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Conceptions of adulthood among migrant women workers in China

Juan Zhong,¹ and Jeffrey J. Arnett¹

Abstract

The experiences of emerging adulthood may vary in different historical and cultural contexts. Little research has been dedicated to how non college students view adulthood in developing countries. Currently, millions of young people are migrating from rural villages to industrial cities in China. The purpose of this study was to investigate conceptions of adulthood among Chinese migrant women workers, using mixed methods. One hundred and nineteen women workers (aged 18–29 years) from a factory in Guangdong, China, completed a questionnaire of markers for adulthood. Then, 15 of them were interviewed regarding their understanding of the transition to adulthood. The results showed that the majority of the young Chinese migrant women workers believed they had reached adulthood in some ways but not others. Married women and women with children were more likely to perceive themselves as adults, even controlling for age. *Learn to care for parents, settled into a long-term career and become capable of caring for children* were ranked as the most important markers for adulthood. Participants were least likely to feel adult when they were with their parents. The migrant women workers' conceptions of adulthood reflected the traditional Chinese emphasis on family obligations, social relations and role transitions.

Keywords

Chinese women workers, conceptions of adulthood, emerging adulthood

The question of what makes a person an adult has been pondered in Chinese society for many centuries. Confucius commented over 2,500 years ago that from the late teens through the twenties, one can pursue various explorations and make himself prepared for an adult life to come, but at the age of 30, a man should build a family and start a career (Confucius, 500 B.C./2005). Going back at least as far as the time of Confucius, getting married and having a job have been important signifiers of adulthood in traditional Chinese culture.

Over the past 30 years, there has been dramatic social change and economic development all over China. During the process of industrialization, many foreign businesses have poured into the Chinese market. A lot of manufacturing plants were built up along the east coast cities. Millions of young men and women left their rural villages and came to work in the factories of urban areas, which resulted in the largest migration in human history (Chang, 2008).

Arnett (2011) proposed that conceptions of adulthood are likely to vary across historical and cultural contexts. However, researchers have paid less attention to the experiences of emerging adults in developing countries. In particular, there has been little research on how non-college-attending young people in the developing world view adulthood. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate the underrepresented, large demographic of migrant women workers of China and their conceptions of adulthood. Our effort to explore cultural differences will provide insights into how non-students from rural backgrounds view adulthood, as well as help understand the way cultural values such as interdependence affect conceptions of adulthood.

Because the factories are sex-divided, only women workers were included in this study. Questionnaires were used to examine the conceptions of adulthood. Interviews were also conducted to offer illustrations on what the adulthood markers mean for migrant women workers in their personal lives. Our main research questions were:

1. To what extent do young Chinese migrant women workers consider themselves to have reached adulthood?
2. What are the conceptions of adulthood held by young Chinese migrant women workers, that is, what criteria are most important?
3. What is the relationship between marital status (or parental status) and conceptions of adulthood?

Conceptions of adulthood

Arnett (2000) proposed a theory of emerging adulthood that describes a distinct developmental period from the late teens through the twenties, when young people in industrialized countries explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work and worldviews before making enduring choices. Emerging adults are no longer adolescents, but have not yet taken on the complete range of adult roles. Based on his research on diverse American samples, Arnett (2004) proposed five features of emerging adulthood: the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities.

In the past and in many traditional cultures, the transition to adulthood was marked by marriage (Schlegel & Barry, 1991) or specific life events, such as getting a job or reaching a certain age. Havighurst (1972) suggested that there are different developmental

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tasks that people face across the life span. For example, the particular tasks that an individual should achieve when entering adulthood are: selecting a mate, learning to live with a partner, starting a family, rearing children, managing a home, selecting an occupation, and assuming civic responsibility.

Today, in American society, what it means to be an adult has become more ambiguous. Based on research conducted in the United States, Arnett (1994, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001) identified three major markers for the transition to adulthood. They were all individualistic character qualities: accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. He found no gender differences regarding conceptions of adulthood. In the following, we will compare the findings from Eastern cultures with the ones from Western cultures to examine how the values of interdependence and independence have an impact on young people's understanding of adulthood.

Since Arnett's early studies, a variety of studies have explored conceptions of adulthood among Americans of different social classes and ethnicities (Arnett, 2003, 2004; Fuligni, 2007). It was found that, for Asian American emerging adults, the most important marker for the transition to adulthood was to accept responsibility for one's self and making independent decisions, as in previous studies of mostly White samples (Arnett, 2003). However, family capacities (such as being able to support and protect a family) and role transitions (such as finishing education) were also ranked high as criteria for adulthood by Asian Americans. Support for family capacities criteria may reflect Asian values of interdependence.

There has also been research on conceptions of adulthood around the world, including Canada (Cheah & Nelson, 2004), Argentina (Facio & Micocci, 2003), Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003), Romania (Nelson, 2009), the Czech Republic (Macek, Bejček, & Vaničková, 2007), and Austria (Sirsch, Dreher, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009). Across countries, the three criteria of accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent, have ranked high as the preeminent markers of adulthood. A recent study on Indian college students and nonstudents showed that, besides accepting responsibility for one's self and having control of one's emotions, being able to take care of a family was also deemed necessary for adulthood, which is indicative of Eastern culture's emphasis on family obligations (Seiter & Nelson, 2011).

