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Understanding Teacher-Student Relationships, Student-Student Relationships, and Conduct Problems in China and the United States

George G. Bear, Chunyan Yang, and Joseph Glutting
School of Education, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, USA

Xishan Huang, Xianyou He, and Wei Zhang
School of Psychology, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, Guangdon Province, People’s Republic of China

Dandan Chen
School of Education, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, USA

Several previous studies have found that Chinese students perceive teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships more favorably than American students. In this study we examined if the same holds true with respect to teachers’ perceptions. Also examined were both students’ and teachers’ perceptions of conduct problems. The sample included 3,253 students and 345 teachers in China and 2,192 students and 540 teachers in the United States. Results of a multivariate analysis of variance revealed the greatest differences in mean scores between countries were in teachers’ and students’ perceptions of student-student relationships and student conduct problems. American students perceived their schools much less favorably, and particularly so in middle school and high school. Students tended to report less favorable relationships and greater conduct problems than their teachers, especially in the United States compared with China. Cultural differences are discussed that may account for the findings, including differences in the valuing of education, filial piety, social harmony, self and peer regulation of behavior, classroom management, and the socialization of cultural values.

Keywords: Teacher-student relationships, student relationships, conduct problems, school climate, Chinese schools

Multiple studies have shown that the quality of students’ relationships with their teachers and peers are related to a number of important academic and social-emotional outcomes for schools and students. Students’ perceptions of positive teacher-student relationships relate positively to school completion (Croninger & Lee, 2001), on-task behavior (Battistich & Hom, 1997), academic initiative or engagement (Danielsen, Wiium, Wilhelmsen, & Wold, 2010; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008), academic achievement (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; Hughes, Wu, Kwok, Villarreal, & Johnson, 2012; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008), peer acceptance (Hughes, Cavell, & Wilson, 2001; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999) and motivation to act responsibly and prosocially (Wentzel, 1996). They relate negatively to oppositional and antisocial behaviors (Bru, Stephens, & Torsheim, 2002; Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Resnick et al., 1997), including bullying (Gregory et al., 2010). Additionally, studies show that close teacher-student relationships serve as a protective moderating factor in children’s development, buffering negative effects of risk
factors and promoting positive mental health, including among children with internalizing and externalizing problems (Hughes, 2013; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Similarly, studies show that positive relationships between students are associated with a number of favorable academic and social-emotional outcomes. For example, students with positive peer relationships experience greater academic initiative and achievement, liking of school, and school completion, and they experience less school avoidance (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Danielsen et al., 2010). They also experience less depression, greater self-esteem, and fewer delinquent and aggressive behaviors (Brand et al., 2003).

With the exception of the Danielsen et al. (2010) study, which was conducted in Norway, all of the studies cited above were conducted in the United States. This is not uncommon: As noted recently by Jia et al. (2009), over 98% of developmental research has been conducted in the United States (Arnett, 2008) and thus we know little about teacher-student and student-student relationships in other countries. This includes the People’s Republic of China, which has 20% of the world’s population. China and the United States differ in many ways. Among them are that class sizes in China are much larger (Ding, Li, Li, & Lulm, 2008; Romanowski, 2006; Shen et al., 2009) and schools and the families of students attending them have much less wealth. The gross national income per capita in China is less than 10% of that in the United States (World Bank, 2012). Despite those differences, compared to American students, Chinese students demonstrate higher academic achievement (Fleischman, Hopstock, Pelczar, & Shelley, 2010).

Given that teacher-student and student-student relationships have consistently been found to correlate positively with academic achievement, one might predict that with their higher academic achievement, students in China have more favorable teacher-student and student-student relationships than students in the United States. However, several cross-cultural researchers have noted that factors other than academic achievement might lead one to predict otherwise: that relationships in Chinese schools, especially between teachers and students, would be less favorable than in American schools because of larger class sizes (with fewer opportunities for individual teacher-student bonding) and Chinese teachers’ greater use of controlling classroom management (Jessor et al., 2003; Zhou, Lam, & Chan, 2012). However, in studying differences between Chinese and American students in conduct problems and students’ perceptions of the classroom management strategies used by teachers to control student behaviors, those researchers did not directly examine the impact of class size and classroom management strategies on teacher-student and student-student relationships.

In our review of the research literature published in both Western and Chinese journals, we found only two studies that have examined differences between the United States and China in teacher-student and student-student relationships. Both were studies of students’ perceptions of differences in school climate that included teacher-student and student-student relationships among the factors of school climate measured. In their study of students’ perceptions of school climate in grades 3–12, Yang et al. (2013) found that Chinese students had more favorable perceptions of both teacher-student and student-student relationships. Chinese students also scored higher on the two other factors of school climate that they measured, which were Liking of School and Fairness of Rules. Across the four factors, effect sizes tended to be smallest in elementary school and largest in middle school. In their study of seventh graders, Jia and colleagues (2009) found more favorable perceptions of teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships among Chinese students, as well as more favorable perceptions of support for autonomy.

In both of the studies above, the findings were attributed to three general cultural differences: (a) Chinese students’ greater valuing of education, and greater respect of and desire to please their parents, teachers, and others in positions of authority; (b) an emphasis in Chinese culture on maintaining social harmony, which greatly influences how Chinese students view and regulate their own behavior and that of their peers; and (c) the greater emphasis that Chinese teachers place on building and maintaining positive relationships as a means of managing student behavior, and how Chinese schools otherwise promote the socialization of traditional Chinese cultural values. Each of those cultural differences is addressed later in the discussion section and in the context of the present study’s findings.

The primary purpose of the present study was to examine if more favorable perceptions of teacher-student and student-student relationships are found not only among Chinese students compared to American students but also among Chinese teachers compared to American teachers. Thus, we attempted to replicate the findings of Jia et al. (2009) and Yang et al. (2013) on perceptions among Chinese and American students and extend them to Chinese and American teachers. Given the findings above on differences between Chinese and American students, and the three general cultural differences that explained them, we hypothesized that Chinese teachers would hold more favorable perceptions than American teachers. Consistent with the findings of Yang et al. (2013), we expected to find the greatest differences in middle school and the smallest in elementary school. Finding similar results across two different informants, students and teachers, would strengthen the evidence that teacher-student and student-student relationships are more favorable in China than the United States.

