

Public perceptions of child physical abuse in Beijing

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on public perceptions of parental child beating and child physical abuse (CPA) in mainland China. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 parents and a quantitative survey was administered to a sample of 1033 adults in urban districts of Beijing. The quantitative and qualitative results are consistent: both parents and the general public were hesitant to consider the beating of one's own child (by biological parents) as a case of CPA. Respondents indicated that only when parents beat their children malevolently and frequently, so as to cause serious physical injuries, could it be considered CPA. The majority of respondents supported governmental interventions in severe cases of CPA. However, respondents' perceptions of CPA in mainland China are different from those that are prevalent in the West. Therefore, it is essential to develop programmes that educate the public in order to improve their awareness and knowledge of CPA in mainland China.

INTRODUCTION

Whether or not parental child beating constitutes child physical abuse (CPA) is very controversial and also complex, especially when considering cross-cultural differences. In recent decades, opposition to the use of corporal punishment of children has grown due to greater worldwide awareness of children's rights and the importance of childhood experiences for later life outcomes. Many social advocates suggest that children should never be spanked because the use of corporal punishment legitimates violence within the family and is a risk factor for CPA (Straus 2005). However, a large portion of the public in many countries still believes in the necessity of using corporal punishment to reprimand children (Straus & Stewart 1999). While most people may disapprove of child abuse, many do not consider all forms of violent behaviour aimed at children to amount to abuse. Certainly, perceptions of what constitutes child abuse can vary widely among different cultures (Korbin 1991) due to different cultural expectations about child rearing practices.

In mainland China, child beating and other types of corporal punishment are still considered by many adults to be legitimate and effective methods for

parents to discipline and educate their children. Some evidence suggests that CPA is fairly widespread in mainland China (e.g. Chen & Dunne 2006; Wang & Chen 2012). Based on a large-scale sample of 6592 junior high school students (ages 13–16 years) in Guangzhou City, Wong *et al.* (2009) found that 26.8% of respondents reported having been physically assaulted by their parents in the previous 6 months, with 2.8% of them reporting very severe violence (e.g. being grabbed around the neck and choked or being burned or scalded on purpose). Furthermore, the frequency of parental corporal punishment among Chinese children is high. In one recent survey (Wang & Xing 2012) of parents of primary school children in Shandong province, 63% of respondents admitted having used corporal punishment on their children an average of eight times over the past 6 months. However, parental corporal punishment is generally considered a family affair, except in the case of severe injuries or death. In China, love and violence can coexist (Qiao & Chan 2008): parents feel that beating their children is way of expressing their love and concern. This dynamic makes it very challenging for parents to view their behaviour as a form of child abuse.

The high prevalence of CPA has escaped widespread public attention in mainland China. In fact, to

date, child abuse has not been widely recognized as a social problem (Qiao & Chan 2005). Child abuse is a relatively new concept in mainland China and the term 'child abuse' is not commonly used in a Chinese social context. Until now, although some laws prohibit the abuse of children, including the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Article 49), the Marriage Law of the PRC (Article 3), the Protection of Minors of the PRC (Article 10) and the Criminal Law of the PRC (Article 260), none of these laws specifically define what constitutes child abuse. Underscoring this point, there is no executive department or departmental public body in charge of child abuse in the government of mainland China at any level. Furthermore, there is no policy or regulation regarding services or support for abused children or 'at risk' families. Abused children are even not included in either the foster care or the adoption system (Qiao & Xie 2013). There is no special unit dedicated to dealing with child abuse investigations or protection by the police, hospitals or schools. While there are several non-governmental organizations that offer treatment services and intervention programmes to abused children, most of them have not been recognized or lack government support. This leads us to wonder why this is the case. Is it due to unique Chinese perceptions regarding CPA?

Very little empirical research has focused on the public's perception of what constitutes CPA. Most existing studies on this topic were conducted in the USA (e.g. Daro & Gelles 1992; Daro 1999; Price *et al.* 2001) and many European countries, such as Germany (Horn 1996), Finland (Paavialainen & Tarkka 2003) and Spain (Gracia & Herrero 2008a). Compared with research in the West, fewer relevant studies have been conducted in an Asian socio-cultural context, although some work has been done in Singapore (Elliott *et al.* 1997; Chan *et al.* 2002), Malaysia (Soh *et al.* 2012) and Japan (Segal & Iwai 2004).

Generally, most international studies indicate that the majority of people are conscious about the problem of child abuse and have constructed their own definitions of what they consider CPA. In the USA, Sigler & Johnson (2004) conducted a longitudinal, cross-sectional 10-year study and found that the general public had a clear and relatively broad definition of CPA, and that this definition was fairly stable over time. In Paavialainen & Tarkka's (2003) study, public health nurses in Finland, who worked with and cared for abused children and their families, described CPA as being composed of two categories: direct

physical abuse and other acts that cause children physical harm. However, there is little consensus about what constitutes CPA, either between or within societies, because people of different backgrounds exhibit different tolerance levels of violent behaviours. For example, one study conducted with a national representative sample in Spain found that 56.3% of Spanish adults believed that it was occasionally necessary to use corporal punishment with children, such as spanking or slapping. Those adults who believed in corporal punishment also felt that CPA was less widespread in society than those adults who thought that children should never be hit. In the case of the former, their beliefs were probably due to a narrower definition of CPA that excluded 'less serious' forms of abuse (Gracia & Herrero 2008a). In other words, they might not consider corporal punishment to be a form of CPA.

