

AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE EMERGING ADULTS-
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TRANSITIONING TO MATURE ADULTHOOD

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Recent research has proposed a new stage in human development, termed emerging adulthood by Jeffrey Arnett, which is characterized by a prolonged journey to adult roles and responsibilities. This thesis explores the experience of Chinese emerging adults, university students aged 20-25 years using Erikson's and Levinson's developmental theories as a theoretical framework. These authors proposed that three major developmental tasks are necessary for the transition to adulthood: separating from family of origin, forming an adult identity and finding the place for the self in the larger society.

Qualitative interviews were conducted virtually with 12 Chinese university students to understand their perceptions and lived experience. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. The results suggest Chinese emerging adults (a) have a low level of separation from parents; (b) have not formed a clear sense of identity and have not achieved a self-definition in adulthood; and (c) have not made initial commitments to love and work. It is speculated that the Chinese sociocultural context may further postpone its young adults' independence and autonomy, and this prolonged transition to adulthood is both positive and problematic to Chinese young adults.

This study lends support to Arnett's emerging adulthood theory through its exploration of emerging adulthood in China, where, to date, little research has been done on this subject. It provides rich descriptions of the experience of Chinese emerging adults' lives and enhances understandings of the role of culture in influencing the emerging adulthood period.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Young adults today have received considerable attention. An increasingly prolonged journey to adulthood has been found to commonly exist among today's twentysomethings (e.g., Buchmann, 1989; Côté, 2006; Levinson, 1979; Hayford & Furstenberg, 2008). Unlike their more traditional counterparts, these young adults postpone the finishing of school year, hop from one temporary job to another, and one temporary partner to another. Some of them move back to live with their parents after a short period of independent living, and some still receive financial assistance from their parents or other adults. Taking on adult roles and responsibilities once seemed so natural to people such as their parents, one or two generations ago, seems to be much more difficult to achieve for these young adults.

Problem Statement

What would a typical 24 or 25 year old young person's life be like fifty years ago? In industrialized societies, researchers pointed out that, the person probably attained independence from parents, worked a job, got married and/or had at least one child (Furstenberg, Kennedy, Mcloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004). Profound changes such as leaving parents' residence, becoming a bread earner rather than a mere consumer and forming a new family were the characteristics of becoming an adult within only five or six years since the attainment of biological maturation during the early or mid-teens. By their early 20s, people several decades ago were typically able to take on enduring responsibilities and become self-sufficient adults.

Today, it is also true that the years from the late teens all the way through the twenties are full of significant changes, and are considered as an important period in life (Berk, 2009; Tanner, 2006). Young people face the task of finishing a transition to adulthood in several aspects.

Biologically, people in this stage have reached their full physical growth. As suggested by Erikson's (1968) classic work, the attainment of genital maturation and changes of body proportion are signals for becoming an adult. Legally, people in this stage have been given the rights to vote, to drive, to drink alcoholic beverages, to serve in the military and engage in other so-called "adult events".

However, unlike their predecessors who were able to finish a transition to adulthood in their early or mid-20s, today's young people seem to be experiencing different life paths. By outlining the demographic changes in the last fifty years, Arnett (2000, 2006) has found that in the United States, from the year 1950 to 2000, the average age for people to get married has dramatically risen (from – in 1950 to – in 2000), as has the age of having a first child (from – in 1950 to – in 2000). Besides, with a shift to a knowledge-oriented labour market, an increasing number of young people choose to participate in higher education and in turn postpone their full-time employment (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Along with a higher proportion of college or university graduates choosing to pursue postgraduate education, the age of settling down to adult roles and enduring decisions has been raised to the late twenties and even the early thirties (Côté, 2000).

Besides, researchers also found that many young people in western societies who arrive at adult age (legally older than 18) live an unsettled and unstable life as they try out various possibilities before they can make long-term life commitments (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Côté, 2000). They were once called "permanent adolescents" and "twenty-something Peter Pans" who were characterized by postponing independence, full-time employment, marriage and parenthood, all of which are considered key markers of adulthood (Modell, 1989; Mortimer & Aronson, 2000; Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee, 1974; Shanahan, 2000). It seems

that the normal transition from adolescence to adulthood forty or fifty years ago has been arrested for many young people. To describe this now seemingly elongated road to adulthood, Arnett (2000) proposes the concept of *emerging adulthood* involving young people aged from 18 to 30 with an emphasis on the age range 18-25 years who are in a new developmental stage situated between adolescence and adulthood. Though it remains debatable how this prolonged period of time should be understood or labelled, the term has been adopted by a number of researchers to indicate today's unsettled young adults of the age range from 18 to 30 years.

In fact, young people who possess the characteristics of emerging adults are found all over the world. Research has been conducted on this phenomenon in highly industrialized countries such as Italy (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007), Canada (Cheah & Nelson, 2004), Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003) and the UK (Côté & Bynner, 2008). It is also recognized that economic development and the accumulation of social affluence make it possible for young people to take a period of time off from adult roles and social expectations. However, the majority of people from developing countries are under rough living conditions, lack of educational opportunities and are forced to move into adult roles such as marriage and full-time jobs in their late teens or early twenties to ensure the family survival (United Nations Children's Fund [UNCF], 2011); therefore, according to Arnett (2000, 2006), there is less possibility for them to experience emerging adulthood. However, despite this speculation, the urban middle classes in economically booming developing countries such as Mexico (Arias & Hernández, 2007), India (Seiter & Nelson, 2011), and China (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004) have been found to possess a delayed adulthood similar to emerging adulthood in western societies.

Arnett (2000) argues that emerging adults are a culturally constructed group, varying between and within cultures. Thus, the phenomenon of emerging adulthood in China may be

influenced, in certain ways, by some aspects of the Chinese culture. A culture, in Fiske's (2002) definition, is a "socially transmitted or socially constructed constellation consisting of such things as practices, competencies, ideas, schemas, symbols, values, norms, institutions, goals, constitutive rules, artefacts, and modifications of the physical environment" (p. 85). As a social construct, according to Keesing (1974), a certain culture influences individuals unconsciously through their "internal models of reality" which are created with "culturally shaped and shaded patterns of mind" (p. 89), even though individuals are generally not highly aware of the norms or rules agreed in a certain culture. As important dimensions of cultural variability, the concepts of individualism and collectivism have been widely used to explain the variations in communication across culture (Gudykunst & Lee, 2002; Triandis, 1995).

Many western societies have been found to possess a high level of commitment to individualism which suggests an independent definition of the self and emphasizes on personal goals, needs, rights and self-development (Carlisle, Henderson & Hanlon, 2010; Triandis, 1995). In contrast, the Chinese culture under the Confucius doctrine tends to emphasize putting family, group, community and nation before self-interest, which is associated with collectivistic values (Nelson & Chen, 2007; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). The Chinese culture which is found relatively homogenous, attaches great importance to connectedness between individuals and concerns for others in addition to self-development (Neslon & Chen, 2007; Winfield, Mizuno, & Beaudoin, 2000). It is also important to note that, in recent years, globalization has brought a great amount of western values and cultural elements (more individualistic ones) to the traditional Asian societies like China. According to Garrott (1995), those young Chinese adults who would be considered emerging adults also attach importance to popular individualistic values in western societies, including freedom, equality and individual actualization.

In addition, with the influence of one-child policy, market economy and opening up to the world, Chinese society has undergone dramatic changes and transitions over the past few decades (Khan & Riskin, 1998; Suliman, 1998; Goh & Kuczynski, 2009). Currently, the majority of urban children and young adults are the only children in the family (Tseng et al., 1988; Liu, 2008a). Generally speaking, most middle class families in China consist of one-child only, which enhances the ability of parents to provide their children with better access to higher education (previous research has revealed the association between the only child and a high expectation of academic achievement from their parents (Rich & Tsui, 2002, Woronov, 2002)). It also increases the chances of experiencing emerging adulthood for Chinese young adults (Jacob, 2006; Liu, 2008a).

Given the prevalent notion that family is the most reliable social welfare agency (Chen & Silverstein, 2000; Rich & Tsui, 2002; Shi, 1993; Yuan, 1987), and the Confucius doctrine of the parent-child bond, most Chinese parents are willing to invest all they have in their children even at the expenses of their own lives and dreams. They expect their children to be competent and well-educated in order to survive the increasingly intense social competition, and to achieve a higher social position for the family (Fong, 2004; Wu & Singh, 2004). Together with a widespread emphasis on “high quality” children, attending colleges or universities especially prestigious universities becomes an inevitable choice and non-stop attempt for Chinese emerging adults (Anagnost, 2004; Liu, 2008a). Hence, colleges or universities could be an interesting context to study Chinese emerging adults’ transition experience.

Taken together, Chinese emerging adults today have to negotiate an adult self and enter the adult world between the seemingly conflicting collectivistic and individualistic social values. Compared with emerging adulthood experienced in western societies, there might be similarities

and differences in terms of the criteria of entering adulthood, behaviours that emerging adults engaged in and the identity exploration processes (Nelson et al., 2004). It therefore would be especially interesting to explore the transition experience of Chinese emerging adults to mature adulthood. The current research focuses on the subjective transition process of Chinese emerging adults (university students), aiming to explore their developmental experiences. It should be noted that although Chinese culture is reported to be relatively homogeneous, there are likely to be intra-cultural variations including between group variations and within group variations (Au & Cheung, 2004; Schwartz & Sagie, 2000); Hence, in this thesis, the researcher only focuses on some aspects or elements of the culture that may influence Chinese emerging adults' transition experience.

Theoretical Framework

In accordance with its focus on the subjective experience of Chinese emerging adults transitioning to adulthood, this study's theoretical context mainly rests within identity theories and specifically Erikson's (1968) and Levinson's (1979) stage theories of life course development.

Erikson (1968) believes that identity is a "subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity" (p. 19). It is a collection of one's behaviours, views, characters, and social interactions and recognitions that make the person unique and differentiable. Identity could be an answer to the question "who am I?" Based on the concept of ego identity, Erikson proposed an eight stage theory of psychosocial development that covers an individuals' life from birth to death. In each stage, there is a core developmental task in the form of a conflict. As Erikson argues, resolving the conflict enables an individual to make progress and move on to the next stage.

The major task of adolescence, according to Erikson (1968) is identity development. In this stage, young people face the challenge of resolving the conflict of identity versus role confusion. They are expected to try out various possibilities and form an initial identity. Erikson argues that during this process, young people are likely to encounter what he terms *identity crisis*, a key turning point of identity development in which young people question the meaning of life and their relationships to others and attempt to form a coherent identity. Erikson suggests that some people, during this identity crisis, require a moratorium, an extra time staying in prolonged immaturity and engaging in role experimentations in order to find a “niche in some section of his society” (p. 156). Erikson names this extra time *psychosocial moratorium* and believes that it only happens to a small number of people.

Fifty years after Erikson’s first proposal of the concept, the scope of moratorium seems to be extended to the majority of young people who are facing the coming of age. According to Arnett (2000), it seems to be normative for today’s young people to have a delayed adulthood and a prolonged transition, which he terms *emerging adulthood*. Since emerging adulthood covers the periods of both late adolescence and young adulthood in Erikson’s stage theory, and presents a delay in development, it is reasonable to believe that the developmental task that happened fifty years ago during adolescence now take place in emerging adulthood. Thus, it is clear that the developmental task of emerging adulthood, similar to Erikson’s adolescence stage, is to resolve an identity crisis, form a new adult identity and find a place in the adult society for one’s self.