In predicting that Chinese teachers would perceive relationships more favorably, we also expected to find that within both countries, teachers’ perceptions of teacher-student
and student-student relationships would be more favorable than those of students. This would be consistent with research on school climate indicating that teachers in the United States perceive school climate more favorably than students (Booren, Handy, & Power, 2011; Skiba, Simmons, Peterson, & Forde, 2006).

A secondary purpose of the study was to examine the extent to which students' conduct problems differ between China and the United States. Parents of children in China report far fewer behavioral problems than parents of children in the United States. In an analysis of studies of parent ratings of children's behavior across 31 countries, Rescorla et al. (2007) reported that China ranked 4th with respect to the fewest behavior problems, and the United States ranked 20th. In our review of the literature, we found very few studies that have more directly compared conduct problems in China to those in the United States. As discussed below, those studies have not always been consistent in their results. Nevertheless, they suggest that whereas minor behavior problems, such as nonattention and talking out of turn, are widely reported in both countries, more serious conduct problems—those that are harmful to others, such as fighting, bullying, stealing, and cheating—are more common in the United States.

Based on interviews with 18 Chinese teachers of grades 1–6, Shen et al. (2009) identified 10 categories of students’ behavior problems in Chinese schools. Six of those categories entailed behaviors that interfered with an individual student’s learning and/or the learning of others but were not likely to harm others, either physically or emotionally. The six categories were nonattention, talking out of turn, overactive, not following the task, uncooperative, and withdrawn. Four other categories included physically or emotionally harmful behaviors: laughing at others (e.g., “saying things like ‘stupid’”), disruptive behavior (e.g., “taking others’ things” and “pushing others”), noncompliance (e.g., criticizing others and not accepting responsibility), and emotional disturbance (e.g., “attacking or fighting with others”). Using those categories, the researchers surveyed 527 Chinese teachers of grades 1–6 in 27 schools in five provinces and found that teachers ranked nonattention, talking out of turn, and being overactive as the most frequent and troublesome behavior problems. The least frequent and troublesome were emotional disturbance, noncompliance, and disruptive behavior.

In a survey of 244 Chinese teachers of grades 1–12, Ding et al. (2008) reported similar findings. They found nonattention, or daydreaming, to be the most frequent and troublesome behavior problem reported by teachers, with 46.3% agreeing that it was the behavior problem occurring most frequently. Those teachers reported that the next most frequent behavior problems were talking out of turn (18.4% reporting), playing with personal stuff (9.8%), chatting or joking (7%), sleeping or looking out of the window (4.9%), and reading unrelated books (2.9%). In comparing their findings to studies conducted in Western countries, the researchers noted that nonattention and talking out of turn also are commonly reported in Western countries. However, they also noted that teachers in Western countries typically viewed behavior problems in general to be a much greater concern. For example, whereas 65.6% of Chinese teachers in their study (72% in high schools) viewed classroom management as not a major concern, the researchers noted that other studies in Western countries have reported the opposite to be true. That is, those studies (e.g., Little, 2005; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988) reported that a high percentage of teachers in Western countries, about 55%–65%, viewed classroom management as a major concern. A likely reason why behavior problems are less of concern among Chinese teachers is that they are uncommon in their schools, particularly behaviors that harm others, such as fighting, bullying, and stealing.

Of the few studies that have directly examined differences in conduct problems between schools in China and the United States, results have been mixed. In a study of 7th and 8th graders, Chen, Greenberger, Lester, Dong, and Gao (1998) found no significant differences between Chinese and American schools in students’ self-reported misconduct and antisocial behavior. Likewise, in a study of students of ages 6–13, Weine, Phillips, and Achenbach (1995) found no differences in teachers’ reports of students’ conduct problems. In contrast to those two studies, in a study of 11th graders, Greenberger, Chen, Beam, Whang, and Dong (2000) found that compared to their Chinese counterparts, American students reported greater physical aggression and school misconduct (including cheating). For example, 52% of the American students, compared to 11% of Chinese students, reported that they had “hit or threatened to hit someone.” Smaller differences were found for cheating (i.e., copying homework), with 94% of American and 70% of Chinese students reporting cheating. Differences between China and the United States in conduct problems also were reported by Jessar et al. (2003) in their study of students in grades 7–9. They found that scores on self-reported delinquent behavior (including fighting and stealing) were significantly higher among American students.

A possible reason for the inconsistent findings in differences in conduct problems between China and the United States is that such differences across studies are a function of the age or grade level of students. That is, in the two studies that reported no differences in conduct problems (Chen et al., 1998; Weine et al., 1995), all students were below the 9th grade, but in the two studies that reported significant differences (Greenberger et al., 2000; Jessar et al., 2003) all students were above the 7th grade. Thus, it appears that differences in conduct problems are not found in elementary school but in high school. Differences in middle school are less clear; whereas Chen et al. (1998)
reported no differences in grades 7–8. Jessor et al. reported greater conduct problems in American than Chinese schools for grades 7–9.

In the current study we examined differences in conduct problems between China and the United States across elementary, middle, and high schools. Consistent with the findings above, we predicted that differences in conduct problems, as reported by both teachers and students, would not be found in elementary school—in both countries, few conduct problems would be reported. However, also consistent with previous research, at the high school level we predicted greater conduct problems in the United States. With respect to middle school, we predicted that teachers and students in both countries would report greater conduct problems than in elementary school, which would be consistent with research showing increased conduct problems in early adolescence (Furlong, Morrison, & Jimerson, 2004). However, we also predicted that conduct problems in middle school would be greater in the United States than China. Predicting greater conduct problems among American students in middle school is consistent with the findings of Jessor et al. (2003) rather than Chen et al. (1998).

