results of the current study seemed to suggest different views. Perhaps it is not simply the IPC itself matters to children. Exposure to the conflictual interactions might provide children a learning opportunity to think about how to handle disagreement in a more constructive way if they reach a certain cognitive level.

The Mediating Effects of Psychological Control and Mother-child Conflict Resolution to the Direct Associations between Conflict Styles and Children's Adjustment

The results of this study indicate the associations between conflict styles and children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors are not mediated by both psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution. In the interparental conflict literature, several processes have been proposed to explain these indirect effects, three of which are spillover, compensatory and compartmentalization processes (Erel & Burman, 1995). To recap, the spillover process suggests that the affect and interaction patterns existing in the marital dyad are transferred to parent-child dyad, reflected in a positive relationship between marital relationship and parent-child relationship and parenting. A competing model is presented by the compensatory hypothesis, which proposes that parents in conflictual and unsatisfied marriages devote extra effort and time to fostering close parent-child relationships and parenting. In contrast, when parents are in high-quality marriages, children might become a source of marital disruptions,

which might lead to maladaptive parent-child relationships and parenting. Another hypothesized process is compartmentalization, which posits that parents separate the marital dyad and parent-child dyad, keeping the negative / positive affect and emotions in their marriage from negatively / positively impacting parent-child relationships and parenting behaviors.

Unlike most prior research, this study did not find evidence for the spillover and compensatory hypotheses, but there was support for the compartmentalization hypothesis. Specifically, mother-report of conflict styles (overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles) were not significantly related to child-report psychological control and mother-child conflict resolution. One speculation for this lack of relationship could be the result of mothers being better able to compartmentalize their interparental conflict from the parenting behaviors and parent-child relationship (Ahrons, 1980). This type of compartmentalization might help parents function well in two subsystems and protect children from the negative impact of being in the hostile environments by paying more attention to their children's needs. It is possible that mothers in this sample are able to compartmentalize roles as spouse and parent and can therefore focus on the needs of their children and establish a positive relationship with their children, regardless of the existence of interparental conflict.

Although compartmentalization hypothesis has received little empirical support and attention, it is not totally surprising that it is supported in the current study. Mothers in this sample are from Shantou, which is one of the three cities (i.e., Chaozhou, Shantou and Jieyang) of the Chaoshan region of eastern Guangdong. People from this region are called Teochew. They have very unique cultural features, in which male chauvinism is deeply rooted and women play the roles of good wives and devoted mothers as the primary care-givers. Teochew women are known for their gentleness, endurance and strong familial values as well as being capable of

managing the household. Hence, Teochew women are highly considered as ideal marital partners in China, reflected in an old saying “choose a Chaoshan woman when you want to get married” (Wen, 2015). It was reported that Shantou enjoyed the lowest divorce rate (.52%), which is 10 times lower than the highest divorce rate city of Guangdong (i.e., Shenzhen), where the divorce rates are among the lowest in China (Wen, 2015). In fact, family in Chaoshan region has long been based on the nurturing, organizing and service role of the mother-housewife, and on her relationship with the children, rather than on the relationship between husband and wife or on the role of the provider-father. Perhaps, it is these unique cultural features and maternal characteristics that make these women separate the roles of spouse and mother.

With regards to the relation between maternal psychological control and both internalizing and externalizing behaviors, it is noteworthy that mother’s use of psychological control was found to be positively correlated with both behavior outcomes. In fact, only the association with internalizing behaviors reaching a statistically significant degree, but not with externalizing behaviors. These positive linkages between maternal psychological control and children’s adjustment are consistent with prior studies performed with samples of adolescents, school age children and even younger children (e.g., Barber 1996; Mill & Rubin, 1998; Holmbeck, Shapera & Hommeyer 2001).

Furthermore, the study also found a significant association between mother-child conflict resolution and both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. This finding suggests that the more children feel that their mothers deal well with conflict and are willing to take responsibilities (i.e., higher mother-child conflict resolution scores), the fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors children will display.

Strengths, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In determining the significance of this study, both strengths and limitations should be considered. There are several strengths associated with this study. First and foremost, the study addresses some of the major conceptual and operational limitations in the interparental conflict literature by including three types of conflict styles (i.e., overt, covert and avoidant conflict styles) and controlling IPC in the analyses. Second, the multi-informant nature of the data strengthens the findings of the current investigation.

Some limitations of this study should also be noted along with future directions. Although the focus of this study was to investigate the direct and indirect linkages between interparental conflict, conflict styles and child adjustment in the Chinese context, there are numerous variations in familial processes across mainland China and high diversity of individuals living in China. Therefore, these findings may not be generalized to all ethnic groups or individuals in mainland China, especially to those who are from the first-tier cities. Given that the current study is among the first to address whether IPC and conflict styles are related to internalizing and externalizing behaviors among school age children in China, these findings should also be viewed as tentative until replicated. Another limitation associated with this study is the small sample size as well as the nature of the sample. The current sample might be biased, not only because it was school-based, but also because participants in the present study are invited to participate rather than being selected in a stratified random manner. Additionally, these data are cross-sectional and thus limited the conclusions that can be drawn about the direction and nature of the relationships investigated. Furthermore, interparental conflict and conflict styles were only reported by mothers, future studies can examine these constructs through both mothers' and fathers' reports to strengthen the findings. Likewise, future studies can examine

children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors through parent, teacher and child reports rather than only through child report.

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