Similarly, Levinson (1979) builds another stage theory mainly on the adult development. He called the ages from 17 to 33 the *novice phase* of adult development during which young adults needs to explore alternatives and form a stable life structure in order to enter full

adulthood. In addition to Erikson's developmental tasks such as forming an adult identity, Levinson also emphasizes that it is important to terminate the previous life structure in order to move on to the next stage. In the novice phase, young people are required to finish a separation process from the family of origin, that is, young adults restructure the relationships between them and their family of origin to gain increased independence and self-governance. Since the age range of Levinson's novice phase is about the same as the age of emerging adulthood, we can assume that they share the same developmental tasks. Emerging adults, therefore, would be required to separate from their family of origin and build a new relationship with their parents on their way to adulthood.

In conclusion, based on Erikson and Levinson's theory, emerging adults experience a period of identity crisis, shown in the form of a moratorium, during which they are attempting to finish the following developmental tasks: (a) separating from the family of origin; (b) forming an adult identity; and (c) finding a place or a fit in the larger society for their self. The developmental tasks shed light on understanding and examining Chinese emerging adults' transition experience to adulthood. The degree of the achievement of each task shows the place where the emerging adults are at on their way to the full responsible adulthood.

Research Questions

The central research question of this study is how do Chinese emerging adults experience the transition to mature adulthood? In order to explore the central research question, there are three more detailed theoretical questions: (a) How do Chinese emerging adults experience the psychological separation from the family of origin? (b) How do they experience the formation of

adult identity? (c) In which ways do Chinese young adults try to find their place in the larger society?

Methodology

In order to address the central research question, one-on-one qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants all located in China. All interviews lasted from 20-60 minutes in length, during which participants' voices were reflected and respected. The interviews were conducted virtually by using Skype or other online instant messaging software which allows live voice calling. By using this technique, the researcher has had a series of interactive communication online with different participants despite their physical distances. The live voice conversations were audio-taped and later transcribed and analyzed.

A prepared interview guide (Appendix A) was used for the interviewing, though how or in which order questions were asked was flexible and dependent on the dynamics of each specific interview. The interview guide was created based on an identity status questionnaire published by Marcia and Archer (1993), whose work is largely rooted in Erikson's identity theory. The interview questions cover the major aspects of identity development such as education, occupations, intimate relationships and family influences. Twelve participants were recruited from four different universities in China to discuss their experiences. The four universities are located in different parts and cities in China including the city of Wuhan, Chongqing, Beijing and Guangzhou. Four students from the four universities who are acquainted with the researcher were invited to act as facilitators to put up recruitment letters on bulletin boards in public places at their current universities. Students who were interested in participating in the study were invited to contact the researcher by e-mail, and set up an interviewing date. All

interviews were conducted and recorded in Chinese. The researcher later translated and transcribed the record word-by-word into English.

After collecting and transcribing the interview data, the researcher carried out a thematic manual coding technique (Boyatzis, 1998) to examine the common themes and patterns that emerged from the text. The data coding process included “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258) to identify themes and create categories. Common themes were highlighted in the transcripts and categorized into several groups. By using this method, the qualitative data can be rearranged, understood and analyzed, and the researcher was able to find out the themes that frequently appeared in participants’ narratives, and thus identify the factors (both internal and external) that impact on Chinese emerging adults' transition experience.

Thesis Structure

The following chapters work to create a comprehensive understanding of how Chinese emerging adults experience the transition from higher education to mature adulthood.

Chapter two, *Theoretical Framework and Literature Review*, provides a theoretical context for the newly proposed concept of emerging adulthood within Erikson’s and Levinson’s stage theory. The definition, features, controversy and developmental tasks of emerging adulthood are later discussed in this chapter. This chapter also reviews previous studies regarding emerging adulthood in different cultures and countries. Finally, the chapter discusses the Chinese cultural and socioeconomic context to better understand Chinese emerging adults’ experience.

Chapter Three, entitled *Research Design and Methodology*, outlines the research strategy used in the study. It provides step-by-step procedures of the data collection and data analysis process. This chapter further offers a justification for the qualitative semi-structured interview

approach selected to investigate the central research questions. The chapter also discusses the role of the researcher to ensure the validation of this research.

Chapter Four, *Results*, identifies and presents the findings of this research. This chapter organizes the study's findings under three major headings that are derived from the theoretical framework. A brief definition of each theme, several indicators of the themes and the direct quote from participants will be presented in this chapter to illustrate the findings.

Chapter Five, *Discussion*, reviews and discusses the study's key findings and places them in the context of the theoretical framework, Chinese socio-cultural environment and the literature examined in previous chapters.

Finally, Chapter Six, *Conclusion*, consists of a discussion of both limitations and future research of this study. Firstly, this chapter briefly reviews study's key findings and how they enhance knowledge of the emerging adulthood period in a different cultural context. The relationship between culture and delayed adulthood are further understood. Later, this chapter discusses the limitations of the current study in terms of the sample size, sample selection and researchers' roles. Then, some suggestions regarding the future research of the phenomenon of emerging adulthood in China are offered.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will provide a theoretical foundation for the concept of emerging adulthood and the developmental tasks in this stage of life. The definition, characteristics and how people experience emerging adulthood will also be discussed. In addition, previous studies of the prolonged transition to adulthood will later be reviewed under different cultural contexts. Lastly, a discussion of the Chinese context and emerging adulthood in China will also be provided.

Theoretical Framework

Erikson's eight stage identity development theory. The cycles of human development have received great attention from researchers. Sigmund Freud (1949) proposed a theory of personality development based mainly on the psychosexual aspects and proposed five stages, which he called the oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital stages, to describe the developmental characteristics from which psychosexual satisfactions originate. He demonstrates a linear development in which individuals move from one stage to another with their progress being motivated by resolving certain psychosexual conflicts. Failing to resolve these conflicts may lead to possible stagnations or regressions. Although Freud provides valuable insights into human development, his theory is criticised by researchers for, among other things, his neglect of the significance of culture.

Identity. Accepting the basic framework of Freud's theory, Erikson (1963), on the other hand, emphasizes the critical role culture and society play in the process of shaping personality. Erikson, considered the pioneer of identity theory, first brought forward the concept of ego identity. According to Erikson (1975), ego identity is "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image" (p. 18). According to Côté (2006), Erikson's

definition of identity contains three aspects: 1) Identity includes a continuous perception of one's own self; 2) Identity carries a collection of one's idiosyncratic behaviours and characters which differentiate individuals; 3) Identity also indicates a person's role in the larger society. Erikson believes that an optimal sense of identity can be experienced with high level of psychosocial well-being when a person has a clear sense of self, future directions and receives social recognition, while a disturbed sense of identity may cause pathological symptoms such as social withdrawal and depression.

Erikson (1968) argued that identities in different life courses are shaped by three interactive aspects: biological, psychological and sociocultural domains. Biological features include ones' physical appearance, body capacities, sexual and racial characteristics, and state of physical health which generate a sense of "bodily self" (Kroger, 2007, p. 8). These physiological features and capacities are subject to change when an individual goes through different stages of life; thus, accordingly, the sense of identity, as it is based on biological features, such physical appearances and capacities, needs to be altered. In addition, psychological factors such as inner strength, interests, or needs will also provide individuals with a sense of self which is distinct from other people. The social or cultural environment, on the other hand, offers individuals a chance or a stage to express their biological and psychological needs or capacities, and at the same time a chance to recognize them (Kroger, 2007). In other words, the social interactions particularly under working environment serve as a stage on which individuals could perform their physical and mental capacity, realize their dreams and interest, receive certain levels of recognitions and respect from others, and develop a clearer understanding of the self. Therefore, an individual's identity development is built upon the synthesis of the threefold development.

Table 1

Erikson's eight-stage life cycle (Erikson, 1963)

Stages of life	Psychosocial crisis & tasks	Psychosocial virtues
I—infant	trust vs. mistrust	hope, faith
II –toddler	autonomy vs. shame and doubt	will, determination
III – preschooler	initiative vs. guilt	purpose, courage
IV -- school-age child	industry vs. inferiority	competence
V – adolescent	ego-identity vs. role-confusion	fidelity, loyalty
VI -- young adult	intimacy vs. isolation	love
VII -- middle adult	generativity vs. self-absorption	care
VIII -- old adult	integrity vs. despair	wisdom

Based on the idea of identity development, Erikson's (1963) work organized life's transitions into eight stages that move from birth through to death. As shown in Table 1, generally individuals pass through the eight life stages one by one. In each stage, there is a major developmental task shown in the form of a conflict. The core identity development builds upon the resolution of each identity task. Similar to Freud's theory, Erikson also believes that failing to resolve the main conflict in one stage usually leads to the failure of the following stages. Through "the selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of the identifications" held in the

previous stage, people develop or form a new identity which matches their current biological, psychological and sociocultural development (Erikson, 1968, p. 159).

Developmental tasks. According to Erikson (1963), identity development is the core task of adolescence. In the adolescence stage, the central conflict is identity versus role confusion. Based on the three aspects of identity formation, Erikson (1968) also contended that the optimal identity development is associated with finding a good fit in the larger social context for one's biological and psychological capacities and interests. This process usually begins during mid to late adolescence when people start exploring their vocational and interpersonal commitments for their adult life (Kroger, 2007). Adolescents make efforts to explore identity questions such as "who am I as an individual?" and "what is my place in society?" in order to form a clear sense of identity. During these explorations, adolescents are prone to experiencing an *identity crisis*, a key turning point of identity development in which young people question the meaning of life, explore alternatives in various areas and attempt to form a coherent sense of adult identity. During an identity crisis, as Erikson (1968, 1975) argues, if young people cannot cope with negative psychological burdens (e.g., anxiety, sense of frustration or defeat) which originate from unsuccessful role experimentations, they may suffer from *identity confusion* (which is characterized by having contradictory self-images or a loss of center) while individuals remain uncommitted to certain identity options.

In order to resolve an identity crisis, Erikson (1963) proposes that adolescents may enter a *psychosocial moratorium* in which they spend an overly extended period of time searching for or exploring meaningful identity commitments (commitments to certain life directions, love, occupations, ideology and values) without taking on permanent responsibilities or choices. Until these identity commitments are determined, adolescents cannot form a clear sense of identity in

the adult world and move to young adulthood. Erikson (1963) recognizes that the adult identity formation period could be extended for certain individuals in certain cultures or certain periods of history. However, as noted by Arnett (2006), half a century after Erikson's first observation, the extension of adult identity formation, or this psychosocial moratorium discussed above, has become a normative phenomenon in western industrialized societies as higher education has grown in popularity. In other words, young people in their early to mid-twenties who used to be viewed and treated as adults now are still experiencing the developmental tasks Erikson assigned to adolescents.

To sum up, based on Erikson's theory, today's young people who are in their 20s need to resolve the core identity task that was previously believed to be experienced by adolescents: identity versus role confusion. In the attempt to complete this task, they are required to engage in various explorations of the self and society in order to form a coherent sense of identity and a self-perception of adult status. Erikson poses an emphasis on finding a good fit for the self in the larger society as an optimal way of developing an adult identity. Thus, besides the sense of self built upon biological maturity, young people also need to make initial occupational and interpersonal commitments (marriage or stable relationships) by engaging into extensive explorations in various domains.

Levinson's seasons of a man's life. Based on interviews with forty middle-aged men, Levinson (1979) also proposed several stages for the life course. Though he focused mainly on the mid-life transition, he clearly states the duration, the proximate age range and the developmental tasks for each stage from childhood to late adulthood. Levinson (1979) also mentioned that the developmental tasks for each stage must be mastered before moving on to the next stage. He contends that people have to terminate the existing life structure (including

various social and interpersonal relationships) and explore new possibilities of the self and the society in order to enter the stability of a new stage. By life structure, Levinson refers to three interrelated aspects: “the individual’s sociocultural context, some aspects of one’s self and a person’s participation in the world” (p. 42). Interestingly, he names the age 17 to the age 33 the novice phase of development, during which young people make their way to full adulthood.