Finally, although we predicted that teachers and students in the United States and China would report a similar pattern of greater conduct problems in middle school and high school than in elementary school, we also predicted that across grade levels, students in both countries would report more conduct problems than would teachers. This is consistent with findings of previous studies, with researchers finding that students are more likely than teachers to observe and report low incidence yet serious conduct problems, such as fighting, bullying, stealing, and cheating (Booren et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2006).

In sum, guided by previous research showing more positive perceptions of teacher-student and student-student relationships among students in China than the United States, we predicted that perceptions of those relationships would be more favorable among Chinese teachers than American teachers, with the greatest differences between countries being in middle school and the smallest in elementary school. We also examined differences in conduct problems between the two countries. Consistent with predicting more positive relationships among teachers and students in China, we predicted that teachers and students in China, compared to teachers and students in the United States, would report fewer conduct problems, but not in elementary school.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Students were drawn from a larger study (Yang et al., 2013) of 86 schools (61 elementary, 15 middle, and 10 high school) throughout the state of Delaware in the United States, and 22 schools (10 elementary, 8 middle, and 8 high schools) in the city of Foshan, Guangdong Province, China. Although Foshan is a city with a population of 5.68 million, it includes many schools that would likely be considered suburban by American standards. The city’s economic level is the 11th highest among cities in China. Schools volunteered to participate upon invitation from either the Delaware or Foshan departments of education.

The same American and Chinese students included in the 2013 study were included here in order to compare the perceptions of teachers with those of students. Of the 107 American and Chinese schools in the 2013 study of students’ perceptions of school climate, 30 were included in the current study: 5 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, and 5 high schools in each country. Five schools at each grade level were selected because that was the highest number of schools across countries and grade levels for which at least 10% of the student population and 50% of the teacher population in each school completed the surveys. For comparative purposes, we desired an equal number of schools across grade levels and countries. Among those American schools with greater than 10% of the students and 50% of the teachers completing the surveys, we chose those schools with the greatest percentages in both categories. Of the 15 schools in the United States sample, the percentage of teachers completing the surveys ranged from 43 to 98 with a median of 70, and the percentage of students completing the surveys ranged from 11 to 59, with a median of 23.5. In each school in the United States, all teachers were administered the survey; however, only 200 students were sampled. Of those 200 students in each school, the response rate for completion of the surveys ranged from 64% to 96%, with a median of 81%.

It was not possible to determine the percentage of Chinese students and teachers completing the surveys because enrollment data were not collected, including the number of students and teachers in each school in China. However, as reported in the study by Yang et al. (2013), a total of 4,800 student surveys were administered in 22 Chinese schools (15 of which were included in the current study), and 4,542 (95%) were completed. A total of 490 teacher surveys also were administered in the same 22 schools, of which 448 (91%) were completed.

The study included a total of 540 teachers and 2,192 students in the United States and 345 teachers and 3,253 students in China, in grades 3–5, 7–8, and 10–12. The racial/ethnicity and gender composition of students by grade level

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1. The purpose of the previous study (Bear et al., 2011) was to validate the Delaware School Climate Survey-Student with Chinese students and compare the scores of American and Chinese students on its four factors (Teacher Student Relationships, Student-Student Relationship, Fairness of Rules, and Liking of School). Teachers were not included in that published study, although data on their perceptions of teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and conduct problems were collected in most of the same schools. Likewise, differences in student conduct problems between countries were not investigated.
are shown in Table 1. Due to U.S. teachers’ concerns about potentially identifying teachers based on gender and race/ethnicity, this demographic information was not collected in the United States. Likewise, race/ethnicity information was not collected in China because the Chinese researchers of the study insisted that 99%–100% of teachers and students in the Chinese sample were of Chinese decent. In the United States, elementary schools included grades 3–5, middle schools included grades 6–8, and high schools included grades 9–12. In China, elementary schools included grades 3–6, middle schools included grades 7–9, and high schools included grades 10–12. To include students and teachers of the same grades, in both countries those in grades 6 and 9 were not included in the analyses of group differences.

### Instruments

The teacher and student versions of the measures of teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and conduct problems are described below. For each of these measures, a 4-item Likert scale was used, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree*. The total score for each scale consisted of the sum of scores across the respective scale’s items divided by the number of items for the scale. Thus, a score of 3.0 reflects that, on average, respondents agreed with the items on the scale. All items on the Chinese versions of both surveys were first translated from English into Chinese and then back-translated into English by a different translator.

#### Students’ perceptions of teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and conduct problems

Students’ perceptions of relationships were measured using items from the student-student relationships and teacher-student relationships subscales of the Modified Delaware School Climate Survey—Student (MDSCS-S; Yang et al., 2013). In the current study, the teacher-student relationships subscale consisted of four items on the MDSCS-S that measure students’ perceptions of the quality of adults’ interactions with students in the school: “Teachers care about their students,” “Teachers listen to you when you have a problem,” “Adults in this school treat students fairly,” and “Adults who work in this school care about the students.” Although the original MDSCS-S consists of six items, we deleted two items from our analyses because those items do not appear on the teacher version of the survey (i.e., “I like my teachers” and “Teachers let you know when you’re doing a good job.”).