Chinese migrant women workers' conception of adulthood

All of the studies of conceptions of adulthood conducted thus far have taken place on emerging adults in developed countries or in urban areas of developing countries (Arnett, 2011).

A study of Chinese college students showed that the three top criteria for adulthood in developed countries are applicable to educated urban young people in China as well (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). Family capacities also ranked high (such as being capable of supporting a family financially) in this sample. Duan (2008) conducted another study on Chinese college students and replicated these findings, with accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent endorsed as the most important criteria for adulthood. But unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese students also believed that being able to "pay back parents financially," "have a happy family," and "develop greater consideration for others" were crucial

for adulthood. Even though there are similarities among college students from different countries, these answers were unique to Chinese culture. Under the strong influence of Confucianism, the values of family obligation and collectivism are rooted in the mind of Chinese young people.

Until now, the only study that has focused on nonstudents in a developing country investigated the conceptions of adulthood among non-college-attending people in India (Seiter & Nelson, 2011). However, the question of what the transition to adulthood is like for young people from rural areas of China remains largely unanswered. Due to the imbalanced development of the Chinese economy, there is an enormous economic difference between rural and urban regions. Over half (57%) of China's population still lives in the countryside and fewer than 20% of young people in China are able to enter college after high school (Nelson & Chen, 2007).

Since the "opening-up" policy in the 1980s, China has been undergoing a massive reform, shifting from a socialist planned economy to a market economy. For 30 years, there have been millions of migrant workers who have come to seek a job in the cities. It is reported that as of 2009, among 145 million migrant workers in China's cities, 58% of which (85 million) were born after 1980, who are called "new generation migrant workers" (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). Compared to the old generation, the new generation is better educated, with an average length of education 9.8 years, and 44% of them work in the manufacturing industries. Because of their young age, 70% of the new generation migrant workers are unmarried.

Among the migrant workers, the portion of women has increased from 27% in the old generation to 41% in the new generation (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). Young migrant women workers usually stay in the city for about 5 years on average and go back to their villages either to get married or to put their children into schools in their hometown (Jacka, 2005). This may lend them an extended period of time between adolescence and taking on adult roles like marriage and parenthood, which may result in a feeling of being in-between adolescence and adulthood.

In Chinese society, family is highly valued. All are expected to fulfill the duties and obligations associated with their roles in the family, such as filial piety (Fei, 1998). For the parent-child relationship, the parents should bring affection, tenderness and love to their child, while the child shows filial piety to the parents by taking care of them when they get old (Ho, 1994). Thus, it was hypothesized that migrant women workers' conceptions of adulthood would be more family-oriented than those of their Western counterparts because they value family capacities, especially the capability of caring for parents and children.

While their peer college students are studying on campus, migrant workers already start working in the factories. The division of the labor market is different for men and women in the city, in that the population of male migrant workers is more spread out geographically, because they move with the construction sites and transportation lines. In contrast, women migrant workers mostly go to the export manufacturing factories, where they are called "Da gong mei" (working girls) in the Pearl River Delta (Pun, 2005). Women migrant workers are found in the labor intensive jobs, because employers for these jobs prefer young women who are able to work deftly and have the least skills (Tan, 2004). For them, "da gong" is only a temporary job. As they approach their late twenties, they have to leave the assembly line and look for a more stable job. Therefore, it was hypothesized that "settled into a long term

career” would also be viewed as an important criterion for the transition to adulthood by migrant women workers.

From his interviews, Arnett (2004) noted that adulthood status varies in different contexts. Young people feel adult differently depending on whether they are with families (that is, parents and siblings), friends, romantic partners, fellow students or instructors. Within the Chinese family, there is a strict hierarchy between parents and children. At home, a good child must first learn to be dutiful and respectful to his/her parents. According to the Confucian teachings, when parents ask the child to do something, he/she should do it quickly; when they talk to the child, he/she should listen carefully (Li, 2010). Therefore, it was expected that migrant women workers would be least likely to feel adult when they are with their parents, and more likely to feel adult in front of other people.

In addition to cross-cultural variations, there may be also individual differences, such as marital status and parenthood status that affect conceptions of adulthood. Past research showed that family obligations play a central role in Chinese college students' understanding of adulthood (Nelson & Chen, 2007). Therefore, it was anticipated that actually taking on adult responsibility of marriage and parenthood might make the migrant women workers more likely to feel adult than those who are single.

In sum, the following hypotheses were investigated:

1. Because they have left their family homes, but their period of working in the factory is likely to be temporary, the majority of young migrant women workers were expected to feel in-between adolescence and adulthood.
2. Due to the traditional Chinese emphasis on family obligations, family capacities, especially the capability of caring for parents and children, would be ranked as top criteria for adulthood by migrant women workers.
3. Because many young women workers seek a more stable long-term job by their late twenties, “settled into a long-term career” would be viewed as an important criterion for the transition to adulthood by migrant women workers.
4. Due to the emphasis on family hierarchy in Chinese tradition, it was expected that migrant women workers would be less likely to feel adult with their parents than in other social contexts.
5. Also, because of the importance of family obligations as a Chinese value, women workers who had entered marriage or parenthood would be more likely to feel adult, and hold a communal view regarding adulthood than those who had not.