Table 2

Three stages of Novice Phase (transition to the adulthood; Levinson, 1979)

Stages	Age Ranges	Major developmental tasks
Early Adult Transition	17-22	To separate from family of origin
Entering the Adult World	22-28	To explore possibilities and create a stable life structure (make initial commitments)
Age Thirty Transition	28-34	To reappraise the preliminary commitments and settle down

Early Adult Transition. The novice phase of adult development consists of three different stages (as shown in table 2). From age 17 to age 22, the first stage is named early adult transition during which young people make preliminary explorations to prepare for the adulthood. The major developmental task for this stage is to separate from family of origin or similar social structure. Specifically, separation from family of origin means “increasing differentiation between self and parents, greater psychological distance from the family and reduced emotional dependency from family support” (Levinson, 1979, p. 73). Moreover, the separation alters the previous parent-child relationship. Children begin to see their parents as independent individuals,

and parents begin to treat their children as adults. Their relationship shifts from a dependent and hierarchical control-obedience to a mutual and reciprocal pattern. As Stierlin (1974) states, “the ultimate aim is mature interdependence of the parties” (p. 173).

Entering the adult world and age thirty transition. The second stage is called entering the adult world, which covers the age range from 22 years to 28 or 29 years. Levinson (1979) believes that in this stage, the two major developmental tasks are exploration and creating a stable life structure. Similar to Erikson’s adolescence stage, young people who are entering the adult world continue exploring all sorts of possibilities in terms of intimate relationships, occupation, values and life style. However, the development does not end at exploring. In this stage, young adults are also required to make initial commitments, to arrive at the self-definition of an adult and to take on adult responsibilities. This is the time when the adulthood begins in the life course. The last stage of the novice phase, the age thirty transition lasts approximately from age 28 to age 34. This is the time young adults reappraise the preliminary commitments and life structure built during the previous stage and form deeper roots and settle down.

Three major developmental tasks. In conclusion, Erikson and Levinson have presented a theoretical framework to describe the process of young people transitioning to adulthood. The stage of late adolescence and the first several years of young adulthood from Erikson overlap with Levinson’s novice phase of early adulthood. Erikson believes the identity formation in the adolescence stage could be excessively extended under certain circumstances, while Levinson proposes a transitional phase that lasts approximately 15 years. Based on Erikson’s and Levinson’s analysis of the transition to adulthood, it would appear that there are three distinct aspects of fully entering adulthood, including: (a) Separating from the family of origin; (b)

Forming an adult identity; and (c) Finding a place or a fit in the larger society for one's self. A brief literature review and discussion of each of the three tasks will be provided next.

Separating from the family of origin. Previous research indicates that separation from parents is a predictive factor of young adults' progress towards independence and self-sufficiency. Blos (1979) proposes that the separation from the family of origin started in late adolescence is actually a second separation-individuation (the first one happened during infancy) during which the painful disengagement process takes place by "shredding the family dependencies" (p. 141). In the process of psychological separation, according to Lapsley, Rice, and Shadid (1989), a young adult should reduce the "psychological dependence on parental introjects for approval, self-esteem and standards of conduct" (p. 286), learn to manage one's own self-definition and establish an independent sense of identity from the identifications previously demanded by parents. De Goede, Branje and Meeus (2009) suggest that as a result, parents-child relationship becomes more egalitarian, and parents who previously was perceived as powerful, now are more likely to be considered as supportive. As Choi (2002) argues, this disengagement from "internalized parental objects" (p. 468) is crucial for young people to develop a separate identity and to become a member of the adult society.

Forming an adult identity. Based on Erikson's (1968) theory, forming an adult identity is another developmental task for young adults transitioning to adulthood. In terms of forming an adult identity, this article mainly focuses on the aspects of establishing a self-definition in the adult world and a clear sense of identity. As Steger, Oishi and Kashdan (2009) suggests, transition to adulthood is associated with a search for meaning in life which may include considerable self-evaluation and explorations. It should be noted that according to Erikson, the formation of adult identity is closely related to young adults' searching of their own place in the

society. As Kroger (2007) points out, finding the right career and future direction requires enormous self-assessment and self-explorations, including one's strengths, interest, goals, skills and talents. Thus, through various explorations and experimentation in different possibilities, young adults are expected to gradually obtain self-knowledge and self-understandings which would not only help them find the right direction of future career, but also clarify their sense of identity and make they feel like an adult.

Finding a place or a fit in the larger society for one's self. As discussed above, Erikson (1968) has argued that finding a place in the larger society for one's self provides a chance to realize one's interest and capacities and also a chance to recognize them. In the attempt to clarify one's identity, Erikson states that "it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity that most disturbs young people" (p. 132). Previous research has revealed the importance of occupational commitments to young people. Lack of occupational commitments has been found to be associated with negative self-esteem and psychological distress (e.g., Mossakowski, 2009; Paul & Moser, 2009). Moreover, in a longitudinal study, Winefield, Tiggerman, Winefield, and Goldney (1993), found that the experience of unemployment could change youth's life philosophy and many aspects of their social relationships. Making commitments to certain occupational direction is thus, seen as an important developmental task for young people transitioning to adulthood.

In addition to making occupational commitments, engaging into marriage or stable romantic relationships is another developmental task that is part of finding one's place in the larger society. How individuals relate to significant others influence their way of finding out whom they really are, their sense of identity (Kroger, 2007). Research has reflected that young people who have been engaged in stable and intimate relationships reported to score higher in

their identity statuses than those who have not (e.g., Marcia, 1976; Tesch & Whitbourne, 1982). Levinson (1979) also views building a new life structure that suits one's self in the adult world including the love relationships as a critical developmental task of transitioning to adulthood. Thus, in sum, the three distinctive developmental tasks derived from the Erikson's and Levinson's theory are seen as important requirements for entering adulthood.

Emerging Adulthood

Extended transition to adulthood. Transition to adulthood has long been of interest to researchers who are concerned about the important stage of human development. The concept of adolescence was used by Erikson (1968) to describe the years between childhood and adulthood and once believed to be an unstable or transitional period until settling down to adulthood. Before the introduction of this concept, according to Baldwin (2010), children were considered as adults-of- tomorrow. They were trained for adult work and ready to contribute to the economy as soon as they reach the age six or seven. In the early twentieth century, the concept of adolescence was created and then widely used to encourage children and youth to participate in extensive public education and set free their obligations from work (Zelizer, 1994).

Scholars typically believe adolescence starts from puberty, but the duration is strongly influenced by cultural and social standards (Conger & Peterson, 1984). For instance, in the United States, adolescence is placed between the ages of 16 to 21 (Côté & Allahaar, 1996), while in other countries, adolescence could start from the age 10 and ends at age 18. With improved nutrition and advances in medical field, the time of physiological maturity (e.g., menarche) has now arrived much earlier than one hundred years ago. In the 1850s, puberty began at age 16 or 18 while now it begins at the age of 12 or 14 (Côté & Allahaar, 1996). This change extends the duration of adolescence and makes it a more important stage in the human life course.

As recognized by a number of researchers, the adolescent years are full of intensive changes in biological, psychological and sociocultural domains (e.g., Kimmel & Weiner, 1985). G. Stanley Hall (1904) describes adolescence as a time of “storm and stress”, because in this stage, various unruly behaviours are at their peak. Adolescents struggle with finding out their true self and separate from their parents, which brings strain to them and their families. According to Erikson (1968) adolescence is a period that allows young people to engage in role experimentations in order to form an identity which matches their current biological, psychological and sociocultural development. Hence, it is regarded as a period of profound changes and instability which means how people experience the adolescent period and make it to adulthood could be an issue worth studying.

Markers of adulthood. The entry into adulthood is viewed as the ending of adolescence. It is true that the concept of adulthood is highly subjective and disputable. Researchers have attempted to find the indicators of entry into adulthood. In most western societies, given the common expectation and emphasis of independent living between generations (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005), growing up often involves moving out of the parents’ home and forming a new family. In order to achieve that, individuals have to be financially independent, which requires stable employment and usually a completion of education. In this sense, regardless of their chronological age, young people are considered to be adults if they leave their parents’ home, enter the labour force, become married or become a parent (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Modell, 1989; Mortimer & Aronson, 2000; Shanahan, 2000).

Though these events are all highly related to autonomy and independence, individuals do not experience these events in the same order or at the same rate (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003). Some might skip one or two events and some might move back and forth

between independence and dependence. Other scholars mention the criteria of adulthood from a more individualistic aspect. For example, by conducting a survey of the perceived criteria of entering adulthood, Arnett (1994) found that several internal criteria, including making independent decisions, becoming financially independent and taking responsibilities for one's action are ranked high by young people as signs of achieving adulthood. A similar study was conducted earlier by Hardwick in the mid-1980s which treats self-reliance as an important sign of grown-up (cited in Côté, 2000). Moreover, Schulenberg, Maggs, and O'Malley (2003) argued that besides these changes in roles (e.g., marriage, employment), attaining adulthood is also marked by a series of psychological changes such as increased control over emotions.

Despite the elusive and disputable criteria, researchers have noted that today's socioeconomic development has helped to postpone these transition events mentioned above. As increasing jobs require more training and educational credentials, people tend to stay in education longer, work full time later, marry later and in turn have their first child later than people in the past (Arnett, 2000; Côté & Allahaar, 1996). Take marriage as an example. In the 1950s in the United States the average age of marriage was 20 for women and 22 for men, while in the 1970s, the average ages increased to 21 for women and 23 for men. In 2000, the mean age for marriage hit the highest record reaching 26 for women and 27 for men. These delayed commitments to marriage, work and parenthood seems to indicate a later ending of adolescence. With an earlier onset and later ending, the duration of adolescence has been extended again.

Many researchers have recognized the phenomenon of a "prolonged adolescence" (e.g., Buchmann, 1989). For instance, Kenneth Keniston (1971) proposed a concept of *Youth* to describe young people who are experiencing the extended transition to adulthood. Like adolescents, Keniston argues, youth have not achieved the full status of adulthood, but are

different from adolescents in several aspects. One of the most important aspects, according to Keniston, is that youth have already established a sense of self in terms of who they are and who they want to become, while adolescents are in the process of forming the sense of identity. Similarly, American scholar Arnett (2000) brings forward the term “emerging adulthood”. He argues that the period of adolescence has been extended greatly since Erikson’s definition of the adolescence stage. Thus, it is reasonable to split the prolonged transitional stage. Treating high school graduation (usually happens around the age of 18) as the ending of adolescence, the extended time period until adulthood is now termed emerging adulthood.

Definition. According to Arnett (2000), *emerging adulthood* describes the life stage in-between but distinct from adolescence and adulthood. The new concept overlaps a period of both adolescence (Erikson’s 4th stage) and young adulthood (Erikson’s 5th stage) and is similar to the novice phase of Levinson’s adult development. Emerging adulthood targets young people aged from late teens through twenties (with a focus on the age range from 18 to 25 years) who have “left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, but have not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood” (p. 469). Arnett argues that emerging adults are less likely to be monitored by parents than adolescents and to be constrained by roles than adults. Thus, they are granted a level of freedom or a period of time independent from adult roles and social expectations which allow them to explore various possibilities in the domains of love, work and future life directions.

In agreement with Arnett, Tanner (2006) also believes emerging adulthood should be treated as a separate developmental stage. She argues that this stage is of great importance in the life span development in that people in this phase experience the most frequent occurrence of significant life marker events such as marriage and first jobs. Tanner also considers emerging

adulthood as a unique turning point in life span development. She argues that before emerging adulthood, young people are strongly attached to their family of origin and, along with significant others, such as, teachers and close relatives, who regulate their behaviours. However, during emerging adulthood, young people start to explore and to gradually regulate their own behaviours. Besides the exploration, most important, emerging adulthood is the time that young adults start to make commitments to adult roles.