When deciding whether or not violent behaviour towards a child should be considered abuse, the public usually bases their judgement using their own standards, such as the intention and consequences of the behaviour. For example, most teachers in Palau, a Pacific Island, were much more likely to recommend intervention when parent's behaviour led to severe or intentional injuries and when parent's behaviour was an expression of his/her own anger or frustrations, absent an explicit intent to discipline the child. Interestingly, only 53.9% of the sample considered beating a child for not doing homework to be abusive (Collier *et al.* 1999). For many people, unless parental beating is so extreme that it results in death or severe injuries, there is little universal consensus about what constitutes CPA.

While public concern about CPA has increased in Western countries and some Asian countries, there is little systematic information about how these public perceptions differ from one society to another. More specifically, it is unclear how different China is from other countries. Research focused on how the Chinese public views CPA is rare. Some research studies have revealed a low awareness of child abuse among the Chinese public (Zhou *et al.* 2006a,b; Zhang & Chen 2011) and professionals (Hesketh *et al.* 2000). Furthermore, Qiao & Chan (2008) discovered six myths regarding child abuse in Beijing, including the perception that in China there was no need to be concerned with the problem of child abuse because the Western concept of 'child abuse' did not fit with China's national conditions. However, existing research studies still do not provide a comprehensive picture of the general public's perceptions regarding

CPA in mainland China. Therefore, this study combines qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches to better understand the public perception of CPA in the socio-cultural context of mainland China.

METHODS

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the course of this study. The field of CPA is very new in mainland China and unsurprisingly the public lacks significant understanding of the term. Moreover, there is at present no universally accepted survey instrument with which to assess the public's perception of CPA. As a result, the process of devising an effective survey instrument to study public perceptions of CPA in China began as an exploratory enterprise. This study originated with a qualitative phase that was well suited to gathering rich and descriptive data from respondents, which was necessary to fully grasp the Chinese concept of CPA. Based on the results of this qualitative phase, the research then moved to a quantitative phase where a questionnaire was developed and a large-scale survey was conducted. The mixed methods employed in this study enhance the breadth and depth of our findings and permit us to better answer our research question than would rely on any one single method.

In-depth interviews

During the qualitative phase of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 parents living in six core urban districts of Beijing. The interviews explored how they understand CPA and parental child beating in the socio-cultural context of China. By using purposive sampling, interview participants were chosen from different backgrounds in terms of occupation, education and economic status in order to ensure that a diverse range of respondents was included in the study (see Table 1). Different interview guides comprised a list of topics developed around the question of 'whether parental child beating is child abuse and why'. Between August and October 2004, twenty parents were interviewed, including 12 mothers and 8 fathers with children less than 18 years of age and generally living in one-child families. Between February and October 2005, of the 20 parents originally interviewed, 9 mothers and 5 fathers were interviewed a second time. From October 2011 to March 2012, six mothers and two fathers from this second group were interviewed a third time. Each interview with a parent took about 1–2.5 hours.

Survey questionnaire

A quantitative survey was conducted with a population of adults also residing in urban districts of Beijing.

Table 1 Personal particulars of 20 respondents

| No. | Name | Sex | Age | Occupation | Education |
|-----|--------------------|-----|-----|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Huanhuan's mother | F | 42 | Financial planner | Diploma |
| 2 | Xiaojun's mother | F | 41 | Accountant | Degree |
| 3 | Yuanyuan's mother | F | 37 | Civil servant | Degree |
| 4 | Ningning's mother | F | 37 | Immigrant worker | Junior high school |
| 5 | KK's mother | F | 36 | Community worker | Senior high school |
| 6 | Jingjing's mother | F | 36 | Community worker | Senior high school + diploma |
| 7 | Dongdong's mother | F | 40 | Housewife | Degree |
| 8 | Tiantian's mother | F | 41 | Journalist | Master |
| 9 | Hanghang's father | M | 40 | Editor | Master |
| 10 | Lulu's father | M | 41 | NGO employee | Junior high school + diploma |
| 11 | Mingming's mother | F | 51 | Doctor | Diploma |
| 12 | Lanlan's father | M | 40 | Police | Special secondary school + diploma |
| 13 | Xiaogang's father | M | 42 | Unemployed | Senior high school |
| 14 | Tingting's father | M | 45 | Community worker | Senior high school |
| 15 | Maomao's father | M | 42 | Civil servant | Degree |
| 16 | Qingqing's mother | F | 36 | Primary teacher | Diploma |
| 17 | Jijia's mother | F | 47 | Community worker | Special secondary school |
| 18 | Xiaoqiang's father | M | 52 | Worker | Senior high school |
| 19 | Chenchen's mother | F | 37 | Nurse | Special secondary school |
| 20 | Fangfang's father | M | 39 | University teacher | PhD |

A three-stage sampling strategy was employed. Specifically, in the first stage, three districts were selected from six core urban districts of Beijing. In the second stage, 20 neighbourhoods were randomly selected from all neighbourhoods of these three districts. Finally, in the third stage, 50 respondents were randomly interviewed in each neighbourhood. Respondents were eligible for the study if they were at least 18 years old. A total of 1100 adult residents were interviewed in the quantitative phase of the study. Based on results of the in-depth interviews described above and a comprehensive review of the literature, a questionnaire was developed with six groups of questions including: (i) public awareness of child abuse; (ii) public perceptions about perpetrators of CPA; (iii) public perceptions of CPA instigated by biological parents; (iv) public perceptions of the definition of CPA; (v) parenting practices and their perceptions; and (vi) public perceptions regarding the government's responsibility to intervene. The questionnaire also obtained socio-demographic information. Data collection was conducted from August to October 2013. Data were analysed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics 20 for Windows. Chi-square tests were used to assess the statistical significance of associations between public perceptions and individual socio-demographic factors.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Qualitative research results