Method

Participants

The present study was conducted in the Pearl River Delta in the southeast region of China. After the 1980s, the Pearl River Delta, which used to be an area of small fishing villages, suddenly rose in economic power and influence (Yan, Lin, Pu, & Zhou, 2007). By the 2000s, the Pearl River Delta witnessed the fastest-growing export economy in Asia. Today, the largest number of migrant women workers in Chinese history, and even in human history, is living and working in the Pearl River Delta (Chang, 2008).

One hundred and nineteen women workers (aged 18–29 years) were recruited from a factory in Guangdong Province, People's

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants ($N = 119$).

Characteristic	Percentage
Marital status	
Not married	59
Married	41
Number of children	
0	65
1 or more	35
Highest level of education completed	
Elementary school	2
Junior high school	76
High school or vocational school	16
College degree or more	6
Hours employed per week	
Less than 40	13
40 or more	87
Current living arrangement	
Live with parents or spouse's parents	13
Live with friends or roommates	45
Live with husband or boyfriend	31
Live alone	11
Father's education	
Elementary school	14
Junior high school	67
High school or vocational school	16
College degree or more	3
Mother's education	
Elementary school	33
Junior high school	56
High school or vocational school	11

Republic of China, where most foreign-capital factories locate. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. The average age of the participants was 23.3 ($SD = 3.48$), 59% of them were unmarried, and 65% did not have children. The participants came from families with limited education, with the majority of their parents having a degree of junior high school as their highest level of educational attainment. For most of the participants, their highest level of educational attainment was also junior high school. Currently, most worked for over 40 hours per week and lived with co-workers in the dormitories of the factory.

Measures

Mixed methods is a research design that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the data collection, analysis and integration within a study to understand a research problem (Creswell, 2012). Given the complexity of social phenomena, mixed methods research allows investigators to examine a problem from different but complementary perspectives, so that they can obtain a multi-level and contextual understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). There are variations on mixed method designs. In this study, explanatory design was implemented, in which qualitative findings were used to help interpret and contextualize quantitative results.

The data collection consisted of two parts, both of which were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. First, all participants completed a questionnaire. Demographic information was collected at the beginning of the questionnaire.

To identify their self-perceptions of their adulthood status, participants were asked "Do you feel like you have reached adulthood?" Response options were "yes," "no" and "in some ways yes, in some ways no." Then, all the participants filled out a 23-item questionnaire, which has been used in many studies examining emerging adults' conceptions of the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2001, 2003; Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006). Participants indicated whether each item is necessary for a person to reach adulthood based on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). The questionnaire was translated and back-translated by the first author, who is fluent in both Chinese and English.

In order to better adapt to the cultural context, several modifications were made on the questionnaire. Items about smoking, drinking and driving were dropped, because in China, there is no legal regulation on the minimum ages of smoking or drinking. Automobiles are still a luxury, and none of the participants was able to afford one. Another item, "learn to care for parents," was added to capture the traditional emphasis on filial piety in Chinese society.

The items covered five major domains of markers for adulthood: biological/age-related transitions, role transitions, family capacities, individualism, and relational maturity. The scale has been used on emerging adults in China (Badger et al., 2006; Duan, 2008) and other countries (e.g., Arnett, 2003; Mayseless & Scharf, 2003; Nelson, 2009). Cronbach's alpha for the scale in this study was 0.77. The biological/age-related transitions subscale consisted of 2 items ($\alpha = .67$), the role transitions subscale consisted of 3 items ($\alpha = .56$), the family capacities subscale consisted of 10 items ($\alpha = .73$), the individualism subscale consisted of 5 items ($\alpha = .56$) and the relational maturity subscale consisted of 3 items ($\alpha = .61$).

To examine their personal perceptions of adult markers, participants were also asked to name the three most important criteria for a person to be considered as an adult. They could answer this question either by choosing from the items listed on the questionnaire or by writing down their own response.

As adulthood status may vary in different contexts, participants responded to the question of how adult they feel when with different people, including father, mother, siblings, friends, husband or boyfriend, boss, and co-workers.

In the second part of the data collection, 15 women workers, randomly chosen, were scheduled at a later date for an individual interview, in order to obtain personal views of the transition to adulthood. Two of the questions were asked to tap into their conceptions of adulthood. One was "Do you feel like you have reached adulthood? Why or why not?" which aimed to find out how the women workers viewed their transition to adulthood, and how they applied the markers of adulthood to their own life. The other question was about their more general conceptions of the transition to adulthood: "What do you think are the most important markers of adulthood?" Compared with the brief choice on the questionnaire, this question in the interview allowed the participants to describe their understanding of transition to adulthood in more detail and further explain which markers they thought were important for being an adult and why.