Researchers have attempted to uncover the cause and characteristics of emerging adulthood. As Arnett (2006) argues, “the social and institutional structures that once both supported and restricted people in the course of coming of age have weakened, leaving people with greater freedom but less support as they make their way to adulthood” (p. 4). In other words, emerging adults are required to rely on themselves to find a way to accomplish the course of individualization from all kinds of possibilities and choices (Côté, 2000). This process is also termed as an “institutionalized moratorium” by Côté (2006), who argues that the essence of emerging adulthood period is the attempt to resolving what Erikson called identity crisis in a prolonged education to work transition.

Arnett (2006) also admits the roots of emerging adulthood in Erikson’s theory. Building on the basis of a prolonged adolescence, emerging adulthood also seems to be a good fit of Erikson’s (1963) concept of psychosocial moratorium, which is also characterized by an extended time period full of explorations, possibilities and instability. This period of moratorium used to be classified as “adolescence” by Erikson, but now it seems that some features of adolescence concluded by Erikson fifty or sixty years ago now may appear during emerging adulthood. Arnett concludes that the features of emerging adulthood include that it is an age of identity exploration, age of instability, age of feeling in-between (adolescence and adulthood),

self-focus and age of possibility. Meanwhile, emerging adults face the same developmental tasks that Erikson and Levinson proposed in the process of entry into adulthood including: separating from parents, forming an adult identity, and finding occupational or interpersonal commitments.

However, Arnett's proposal of emerging adulthood has been challenged by a number of researchers. The opposite view mainly lies in the necessity of a new terminology, its applicability in different cultural and life-span contexts, and the cause of this prolonged transition to adulthood. Bynner (2005) argues that the term "youth" has been historically well-established to describe this specific group facing the same developmental tasks. Youth transition has also been used to indicate the prolonged transition into adulthood and a process of individuation. Thus, there is no need for a new term like emerging adulthood. Bynner also criticizes the stage theories of human development, which place emphasis on the developmental changes associated with chronological age. Instead, he believes that the experience and trajectories of human development should be closely studied for they represent a broader conception and area.

Similarly, Hendry and Kloep (2007) argue that in most developing countries or other collectivism-oriented cultures, or for most disadvantaged groups such as women in rural areas, emerging adulthood does not exist. Besides, with the rapid development of technology, individuals' lifestyles and socialization processes are continuously changing. Thus, the term emerging adulthood will soon be outdated because there could be new developmental characteristics emerging all the time. Hence, they believe the theory of emerging adulthood is "a description limited to a certain age cohort in certain societies at a certain historical time with particular socioeconomic conditions" (p. 76). Hendry and Kloep argue, as a result, that emerging adulthood cannot be developed into a theory which should be widely applicable and able to widen the current knowledge and understandings.

Furthermore, Côté and Bynner (2008) are concerned that Arnett seems to mistakenly narrow the cause of the prolonged journey to adulthood. It is true that some privileged young people with affluent economic background choose to delay their commitments purposefully because they hesitate among various available choices. However, Côté and Bynner argue that for many disadvantaged groups and groups in developing countries or other cultures, the extended transition to adulthood is not an active or deliberate selection. It is more of a coping mechanism of the wide spread identity confusion caused by the changing socioeconomic conditions. Despite the different voices, the concept of emerging adulthood has been widely used by a number of researchers to represent the world-wide phenomenon of a prolonged transition to adulthood, and has received considerable empirical support from the research community (e.g., Arias & Hernández, 2007; Cheah & Nelson, 2004; Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Nelson et al., 2004).

Impact of emerging adulthood. Generally, Arnett (2004) views emerging adulthood as a positive experience for individuals and society. Emerging adults enjoy this privileged period of time to contemplate the meaning of life, explore various identity options and gain a better understanding of the self and others. Arnett's argument is mainly based on the common positive attitude among emerging adults who tend to expect a promising career which is not only financially rewarding but also psychologically satisfying (Arnett, 2004). Nelson et al. (2004) report a similar sense of optimism among Chinese emerging adults who generally believe they will achieve higher socioeconomic status than their parents. Moreover, in a seven year longitudinal study, Galambos, Barker, and Krahn (2006) found a decline in depressive symptoms and a rise in self-esteem within Canadian young adults during the emerging adulthood years. These authors conclude that this indicates that emerging adults are satisfied with themselves

when they gradually gain self-sufficiency and take on adult responsibilities. Similar findings were reported by Pettit, Roberts, Lewinsohn, Seeley and Yaroslavsky (2011).

Furthermore, emerging adults enjoy a longer period of time to prepare for adult roles and enduring responsibilities until they judge themselves to be ready (Arnett, 2004). Thus, their final commitments are a result of contemplation and careful selection, which means, according to Arnett, that they are less likely to be regretful about these choices in the later life stage. In addition, emerging adults obtain an opportunity to turn their lives into a better or healthier direction by leaving their parents' home if their family of origin were not able to provide a healthy environment during their childhood and adolescence (Arnett, 2006). Even if they already live in an advantageous family environment, they still benefit from the process of forming an independent identity and increased autonomy. Most important, emerging adulthood is beneficial to the society in that it allows young people to participate in higher education and extensive training to be prepared for today's information and technology oriented economy (Arnett, 2007). Arnett has pointed to the benefits of emerging adulthood and other studies have shown the costs of this developmental stage, the current study thus attempts to explore both sides of this phenomenon.

Hendry and Kloep (2007) claim that emerging adulthood may have a negative impact on both young adults and society. Firstly, the lack of "road map" or institutional directions could cause a high level of anxiety for emerging adults who are forced to make far-reaching decisions before they have enough life experience to choose wisely. Secondly, for emerging adults from disadvantaged groups (e.g. parents with lower socioeconomic status or less education), the lack of available resources from their parents prevents them from acquiring a house, an education or a well-paid job, which again discourages them from attaining independence and self-sufficiency.

Even for emerging adults from middle-class affluent families, if they fail to develop some crucial skills (e.g., planning, organizing, decision-making, and communication skills) in the emerging adulthood years, they are likely to be paralyzed in terms of transitioning to the work world and remain “forever emerging but never adults” (Hendry & Kloep, 2007, p. 77).

Furthermore, other researchers are concerned about emerging adults who experience serious mental health problems like depressive symptoms (Pettit et al, 2011) or substance abuse problems (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006; Tanner et al., 2007). For instance, in a longitudinal study, Tanner et al. (2007) found that unemployment could be a direct factor for emerging adults’ depressive symptom. Meanwhile, research has also found a strong association between high risk behaviours (e.g., binge drinking, unprotected sex and illegal drug use) and the emerging adulthood period (Bachman, Johnston, O’ Malley, & Schulenberg, 1996; Grossman, 2005). Because of the absence of control and rites of passage, these young adults are believed to be lost in the free exploration of identity which leads to their frequent engagement in risky behaviours.

At the societal level, many researchers recognize that a large number of young adults not participating in the labour market or postponing it until their early 30s could be a serious waste of social resources, and that could cost society a large fortune (Hendry & Kloep, 2007; Li, 2006). At the same time, emerging adults may live with or depend on their middle aged parents, who may provide them with all or part of their living expenses. As a result, parents who are getting older have to shoulder a heavier burden and intense responsibilities that should be taken over by their adult children (Wu, 2009). This development may bring about a negative influence on the parents’ psychological well-being, declining of young adults’ self-esteem, and unhealthy family dynamics (Li, 2006).

Emerging adulthood as a worldwide phenomenon. Whether young adults experience emerging adulthood positively or negatively, the features of emerging adulthood appear in many different countries. Research has been conducted on this phenomenon in developed countries such as Italy (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007), Canada (Cheah & Nelson, 2004), Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003) and the UK (Côté & Bynner, 2008) in addition to the United States (Arnett, 1994, 2000, 2004). Researchers are especially interested in how specific values and cultural standards impact on emerging adulthood. The perceived markers of entry into adulthood in different cultural settings, the different pathways to the mature adulthood and different characteristics of emerging adulthood in different countries have been investigated to understand the role culture plays in this transition process.

In the study of emerging adulthood in Israel, Mayseless and Scharf (2003) found that young people in this country view individualistic characteristics the most important in terms of deciding whether or not a person has achieved adulthood. This result is similar to the research of emerging adulthood in the United States (Arnett, 1994). Both of them emphasize the ability of making independent decisions and taking responsibility for one's own action. It is also found that compared with the American counterparts, young Israelis attach greater importance to norm-compliance behaviours such as to avoid committing crimes and risk behaviours.

Buhl and Lanz (2007) conducted a meta-analysis to compare emerging adulthood in five different European countries including Spain, Italy, Finland, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Common features and disparities of emerging adulthood in various nations have been identified in this research. They have also re-examined the applicability of the traditional markers (completion of education, working full-time, getting married, becoming a parent) in different countries. Interestingly, they found that the importance of each traditional marker varies under

different cultural contexts. For instance, because of the exceedingly long duration of education in Germany, finishing school outweighs other markers becoming the most important for reaching adulthood. However, in Italy, marriage is considered as the most significant sign of adulthood in that young people would not move out of parents' residence until they settle into marriage.

Emerging adulthood in developing countries. Although researchers argue that a delayed adulthood is most likely to take place in western industrialized societies (Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002), emerging adulthood has been found to exist in countries with lower levels of economic development such as China (Nelson et al., 2004), Romania (Nelson, 2009) and Argentina (Facio & Micocci, 2003). It is reported that many young people living in developing countries have few economic resources, receive only limited education, and tend to take on adult roles (marriage, parenthood, full-time employment) at an early age to support their family (UNCF, 2011). However, in economically booming countries where an enlarging middle class emerges, it becomes affordable for some young adults to have an extra period of time getting prepared for the complexity of adult world (Nelson & Chen, 2007). In addition, with gradual popularization of higher education in developing countries, more people have the chance to explore the self and develop necessary working skills before taking on adult responsibilities. The timing of entering marriage, full-time work and other adult roles will be accordingly postponed. Thus, the phenomenon of emerging adulthood may appear in developing countries (non-western) especially among young people from urban middle class families.

The study in Romania, for example, surveyed 230 Romanian college students aged 18-27 years to examine the characteristics of emerging adulthood in this country (Nelson, 2009). Based on the five features of emerging adulthood proposed by Arnett (2006), the study found that a majority of the participants do not feel like an adult. They perceive criteria such as relational

maturity, financial independence, and norm compliance as the most important ones determining the attainment of adulthood. This research also found a strong connection between engaging in identity issues and feeling like an adult. Although the study was only limited to college students from a relatively well-educated background, in other words, from middle class families, it still shows that emerging adulthood exists in developing countries like Romania, and possesses some special features compared with western developed countries.

Though there is limited research in the phenomenon of emerging adulthood in China, Nelson et al. (2004) conducted an interesting pioneer study exploring this issue and proposed that many Chinese young people do experience a prolonged transition to adulthood. This study surveyed 207 Chinese university students, and found that the sample of Chinese students not only considers different types of criteria as necessary for becoming an adult, but also engages in different behaviours in comparison to emerging adults from western cultures. When compared to their western counterparts, Chinese emerging adults in this study gave a higher ranking to criteria that are associated with collectivistic ideology such as “become capable of supporting family financially” as necessary for adulthood. In addition, they placed greater emphasis on avoiding norm violating behaviours, such as drunk driving, using illegal drugs, and shoplifting. The differences are believed to be influenced by the contrast of individualistic and collectivistic value systems (Nelson et al., 2004). In China, the collectivistic value system emphasizes “obedience, conformity and cooperation” (Nelson et al., 2004, p. 33) which may lead to a clear tendency of norm compliance, whereas in western society, which is characterized as more individualistic, values such as freedom, equality and personal achievement are generally endorsed.

Sociocultural Context of Today’s China

Market economy. China's economic reform (under the name of socialism with Chinese characteristics) took place in 1978 starting from the rural areas and gradually expanding to urban areas. Three decades since the first implementation of the economic reform and opening up policy, Chinese society has undergone a series of dramatic transformations in all facets of life including economic, political, social and cultural aspects (Sigley, 2006). People's living standards, consuming capacity and quality of life have substantially increased as a result. Before the economic reform, China had been a centrally planned economy which means the government or the state owns industry and has control over significant decisions including resource allocation, production, pricing and distribution (Suliman, 1998).