The student-student relations subscale consists of four items that measure students’ perceptions of the quality of interactions among students: “Students get along with one another,” “Students are friendly toward most other students,” “Students really care about each other,” and “Students treat each other with respect.” In previous studies of students’ perceptions of school climate in the United States (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011) and in both the United States and China (Yang et al., 2013) confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) supported the integrity and reliability of the teacher-student and student-student subscales, including across country, gender, race/ethnicity, and grade level (elementary, middle, and high school). The MDSCS-S consists of two additional factors, Liking of School (4 items) and Fairness of School rules (3 items), but those factors were excluded from the analyses because they were not the focus of the current study. Moreover, items on the Liking of School factor are not the same on the teacher and student versions, precluding meaningful comparisons between teachers and students (furthermore, the internal consistency coefficient for the Chinese elementary students was only .55).
In assessing students’ and teachers’ perceptions of conduct problems in their school, we used four items that were originally intended to comprise a school climate factor on the DSCS-S (Bear et al., 2011). Those four items were: “Fights are a problem in this school,” “Students threaten and bully others in this school,” “Stealing is a problem in this school,” “Students cheating is a problem in this school.” In examining the factor structure of the DSCS-S, Bear et al. (2011) found that those four items constituted a factor distinct from school climate. Although the items emerged as a separate factor, scores on that factor correlated very weakly with most other factors (−.02 with Teacher-Student Relations, −.02 with Fairness of Rules, −.10 with Liking of School, and −.24 with Student-Student Relations). Moreover, several items had loadings below .30 on the general factor. Together, results indicated that the Conduct Problems factor did not measure the same construct (i.e., school climate) as measured by the other factors, and thus the factor was deleted from the DSCS-S in that study. Nevertheless, in support of the conduct problem scale’s criterion-related validity, scores among elementary schools and middle/high schools (aggregated at the school level) were found to correlate .50 and .51, respectively, with suspension/expulsion rates, −.72 and −.37, respectively, with English Language Arts scores on state achievement tests, and −.68 and −.42, respectively, with math scores on the same tests. Thus, although the factor was deleted in that study, which focused specifically on school climate, it was included in the present study as a separate measure of students’ and teachers’ perceptions of conduct problems in their school.

Because the factorial integrity and reliability of the conduct problem factor had not been examined previously with students in China, and had not been examined in either country when used in combination with teacher-student relationships and student-student relationship subscales, we used CFA to confirm the structure of items on the three scales. Mplus software (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2011) was used for this purpose, including the full information maximum likelihood estimator procedure for estimating parameters with incomplete data. The following criteria were employed to determine a good fit: comparative fit index (CFI) ≥.95, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) ≤.06, and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) ≤.08. Fit statistics for the American student sample were: \( \chi^2 = 284.34 \) (df = 39), \( p < .001 \); CFI = .968, RMSEA = .037, RMR = .043. For the Chinese sample they were: \( \chi^2 = 247.37 \) (df = 51), \( p < .001 \); CFI = .974, RMSEA = .033, RMR = .028. Standardized loadings on the factors ranged from .45 to .81 for American student sample and from .56 to .75 for the Chinese student sample, with all coefficients being statistically significant (\( p < .001 \)). In the American sample, Teacher-Student Relationships correlated .62 with Student-Student Relationships and −.30 with Conduct Problems, whereas Student-Student Relationships correlated −.64 with Conduct Problems. In the Chinese sample, Teacher-Student Relationships correlated .77 with Student-Student Relationships and −.49 with Conduct Problems, whereas Student-Student Relationships correlated −.47 with Conduct Problems. In the American sample, internal consistency coefficients were .85 for Teacher-Student Relationships, .82 for Student-Student Relationships, and .66 for Conduct Problems. In the Chinese sample, they were .76, .74, and .74, respectively.

**Teachers’ perceptions of teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and conduct problems**

Teachers’ perceptions of relationships were measured using items from the student-student relationships and teacher-student relationships subscales of the Delaware School Climate Survey–Teacher surveys (DSCS-T; Bear, Yang, Gaskins, & Pell, 2014). To allow for comparisons in responses between students and teachers, we used only those items on the DSCS-T that were the same as those on the MDSCS-S (as listed earlier). In a previous study of teachers’ perceptions of school climate in the United States (Bear et al., 2014), CFA supported the integrity and reliability of the two subscales. However, because the factorial integrity and reliability of the conduct problem factor had not been examined previously with teachers in either the United States or China and the teacher-student and student-student relationships factors had not been established with Chinese teachers, CFA was conducted for the current study to test if the three factors fit the teacher survey for both Chinese and American teachers. Using the same criteria reported previously, CFA results supported an adequate fit for the three-factor model. Fit indices for American teachers were: \( \chi^2 = 119.75 \) (df = 51), \( p < .001 \); CFI = .973, RMSEA = .031, RMR = .048. For Chinese teachers the fit indices were: \( \chi^2 = 86.21 \) (df = 51), \( p < .001 \); CFI = .950, RMSEA = .044, RMR = .047. Standardized loadings on the factors ranged from .61 to .84 for the American teacher sample and from .53 to .76 for the Chinese teacher sample, with all coefficients being statistically significant (\( p < .001 \)). Internal consistency coefficients were .80 for Teacher-Student Relationships, .86 for Student-Student Relationships, and .81 for Conduct Problems in the American teacher sample, and .71, .68, and .74, respectively, in the Chinese teacher sample.

**Survey Procedures**

Teachers were given procedures to administer the survey to students, which included assuring students of confidentiality (neither names nor identification numbers were used). Likewise, to protect teachers from identification, no method

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2. A fifth item, “Drugs are a problem in this school,” also was included in the earlier study, but was not included in this study because researchers in China insisted that drugs were not a problem in Chinese schools.
was used to identify classrooms or teachers, including collection of data on race/ethnicity (this was not an issue in China, however, as all teachers were Chinese). All surveys were given between late February and late April, with the teacher and student versions administered at the same point in time in each school. The study was approved by human subjects research committees of the American and Chinese universities conducting the research.

RESULTS

A 2 (country) × 2 (respondent) × 3 (grade level) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), using Pillai’s criterion, revealed that all main effects and two-way interactions were statistically significant (all six ps < .001). Those effects were qualified by a statistically significant three-way multivariate interaction, which showed that the 12 groups were affected by variation in scores on the surveys (Pillai’s Trace = .01, F = 10.53, df [6: 12,6340], p = .001). Given the three-way interaction, a separate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was completed for each of the three dependent variables, with the family-wise error rate apportioned within each ANOVA using Tukey’s adjustment. Results of those comparisons are summarized below. Means and standard deviations for student-student relationships, student-teacher relationships, and conduct problems are presented in Table 2, and according to descending order for each variable.

Student-Student Relationships

As shown in Table 2 (first column), students and teachers in China, in general, viewed student-student relationships more favorably than students and teachers in the United States. The eta squared for the model was .30, which is a large effect size (Cohen, 1988). Across grade levels, Chinese students had significantly more favorable perceptions than American students and Chinese teachers had significantly more favorable perceptions than American teachers. The only exception was that there were no significant differences between Chinese and American teachers in elementary school—both groups held very favorable perceptions. Within the U.S. sample, and irrespective of respondent, perceptions were significantly higher in elementary than middle school and high school, and significantly lower in middle school than high school.