Qualitative data analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was performed by the first author on the verbatim transcripts of the interviews (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The recurring themes and the linkages among the

themes were extracted inductively from the data through an iterative coding process. The first author read through all the transcripts and identified the themes regarding their conceptions of adulthood. Then the transcripts were coded according to the coding scheme. The second author independently coded the transcripts using the same coding scheme. The Kappa was .93. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Results

Quantitative results

Self-perceived adulthood status. In order to determine the migrant women workers' views of their adulthood status, the participants were asked the question "Do you feel like you have reached adulthood?" Results showed that 44% of the migrant women workers responded "yes," 4% responded "no," and 52% of them replied "In some ways yes, in some ways no." Thus, half of the migrant women workers viewed themselves as adults in some ways, but not in others, which indicated the ambiguity of their adult status.

Endorsed markers for adulthood. In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to indicate the importance of each marker in determining whether or not a person has reached adulthood (Table 2). The five markers that were most often rated as important were: (1) "Learn to care for parents" (2) "If a man, become capable of supporting a family financially" (3) "Settled into a long-term career" (4) "If a woman, become capable of caring for children" (5) If a man, become capable of keeping family physically safe. The three markers that were ranked as least important include: (1) "If a man, become capable of running a household" (2) "Financially independent from parents" (3) "If a woman, become capable of keeping family physically safe."

A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was applied to examine the importance of each set of markers, using the five conceptual categories, which are biological/age-related transitions, role transitions, family capacities, individualism and relational maturity. The results revealed that the observed F value was statistically significant, $F(4, 408) = 20.71, p < .001$. Bonferroni pairwise comparison tests ($p < .001$) suggested that relational maturity ($M = 3.43, SD = .44$), role transitions ($M = 3.39, SD = .51$) and family capacities ($M = 3.34, SD = .32$) were rated more important than individualism ($M = 3.11, SD = .45$) and biological/age-related transitions ($M = 2.98, SD = .60$). No significant differences were found among relational maturity, role transitions and family capacities. There was no significant difference between individualism and biological/age-related transitions.

In the open-ended question, the participants were asked to name three markers they viewed as most important for adulthood status. "Settled into a long-term career" was nominated by 61% of the participants as the most important marker for adulthood, followed by 42% "Have a sense of responsibility for others" and 32% "Learn to care for parents." Other responses that the participants wrote down were: Have a happy family and stay healthy and safe (13%), have a sense of responsibility for the society and be considerate for others (9%), show filial piety to the parents and respect the aged (9%), and raise up children and care for the young (7%).

Adulthood status in different contexts. To investigate further their perceptions of their adulthood status, the participants were asked to report how adult they feel when with different people (Table 3). A

Table 2. Means of how important each marker is for adulthood and percentages of participants viewing a marker as very important ($N = 119$).

Markers of adulthood	Mean	Percentage
Biological/age-related transitions		
Reached age 18	2.87	17
Reached age 20	3.09	24
Role transitions		
Married	3.09	34
Have at least one child	3.31	45
Settled into a long-term career	3.74	74
Family capacities		
If a man, become capable of keeping family physically safe	3.61	66
If a woman, become capable of keeping family physically safe	2.84	14
If a man, become capable of caring for children	2.91	24
If a woman, become capable of caring for children	3.71	72
If a man, become capable of running a household	2.56	10
If a woman, become capable of running a household	3.52	57
If a man, become capable of supporting a family financially	3.75	75
If a woman, become capable of supporting a family financially	2.97	15
Learn to care for parents	3.87	88
Capable of supporting parents financially	3.50	53
Individualism		
Financially independent from parents	2.67	23
Not deeply tied to parents emotionally	3.08	33
Make independent decisions	3.01	29
Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions	3.49	54
Establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult	3.14	30
Relational maturity		
Have a sense of responsibility for others	3.59	61
Learn always to have good control of your emotions	3.26	40
Become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others	3.33	42

Note. The means are based on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). The percentages indicate those who rated the item as "very important."

series of 2 (different people, e.g. Father and mother) \times 4 (different adulthood statuses) Chi-square tests were conducted to compare the adulthood status the participants felt when they were with different people. The results showed that the participants were least likely to feel adult when they were with their parents (especially mother), and more likely to feel adult in front of other people, such as siblings, friends, romantic partner, boss and co-workers (Table 4).

The relationship between marital status (or parental status) and conceptions of adulthood. Because the study aimed at investigating the relationship between marital status (or parenthood status), age and self-perceived adulthood status, the 4% of individuals who responded "no" was not included in the next analyses. Based on the two levels of the criterion variable, self-perceived adulthood status (coded 0 = yes, 1 = in some ways yes, in some ways no), logistic regressions were carried out to test the relationship between marital status (or parenthood status), age, and self-perceived adulthood status.

Table 3. How adult they feel when they are with different people.

The person they are with	Adulthood status (%)			
	Hard to tell	Not at all adult	Partly adult	Fully adult
Father	14	17	37	32
Mother	12	23	33	32
Brother or sister (including cousins)	20	7	44	29
Friends	13	7	44	36
Husband or boyfriend	25	6	43	26
Boss	16	7	31	46
Co-workers	16	3	44	37

The predictor variables in the first logistic regression were (a) marital status (coded 0 = married, 1 = single) and (b) age. The results indicated that the two-predictor model provided a statistically significant improvement over the constant-only model, $\chi^2(2, N = 111) = 12.39, p < .01$. According to the model, the likelihood that a participant will view herself as an adult was positively related to her marital status ($p < .05$; Table 5). This suggested that, regardless of age, married women were 3.08 times more likely to view themselves as adults than single women.