Researchers believe that the economic reform in China can be considered as a decentralized process in which the market mechanism starts to play a role in the economy within the context of socialism (Howe, Kueh, & Ash, 2003; Suliman, 1998). It means that though the state still owns the most of the major industry, the price of merchandise is largely based on a free market price which is not fixed or directly controlled by the government. The reform also encourages the emergence of other forms of companies such as stock companies, private companies, foreign fund companies or joint-ventures besides state-owned corporations (Hu, 2005). Within this pattern, enterprises are free from excessive governmental regulation, and are able to function and compete freely as in the western market economy (Howe et al., 2003).

In addition to the economic growth, the reform also promotes a transformation of the educational system and especially higher education: from the elite education to common education which opens doors to more ordinary students. Since the reform, more universities and colleges have been built and more majors and fields of studies have been developed and created. Even in existing universities, efforts to recruit students have also largely been expanded.

According to Cao (2009) the total number of college students' recruitment has been increased by 10 percent each year since 1999 in China. There are now more opportunities than ever available for Chinese students to receive higher education and to develop individualized future life plans.

The reform energizes China's economy by bringing in competition, efficiency and liberation, and solved some intrinsic problems of the former planned economy such as lack of motivation of the workers. However, according to Khan and Riskin (1998), Chinese people do not benefit equally from the economic reform. The reform and opening up of China has also caused or aggravated a huge inequality in a variety of fields such as the urban-rural gap (Sicular, Yue, Gustafsson, & Li, 2007), the regional disparity between eastern coastal area and western inland area (Fujita & Hu, 2001), and the differences between different industries (Wang & Wan, 2008). The Gini coefficient, a common indicator of income inequality in China, has increased over .4, which is the international warning line for considerable social inequality (Wang & Wan, 2008).

In terms of urban- rural differences, for example, it is reported that the urban-rural income gap has increased 12 times as much as of the year 1978 in the past several decades (Cai & Du, 2009). The disparity of the average urban and rural income reaches its highest record, 3.33:1, in 2007, and it still maintains the increasing tendency (Cai & Du, 2009). Besides the income gap, there is also inequality in the realms of medical care, educational resources and other infrastructure constructions between urban and rural areas (Griffin & Zhao, 1993; Khan & Riskin, 1998). Given this situation and a rapid development of China's economy, it is not surprising that a new and relatively affluent middle class is observed emerging mainly in China's urban area.

Xin (2003) reports a popular definition of China's middle class which describes people who have received a certain level of education, possess some expertise and occupational skills, and have a certain amount of disposable income. These people usually have some leisure time, emphasize quality of life and are able to afford a private home, vehicles, education and holidays (Chinese Academy of Social Science, 2004). The characteristics of China's newly emerged middle class are largely shaped by the unique socioeconomic environment of today's China. According to Sigley (2006) the economic reform in the socialist context produces a "creative blending of neoliberal rationalities and revitalized forms of socialist rationalities" (p. 504). Liu (2008a) interprets the current socioeconomic system as a "hybrid": on the one hand, China has a relatively free market economy based on neoliberal principles such as free market pricing; on the other hand, the political system remains an authoritarian one party leadership which is still largely guided by the Marxist- Maoist theories and norms of traditional Confucian collectivism.

Such mixed socioeconomic pattern impacts directly on a diversified value system. According to Liu (2008a), the neoliberal part emphasizes more individualistic-oriented and self-centered values such as self-development, self-actualization, free choices and autonomy. It suggests that the individual should face the true self, and actively participate in various competitions (Fotopoulos, 2008). In terms of the identity formation, Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that it implies that individuals tend to form an independent self, follow their own interest, and freely express their inner attributes. The socialist part, on the other hand, is apt to a more conformist value to the authority such as the Communist Party, parents or teachers. It requires individuals to be selfless and patriotic and to put the larger interest before personal desires (Hofstede, 2001). Consequently, the external factors especially the expectations from authority play a significant role in the identity formation process for the young adults (Stockman, 2000).

One-child policy. Apart from the economic reform, the implementation of the one-child policy is influential in Chinese society. The policy, which stipulates that each married couple can only have one child, was initiated in 1979 to relieve the economic, environmental and population problems in China (Milwertz, 1997). After the first several years' implementation, the policy received strong resistance from the rural area. In the late 1980s the national policy was amended and took into account the situations in different regions (Milwertz, 1997; Liu, 2008b). Hence, couples from rural area, ethnic minority groups and couples without siblings are allowed to have more than one child. It means the major influence of this policy is mainly limited to urban areas. One direct outcome is that the majority of the urban families are at the same time single child families who consist of the largest part of China's middle class.

Although to some extent the one child policy eased the pressure of rapid population growth in China, this policy has received considerable critique ever since its initiation. It has been associated with forced abortion, infringement of human rights, increased gender discrimination and potential impact on the gender imbalance (Kane & Choi, 1999; Sen, 1990; Yi et al., 1993). The one child policy is also reported to be associated with parents' overindulgence and overprotection of their single children (Jing, Wan, & Over, 1987). Researchers are concerned that this overprotection and overinvestment may result in a high level of dependency, vulnerability and lack of adaptive capacity of the only child when facing the real world competition and complexity (Fong, 2004).

Furthermore, parents from only-child families are generally reported to hold an exceptionally high expectation of their children's academic and occupational excellence (Chen, 2003; Fong, 2004; Tsui & Rich, 2002). Many of them are not only financially capable of investing but also highly motivated to invest on their children's education. Firstly, since a

nuclear family now has only one child, there is “increased financial and social capital available for the care and education of the single-child” (Tsui & Rich, 2002, p. 74). Together with a relatively high socioeconomic background, middle-class only-child families can provide their children more attentive parental care, better support and better access to educational resources (Chen, 2003).

In addition to these increased resources, parents are also willing to invest in their children for the following reasons. The traditional Confucius legacy places a huge emphasis on children’s filial duty which includes parental reliance on children for medical care, company and financial support when the parents reach older age (Fong, 2004). Researchers also argue that the Chinese authorities are now further promoting this traditional filial duty of the adult children as an alleviator of the huge pressure faced by the current social welfare system which is considered to be ineffective in terms of its inability to support the increasing number of aging people in China (Fong, 2004). As a result, the concept that family is the most reliable social welfare agency is widespread and accepted which enhances parents’ investment in their children.

Moreover, the high parental expectation has also found to be partly associated with the parents’ own experiences. Many parents of the first only-children generation have been through the culture revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, during which they had to give up their dreams of entering higher education, and had to work and live in rural areas (Liu, 2008a). It is understandable that they hope their children could be the person realizing the dreams that they themselves had no chance to pursue. In that sense, it has been well documented that single-child (both boy and girl) parents have a shared understanding of encouraging their children to participate in higher education (e.g., Stockman, 2000; Woronov, 2002), so that the children could be better prepared to reach “the top of the local and global hierarchies” (Fong, 2004, p. 100).

Thus, performing well in the nation-wide college entrance examination in order to enter universities, especially prestigious universities, could be an important goal and combined effort of the whole family. According to Gu (2005), Chinese parents will use all kinds of available capital to send their children to the best kindergarten, the best elementary school and best high school to guarantee that their children have received the best education. The strong emphasis on the education in single-child families makes university a particular interesting context under which to examine the identity development of young adults from middle class families.

With all the concerns and hopes, the first only-child generation as a result of the one-child policy has now grown up. Starting from the first year of the policy implementation, the oldest only children have reached the age of 31 years, and the first only-child generation is around the same age range of Arnett's emerging adulthood (aged from 18 to 30 years). Following the logic that the only-child family consist of the majority of urban middle-class who possess relatively high socioeconomic status and do not have the urgent need to push their adult children to support the family financially or into other adult roles, the only-child family also represent the most emerging adult families in China.

Confucian-Collectivistic value. As summarized by Nelson and Chen (2007), the major Chinese culture is relatively homogenous in which "Confucian collectivism commonly serves as a predominant ideological guideline for social activities" (p. 86). Confucianism is a set of philosophical and ethical norms and morality that originated from the ancient philosopher Confucius (551–478 BC) and later developed by a number of important scholars in China's feudal times. The influence of Confucian ideas is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, Chinese people's collective identities and behaviours (Stockman, 2000). Several important Confucian concepts including Hsiao (filial piety), Li (etiquette or ritual), Ren (kindness), Shu

(empathy and compassion) Chung (loyalty or dutifulness) and Xin (honesty and sincerity) constitute the foundation of a good person (Rainey, 2010). Of most relevance to this thesis is the concept of Hsiao.

Hsiao (filial piety), as one of the most important virtues, plays a significant role in Chinese people's value system. According to Rainey's (2010) definition, it means "the respect and reverence for one's parents, and later extends to one's teachers and elders" (p. 24). This respect and obedience to the parents, according to Hwang (1999), originates from the assumption that "individuals' lives are the continuation of their parents' physical lives" (p. 169). According to this virtue, parents give a child life -- the most important and precious thing in the world -- take care of them and educate them until they grow up. In return, a child is expected to respect one's parents, obey their orders and support them when they get older. This reciprocal and mutual dependence is interpreted by Liu (2008b) as the core element of the Confucian values.

In this interdependent parent-child relationship, children are likely to possess a sense of indebtedness which is viewed as an inner motivator of filial piety (Smith, 1973). As analyzed above, Chinese children, especially single children, are given enormous hopes and expectations from their parents, which can be experienced as a high level of pressure. The filial beliefs and sense of indebtedness may keep reminding individuals that once they grow up, they should begin to return the favour of their parents for giving their lives and bringing them up, which again aggravate the pressure of Chinese children when they face the issue of entering the adulthood. Thus in the critical period of time, a transition to adulthood, the choices made in this process are of great significance to Chinese people's lives and their intergenerational relationships.

In line with the high level of obedience from the requirement of filial piety, Confucian ideas also signify behaviours that indicate strong collectivistic-oriented values such as the emphasis on the interdependent relationships and on putting the interest of the family and community in front of the personal needs and interests (Cao, 2009; Lin, 1935). Triandis (1995) argues that collectivism and individualism are two important forms of cultural syndromes which describe a shared synthesis of “beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles and values” (p. 43) of a society. Further, compared to individualistic cultures, Triandis concluded the key attributes of a collectivistic-oriented culture such as Chinese culture which includes: (1) an interdependent definition of the self; (2) compatible group goals and personal goals with the former more important than the latter; (3) social behaviours that are guided more by norms and obligations rather than personal needs; and (4) a huge emphasis on the importance of relationships.

Although being categorized as one of the most typical collectivistic cultures, China has undergone a series of changes in the socioeconomic field in recent years and thus has expanded into the realms of ideology and social values (Cao, 2009). As a result, the degree and extent of the collectivism-pervasion in the society could be altered accordingly. Cao also found that though it still claims to be a collectivism-prevalent country, Chinese society has started to adopt more individualistic values under the influence of globalization and rapid economic development since the year 1979. Cao believes that the increased individualistic tendency, particularly existing in the younger generation, is caused by the increased availability of diversified choices and the effect of media and education, which all together enhance the sense of self in the process of making independent decisions.

As shown in Garrott’s (1995) survey research of 512 participants, a strong acceptance of individualistic values is identified as commonly existing among Chinese college or university

students. Individualistic values such as knowledge, self-cultivation and perseverance are ranked highest on the cultural value survey, while some traditional collectivistic-oriented values including conservatism and moderation are ranked the lowest. However, despite the emphasis on self-development, the sample students in this study still maintain strong identification with traditional, collectivistic virtues such as humbleness, harmony and patriotism. It seems that the two value orientations co-exist in contemporary Chinese society, and both affect Chinese young people's identity development process.