At each grade level, American teachers held significantly more favorable perceptions of student-student relationships than did students. The same pattern did not emerge in the Chinese sample, and differences between grade levels and respondents tended to be much smaller than in the U.S. sample. Among Chinese students, scores in elementary school were significantly higher than those in middle and high school but there were no significant differences in scores between middle and high school. Among Chinese teachers, scores in elementary school did not differ significantly from those in middle and high school but scores were significantly higher in high school than middle school.

Teacher-Student Relationships

The eta squared for the model comparing differences in teacher-student relationships was .32, which is a large effect size. As shown in the second column of Table 2, the most striking finding was that among the 12 contrasting groups, the 4 with the least favorable perceptions were middle and high school students, with the U.S. students scoring significantly lower than all other 10 groups and holding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Student-student relationships</th>
<th>Mean &amp; SD</th>
<th>Teacher-student relationships</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean &amp; SD</th>
<th>Conduct problems</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean &amp; SD</th>
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<tr>
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<td>U.S., Teacher, ES</td>
<td>3.52 (.38)</td>
<td>China, Student, ES</td>
<td>3.41 (.46)</td>
<td>U.S., Student, MS</td>
<td>2.77 (.61)</td>
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<td>3.04 (.29)</td>
<td>China, Student, ES</td>
<td>3.17 (.41)</td>
<td>U.S., Student, HS</td>
<td>2.62 (.58)</td>
<td>U.S., Teacher, MS</td>
<td>2.59 (.59)</td>
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<tr>
<td>China, Student, HS (n = 1383)</td>
<td>3.03 (.48)</td>
<td>U.S., Student, ES</td>
<td>3.35 (.58)</td>
<td>U.S., Teacher, HS</td>
<td>2.54 (.49)</td>
<td>China, Student, MS</td>
<td>2.49 (.62)</td>
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<td>U.S., Teacher, MS</td>
<td>3.29 (.44)</td>
<td>China, Student, HS</td>
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<td>U.S., Teacher, ES</td>
<td>2.41 (.82)</td>
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<tr>
<td>China, Student, MS (n = 984)</td>
<td>3.02 (.53)</td>
<td>U.S., Teacher, HS</td>
<td>3.23 (.40)</td>
<td>China, Student, ES</td>
<td>3.19 (.42)</td>
<td>China, Student, ES</td>
<td>2.35 (.57)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.20 (.37)</td>
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<td>3.19 (.42)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, HS</td>
<td>3.05 (.50)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, HS</td>
<td>1.98 (.48)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S., Student, ES (n = 770)</td>
<td>2.71 (.72)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, MS</td>
<td>3.05 (.50)</td>
<td>U.S., Teacher, ES</td>
<td>2.96 (.50)</td>
<td>U.S., Teacher, MS</td>
<td>1.89 (.61)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S., Teacher, HS (n = 221)</td>
<td>2.66 (.47)</td>
<td>China, Student, MS</td>
<td>2.65 (.66)</td>
<td>China, Student, ES</td>
<td>2.65 (.66)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, MS</td>
<td>1.85 (.67)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S., Teacher, MS (n = 162)</td>
<td>2.50 (.51)</td>
<td>China, Student, HS</td>
<td>2.59 (.56)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, ES</td>
<td>1.85 (.44)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, ES</td>
<td>1.85 (.44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S., Student, HS (n = 688)</td>
<td>2.30 (.57)</td>
<td>U.S., Student, MS</td>
<td>2.59 (.56)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, ES</td>
<td>1.85 (.44)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, ES</td>
<td>1.85 (.44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S., Student, MS (n = 734)</td>
<td>2.16 (.60)</td>
<td>U.S., Student, ES</td>
<td>2.59 (.56)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, ES</td>
<td>1.85 (.44)</td>
<td>China, Teacher, ES</td>
<td>1.85 (.44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For each variable, mean scores are listed in rank order; SD = Standard Deviation (in parentheses); ES = Elementary School, MS = Middle School, HS = High School. n is the same for each respective group across the 3 variables.
markedly unfavorable perceptions. In elementary school, students’ perceptions were quite favorable and equally so across countries, but American teachers had significantly more favorable perceptions than Chinese teachers. In middle and high school, Chinese students scored significantly higher than American students, but there were no significant differences between American and Chinese teachers—teachers in both countries held favorable perceptions.

Within countries, teachers at each grade level tended to view teacher-student relationships more favorably than did students. The one exception was in elementary school where Chinese teachers had significantly less favorable perceptions than their students. Also within countries, teachers’ perceptions differed little between grade levels. Indeed, there were no significant differences between grade levels in perceptions of Chinese teachers. Likewise, American teachers had similar, and favorable, perceptions between grade levels, with the exception of American elementary school teachers having significantly more favorable perceptions than middle school and high school teachers.

**Conduct Problems**

Means and standard deviations for conduct problems are presented in the third column of Table 2. The eta squared for the model was .17, which is a large effect size. As predicted, in middle and high school, and irrespective of respondent, greater conduct problems were reported in the United States than China. Indeed, of the 12 contrasting groups, the 4 highest scoring were American students and teachers in middle and high school. In both countries, significantly fewer conduct problems were reported in elementary than middle and high school. Nevertheless, in elementary school Chinese students reported significantly fewer conduct problems than did American students. Significant differences were not found between American and Chinese elementary teachers, however.

Within both countries, and irrespective of respondent, significantly fewer conduct problems were reported in elementary school than middle school. However, different patterns emerged within each country with respect to other grade level differences, with the differences being largely a function of respondent. That is, American students reported significantly more conduct problems in middle school than high school, but American teachers reported similar degrees of conduct problems at those two grade levels. Chinese students reported significantly more conduct problems in middle school than high school (and fewer conduct problems in elementary than middle and high school). Chinese teachers, however, reported significantly fewer conduct problems in elementary than middle school, but no fewer conduct problems in elementary school than in high school.