The predictor variables in the second logistic regression were (a) parenthood status (coded 0 = 1 or more, 1 = none), and (b) age. The result showed that the two-predictor model provided a statistically significant improvement over the constant-only model, $\chi^2(2, N = 109) = 13.05, p < .01$. The likelihood that a participant will view herself as an adult was positively related to her parenthood status ($p < .05$; Table 6). From the model, it can be inferred that regardless of age, women with children were 3.39 times more likely to view themselves as adults than women without children.

A series of ANCOVAs were conducted with marital status (or parental status) as the independent variables, age as the covariate, and endorsed markers for adulthood or adulthood status in different contexts as the dependent variables. No significant results were found. Single and married women (or women with children and women without children) did not differ significantly on endorsed markers for adulthood and on adult status in different contexts.

Qualitative results

A thematic analysis was used on the transcripts of the interviews. It was found that the participants' views about adulthood could be classified into four major domains: family capacities, relational maturity, role transitions and individualism. In the following sections, each domain of markers for adulthood will be elaborated with the illustrations from the interviews.

"Take care of the whole family" – Family capacities are essential to adulthood. On the questionnaire, "learn to care for parents" was the criterion for adulthood most commonly-endorsed in the sample, and three of the other five most-endorsed criteria for adulthood also pertained to family capacities. The theme of family obligations and capacities was strong in the interviews as well. A set of responsibilities that were associated with marriage would make one feel adult. A 23-year-old woman, who was married and had a 1-year-old son, observed:

Table 4. Comparisons of adulthood status with different people ($df = 3$).

	Father	Mother	Brother or sister (including cousins)	Friends	Romantic partner (boyfriend)	Boss	Co-workers
Father	—						
Mother	1.47	—					
Brother or sister (including cousins)	7.13	14.37**	—				
Friends	6.15	12.51**	2.42	—			
Husband or boyfriend	10.47*	18.27***	.80	5.79	—		
Boss	8.64*	13.62**	7.16	4.03	10.31*	—	
Co-workers	13.78**	21.96***	3.88	2.54	5.97	5.82	—

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

Table 5. Logistic regression predicting self-perceived adulthood status using marital status and age as independent variables.

Predictor	B	Wald	Significance	Exp(B)	95.0% CI for Exp(B)	
					Lower	Upper
Marital status	1.13	4.44	.04	3.08	1.08	8.79
Age	-.05	.47	.49	.95	.81	1.10
Constant	-.36	.02	.89	.70		

Table 6. Logistic regression predicting self-perceived adulthood status using parenthood status and age as independent variables.

Predictor	B	Wald	Significance	Exp(B)	95.0% CI for Exp(B)	
					Lower	Upper
Parenthood status	1.22	5.24	.02	3.39	1.19	9.66
Age	-.06	.54	.46	.95	.82	1.10
Constant	-.59	.06	.81	.56		

I am married now, I should have a sense of responsibility toward family; I am also a mother, I should take care of my child. My parents-in-law are taking care of him, and we must send a few thousand yuan to them every year. Right now, he is only 1 year old. When it's time for him to go to school, I will go back home and take care of him myself. After all, my parents-in-law, who are not well educated, only care about if he is full [well-fed] or warm. They don't know how to teach him, so it's better for me to take care of him.

When the term “family” was used, its boundary extended beyond the core family. For those who have already married, family did not only refer to the husband and the child, but also included their parents and parents-in-law. A 27-year-old woman commented,

As an adult, it's most important to maintain a family, look after the child, and look after the parents. . . . Financially, I support my parents-in-law more than my own parents. I would like to support my own parents, but I can't afford to do so. My parents' health is not in a good condition, so I will send some money home for them to see a doctor.

Another 24-year-old woman stated a similar view:

Compared to the past, I feel like I am an adult now. I knew nothing before marriage. I felt no responsibility for the family. Now, I am married, I have to take care of both my parents and child. . . . Because living conditions have improved a lot, I try hard to make money so that I could bring the parents-in-law into the city. When it comes to my own parents, they had a really difficult life in the past. Nowadays, life is much better. So I would like to bring them here as well and give them a better life. I don't want them to always worry about me.

These women workers have built their nuclear family, but they were not separated from their parents (including parents-in-law). Their parents were helping with the grandchildren. At the same time, the women workers became the caretaker for their parents by providing them with financial support. When talking about family, they often described themselves as “have aging parents and

young children.” By paying back, the women workers were able to keep a close emotional bond with their parents. For them, “the most important thing for an adult is to respect the parents and take care of them.” A 23-year-old woman said: “I will try to support my parents financially as best as I can. But I will definitely look after them in their daily lives.” For those who were unmarried, family meant their biological parents and siblings. An 18-year-old woman said she would send money back home and share the load of her parents. A 20-year-old woman defined her adulthood status by saying, “I think I am an adult, because I can take care of my siblings now. I can even take care of others.”

“Be considerate for others”—*Relational maturity means not childish.* The women workers reported that in some respects they had grown up, but sometimes they still felt they were not mature enough. Several said that having a bad temper made them look childish and feel like they had not reached adulthood yet. A 23-year-old woman explained:

When it comes to doing things, I am OK. But I am a little bit childish in terms of character, because I lose my temper easily. If I don't enjoy what I am doing at work, I can not help but lose my temper.