As discussed above, Chinese society can be viewed as a hybrid consisting of both traditional and modern elements. The traditional Confucian-collectivistic value system has been largely challenged by the modernization projects such as an opening up to the world trade and investment and an economic reform which brings in not only westernized market mechanism but also a number of neoliberal concepts and values. As well, the one-child policy impacts greatly on Chinese people's opinion of family and induces a different personality formation process for a new generation (the post 80s). At the same time, China remains a centralized political system and dominated by the guidelines of Marxist- Maoist socialist ideology. Conflicting values such as conformity versus freedom, hedonism versus plain living and self-development versus self-sacrifice are coexisted in people's value system (Liu, 2008a).

In conclusion, under such a pluralistic, and even conflicting sociocultural context, this thesis is aiming to understand the unique experience of Chinese emerging adults (university students) transitioning to mature adulthood. Using Erikson and Levinson's developmental theories as a theoretical framework, the transition experience is discussed in the gradual process of achieving the developmental tasks such as separation from parents, self-identification of adult status, and attempts to find a place in the larger society. In order to explore and understand these

experiences, a qualitative research method was undertaken, as described in the next chapter. An interactive approach and open-ended interviews were used to understand Chinese young adults' perception and lived experience of this prolonged transition.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter provides the research strategy used in the study including step-by-step procedures of the data collection and data analysis processes. This chapter further offers a justification for the qualitative semi-structured interview approach selected to investigate the central research questions and discusses the role of the researcher in this research design. In addition, the chapter offers explanations with regards to how the study roots the interview questions in the theories and how to identify and analyze the emergent themes from the transcripts.

After obtaining ethical clearance for this study from the University of Ottawa's Ethical Review Board (See Appendix B), twelve one-on-one qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted via online live calling (e.g., Skype). These live voice conversations were conducted in Chinese and audio recorded. The researcher later translated the conversations into English and transcribed the recordings verbatim. According to the suggestion of University of Ottawa Ethic Review Board, the researcher collected oral consent from the interviewee before the beginning of each interview. The interview questions loosely followed the interview guide (See Appendix A), which was based on an identity status questionnaire published by Marcia and Archer (1993), whose work is largely rooted in Erikson's identity theory. Twenty-one questions were drawn from the questionnaire, and the selection process was guided by the framework of Erikson's and Levinson's developmental theories. Participants' perspectives were analyzed using a thematic analysis and the emergent themes were categorized and analyzed to answer the central research question.

Data Gathering

This study uses qualitative research in the form of one-on-one semi-structured interviews with twelve Chinese emerging adults via online live calling (e.g., Skype) to hear their experience and comments. Interviews lasted for a duration of 20-60 minutes. All interview questions were open-ended to “allow respondents to provide a fresh commentary about their experience and opinions” (Yin, 1994, p. 85). H. J. Rubin and Rubin (2005) contend that qualitative interviewing can be considered as a guided conversation in which the researchers interact with the interviewee, elicit answers, and create unique follow-up questions according to the previous answers given by the participants. It means, by its nature, that qualitative interview questions are flexible and subjective to the social dynamics of each conversation. The goal of qualitative interviewing, according to Warren (2002) is to “unveil the distinctive meaning making actions of interview participants” (p. 86).

As such, qualitative interviewing is especially suitable for the current research in that the purpose of the current study is to make sense of Chinese emerging adults’ transition experience to full adulthood. Compared to survey research which is characterized by applying fixed pre-established questionnaire to each respondents, qualitative interviewing uses open-ended questions to generate richer data that allow the researcher to delve into the meanings that participants conveyed through their words and stories (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). As stated by Arnett (2006), qualitative interviews will reduce the pre-study assumptions researchers might apply into the study of emerging adulthood. For instance, according to Arnett (2006), it could be a big mistake to simply take the “measures used on adolescents and give them to emerging adults” (p. 327), because emerging adults may have some characteristics and developmental issues that are different from adolescents. Hence, the use of qualitative interviewing could help

enhance the knowledge and understandings of emerging adulthood which is a relatively new phenomenon in China.

In addition, semi-structured, rather than structured, interviews were specifically used in this qualitative research to collect data. Unlike a structured interview which is based on standardized sets of questions, fixed sequences, and a pre-established coding scheme (Fontana & Frey, 1994), a semi-structured interview offers more freedom and flexibility to bring up new questions and adjust wordings and orders according to the interaction with different participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). It does contain a prepared interview guide (which does not exist in unstructured interviews), but how and in which order questions are posed is dependent on the social dynamics or the social contexts of interviewing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As Berg (2004) argues, semi-structured interviews allow researcher to “probe far beyond the answers to their prepared standardized questions” (p. 81). The study’s Interview Guide (Appendix A) was used to ensure some important aspects of information was collected from every participant, while the flexible way of asking questions guarantees the fluidity of the whole interview. Questions such as “can you describe your current status” or “what is your experience in this event” were frequently used to encourage participants to reveal detailed information of their responses and gain further meanings of their shared stories.

Morse (2002) also noted that a structured interview is appropriate only when considerable knowledge and understandings are already obtained about a certain research topic, but emerging adulthood in China is a relatively new phenomenon, and only a few studies have been done in this area. Thus, qualitative semi-structured interviewing serves as a useful tool to collect data and answer the central research questions as it allows certain priori categorizations

and theoretical guidance and at the same time it offers considerable freedom for new knowledge and further exploration.

The interviews were all conducted virtually, which means by using the computer and internet the researcher could directly interact with different participants regardless of their physical distances. Some researchers are concerned that computer-mediated communication (CMC) may not be able to generate “highly interactive, rich and spontaneous communication that can be achieved in face-to-face communication” (Mann & Stewart, 2003, p. 251) for the reason that the volume of information and social cues are limited by the “bandwidth” of the internet and use of computer as a platform (Mann & Stewart, 2003). However, unlike the most commonly used tools of online interviewing such as email survey or instant messaging, which often includes text-based information exchange (Kazmer & Xie, 2008), this study imitated the telephone interviewing using live audio calling but with lower cost. Since live voice conversations were used in the interview instead of text, there is larger volume of information including the certain level of emotion and instant reaction exchanged during the interview than the traditional computer-mediated text based communication.

It is true that the quality of the interviews may be compromised due to the condition of the internet connections (e.g., delayed response, sudden interruption) and lack of visual communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Mann & Stewart, 2003), but Walther (1992) argues that effective communication and warm relationships can be developed on-line. Based on the consideration of the cost and geographic distances of the interviewing, it is reasonable to use on-line live callings to collect data and ensure the necessary oral interactions. Besides, by using online live callings, most of the participants were staying in their dormitories and sitting in front of their personal computers while communicating with the researcher. The familiar and

comfortable environment may make it easier for them to build trust with the researcher and enhance their willingness to share their stories.

Sample

Recruitment. The sample participants are currently university students (including both undergraduate and graduate students) who were recruited from four different universities in China: Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Southwest University, Communication University of China and Jinan University. The four universities are located in different parts and cities in China including the city of Wuhan, Chongqing, Beijing and Guangzhou. All four universities are China's key universities which receive more attention and funds from the state, and consequently, intense competition for the admission. Four students from the four universities who are acquainted with the researcher were invited to act as facilitators to put up recruitment letters on bulletin boards in public places at their current universities. A brief description of the study, the requirements of participation, and contact information of the researcher were provided in the recruitment letters. Students who were interested in participating in the study were invited to contact the researcher by e-mail, and set up an interviewing date when they would both have access to a computer, a microphone and internet.

Based on the nature of the current research, these were the criteria for participation in this study.

- Participants have knowledge of the use of computer, internet and microphone.
- Participants are aged from 18-30, who are currently studying at the university.

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- Participants have the characteristics of emerging adulthood which means they may fail to be self-sufficient or to be committed to a long-term identity option (e. g. full-time work or marriage)

According to Keyton (2006), this way of recruiting participants can be viewed as a purposive sampling which is “used to select cases that are typical of the population of interest” (p. 130). As analyzed in chapter two, emerging adulthood in China is not a common phenomenon; it is most likely to exist within urban middle class families, and it has the features of delayed adulthood and adult role commitments. Thus, in order to understand Chinese emerging adults’ experience, the researcher needs to select the participants who belong to the targeted population.

The recruitment letter (See Appendix B) resulted in four undergraduate students and eight graduate students ranging from 20 to 25 years, with an average age of 22.75 years participating in the interviews. The sample contained eleven female and one male participant (See Appendix C for demographic information).

Data Analysis

H. J. Rubin and Rubin (2005) state,

Analysis entails classifying, comparing, weighing, and combining material from the interview to extract the meaning and implications, to reveal patterns, or to stitch together descriptions of events into a coherent narrative (p. 201).

The above explanation of data analysis accurately states how the current study analyzes the qualitative semi-structured interviews. After collecting and transcribing the interview data, the researcher carried out a thematic manual coding technique (Boyatzis, 1998) to examine the common themes and patterns that emerge from the text. A theme, according to Boyatzis (1998),

is “a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (p. 161). The data coding process involves “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258) to identify patterns and summarize common themes. These themes, which may be frequently mentioned by participants, indirectly revealed, emerged from the comparisons of different interviews or implied by special metaphors and stories, were extracted from the transcripts and later used as labels to categorize data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

In qualitative research, Keyton (2006) mentions that: “categories may be drawn from the literature and used to build a foundation for the qualitative research design” (p. 91). In the current study, the theoretical framework provided the three main themes to organize the data (separating from parents, forming an adult identity, and finding a place for the self in the larger society) while allowing other themes and sub-themes to emerge from the text. To ensure that no important categories were missing, the researcher revisited the pre-existing literature and the theoretical framework during the data analysis to compare what had been revealed in the past with what the current data conveyed. Using the three main themes as a framework, all emerging themes were grouped under one or the other of the themes as sub-themes.

Using these themes and sub-themes, the researcher developed a coding structure and then went over the transcripts again to mark spoken utterances which served as indicators of the themes and subthemes. As suggested by Keyton (2006), this data analysis technique groups “all of the data units that refer to the same subject across the interviews” (p. 207), so that they can be retrieved (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). By using this method, the qualitative data were rearranged, understood and analyzed and the researcher was able to uncover the meanings of those transition experiences that participants conveyed through their narratives.

Role of the Researcher

As a native Chinese, based on background and language similarity, the researcher had a better chance to earn trust and cooperation from her interviewee. But at the same time, as a native researcher, she could be blinded by the similarity of culture and take their answers or behaviours for granted; hence, the researcher might leave out some important themes or be discouraged to further probe information that is already too familiar (Hayano, 1979; Kanuha, 2000). However, the researcher made efforts to enhance the rigor of the data analysis by using mainly direct quotes from the transcription, “letting the participants talk for themselves” (Liu, 2008b, p. 412). Moreover, in order to make the written report more objective, the researcher provided comprehensive information about the cultural and social context in today’s China under which the emerging adulthood appear.

Chapter Four: Results

This chapter reviews the study's key findings. Themes and patterns were presented under three major headings that are derived from the theoretical framework. A brief definition of each theme, several indicators of the themes and several direct quotes from participants will be presented in this chapter to illustrate the findings.

The qualitative data was analyzed to uncover the themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' discourses. The emerged themes and patterns were organized under three main themes which are, according to Erikson's and Levinson's theories, the three major developmental tasks young people have to achieve in order to fully enter adulthood: *separating from parents*, which means a young person has to shift one's relationship with parents from a dependent control-obedience pattern to an independent reciprocal manner, in which they are expected to gain self-governance and independence and loosen the parental tie (Levinson, 1979); *forming an adult identity*, in which young adults are expected to form a self-definition in the adult world and form a clear sense of identity by conducting certain self-explorations and self-evaluations; and *finding a place for the self in the larger society*, meaning a young person is able to make interpersonal and occupational commitments which provide a stage to express biological and psychological needs or capacities, and at the same time a chance to recognize them (Kroger, 2007). By completing the three major developmental tasks mentioned above, young adults gradually obtain independence and autonomy which would help them finally enter full-fledged adulthood. In following part, direct quotes from participants were employed to illustrate the findings, and fictional names were used throughout the text to protect the anonymity of participants.