**DISCUSSION**

There were two primary purposes of this study. First, we examined if teacher-student and student-student relationships are viewed more favorably by Chinese than American teachers. If found, results would replicate two previous studies showing more favorable perceptions among Chinese than American students, and thus would provide further evidence that more positive relationships—a key element of school climate (Bear et al., 2011)—exist in Chinese schools. Second, we examined if Chinese students exhibit fewer conduct problems than American students, and if grade level differences are similar across countries. With respect to the first purpose of the study, we found that Chinese teachers in both middle and high school have significantly more favorable perceptions of student-student relationships than American teachers. Those findings are consistent with other studies of differences in student-student relationships reported by students at the middle and high school levels (Jia et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2013). We know of no previous studies that examined such differences as reported by teachers. The finding of more favorable student-student relationships, as reported by teachers, also was found in the student sample, and across all grade levels. However, results also indicate that whereas Chinese students and teachers in middle school and high school view student-student relationships more favorably than do American students and teachers, the same is not found in elementary school. That is, Chinese students in elementary school in China view student-student relationships more favorably than American students, but elementary teachers in China view student-student relationships similarly to American teachers (and favorably).

In contrast to differences in student-student relationships, the findings indicate that American and Chinese teachers in middle and high school differ little in perceptions of teacher-student relationships. In both countries teacher-student relationships are viewed positively, as was revealed in all scores being above 3.00 on the 4-point scale. In elementary schools, however, results indicate that American teachers have significantly more favorable perceptions than Chinese teachers (3.52 versus 3.19).

In examining perceptions of relationships within countries, we found that American teachers and students perceive both student-student and teacher-student relationships more favorably in elementary school than in middle and high school, and least favorably in middle school. The same pattern is not found in Chinese schools: In Chinese schools, differences between grade levels and between students and teachers are much smaller and not always in the same direction. For student-student relationships, the perceptions of Chinese elementary school teachers do not differ significantly from those of middle and high school teachers. Teachers’ perceptions of student-student relationships are more favorable in high school than middle school; however, this is not true for teacher-student relationships.
For teacher-student relationships, Chinese teachers’ perceptions are similar (and favorable) across grade levels. This was not found for Chinese students: We found that whereas Chinese students view teacher-student relationships more favorably in elementary school than in middle and high school, students’ perceptions of teacher-student relationships are similar in middle and high school.

Consistent with previous research (Booren et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2006), we predicted that within both countries the perceptions of teachers would be more favorable than those among students. Our results indicate that in each grade level, American teachers hold more favorable perceptions of both student-student and teacher-student relationships than their students. In China, this appears to be true only in high school and only for teacher-student relationships, and the opposite is found in elementary schools (i.e., students have more favorable perceptions). For middle school in China, teachers and students share similar perceptions of student-student and teacher-student relationships.

Regarding the second focus of the study—differences in conduct problems between the two countries—in general, a greater number of conduct problems exist in Chinese than American schools, as reported by both Chinese students and teachers. This was found consistently at the middle and high school levels. However, at the elementary school level we found that American students, but not teachers, perceive greater conduct problems than their Chinese counterparts. We also found that within both countries, students and teachers alike perceive greater conduct problems in middle school than elementary school. Students also perceive greater conduct problems in middle school than high school. However, whereas American teachers report a similar degree of conduct problems in middle school and high school (and higher than in elementary school), Chinese teachers report significantly fewer conduct problems in high school than middle school (with conduct problems in elementary and high school not differing significantly).

Despite these differences, a general pattern of students’ perceptions of increasing conduct problems from elementary school to secondary school is found in both countries, and this pattern likely mirrors a general decrease in students’ perceptions of the quality of relationships. Such a decline in the quality of relationships, and its link to conduct problems, has been reported or discussed often in the school climate literature (e.g., Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameoff, 2000; Wang & Dishion, 2012; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). For example, in a recent longitudinal study of American students in grades 6–8, Wang and Dishion (2012) found that students’ perceptions of teacher support, peer support, and behavior management decline through the middle school years, and those declines are associated with increases in students’ behavior problems. Their findings, and those of the current study, are consistent with theory and research on a similar decline in student motivation and academic expectation (Eccles et al., 1993).

In sum, results are most consistent in indicating that American teachers and students in middle school and high school have the least favorable perceptions of student-student and teacher-student relationships and the greatest conduct problems. This is true when perceptions of American teachers and students in middle school and high school are compared to their Chinese counterparts, as well as when they are compared to the perceptions of American teachers and student in elementary school. Although perceptions of teachers are more favorable than those of their students, American middle and high school teachers tend to corroborate their students’ unfavorable perceptions of student-student relationships and conduct problems. However, whereas American teachers perceive student-student relationships and conduct problems similarly to their students (although not as poorly), they view teacher-student relationships significantly more favorably than their students and view them similarly to their Chinese counterparts.

As noted previously in the introduction, and discussed below, three general cultural factors are likely to account for more favorable perceptions of relationships and fewer conduct problems among Chinese than American students: (a) Chinese students’ views of education and teachers; (b) social harmony and behavior regulation; and (c) classroom management and socialization.

How Chinese Students View Education, Teachers, and Their Parents

High academic achievement and few behavior problems in Chinese schools are often attributed to students’ internalization of cultural norms that reflect Confucian values of respect for parents and honor to family (Hui, Sun, Chow, & Chu, 2011; Jia et al., 2009; Teddlie & Liu, 2008). In Chinese culture, filial piety, which incorporates respect of parents and honor to the family, is widely viewed as the foremost traditional value that serves to regulate student behavior, as well as to promote another important Confucian value, self-perfection (Zhou et al., 2012). At home, and throughout Chinese society, it is expected that children will conform to and comply with their parents’ expectations. To do otherwise would show lack of respect and failure to honor the family as well as lack of self-perfection. Chinese parents emphasize that compliance and obedience are important in learning self-discipline and achieving self-perfection, but also are necessary for a positive parent-child relationship (Yau, Smetana, & Metzger, 2009). As Tseng Tzu, a famous Chinese ancient philosopher, said: “I question myself three times a day to check my behavior.” This traditional idea encourages Chinese people to regulate their daily behavior.