In the course of the qualitative exploration, the underlying social and cultural roots of parents' views were revealed. Changes attendant to the parent-child relationship in present-day one-child families seem to reflect a tendency towards the weakening of parental power and authority. In this context, child beating may in some sense have become a means of upholding parents' power and authority. All the interviewed parents, except one mother, admitted that they had beaten their children, and the frequency was high for some of them (every 2 or 3 days). This finding indicated that parental child beating is still a very common phenomenon in one-child families in Beijing. Some parents believed that, compared with Western parents, 'Chinese parents discipline their children too strictly and too much'. The perceptions of these parents as to what constitutes CPA did not appear to change much in three rounds of interviews.

1. Parents agreed that corporal punishment played an educational role, which was 'for the good of their child'.

Based on the explanations offered by interviewed parents, parental child beating mainly resulted from the child's poor study habits, disobedience, defiant responses and moral conduct. The pressure of competition in society, pressure from school and economic pressures contributed to a strong investment in education, resulting in parents putting pressure on their children. Hanghang's father believed that 'parents now spend too much time on their children's studying and that half of teaching was done at home'. Many of the interviewed parents indicated that if despite parents sacrificing their time and effort, children's academic performance did not reach their expectations or those of teachers, children might understandably be beaten by their parents. Parents beat their child with the intention of correcting their mistakes and disciplining them. The dominant opinion about child beating was that it was regarded as a necessary and effective disciplinary method; they advocated for 'moderate corporal punishment'.

2. Frequent and severe child beating with malevolence was considered as CPA.

KK's mother presented a typical view of parental beating and child abuse as seen below:

Abuse is another concept, like not feeding the child, torturing her mentally and simply disliking her. It's ill-willed. Our beating is out of love. We can't help carrying out beating for the child's good, which I think is totally different from abuse. Normal parents beat their children only because they hope their child will be a high-flier, which is not abuse. Abuse is malevolent in cases where the child is not their own, or the parents are abnormal and have mental problems.

In some parents' opinion, the malevolence of abuse lies in 'the intention to cause harm', which is a different starting point from constructing the behaviour as corporal punishment. Furthermore, a minority of the interviewed parents defined child abuse based on the severity of the child beating, recognizing that despite parental good intentions, parental child beating can still constitute child abuse if it may lead to serious harm. Some parents also emphasized that frequent child beating is child abuse while occasional but severe beating is not child abuse.

3. Parental child beating was a form of corporal punishment, which was essentially different from CPA. During the second interview, Yuanyuan's mother pointed out:

Abuse is child beating without reason, while corporal punishment involves a causal relationship in

which the cause is the child having committed mistakes first. It aims for discipline and is for the child's good, with a different cause. Abuse is meant to cause injury with the result being intentional. For corporal punishment, the result is not expected or predictable at the beginning and is not intended to cause harm. Abuse is to bring harm, for example, using a cigarette end to burn the child.

In the opinion of interviewed parents, parents beating their children with malevolence, without reason, frequently and severely hurting their children's bodies and minds were committing a violent act that constitutes CPA. In contrast, moderate disciplinary acts for children's mistakes are merely corporal punishments. The primary basis on which to distinguish child abuse from corporal punishment is malevolent intent – apparently a moral evaluation – and with it come irrationality and seriousness of parental child beating.

4. Chinese parents showed much tolerance for corporal punishment but antipathy towards 'child abuse'. 'Child abuse' was considered by interviewed parents to be quite an offensive term. They did not want to connect their beating of their child to child abuse even if beating was carried out impulsively due to an emotional reaction. Most of them found it difficult to accept the Western concept that parental child beating was a form of 'child abuse'. They always stressed, 'China's national conditions are different from that of the United States'. The traditional Chinese teachings 'the rod makes an obedient son' and 'spare the rod and spoil the child' were deep rooted.

5. Chinese parents constructed 'child abuse' based on affection or relations.

Chinese people emphasize *guanxi* (relation) between persons and are accustomed to placing themselves within this tradition of *guanxi* when understanding and interpreting their behaviour. Many studies have shown that Chinese people particularly emphasize the difference between 'insider' and 'outsider' (King 1993; Yang 2004). In the 'insider' circle, especially within the family, the important prerequisites for maintaining relations are affection and responsibilities rather than rights. The greatest similarity among different parents in their construction of child abuse is that most of them are concerned about the motive and purpose of parental child beating and emphasize the role of parent-child affection between them and their 'own child'. In China, there are completely different explanations for beating depending on who the beat subject is. Parents do not consider the problem of child abuse from the perspectives of individual child

rights or the negative consequences for the physical and mental development of the child.

The quantitative research results

1. Socio-demographics of the respondents

A final total of 1033 eligible questionnaires remained after 67 questionnaires were excluded because two or more questions were missed. The response rate was 94% among the 1100 participants who completed the survey. The majority of the respondents were female (68.3%) with a mean age of 45.8 years. Approximately 77% of respondents were married. Approximately 41% of the sample had completed college or its equivalent and 10.6% was professional. Approximately 37% of respondent households contained at least one child who was under 18 years of age. Half of the sample reported a total household income of less than 6000 yuan per month (see Table 2).