Separating from Parents

Psychological separation from family of origin is a major task that is confronted by emerging adults on their way to mature adulthood (Blos, 1979). The level of separation is believed to have a great impact on both emerging adults' personality organization and personal adjustment (Blos, 1979; Hoffman, 1984). Hoffman (1984) has developed a scale containing four dimensions (*Psychological Separation Inventory, PSI*) to assess young people's psychological separation status from parents, including functional independence, emotional independence, conflictual independence and attitudinal independence. According to Hoffman, functional independence refers to "the ability to manage and direct one's practical and personal affairs without the help of his or her mother or father" (p. 171). Emotional independence means less needs or reliance on closeness, approval or emotional support of parents. Further, Hoffman defines conflictual independence as "freedom from excessive guilt, anxiety, mistrust, responsibility, inhibition, resentment and anger in relation to the mother and father" (p. 171-172), while attitudinal independence encourages individuals to have an independent self-image and independent thoughts, values and attitudes from their parents.

Hoffman's model breaks down the concept of separating from parents and makes the separation process more easily assessed. However, the separation is actually a dual process including parents letting go of their adult children and children individuating from parents. The former part may accelerate or impede the separation process depending on how much parents have done to support the separation (Tanner, 2006). Thus, the current study uses not only young adults' perceptions of their parents' contribution to individuation, but also children's dependence level on parents, the four aspects of separation in the analysis.

Parents' treatment of emerging adult children. Previous research has shown the importance of parents treating their children as equal adults. Fraser and Tucker (1997) found that

parents who support their children in the separation process may promote their children's sense of responsibility, self-confidence and sense of optimism which results in better problem-solving skills of the children. In contrast, parents who exert too much control and monitoring on their children discourage children's independent adult identity formation (Elder, 1968). Stierlin (1974) also emphasized that parents' supportive or enabling interactions (e.g., explaining; letting go) would help enhance emerging adults' maturation, while parents' inhibiting interactions (e.g., being overprotective) would impede emerging adults' gaining of autonomy and independence (as cited in Tanner, 2006). Participants in the current study generally reported that their parents did not treat them as equal adults. As an example, Mark, a 24 year old graduate student said:

They "tried" to respect my opinion. It is impossible to be completely equal from your parents. In their point of view, you are always their little boy.

Specifically, three aspects of parents' behaviours and treatments were identified in the data:

- Parents do not discuss important familial decisions with the participants
- Parents overly interfere with participants' lives
- Parents do not expect children to take on responsibilities or face the complexity of adult world

Several examples directly from the data illustrate how Chinese parents treated their emerging adult children in the above mentioned three aspects.

Do not discuss important familial decisions. The first example is from Mary (24 years old) a first year graduate student, whose parents sold their house and kept her uninformed:

I totally have no idea when my parents sold our house. They didn't tell me until they had it sold. Buying or selling a home is a big deal to me and they keep me uninformed about big decisions like that.

A similar thing happened to Rebecca, who is a 20 years old undergraduate student:

My parents just finished moving to a new place and they took care of all the decorations and the arrangements of my room. When I went back home, I moved into the new place directly. They have everything fixed, so I don't need to worry about anything.

Judy (23 years old) is a second year graduate student whose parents made a decision to change their jobs and move to another city without discussing this with her:

They haven't discussed the moving from the city of Yangzhou to the city of Suzhou with me, including their purchase of a new apartment and the changes of their jobs. They discussed this with my sister, because she is working there right now. They didn't want to give me any pressure of buying a new place, because they think I'm still young.

Likewise, 23 year old Diana, who is also a second year graduate student, had a hard time describing her parents' marital status, because her parents chose not to discuss their relationship with her.

Researcher: Have your parents separated or divorced before?

Diana: Yes. They have divorced and then gotten together again, and then they divorced again, and gotten together again. I almost got used to it.

Researcher: When was the first time they separate?

Diana: When I was in the last year of high school.

Researcher: When did they go back together again?

Diana: Well, because they didn't tell me... I don't know.

Selling or buying a house, moving to another city, divorce and remarrying are all considered as important familial decisions. Chinese parents tend not to discuss these decisions with their adult children. From the narrative of the participants, parents who make such decisions on their own without consulting their children do not expect these young adults to take on responsibilities or to worry about family issues. This is reflected in Mark's (24 years old) comment:

I was usually just told that they have already made that decision. My opinion on such things is not important at all, unless I really have made a strong point.

Overly interfere with children's lives. During the interviews with the participants, the researcher also found that Chinese parents tend to overly control or monitor their adult children's

lives. Parents hope to know everything that happens to their children, take care of the boyfriend or girlfriend issues, and influence children's important choices. For example, Emily, a 23-year-old who is a second year graduate student, complained about her parents: "They interfere a lot in my issues, hope that I'll follow their expectations and want me to tell them everything." She also mentioned that: "They would like to be in charge of my life and take control over (Guan) me."

Similarly, Linda, who is 25 years old and currently doing her last year of graduate studies, said her parents treated her like a child and interfere too much in her life:

In fact, my parents think that from the perspective of age, I'm not a child anymore. They would also urge me to find a boyfriend and a job. But in terms of interaction with me, they still haven't treated me as an adult. They want to take care of me and to know everything that happens to me.

Moreover, Britney (24 years old), a second year graduate student, expressed her concern that her parents talked to her about which type of men to marry over and over again, and she was influenced greatly by their expectations:

The man has to be well-off, respectable, good looking, from a good family and have a good personality. Yes, a perfect guy. But the result is that no one is good enough for me, I'll never be married.

Mark is also facing the pressure from parents about girlfriend issues. He has a girlfriend, and they have been together for 3 years, but he kept this as a secret from his parents because, he said, "I wanted to avoid trouble. If I told them too early, I'll have to bear their endless comments and expectations. If there really is the need, I'll tell them by then."

Likewise, Diana's mother did not like her current boyfriend and expressed her disagreement of to their relationship even though she said she trusted Diana's choice.

Diana: my mother doesn't like my current boyfriend...She thinks he is not a reliable man.

Researcher: Have they discussed their expectations of your future partner with you?

Diana: Yes, they did, quite a lot of times.

Researcher: Do they have any criteria?

Diana: Well, actually, they said as long as I like the person they're ok with it. But with (my current boyfriend), they don't approve of our relationship.

Some participants revealed that their parents interfere too much in their future life direction. Cindy (21 years old), who is a third year undergraduate student, tried to decide her future direction after graduation, but her parents made the decision of continuing post-graduate education for her despite her own will of entering the job market directly after graduation:

Personally, I didn't like going to school and studying in universities, so I was eager to start working, making money and being financially independent... but my parents insisted on it. They said: "you must finish the master's degree first, and then you can go look for a job."

My mother thinks that I should continue studying while I'm still young and I just finished undergraduate studies. She said to see more, experience more would broaden my perspective and make me different.

The conflict between Cindy and her parents is not the only one. Emma, a 20 years old undergraduate student, reported that her parents did not approve of her plan of studying abroad, and pressured her to take the exam for post-graduate study in China:

It is not like I can do whatever I want. Personally, I wanted to study abroad. But I know it is going to cost a lot of money, especially in my field of study... Of course, my father didn't mention too much about money... but he tried to persuade me to continue my education in China. My mother supported my father on this and they both gave me some pressure on it.

In addition, parents also play a decisive role in most participants' far-reaching decisions such as the choice of universities and fields of study which could impact on the children's future career and development. Sarah (21 years old), who is a third year undergraduate student, recalled that her parents changed her original choice of university and field of study without letting her know or discussing it with her:

I didn't choose the university by myself... I went to the United States right after I finished my college entrance examination. When I was on my way doing transfers, I lost contact with my parents. They revised my (selection of university and field of study) form, and wrote down Journalism, Jinan University.

In the beginning, I chose a university in Northern China with a major in landscape design. They didn't want me to be too far from them, so they picked the university which is in the same city as where we live. So my original dream was killed by my parents.

Additionally, Diana told the researcher that her decisions of choosing universities and majors were all made by her mother: "It was my mom's decision of universities and majors. I wasn't involved in the process." The same thing happened to Mark whose university and field of study were also chosen by his parents:

To be honest, I really didn't like my university and field of study. At that time, it was all my parents' decision. I had completely no idea what the field of study was and what I would learn from it. The name was the only thing I know about it. So when they told me to choose it, I did.

Mary's parents, on the other hand, persuaded her to change her mind and revised her university and field of study selection form:

At first, I did not want to go to a university that is so close to my home. I decided on another university. My parents thought that it is not safe to go with that university, because my score is not enough to send me to a prestigious university outside Liaoning Province. I might end up having no place to go. Though I already handed in my form, my parents talked to me and tried to make me change my mind. I agreed, so I end up attending Liaoning University.

Do not expect children to take on responsibilities or face the complexity of the adult world. In addition to excessive interference in children's lives, participants also reported that their parents did not expect them to take on responsibilities and face the dark side of society. On the one hand, parents who have a relatively good socioeconomic background did not expect their children to provide financial support for them when they get older, even though it is normative in traditional Chinese culture. Judy said her parents were willing to still support her financially if her first job could not help her make ends meet, and they did not require any financial contribution of her to the family:

I thought that they expected me to work a well-paid job. But there was one time when I talked to my father about it and I said what if I can't have a good earning every month, and he said that's totally ok, and understandable... Then I realized that they didn't expect me to earn a lot of money, and they would support me to do whatever I feel like doing. They didn't have any requirements on me financially... They both have pensions and other social insurance to support their lives.

Rebecca's parents told her the same thing:

Like my parents, they already told me that they have enough pensions for older age, and I don't need to support them financially.

Similarly, Mary's parents suggested that as long as her job makes her happy, they did not expect her to return their favours by providing older age financial support:

Mary: My parents said that as long as I feel happy working a job, they don't care about how much money I can make.

Researcher: So you're not under pressure to support your parents financially?

Mary: no, I'm not.

In addition, participants reported that their parents tend to be overprotective and keep them away from the complexity of the adult world. For instance, Sarah was well-protected by her father:

My father tends to protect me. He never took me out with him to any social events. I was really protected from the complicated interpersonal relationships and the dark side of society. Even for now, I'm still living in my ideal and my dreams.

Dependence on parents. Dependence on the parents refers to emerging adults' reliance on parents or their needs of parental support in various aspects. Using Hoffman's (1984) scale, the second part of separating from parents were coded and divided into four sub-sections to assess emerging adults' dependency on their parents, including:

- Functional dependence
- Emotional dependence
- Conflictual dependence

-
- Attitudinal dependence

Though participants expressed that they are getting more mature and independent every day, they are still dependent on their parents in some aspects. Several examples for every aspect will be drawn directly from participants' narratives to explain how Chinese emerging adults depend on their parents.

Functional dependence. According to Hoffman's (1984) definition, functional dependence means a person needs parents' help in dealing with practical or personal affairs. Based on the qualitative data, 11 out of 12 participants reported that they are highly dependent on their parents financially. Most of the participants' parents pay for all the expenses of their lives and study. Olive, who is a 25 years old graduate student, said: "financially, I'm completely relying on my parents. I'm a student right now, and I am not working part-time." Similarly, Linda's parents not only supported her financially during her undergraduate studies, but also provide financial assistance for her graduate study:

They actually give me more money now than when I was doing my undergraduate study. Now I feel like I'm studying while working at the same time, but I do not get paid sometimes for my work. I have to spend more money on preparing for clothing that fits the dress code... and also on taking taxis.