As is true in American society, over the past century there have been marked changes in Chinese society. However, many traditional norms and values have changed little, and indeed increased emphasis on academic
excellence in Chinese culture has been seen in recent years
in light of China’s one-child policy and increased
recognition that economic prosperity depends on a highly
educated population (Gao, 2008). As reflected in a Chinese
proverb, “The worth of other pursuits is small, the study of
books excels them all,” it is expected that Chinese students
will pursue academic excellence.

The concept of filial piety applies not only to parents and
the home but also to teachers and the school (Hui et al.,
2011). This is reflected in the old Chinese idiom “once my
teacher, forever my parents.” Students are expected to
demonstrate the same respect toward teachers as they do
toward their parents, which includes showing compliance
and obedience. In turn, assuming the role of parents,
teachers are expected to provide their students with the
caring, support, and structure needed to promote learning,
development, and self-perfection (Jia et al., 2009; Ning,
Lam, & Chan, 2012). Teachers assume responsibilities of
parents, as seen in teachers often being described as
“silkworms” who tirelessly spin silk thread till death,
“candles” who selflessly burn themselves to light others,
and “soul engineers” who carefully cultivate the mental as well
as physical well-being of students (Gao, 2008). In viewing
teachers as similar to parents, and as fulfilling similar roles
in promoting important Chinese values in society,
traditionally teachers have been highly respected not only
among students in the classroom but throughout Chinese
society (Gao, 2008). In 1985 the Chinese government chose
September 10 as “Teachers’ Day” to demonstrate the
importance of teachers, and since then that day has been
celebrated throughout China every year. There are signs,
however, that such reverence of teachers may be declining
as one-child only Chinese parents become more inclined to
demand even more effective schools and to thus question
the educational system (Gao, 2008).

Related to respect of teachers, gratitude, which is a
characteristic of collectivist cultures, is likely to play a role
in teacher-student relationships. That is, Chinese students
also are more likely than students in less collectivistic
cultures to express greater gratitude, or indebtedness and
obligation to reciprocate with others (Cohen, 2006). A Chinese proverb states that “a drop of water shall be
returned with a burst of spring.” When Chinese teachers
demonstrate commitment and excellence in teaching,
students are expected to reciprocate with excellence in
achievement and behavior. Several recent studies have
shown that high gratitude among Chinese students is related
positively to academic achievement and negatively to
internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Dai,
Zhang, Li, Yu, & Wen, 2010; Li, Zhang, Li, Li, & Ye, 2012). No studies, however, have examined differences in
gratitude between Chinese and American students.

Greater respect of and gratitude toward teachers in
Chinese culture, especially when combined with an
emphasis on academic excellence, is likely to lead to
students’ greater bonding with teachers and with school in
general. As noted previously, ample research has shown a
strong relation between school connectedness, or bonding,
and student behavior. Our findings suggest that in both
China and the United States these effects are apparent in
elementary school, but thereafter they are found more in
Chinese than American schools. That is, whereas highly
favorable teacher-student relationships and few conduct
problems exist in elementary school in both countries,
marked differences between countries on both variables are
found in middle school and high school. In a more direct test
of the relationship between these two variables, Jang (2002)
compared non-Asian American students and Chinese
American students. He found that Chinese American
students felt more bonded, or attached, with their schools.
Commitment to education and respect of teachers accounted
the greatest for less deviant school behavior among Chinese
American students.

Social Harmony and How Chinese Students View
and Regulate Their Own Behavior and That
of the Peer Group

In addition to filial piety and self-perfection, social harmony
is highly valued in traditional and contemporary Chinese
culture (Chen & French, 2008; Chen, Huang, Chang, Wang,
& Li, 2010). These three values are highly interrelated.
Respect of adults and self-perfection, which are reflected in
students striving for academic excellence and in self-
regulation of behavior, will promote social harmony, but so
too does social harmony foster respect of teachers and self-
perception. This is supported by research showing fewer
behavior problems and greater academic achievement in
classrooms with positive teacher-student relationships
(Hughes, 2013; Sabol & Pianta, 2012) and in research
showing that students are inclined to internalize the values
of teachers that they highly respect (Wentzel, 1997, 2006;
Zhou et al., 2012).

In recognizing social harmony as a cultural value that
greatly influences teacher-student relationships, Jia and
colleagues (2009) noted that Chinese teachers and students
spend more time together than American teachers and
students, which they argued promotes greater connected-
ness. Chinese students often have the same teacher for more
than one year. Referred to as “looping,” this practice has
been shown to enhance relationships and academic
achievement (Rodriguez & Arenz, 2007). Other practices
in Chinese schools that likely enhance relationships and
school connectedness, or at least provide greater opportu-
nities for such, are longer school days, after-school tutoring,
and greater time students spend studying together (Tian,
Liu, Huang, & Huebner, 2012; Jester et al., 2003). Instead of
students changing classes in middle school and high school,
teachers typically change classes, which keeps cohorts more
intact, as well as reduces classroom transitions—a context

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in which behavior problems often occur (Zumbrunn, Doll, Dooley, LeClair, & Wimmer, 2013).

For sake of social harmony, as well as out of respect of their teachers, Chinese students are expected to regulate not only their own behavior, but also that of their peers (Chen & French, 2008; Espelage, Holt, & VanAcker, 2003). Peer norms against aggression, which research has shown to be critical in preventing bullying and aggression (Dishion, Pehlker, & Myers, 2008; Espelage, Holt, & VanAcker, 2003), are common in Chinese schools (Chen, Kaspar, Zhang, Wang, & Zheng, 2004). Students who disrupt learning, harm others, or otherwise compromise social harmony in the classroom or school are likely to experience negative, and public, evaluations from peers and teachers, as well as peer rejection (Chang, 2004; Chen et al., 2010). Research indicates that this occurs much more often in Chinese than American schools (Chen, 2010). In addition to preventing behavior problems, the norm of social harmony promotes academic motivation and achievement, positive attitudes toward school, and prosocial behavior (Chuang-Hall & Chen, 2010; Ran, 2001). Findings of the current study suggest that the norm of social harmony may serve to help prevent conduct problems throughout the school years, stifling (albeit not eliminating) the tendency for conduct problems to increase greatly during adolescence.