2. Public awareness of child abuse

Respondents were asked whether they had heard about any incidences or cases of child abuse. Up to 44.7% of respondents indicated they 'often' heard about child abuse cases and 44.8% said they heard about child abuse cases 'one or two times'. Up to 10.5% of them stated that they had never heard about child abuse incidents from anywhere. Respondents who were older, with lower levels of education or lived alone were less likely to be aware of child abuse than others ($P < 0.05$, see Table 3 and Appendix). It is not surprising that young or highly educated people have comparatively more exposure to information about child abuse. Furthermore, it is possible that people who lived alone paid less attention to child abuse issues because they did not have a child living with them.

3. Public perceptions of perpetrators of CPA

Respondents were asked whether or not they considered child beating conducted by biological parents, stepparents, teachers or strangers respectively to be CPA. The same type of violent behaviours perpetrated against children, when conducted by people with a different relationship to the child, elicits different interpretations by the Chinese public. While 39.4% of respondents considered child beating by biological parents to be CPA, a much larger share of respondents considered similar types of beating by other people to reflect CPA (stepparents, 56.2%; teachers, 79.9%; strangers, 92%). The Chinese public shows much more tolerance of child beating conducted by biological parents than other people. It is interesting to note that there was much less ambiguity about CPA when the perpetrator was someone other than the biological

Table 2 Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents ($N = 1033$)

| Variable | <i>n</i> | % |
|---|----------|------|
| Age (years) | | |
| 18–35 | 369 | 35.7 |
| 36–55 | 290 | 28.1 |
| 56+ | 374 | 36.2 |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 327 | 31.7 |
| Female | 706 | 68.3 |
| Marriage | | |
| Unmarried | 174 | 16.8 |
| Married | 798 | 77.3 |
| Divorced or widowed | 61 | 5.9 |
| Level of education | | |
| Primary school graduate | 61 | 5.9 |
| Middle/high school graduate | 551 | 53.3 |
| College graduate | 421 | 40.8 |
| Occupation | | |
| Professional (e.g. teachers, doctors, government employees) | 109 | 10.6 |
| Non-professional | 924 | 89.4 |
| Number of family member(s) living together | | |
| 1 | 77 | 7.5 |
| 2 | 211 | 20.4 |
| 3 | 389 | 37.7 |
| 4 | 200 | 19.4 |
| 5+ | 156 | 15.1 |
| Child(ren) living in the family | | |
| Yes | 385 | 37.3 |
| No | 648 | 62.7 |
| Monthly household income (yuan) | | |
| <3000 | 125 | 12.1 |
| 3000–6000 | 398 | 38.5 |
| 6000–10 000 | 273 | 26.4 |
| 10 000–15 000 | 132 | 12.8 |
| 15 000+ | 105 | 10.2 |

parents. Up to 25.9% respondents reported being unsure about whether or not child beating by biological parents was CPA while only 4% reported being unsure about such conduct by strangers (see Table 4). The Chinese public had a clearer notion of what constituted child beating by teachers or strangers. However, it might be harder for the Chinese public to construct beating by biological parents as abuse probably because biological parents are considered to have responsibility and rights to discipline children. Respondents who were older or had lower levels of education were significantly less likely than younger or higher educated respondents to believe that child beating by biological parents was CPA ($P < 0.05$, see Table 5). This is likely due to the fact that they hold more traditional Chinese views about the treatment of children. The public's perceptions of child beating by stepparents had no significant relationship with their socio-demographic characteristics (see Appendix). In

sum, the relationship between the beaten child and the perpetrator is an important consideration in the public's determination of whether child beating rises to the level of CPA or not.

4. Public perceptions of CPA performed by biological parents

Moreover, respondents were asked four questions regarding the frequency, intentionality, consequences and methods of child beating conducted by biological parents (see Table 6). First, when biological parents beat their children six times or more per month, 38.8% of respondents considered this to be a case of CPA. Less frequent child beating was less likely to be considered CPA. Second, more than half of respondents perceived child beating by biological parents as CPA when it was caused by the parents' own problems, such as reflecting malicious intent (90.9%), expressions of parental anger or frustration (88.1%), or parents' mental health problems (65.6%). Less than half of respondents considered child beating by biological parents to constitute CPA when it was caused by the child's own problems, such as poor school performance (36.4%), disobedience (24.4%) and actions that cause parents to impart a moral lesson (16.8%). Third, the majority of respondents (81.6%) regarded child beating by biological parents as CPA if parents used objects. Fourth, most of the respondents (91.5%) perceived that when child beating caused very serious injuries that required treatment, such battery could be considered CPA. However, if child beating by biological parents did not result in observable physical injuries, the majority of respondents (94.9%) did not consider it to constitute CPA.

5. Public perceptions of the definition of CPA

Among the four descriptions provided, respondents were asked to choose one or more descriptions that they considered to constitute CPA. The majority of respondents (89%) considered 'violent acts toward children with malevolence or done intentionally' to be CPA. Approximately 84% of them thought 'violent acts toward children continuously and frequently by family members' reflected CPA and 76.3% of them believed that 'violent acts toward children which were conducted by non-family members (e.g. teachers or strangers)' were CPA. Only about half of them (49.5%) considered 'violent acts that put children at risk of injury but don't result in observable physical injuries' as CPA.