“Character” was a term they often used to judge whether they had become an adult or not. “Childish” was something that implied immaturity, and must be overcome eventually. For the women workers, becoming an adult was regarded as a gradual process, which required constant effort to get rid of immature qualities and develop positive character.

Therefore, “mellowness” was a character quality that the woman workers admired a lot. As an adult, one should “look twice before you jump.” They thought they should “act more prudently,” especially in the area of interpersonal communication. According to a 20-year-old woman who “still felt like a child,” because she viewed her “talkativeness” as immature. A 25-year-old woman reflected on her way of interacting with others:

I don't take everything into consideration when faced with problems. When I talk, I speak out whatever I can think of without considering others' feelings. Too straightforward! I think we should talk less straightforward.

Open and direct expressions of personal opinions were often described as potentially offensive to others, and thus disruptive to a harmonious relationship. Emotional control and mellowness were not only necessary for one's own character development, but also served a functional purpose in keeping a good relationship. The woman workers put high values on sensitivity to others' needs. A 19-year-old woman stated:

I always act on my own will, never considering others' feelings. Once I make a decision, I just do it, without listening to the advice from others. I think sense of responsibility is important for an adult. Be responsible in every respect. Be responsible for my parents, myself and my work. It's irresponsible for me to quit the job just because I don't like it!

"As a wife/mother . . ."—Role transitions help establish the status of adulthood. For the women workers, adult status came along with marriage and motherhood. Getting married was viewed by many as a necessary step to enter adulthood. A 23-year-old woman was not sure whether she had reached adulthood or not, because "First of all, you have to get married in order to experience adulthood. Since I am still single, I don't have the feeling of being an adult. If you are not married yet, you are not an adult."

Motherhood played a pivotal role in their views of the transition to adulthood. A 23-year-old woman talked about her vision for the family life:

Since I am already married, I think I should have a child. That will make a family look like a family. Imagine you come home from work with an angry mood. Once you see the child, your anger immediately goes away. So I plan to have a child in the future.

A 24-year-old woman described the way that she entered adulthood as well as the life cycle as a woman in general:

As a woman, I am supposed to get married, have children and raise them up until they are able to live by themselves. When I am too old to do anything, it would be better for my children to take care of me.

"Don't depend on parents"—Individualism indicates a new relationship with parents. Even though independence from parents was not as often referred to as a marker of adulthood, some women migrant workers did mention it. Working far away from home, the women migrant workers had tried to make their own decisions. A 23-year-old woman thought that she "should learn to take responsibility of my own actions."

As wage earners, the women migrant workers were very aware of financial independence. A 19-year-old woman commented: "I haven't reached adulthood, because I am not financially independent yet." Another 20-year-old woman who viewed herself as an adult said: "I don't have to depend on someone else, and I can live by myself." Making money also changed their financial relationships with their parents. A 25-year-old woman described her relationship with her parents before and after her marriage:

Since I have been married, I shouldn't rely on my parents anymore. I think I should have the strength. Before marriage, I could depend on my parents. But now, I am married and it's time to make a living by myself. It's different! My parents don't have much money to give to me, so I have to depend on myself. In everything! I need to start the family myself, which the parents cannot help you do.

The women workers came to the cities to make a living, and they did not want to depend on their parents any more. By sending money home, they could even help the family instead of being an economic burden to the parents. This can be seen from what a 21-year-old woman remarked: "Don't depend on parents. Be independent. Make one's own decision. I do hope my parents no longer worry about me." Note that her striving for independence was not motivated by a desire to be separate from parents, but out of consideration for parents.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to examine the markers of adulthood most important to Chinese migrant women workers, and to gain insights into the cultural beliefs that these women workers draw upon to develop their understanding of the transition to adulthood.

The results showed that the majority of women workers considered themselves as adults in some ways, but not in others, indicating the ambiguous experience of these women workers. *Learn to care for parents, settled into a long-term career and become capable of caring for children* were ranked as the most important markers for adulthood. There were strong gender roles reflected in their ratings of the importance of various family capacities for men and women. The women workers' conception of adulthood was very relational. They were more concerned about family and society, elders and young children, than about personal markers of independence, reflecting the collectivistic values they held for the transition to adulthood.

Ambiguity in feelings of adulthood in Chinese migrant women workers

The results indicate that half of the migrant women workers experience their current status as a time of feeling in between adolescence and adulthood, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. This is consistent with previous studies on emerging adults in the U.S. (e.g. Arnett, 2003) and Chinese college students (Duan, 2008), with half or more of the young people having the ambiguous "yes and no" feeling about their adult status.