How Teachers Manage Their Classrooms and Student Behavior, and Otherwise Promote the Socialization of Traditional Chinese Cultural Values

Social support and structure, referred to as responsiveness and demandingness in the parenting literature, are two critical dimensions of effective classroom management and school discipline (Gregory et al., 2010), school climate (Bear et al., 2011), and parenting (Baumrind, 2013). Social support is seen in close teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships, whereas structure is seen primarily in adults using teacher-centered practices that curtail misbehavior and promote academic engagement and prosocial behavior. Research indicates that Chinese teachers are high on both of these dimensions. As suggested in the present findings, and discussed earlier, Chinese teachers build and maintain positive relationships to help prevent behavior problems. Other studies have shown Chinese teachers to be more highly structured and efficient than American teachers, relying more upon whole-group instruction than small-group or individualized instruction and making greater use of proactive, rather than reactive, corrective techniques (Lan et al., 2009; Teddlie & Liu, 2008). Also related to increased structure, Chinese teachers are expected to directly teach and promote Chinese values via a national moral education curriculum designed not only to promote those values, but also to prevent behavior problems and enhance student motivation (Camicia & Zhu, 2011; Li, Taylor, & Yang, 2004). Finally, as discussed above, teachers expect students themselves to play an active role in managing their behavior and that of their peers. This extends to care of their physical environment, as seen in Chinese students commonly assuming responsibilities that are assigned to adult custodians and cafeteria workers in American schools, such as cleaning classrooms and serving meals. Whether or not the above cultural differences are found more so in middle school and high school than in elementary school, and largely account for grade-level differences found in the current study, remains to be determined.

Limitations

Limitations of this study should be noted. Firstly, data were from schools in only one state in the United States and one city in China; thus, generalization of findings to other schools is limited. Secondly, although both student and teacher informants were included (and we know of no other studies of school climate that have done the same), data were based on self-reports. There are limitations to self-reports, and primary among them is informant bias, particularly social desirability bias. It is unknown if social desirability bias is more prevalent among Chinese than American students, which might be expected in light of Chinese culture being more collectivistic (and thus students and teachers desiring to shed a favorable light on their school) and its greater respect and deference to authority (and thus students responding as they expect their teacher would desire, and teachers responding as administrators would desire). However, the fact that Chinese elementary school Chinese teachers reported less favorable perceptions (although still highly favorable) than American teachers runs counter to this possible limitation. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical objective evidence to counter the general finding that teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships are more favorable and conduct problems less prevalent in China than in the United States. Clearly, direct observational data are needed in this area.

Thirdly, each measure consisted of a small number of items, which restricts reliability and the extent to which teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and conduct problems are measured sufficiently. Relatedly, items on those three scales were originally developed and standardized on American students and based on American research and theory in the respective areas measured. As such, the measures may not have included aspects of relationships and types of conduct problems more specific to the Chinese culture. As discussed by Yang et al. (2013), however, this limitation is not unique to the measures in the current study, as the use of American instruments is common in studies of school climate and student behavior in China whether conducted by Western or Chinese researchers.

Fourthly, the study did not entail multilevel analyses of data, but only analyses at the individual level and not the
classroom and school levels. Obtaining classroom-level data is problematic in middle and high schools, where students change classes and teachers (especially in the United States). Moreover, greater issues of confidentiality arise in collecting classroom-level data (e.g., identifying teachers); although this can be avoided, participation rates often suffer. School-level effects were not included in the analyses given that there were only five schools at each grade level in each country. Nevertheless, it is important to note that effects of teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and conduct problems occur not only at the individual level but also at the classroom and school levels, although the individual-level effects are consistently found to be the greatest (Bierman et al., 2007; Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008).

A final limitation, which is related to the preceding limitation, is that we did not examine different cultures between schools in the same country or within classrooms. This is perhaps more relevant to American schools than Chinese schools, given the greater racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in American schools, including those in the current study. Research shows significant differences in school climate, including behavior problems, as a function of the racial and ethnic composition and average socioeconomic status of a school and its community (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005). Thus, caution is warranted in generalizing the findings to other American schools, and in concluding that results reflect a singular and pervasive American culture.

CONCLUSION

As found in several previous studies of differences in students’ perceptions of teacher-student and student-student relationships between China and the United States, results demonstrate that similar differences are reported by teachers. In general, students and teachers, but especially students, perceive relationships to be more favorable in Chinese schools than in American schools. They also report fewer conduct problems. Differences are greatest after elementary school. Thus, it is increasingly clear, based on multiple informants and measures, that middle and high schools in China are more pleasant and conducive to learning than those in the United States, at least as perceived by students and teachers. It remains to be determined whether or not differences in students’ and teachers’ perceptions are supported by actual observed differences in behavior, such as the frequency of positive interactions and preventive and corrective classroom management techniques, and especially in middle and high school. Nevertheless, multiple cultural differences, as discussed in this article, likely account for the differences in school climate between Chinese and American schools.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. George Bear is a professor of school psychology at the University of Delaware. His research interests are in school climate and discipline.

Chunyan Yang is a doctoral student of school psychology at the University of Delaware, with research interest in school climate.

Dr. Joseph Glutting is a professor of school psychology at the University of Delaware, with research interests in applied psychometric theory and multivariate statistics.

Dr. Xishan Huang is an assistant professor in the School of Psychology at South China Normal University, with research interest in adolescent development and school psychology.

Dr. Xianyou He is a professor in the School of Psychology at South China Normal University. His research interests concern factors that contribute to the students’ learning and development.

Dr. Wei Zhang is a professor and director of the School of Psychology at South China Normal University, with research interest in adolescent development and school psychology.

Dandan Chen is a doctoral student of school psychology at the University of Delaware, with a research interest in school climate.

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