6. Parenting practices and their perceptions

Respondents were asked whether or not they or their family members had participated in incidents of child beating before. More than half of respondents (56.9%)

Table 3 Public awareness of child abuse ($N = 1033$)

| | Awareness | | | χ^2 | <i>P</i> |
|-------------------------|-----------|------------------|-------|----------|----------|
| | Often | One or two times | Never | | |
| Total | 44.7 | 44.8 | 10.5 | | |
| Age (years) | | | | | |
| 18–35 | 45.3 | 47.4 | 7.3 | 19.528 | 0.001 |
| 36–55 | 40.3 | 50.7 | 9.0 | | |
| 56+ | 47.6 | 37.7 | 14.7 | | |
| Level of education | | | | | |
| Primary school | 21.3 | 32.8 | 21.3 | 13.429 | 0.009 |
| Middle/high school | 44.6 | 43.9 | 11.4 | | |
| College graduate | 44.8 | 47.6 | 7.6 | | |
| No. of family member(s) | | | | | |
| 1 | 27.3 | 49.4 | 23.4 | 30.607 | 0.000 |
| 2 | 41.9 | 45.2 | 12.9 | | |
| 3 | 44.5 | 48.3 | 7.2 | | |
| 4 | 50.0 | 41.5 | 8.5 | | |
| 5+ | 51.3 | 37.2 | 11.5 | | |

Table 4 Public perceptions of perpetrators of CPA ($N = 1033$)

| | Yes | No | Not sure |
|--------------------|------|------|----------|
| Biological parents | 39.4 | 34.7 | 25.9 |
| Stepparents | 56.2 | 19.7 | 24.1 |
| Teachers | 79.9 | 10.0 | 10.2 |
| Strangers | 92.0 | 4.0 | 4.1 |

admitted that they or their family members have beaten children. For those who answered 'Yes', they were asked whether or not they considered this incident of child beating to constitute CPA. Only 14.6% of them classified their or their family members' child beating as CPA. Obviously, the Chinese public and parents exhibit considerable tolerance towards their own violence towards their children.

7. Public perceptions regarding the government's responsibility to intervene

When asking about whether or not respondents thought the Chinese government needed to intervene in the problem of child abuse, the majority (97.8%) of them believed 'Yes'. For those who answered 'Yes', further questions were asked regarding which type(s) of child abuse (including physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse and neglect) required government intervention. It seems as if the Chinese public is more attentive to child sexual and/or physical abuse than to psychological abuse and/or neglect. Up to 88.7% and 88.5% of the respondents thought sexual abuse and physical abuse respectively warranted government

intervention; however, substantially fewer thought the same about psychological abuse (78.8%) while the fewest respondents chose neglect (53.8%). The problem of neglect, it seems, is largely overlooked by the Chinese public.

DISCUSSION

The current study emphasizes how important it is to take cultural and social factors into consideration when thinking about what constitutes CPA. Based on both qualitative and quantitative data, we have been able to sketch a fairly comprehensive picture of how the public views parental child beating and CPA in the socio-cultural context of mainland China. The quantitative results are consistent with the qualitative results.

The results indicate that the general Chinese public was consistently not willing to consider beating by biological parents to be CPA. In both quantitative and qualitative results, the majority of parents admitted that they or their family members had beaten children before but that most of them did not consider such beating to be CPA. The respondents believed that biological parents would not abuse 'their own child', only biological parents with mental problems would abuse their own children, and they were not that kind of parent. This finding is congruent with the results of a study conducted in the USA (Price *et al.* 2001) where the authors identified a potential type of stereotyping: adults living in an urban community reported that child abuse occurs among people unlike themselves and that it would not occur in a family like the one in which they grew up.

| | Biological parents | | | χ^2 | <i>P</i> |
|--------------------|--------------------|------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Yes | No | Not sure | | |
| Age (years) | | | | | |
| 18–35 | 40.1 | 31.7 | 28.2 | 9.882 | 0.042 |
| 36–55 | 39.7 | 31.4 | 29.0 | | |
| 56+ | 38.5 | 40.1 | 21.4 | | |
| Level of education | | | | 20.801 | 0.000 |
| Primary school | 29.5 | 37.7 | 32.8 | | |
| Middle/high school | 35.6 | 39.9 | 24.5 | | |
| College graduate | 45.8 | 27.3 | 26.8 | | |

Table 5 Public perceptions of perpetrators of CPA (*N* = 1033)

Table 6 Public perceptions of CPA performed by biological parents

| | <i>n</i> | % |
|---|----------|------|
| Frequency | | |
| 1–2 times per year | 129 | 12.5 |
| 1–2 times per month | 218 | 21.1 |
| 3–5 times per month | 285 | 27.6 |
| 6+ times per month | 401 | 38.8 |
| Intentionality | | |
| Child(ren)'s actions or behaviours | 174 | 16.8 |
| Child(ren)'s disobediences | 252 | 24.4 |
| Child(ren)'s poor school performances | 376 | 36.4 |
| Parents' mental health problems | 678 | 65.6 |
| Expressing own angers or frustration | 910 | 88.1 |
| Hurting with malevolent intention | 939 | 90.9 |
| Methods (using objects or not) | | |
| Yes | 843 | 81.6 |
| No | 189 | 18.3 |
| Consequences | | |
| No observable physical injuries | 156 | 15.1 |
| Swelling or bleeding | 837 | 81.0 |
| Very serious injuries that required treatment | 945 | 91.5 |

Tolerance of parental child beating is rooted in the Chinese public's attitudes and values about what is acceptable and appropriate with respect to the way children should be treated within the family. In fact, many Chinese still believe that 'the rod makes an obedient son' and 'beating is caring and scolding is loving' (Qiao & Chan 2005). Indeed, authoritarian parenting is viewed favourably among the Chinese (Chao 1994). However, despite perceptions, it is well documented that most child abuse occurs within families and biological parents are the most likely abusers (Sigler & Johnson 2004). In some Asian countries, such as Japan, which also highly values parental rights and the sanctity of the family, increasing efforts are being made to protect children from abuse by parents (Segal & Iwai 2004). At present, however, the public in main-

land China is not yet very knowledgeable about the nature and extent of CPA carried out by parents.