Two other studies (Badger et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2004) on Chinese college students showed that the majority of the participants believed that they had reached adulthood, and 35% still had the ambiguous feeling about their adult status. In one study, 22% of Chinese college students reported that they had reached adulthood (Duan, 2008), and in other studies, 59% of Chinese college students viewed themselves as adults (Badger et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2004). Why would some Chinese college students be less likely, and others be more likely than young women workers to perceive themselves as having reached adulthood? It is not possible to tell, based on the studies done so far. However, it is worth noting that China is a very diverse country, with many regional differences between north and south, east and west, and rural areas and urban

cities. Every geographical area has its own local culture, economy and customs. Even among college students, there are differences in terms of where they come from. College students who are from urban cities might be different from the ones from rural villages because they grow up differently and hold different values. The difference in feeling adult between Chinese college students in previous studies and women workers in the present study is intriguing, and more research needs to be done in order to get a comprehensive picture of when young people in China feel they have reached adulthood, including studies of young male migrant workers and young people that never go to college but stay in their home villages.

Markers for adulthood

The quantitative findings revealed that learning to care for parents, settling into a long-term career and various family roles and responsibilities were rated as the most important markers. In contrast, individualistic criteria such as making independent decisions and becoming financially independent, which have ranked at the top in Western samples (Arnett, 2003; Cheah & Nelson, 2004; Facio & Micocci, 2003; Mayselless & Scharf, 2003), were rated relatively low by the Chinese migrant women workers. The results from the interview further support the quantitative results, with the topics as family capacities, relational maturity and role transitions being most often mentioned. Similar findings were also reported for Indian young people, who put emphasis on *become capable of keeping family physically safe and learn always to have good control of your emotions*, which is reflective of collectivism in Eastern cultures (Seiter & Nelson, 2011). Next, we consider in more detail each of the top criteria for adulthood.

Learn to care for parents

“Learn to care for parents” was ranked first as the marker for adulthood, which is an illustration of filial piety. In Chinese tradition, the family is viewed as the central social relation one has. All family members are supposed to value their relationships with others, and behave in accordance with their roles (Lin, 2008; Yang, 2007).

Filial piety is more than just a duty, obedience, or respect to an authority. The Chinese migrant women workers are also emotionally tied to their parents, and would like to “take care of them in their daily lives” and “support them financially.”

In the written responses and interviews, Chinese migrant women workers used common idioms to express their views about what means to be an adult. “Respect the aged, care for the young” and “show filial piety to parents” were the indigenous concepts to describe the role an adult should play in the family. Since maintaining harmonious relationships is much-praised in Chinese tradition, traditional Chinese virtues are taught and promoted in the society to enforce these Confucian doctrines, which emphasize putting others’ needs before oneself and the moral obligation a person has to the group. Filial piety is the most important of all virtues (Wang, 2011). It is not surprising that Chinese migrant women workers mentioned filial piety as an important marker for adulthood, because respecting the aged and caring for the young is not only the way they believe they should treat their family members, but also at the heart of their ideal of moral excellence. Also, in the interviews, there was frequent use of phrases such as “should do” and “is supposed to do” in Chinese migrant women workers’ statements,

which again reflect the expectation from their culture of the responsibilities they have as an adult.

As adulthood status may vary in different contexts, Chinese migrant women workers responded to the question of how adult they feel when they are with different people, including parents, siblings, friends, husband or boyfriend, boss, and co-workers. There was a sharp contrast between parents and others, as they were least likely to feel adult with their parents, and more likely to feel adult in front of other people. This is interesting, because establishing an equal relationship with parents is viewed as a necessary step towards adulthood in the West (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2004). On the one hand, the women workers had become capable of supporting their parents. On the other hand, their role as a daughter had a strong implication for their relationship with their parents, because “in the eyes of parents, we are still their children just as we always treat them as our parents.” Again, the value of filial piety is evident.

Their interdependence with parents does not necessarily conflict with their adult role as an adult. The role is context-dependent, as some women indicated in articulating their dual feelings as both a daughter of their parents and a mother of their child. In fact, the women generally enjoyed the emotional tie they had with their parents, which also made them want to pay back to the parents as an adult.

Contrary to the predictions, single and married women (or women with children and women without children) did not differ significantly on endorsed markers for adulthood or adulthood status in different contexts. This may be because the interdependent bonding was so strong in the relationships with their parents that they would always act as a daughter in front of their parents, regardless of their own marital and parenthood status.

Settled into a long-term career

“Settled into a long-term career” was perceived necessary for adult status by Chinese migrant women workers. As the traditional Chinese culture holds, “establish oneself at thirty” does not only refer to independence and self-reliance, but also implies that one should get married and have a long-term job by the age of thirty.

Chinese people used to apply chronological ages to mark the life cycle: At fifteen I set my heart upon learning; at thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground; at forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities . . . (Confucius, 500 B.C./2005). By having the feet firm upon the ground, it means by the age of 30, one should find his/her place in the world and take on the responsibility of an adult. So there is a clear cultural expectation of what one should do in certain years and what obligations one should fulfill that come with the age. In the present study, this was indicated by the importance of settling into a career as a criterion for adulthood. Settling into a career is one aspect of finding one’s place in the world and taking on the responsibilities of an adult.

Before the migrant women workers were exposed to city life, they did not realize their career aspirations. Living in the countryside, they dealt with what they had in front of them, e.g., providing for their family through agriculture and house work. Once they start actually working and living in the industrialized city, they become mindful of career opportunities and alternative ways to provide for their family. Compared with college students, the newly urbanized migrant women workers have intense work experience and complete focus on their career aspirations. Duan (2008) and Nelson

et al. (2004) demonstrated that despite being enrolled in college and have chosen a major study, the college students did not put career as their priority.