Chinese parents would like to distinguish CPA from corporal punishment primarily based on malevolence intent and the unreasonableness of parental child beating. Usually, the subjective intention of Chinese parents to inflict corporal punishment is to foster a child who is 'good at studies, tame, gentle and has good moral character' (Tian & He 2003). Furthermore, when the Chinese public in the sample classified child beating by biological parents as CPA, they relied on a set of criteria including the intention of the parents, frequency and severity of the beating, and the consequences for the child. This finding can be interpreted to mean that the Chinese public considered a very small portion of corporal punishment to be CPA. Similar results were also found in Elliott *et al.*'s (1997) study in Singapore and Collier *et al.*'s (1999) study in a Pacific Island community. Some forms of parental misconduct towards children may be perceived as unacceptable but may not always be considered abuse.

The Chinese public's perceptions regarding what comprises CPA differ significantly from the mainstream definition of CPA in the West. In the West, the perpetrator of CPA usually refers to caregivers of the child or people who are responsible for child's welfare. Under Chinese law, offenders of abuse are only limited to family members, but the Chinese public thinks that the perpetrators of CPA are more likely to be strangers than parents. Many Chinese parents regard children as private property and believe that biological parents have the right to beat their own children as a means of teaching them; however, other people do not have such a right. It is said in China that 'blood is thicker than water'. The relationship between biological parents and children reflects 'blood ties' which differs from the relationship between children and others, such as stepparents, teachers and

strangers. Some Chinese people seem to pay more attention to ethics or emotions of affection rather than law or reason when they think about issues related to 'blood ties'. It is not only the public that shows more tolerance towards parental child beating, but Chinese laws also tolerate more violent behaviours within the family. Although severe abuse of family members is a criminal offence (Article 260) under the Criminal Law of the PRC, punishments for people who abuse their family members (even when it results in death) are much lighter than punishments given to people who conduct crimes outside family. In sum, the Chinese public's perception of violence within the family is very different from its perception of violence outside the family. Violence against children within the family is still regarded as a private matter in most circumstances in mainland China.

Moreover, the definition of CPA in a Chinese socio-cultural context is much narrower than the mainstream definition of CPA in the West. For example, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect in the USA defines CPA, not only using a harm standard but also employing an endangerment standard, based on which children are deemed to be at risk for injury, even when they do not have observable injuries (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families 1996). However, in China, CPA refers to violent acts towards children with malevolence intentionally, continuously and frequently. The public's definition found in this study of CPA is similar to the interpretation of 'abuse' in the laws of mainland China. The Application of the Marriage Law of the PRC, issued by the Supreme People's Court of China on 25 December 2001, for the first time distinguished abuse of family members and domestic violence: 'Domestic violence indicates the acts which result in a given consequential damage physically and mentally to the doer's family members by means of hitting, tying up, injuring cruelly and confining personal freedom by force, etc. Continuous and frequent domestic violence constitutes abuse'. Obviously, the concept of 'abuse' in China is very narrow, excluding occasional or minor violence or actions that put family members in danger. This is not surprising, as some studies show that when societies first begin to pay attention to the problem of child abuse, public perceptions often differ greatly from the definitions used by professionals today. For example, Hong Kong began to pay attention to the problem of child abuse in the 1990s. In 1999, Lau *et al.* found that the public exhibited little awareness of child abuse, and their conceptualization of what

comprised child abuse differed from today's common definitions. Therefore, we suggest that there is a need to improve the public's knowledge about child abuse in mainland China, and caution that addressing the problem will be a protracted process.

In mainland China, both the public and government's understanding of child abuse is ambiguous and different from mainstream international definitions. Therefore, a clear definition of child abuse in mainland China is an urgent necessity. However, it is not easy to define the problem of child abuse in a society. We suggest that two important criteria should be considered when attempting to define child abuse in mainland China. The first and most important requirement is that the definition must protect children's rights and safety outside and within the family. The second requirement is that the definition must be understandable and recognized by the majority of people in the society following an extensive public education campaign. In order for effective prevention policy and intervention programmes to be designed and implemented, the new definition must gain wide public acceptance. Considering cultural and social factors in devising this new definition is crucial.

This study found that in terms of individual characteristics, older respondents and those with lower levels of education were likely to show more tolerance of parental child beating. These findings are congruent with studies conducted in other cultural contexts (e.g. Segal & Iwai 2004; Worden & Carlson 2005; Gracia & Herrero 2008b). Further, the Chinese public's high level of tolerance towards parental child beating can be explained in part by findings from a study conducted by Gracia & Herrero (2008a) among 14 countries of the European Union. They found that when people lived in a country where legislation prohibited all forms of corporal punishment of children, there was a lower acceptance by the public of corporal punishment of children. At present, legislation of mainland China has not the statement of prohibiting corporal punishment of children within the family.

Even if the Chinese are reticent about accepting a Western definition of child abuse, existing violations of children's rights still need to be considered in China. Most Chinese support government intervention in response to child abuse. It is an opportune time for the Chinese government to pay attention to this social problem and take action to protect children who are abused and at risk of abuse. Already, local governments have launched some pilot programmes aimed at protecting children from harm. A high level of public awareness is a key to providing effective child abuse

interventions and services. In the absence of awareness and little understanding about what constitutes child abuse, the first step in dealing with the problem may be to educate the public, especially parents. Research suggests that educating the public about the problem of child abuse through education programmes or mass media campaigns is an effective strategy in reducing CPA (Sedlak & Broadhurst 1996; Hoefnagels & Mudde 2000) because it can reliably increase the public's knowledge and awareness about the problem of CPA.

Since the survey questionnaire was self-created for research about CPA in China and was not tested for reliability in other studies, the study results may not have examined all potential factors influencing the Chinese public's perceptions of CPA. However, this limitation may have been somewhat mitigated because the survey questionnaire was developed based on the findings of a qualitative study. It will be important for future studies to examine the questionnaire with other samples and to improve it in China or other social contexts in the future.

CONCLUSION

Child abuse is a pervasive and serious social problem occurring everywhere in the world; however, public perceptions regarding what constitutes child abuse are extremely different in depending on the cultural context. In mainland China, the problem of child abuse receives scant attention from both the academic community and government. The Chinese public exhibits too much tolerance of parental child beating. In the absence of professional social workers and organizations to provide adequate services to children and families, a prevention-oriented strategy based on changing attitudes through education and promotion should be the first step in systematically dealing with the problem of child abuse in mainland China.

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APPENDIX

Statistics details for public awareness of child abuse and public perceptions of perpetrators of CPA.

| | Awareness | | | χ^2 | P |
|---------------------|-----------|------------------|-------|----------|-------|
| | Often | One or two times | Never | | |
| Total | 44.7 | 44.8 | 10.5 | | |
| Age (years) | | | | | |
| 18–35 | 45.3 | 47.4 | 7.3 | 19.528 | 0.001 |
| 36–55 | 40.3 | 50.7 | 9.0 | | |
| 56+ | 47.6 | 37.7 | 14.7 | | |
| Sex | | | | 0.804 | 0.669 |
| Male | 42.9 | 45.7 | 11.3 | | |
| Female | 44.8 | 44.8 | 10.1 | | |
| Marriage | | | | 5.786 | 0.216 |
| Unmarried | 43.7 | 49.4 | 6.9 | | |
| Married | 45.4 | 43.8 | 10.8 | | |
| Divorced or widowed | 44.3 | 16.4 | 16.4 | | |
| Level of education | | | | 13.429 | 0.009 |
| Primary school | 21.3 | 32.8 | 21.3 | | |
| Middle/high school | 44.6 | 43.9 | 11.4 | | |
| College graduate | 44.8 | 47.6 | 7.6 | | |

| | Awareness | | | χ^2 | <i>P</i> |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------------|-------|----------|----------|
| | Often | One or two times | Never | | |
| Occupation | | | | | |
| Professional | 45.4 | 47.2 | 7.4 | 1.250 | 0.535 |
| Non-professional | 44.7 | 44.5 | 10.8 | | |
| No. of family member(s) | | | | | |
| 1 | 27.3 | 49.4 | 23.4 | 30.607 | 0.000 |
| 2 | 41.9 | 45.2 | 12.9 | | |
| 3 | 44.5 | 48.3 | 7.2 | | |
| 4 | 50.0 | 41.5 | 8.5 | | |
| 5+ | 51.3 | 37.2 | 11.5 | | |
| Child(ren) in the family | | | | | |
| Yes | 48.1 | 43.9 | 8.1 | 5.001 | 0.082 |
| No | 42.8 | 45.3 | 11.9 | | |
| Family income/month (yuan) | | | | | |
| <3000 | 43.2 | 44.0 | 12.8 | 5.393 | 0.715 |
| 3000–6000 | 42.2 | 46.0 | 11.8 | | |
| 6000–10 000 | 45.8 | 44.7 | 9.5 | | |
| 10 000–15 000 | 51.1 | 41.2 | 7.6 | | |
| 15 000+ | 45.7 | 45.7 | 8.6 | | |

| | Biological parents | | | | | Stepparents | | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Yes | No | Not sure | χ^2 | <i>P</i> | Yes | No | Not sure | χ^2 | <i>P</i> |
| Total | 39.4 | 34.7 | 25.9 | | | 56.2 | 19.7 | 24.1 | | |
| Age (years) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 18–35 | 40.1 | 31.7 | 28.2 | 9.882 | 0.042 | 54.5 | 21.1 | 24.4 | 4.716 | 0.318 |
| 36–55 | 39.7 | 31.4 | 29.0 | | | | | | | |
| 56+ | 38.5 | 40.1 | 21.4 | | | | | | | |
| Sex | | | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 39.8 | 34.9 | 25.4 | 0.079 | 0.961 | 52.6 | 23.2 | 24.2 | 4.269 | 0.118 |
| Female | 39.2 | 34.6 | 26.2 | | | | | | | |
| Marriage | | | | | | | | | | |
| Unmarried | 40.2 | 33.3 | 26.4 | 4.834 | 0.305 | 55.2 | 21.8 | 23.0 | 1.033 | 0.905 |
| Married | 39.7 | 34.0 | 26.3 | | | | | | | |
| Divorced or widowed | 32.8 | 47.5 | 19.7 | | | | | | | |
| Level of education | | | | | | | | | | |
| Primary school | 29.5 | 37.7 | 32.8 | 20.801 | 0.000 | 55.7 | 21.3 | 23.0 | 0.276 | 0.991 |
| Middle/high school | 35.6 | 39.9 | 24.5 | | | | | | | |
| College graduate | 45.8 | 27.3 | 26.8 | | | | | | | |
| Occupation | | | | | | | | | | |
| Professional | 49.5 | 28.4 | 22.0 | 5.263 | 0.072 | 56.9 | 20.2 | 22.9 | 0.095 | 0.953 |
| Non-professional | 38.2 | 35.4 | 26.4 | | | | | | | |
| No. of family member(s) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 41.6 | 32.5 | 26.0 | 9.239 | 0.323 | 66.2 | 15.6 | 18.2 | 8.130 | 0.421 |
| 2 | 33.6 | 36.0 | 30.3 | | | | | | | |
| 3 | 41.6 | 32.1 | 26.2 | | | | | | | |
| 4 | 42.0 | 33.5 | 24.5 | | | | | | | |
| 5+ | 37.2 | 41.7 | 21.2 | | | | | | | |
| Child(ren) in the family | | | | | | | | | | |
| Yes | 38.4 | 33.8 | 27.8 | 1.092 | 0.579 | 53.0 | 18.7 | 28.3 | 5.946 | 0.051 |
| No | 40.0 | 35.2 | 24.8 | | | | | | | |
| Family income/month (yuan) | | | | | | | | | | |
| <3000 | 32.0 | 38.4 | 29.6 | 8.669 | 0.371 | 56.8 | 20.8 | 22.4 | 5.103 | 0.747 |
| 3000–6000 | 37.2 | 35.2 | 27.6 | | | | | | | |
| 6000–10 000 | 44.7 | 31.1 | 24.2 | | | | | | | |
| 10 000–15 000 | 42.4 | 36.4 | 21.2 | | | | | | | |
| 15 000+ | 39.0 | 35.2 | 25.7 | | | | | | | |