Family roles and responsibilities

The quantitative results showed that married women and women with children were more likely to view themselves as adults. These are different from previous studies' findings, because in Arnett's research marital status has not been related to self-perceived adulthood in American samples (e.g., Arnett, 2001). Also, among the top five criteria for adulthood in the quantitative results were three gender-specific family roles: "If a man, become capable of supporting a family financially," "If a woman, become capable of caring for children," and "If a man, become capable of keeping family physically safe." The qualitative interviews further confirmed that it was the responsibilities associated with marriage and parenthood that made one feel like an adult, such as "maintain a family, look after the child and look after the parents."

In the results of the questionnaire, there were four interesting contrasts regarding family capacities and gender. Chinese migrant women ranked providing and protecting important for men but not for women, while caring for children and running a household important for women but not for men. It was found in previous research that, in many very traditional cultures, men need to show their ability to provide, protect and procreate in order to be considered as an adult, whereas women are expected to care for children and run a household to gain the adult status (Arnett, 1998).

Even though China is undergoing rapid economic and social change, traditional gender roles may often persist, especially in rural areas (Liang, 2007). In a rural society, where the economy is less developed, the division of labor between husband and wife is critical, because the husband and wife have to become highly cooperative and interdependent with each other in everyday life to ensure the survival of the whole family (Fei, 1998). Women workers in China may bring these values with them when they migrate from the villages to the cities.

Notably unimportant: Financially independent from parents

Most Chinese migrant women workers in this study were able to make money to live independently and even have enough to send money back home. This is a group of people who are financially independent, and some did bring it up in the interviews. Due to their migration and working experience in the cities, their values were influenced by Western cultures to some degree, which emphasizes self-reliance and individualistic characters.

However, the individualistic criteria "financially independent from parents" was rated the least important for them to be considered as adults. Their financial independence from parents was not to prove their individualism, but to better act as a care taker and provider, because they did not want to be a burden to their parents. As can be seen from the Chinese migrant women workers' relationship with their parents, filial piety is more than just paying back money, but also implies reciprocity between two generations, duties and obligations for the parents, and a hierarchy of authority in the family.

At first sight, their emphasis on self-reliance and no intention to be individualistic seemed contradictory to each other. However, they are not contradictory. Even though they showed some

individualistic features, it was not individualism. Their motivation to make money was not to be financially independent from parents, but to support their family.

Therefore, entering adulthood for Chinese migrant women workers is not necessarily a process of separation and individuation from parents, until reaching the maturity of individual personality. Rather, becoming an adult only changes their relative position in their interpersonal relationships (Sun, 2008). All the interpersonal relationships are actually about obligations. Every individual is a dependent being, which does not mean they rely on others for economic survival, but means that they live for each other by taking on their part of family responsibilities and obligations (Liang, 2007).

Taken together, on the one hand, as the women workers moved from the villages to the cities, they brought the traditional familial values with them, such as taking care of parents and children. On the other hand, their working experience in the industrialized cities made them more aware of their career prospects, e.g., settled into a long-term career. It should be noted that their ultimate goal in making money was not to claim financial independence from parents. On the contrary, they wanted to use the money to help out their family in the villages.

Limitations and future directions

The present study adds to current understanding of how young people in various cultural contexts think about what it means to reach adulthood. In particular, it shows that traditional beliefs in family obligations persist in young women workers' views of adulthood even in modern times, even when the context of their daily lives is far away from their family of origin. However, several limitations should be noted. Given the low reliability coefficients for some of the subscales measuring criteria for adulthood, the subscale results should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, many of the reliability coefficients fell within ranges similar to other published studies employing samples from Asia (e.g., India: Seiter & Nelson, 2011; China: Nelson, Duan, & Padilla-Walker, 2011). This may suggest that while caution is warranted, the results of our analyses using these scales may still be providing useful information and insight into the beliefs of Chinese migrant women workers regarding the criteria they have for adulthood.

In addition to modifying the scales for adulthood markers, more research is needed to study the acculturative changes of migrant women workers. For example, it would be valuable to compare "early arrived vs. late arrived women workers" to see if the length of stay (short vs. long or early arrival vs. late arrival) in the factory shapes their idea about adulthood. Another important issue concerning the migrant women workers is their leaving home decision strategy. For example, why do they leave home and go out to work in the cities? How is the migration decision made within a family? How is the migration decision-making contextualized by their family relationships and job histories following migration? Considering the gender and regional differences in China, further work should also be extended to other cohorts, such as young male migrant workers and young people that stay in their home villages instead of attending college or going out to work.

Conclusion

The study is among the first attempts to examine emerging adulthood among a non-college-student population in developing

countries. In this study, conceptions of adulthood were explored among Chinese migrant women workers, who are among millions of young people migrating from rural villages to industrial cities in China. Family obligations were deemed very important for adulthood, which is indicative of interdependence in Eastern cultures. The findings shed light on how young people view the transition to adulthood in developing countries, extend the understanding of emerging adulthood among nonstudents, and support the idea that the experiences of emerging adulthood are affected by cultural and social factors (Arnett, 2011).

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