| | Teachers | | | | | Strangers | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------|------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----|----------|----------|----------|
| | Yes | No | Not sure | χ^2 | <i>P</i> | Yes | No | Not sure | χ^2 | <i>P</i> |
| Total | 79.9 | 10.0 | 10.2 | | | 92.0 | 4.0 | 4.1 | | |
| Age (years) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 18–35 | 72.1 | 15.7 | 12.2 | | | 92.1 | 3.8 | 4.1 | | |
| 36–55 | 78.3 | 10.0 | 11.7 | 36.969 | 0.000 | 90.3 | 5.2 | 4.5 | 1.983 | 0.739 |
| 56+ | 88.8 | 4.3 | 7.0 | | | 93.0 | 3.2 | 3.7 | | |
| Sex | | | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 74.3 | 14.7 | 11.0 | 12.819 | 0.002 | 89.3 | 4.3 | 6.4 | 7.021 | 0.030 |
| Female | 82.4 | 7.8 | 9.8 | | | 93.2 | 3.8 | 3.0 | | |
| Marriage | | | | | | | | | | |
| Unmarried | 71.3 | 16.7 | 12.1 | | | 92.0 | 2.9 | 5.2 | | |
| Married | 80.8 | 9.0 | 10.2 | 16.349 | 0.003 | 91.7 | 4.4 | 3.9 | 2.460 | 0.652 |
| Divorced or widowed | 91.8 | 3.3 | 4.9 | | | 95.1 | 1.6 | 3.3 | | |
| Level of education | | | | | | | | | | |
| Primary school | 78.7 | 9.8 | 11.5 | | | 91.8 | 0.0 | 8.2 | | |
| Middle/high school | 80.2 | 9.8 | 10.0 | 0.188 | 0.996 | 92.2 | 4.7 | 3.1 | 7.732 | 0.102 |
| College graduate | 79.6 | 10.2 | 10.2 | | | 91.7 | 3.6 | 4.8 | | |
| Occupation | | | | | | | | | | |
| Professional | 77.1 | 15.6 | 7.3 | 4.944 | 0.084 | 92.7 | 4.6 | 2.8 | 0.641 | 0.726 |
| Non-professional | 80.2 | 9.3 | 10.5 | | | 91.9 | 3.9 | 4.2 | | |
| No. of family member(s) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 83.1 | 3.9 | 13.0 | | | 92.2 | 3.9 | 3.9 | | |
| 2 | 79.1 | 9.5 | 11.4 | | | 89.1 | 4.7 | 6.2 | | |
| 3 | 81.0 | 10.0 | 9.0 | 6.735 | 0.565 | 91.5 | 4.4 | 4.1 | 5.335 | 0.721 |
| 4 | 76.5 | 13.0 | 10.5 | | | 94.5 | 3.0 | 2.5 | | |
| 5+ | 80.8 | 9.6 | 9.6 | | | 93.6 | 3.2 | 3.2 | | |
| Child(ren) in the family | | | | | | | | | | |
| Yes | 77.1 | 10.4 | 12.5 | 3.879 | 0.144 | 92.7 | 3.6 | 3.6 | 0.488 | 0.783 |
| No | 81.5 | 9.7 | 8.8 | | | 91.5 | 4.2 | 4.3 | | |
| Family income/month (yuan) | | | | | | | | | | |
| <3000 | 79.2 | 6.4 | 14.4 | | | 92.8 | 2.4 | 4.8 | | |
| 3000–6000 | 77.9 | 11.3 | 10.8 | | | 91.5 | 5.3 | 3.3 | | |
| 6000–10 000 | 83.9 | 8.4 | 7.7 | 11.625 | 0.169 | 92.7 | 2.9 | 4.4 | 4.904 | 0.768 |
| 10 000–15 000 | 77.3 | 14.4 | 8.3 | | | 92.4 | 3.8 | 3.8 | | |
| 15 000+ | 81.0 | 7.6 | 11.4 | | | 90.5 | 3.8 | 5.7 | | |