Emily also expressed her financial dependency by stating the following: "I am not independent yet. My parents pay for all the expenses of my education and life. I can't say I rely on them in every aspect, but I'm completely dependent financially."

Besides the financial dependency, the researcher also found that participants more or less rely on their parents in their problem solving or decision-making processes. Although most of the participants reported that they are capable of managing their daily life independently, Cindy

relied on her father to run some daily errands for her and relied on her mother to help her with some tough decisions:

My father would do a lot of things for me... such as getting certificates from public authorities and open a bank account or open a card. So if I have things like that, I really depend on my father. As for my mother, if I have tough choices, or questions, I'll turn to her suggestions.

Britney has the same experience that her parents helped her to arrange and furnish her new place before she started her internship, so that she could directly move in.

I got an apartment to temporarily live in, but I have never actually tried to furnish and decorate a place before. So my parents helped me with everything...paint the walls, buy the furniture, everything.

Similarly, Emma usually turns to her parents, when she comes across problems instead of asking for her friend's ideas or professor's advice:

When I have problems, if I talk to my friends who are at the same age range as me, I am probably not able to obtain any useful suggestions. So I would ask my parents, talk to them and they would give me advises.

Mark shared a personal experience that his parents helped him decide on a different department for his graduate studies:

When I was about to finish my undergraduate study, I had two choices to continue education. One is to be recommended to the same department as my undergraduate study. They second one is to be recommended to another department. I will be sure to be accepted to the former option, but the latter one is of lower probability. Though I wanted to transfer to another department, I am afraid to lose this great opportunity, so I asked my parents' opinion... My parents encouraged me to go for something I really wanted to learn at that time, so I finally decided on the risky department...I appreciated my parents' opinion. I think they have much more experience than me and they can make wiser choices.

In addition to the dependence on decision-making, the researcher also found that some participants also dependent on their parents' social networking for opportunities and resources.

For example, Cindy's parents are willing to provide job opportunities for her after she graduates from university.

My parents would give me some support. For example, if I want to choose a job, they will try their best to provide me a possible platform... They would provide me job opportunities by using their social connections.

Further, she is also dependent on her parents' opinion in the selection of future partners. Her parents' preference and judgment plays a crucial role in the process:

I would discuss with them about my boyfriend including his habits, personality and how we get along and some details. I would like to hear their ideas and judgement; after all, they have more life experience than me.

Emily has similar experience about how her parents' opinions influence her choice of future partner:

I think their opinions are definitely important. After all, they have experienced so much more than me, and I think they have good eyes for sizing people up and better judgments of good and bad guys.

Emotional dependence. Emotional dependence is defined as the desire for the sense of closeness, approval and emotional support from family of origin (Hoffman, 1984). Participants in this study demonstrated a high level of emotional dependence, though the level varies between different individuals, on their parents. For example, Rebecca believed that: "a person should always connect to one's parents emotionally, no matter how old he/she is." In their discourses, participants mentioned that they would need to call their parents at least once to twice during a week and think about their parents very often.

Diana is living in a public dormitory on campus which is far away from her parents' home. She mentioned she thought about her parents quite often:

I think about my parents all the time... I missed them even more on holidays... I have a boyfriend now, so the emotional dependence on my parents has been reduced. But I'm still quite dependent on them.

Though Mary denied that she missed her parents, she mentioned that she would call them once she has free time, and just hear their voice and share her life with them:

I'll call them very often, twice a week... If I was not busy, I would call them. Like after class, when I walk to my dorm, I'll call them on my way. It's not like I missed them so much that I had to call. Just talk to them, tell them the little things that happen to my life.

Similarly, Judy emphasized her emotional bond with her parents:

I think I rely on them a lot emotionally. Now that I'm far away from home, I miss them a lot. Since I was little, I have lived with my parents. I'm used to the way that I would discuss my personal issues with them. Whether I'm happy or not, I would like to call them... We'll exchange phone calls every one or two days.

Conflictual dependence. Based on the definition given by Hoffman (1984), conflictual dependence means a person has excessive feelings of responsibility, anger, mistrust, anxiety and resentment towards parents. Previous research has provided some empirical support for the connections between conflictual dependence (mainly the negative feelings such as anger, mistrust or resentment towards parents) and college students' adjustment and identity formation. For instance, Lopez, Manus, Hunton-Shoup, and Watkins (1992) argues that conflictual independence is, among the four subscales of Hoffman (1984)'s Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI), the most consistently related to the mood regulation and generalized self-efficacy. Further, in a comparative survey research, Lapsley et al. (1989) found that conflictual independence from father is strongly associated with the personal and emotional adjustment of college students, and especially that of first-years.

The findings of conflictual dependence from the current sample exhibit certain inconsistencies. On the one hand, the majority of the university students reported that they are

currently in a positive relationship with their parents that is free from anxiety, mistrust or resentment. On the other hand, in the students' narratives, the researcher identified a high level of responsibility and guilt towards their parents. For instance, Sarah described her love and trust towards her parents:

I could only say that I love them so much, but I'm not afraid of leaving them and making a living away from them, away from home.... I'm not very rebellious. When my parents made decisions for me, I believe they have thought this though... I trust my parents, and I trust their decisions.

Similarly, Judy appreciated everything her parents have done for her and referred to her relationship with her parents as warm and supportive:

They took care of me very well. I have some friends whose parents weren't so supportive to them. In comparison, I realize how great my parents have been. Though we would fight sometimes, I would never forget how good they are.

Olive (25 years old), a second year graduate student, described her recently repaired relationship with her parents:

I barely lived with my parents, because my parents have three children... So my parents weren't able to take care of three children all at once. When I was little, I lived with my grandparents most of the times... When I just finished my undergraduate studies, my relationship with my parents was different from what we have right now. I felt that they didn't love me... So the financial dependence made me feel uncomfortable and restrained... I defied them and tried to start my own business, but once I failed, I went back to continue receiving education. And then I don't think it's shameful to follow my parents' will... Now I actually have a closer relationship with my parents. We communicate a lot more than before. I feel really good about it. I even started to feel that I missed them and feel homesick. I've never felt this way before.

Olive's feeling of resentment or anger towards her parents has been reduced in the recent two years which means the level of conflictual dependence is also lowered. A better relationship or attachment with his parents was also reported by Mark who believed that his increased maturity made him understand his parents more and that this reduced their conflicts and brought them together closer than before:

Before, when I didn't have any pressure of independent living, I had distance from my parents. But now, there is no distance anymore... because (by facing the) difficulty and pressure of life, I think, we have the same considerations and concerns.

The above mentioned examples demonstrate a reduced conflictual dependence of participants; nevertheless, some students also suggested that they have a high level of responsibility and guilt towards their parents. For instance, Rebecca described her family as harmonious, warm and supportive and demonstrated an excessive sense of responsibility towards her parents:

I'll always put my parents in the first place. I respect them, and I care about them. My current efforts in study or in work are all for one major purpose: I wanted to be able to offer them a better life environment and to provide them feelings of happiness. ... I think it is hard to not let your parents' mind dominate yours... because you have to always care about their feelings.

Attitudinal dependence. Attitudinal dependence signifies the resemblance of emerging adults' values, beliefs and attitudes with their parents (Hoffman, 1984). The level of attitudinal independence on parents contributes to the formation of emerging adults' separate self-image or sense of identity (Hoffman, 1984). The sample participants in the current research generally have a resemblance with their parents' values, beliefs and attitudes including similar perception of how to make a living, similar judgment of current events, similar way of deal with various affairs, and similar expectations on the choice of future partner.

Mark for example, described that the most important life principles he has were inherited from his father:

I really don't like participating in the stock market, which is completely gotten from my family tradition. My parents are traditional and they are very righteous. They believe that it is only acceptable when you earn money through hard-working, slow but steady... I agree with them. I think the only good way of earning a future is to be down-to-earth and to be open and honest... The other thing is the sense of responsibility. I got it from my father who is very responsible and always able to finish what he started.

Rebecca has the similar attitudinal dependence on their parents. She mentioned that since she spent most of her time with her parents, she has been influenced greatly:

We have something alike, but there are also differences... For example, I'm more like my father. Our judgement on the same thing or thoughts on some events are sometimes similar... I have spent so much time with them, I have seen how they deal with things, or heard about their comments on what happened around us, so I may have similar patterns when I deal with things and relationships.

Cindy believes that her parents and she possess many common ideas towards some news events:

I think for some events, we really have similar ideas. For example, when there is some news events reported, and our family would discuss these events, we usually have the same attitude and comments towards them.

In terms of expectations of the future partner, Emily reported a high level of resemblance between her and her parents' criteria:

They wish I can end up with a guy who is down-to-earth and have the similar family background as mine. They disagree with guys whose family background is really bad or whose parents have divorced. The key point is that the person has to be a good man.... I think they made all these good points. These are actually our shared values and ideas about my future partner.

Likewise, Emma mentioned that her mother and she have similar expectations towards her future partner:

Actually my mom has similar ideas as me. We both expect that my future partner and I could have a similar family background... Indeed, their ideas definitely influence me a lot. I think I have mostly mainstream values and views. I think when faced with a question, I usually reach the same conclusion as my family members. So I don't mind their influence.

However, participants also show some unique opinions different from their father or mother. Despite the similarities, a majority of the respondents intentionally differentiate their values and beliefs from their parents. For instance, besides all the similarities, Emma also identified some disparities between her opinion and her parents'.

My mother thinks the fame of a university is the most important thing. But I disagree. To me, the most important thing is what I can learn from a university or a major. My father

is prudent. When I first started to shop online, he was against that, because he thought those were really not safe. I think he is too prudent to make risky decisions or make breakthroughs.

Strong emphasis on interdependence. Besides the parents' treatment of their children and children's dependence on parents, the researcher also found that participants place great emphasis on the interdependence between them and their parents. The interdependence is characterized by the mutual contribution of different parties and the connections between children's lives and parents' (Stierlin, 1974). The most obvious example is from Mary, who stated that her parents' lives and hers are interwoven:

My life is part of my parents' lives... In my first half of my life, my parents are responsible for me and take care of me. But in my latter half of my life, I'll grow up and be responsible for them.

Judy believes that her life is not completely separate from her parents' lives. Her future is closely related to returning the favour of her parents for taking care of her, so she would like to involve her parents in the decision-making process of her future directions because it is also part of their lives. She said: "My future is also related to how I am going to take care of my parents, so I think it's better to involve them early."

Rebecca's response also shows a strong emphasis on an interdependent living between her and her parents:

After all, they have devoted all their energy, love and a lot of money on me for twenty years. I couldn't just leave them on their own... Even though I might not work at home, I'll still ask my parents to move to where I live. I don't want to be separate from my parents... it may be really hard for them to get use to the life in the city of Guangzhou, but I'll definitely buy a place for them, and if they want, they can come here and live for a while with me.

Forming an Adult Identity

According to Erikson (1968), forming a coherent sense of identity is the major developmental task in the transition to adulthood. Facing the issue of coming of age, emerging adults are required to form a self-image or self-definition in the adult world by engaging in some self-explorations in various areas. In the course of exploration, emerging adults clarify their identity and deepen their self-understandings, which mean they gain more knowledge about who they are, who they want to become and what they want in life (Arnett, 2006). In the current research, all twelve sample participants reported that they do not feel like an adult, rather, they feel in-between adolescence and adulthood. Further, the researcher also found that the sample students fall behind in terms of their engagement of self-explorations: A majority of the sample university students have just began exploration or have not yet engaged in this process; therefore, participants reported that they have no clear sense of their own identity.

Self-definition as “in-between”. According to identity theory, a self-perception of adult status or feeling like an adult is a critical component of emerging adults’ adult identity formation (e.g., Erikson, 1968). In the current study, participants were asked to provide their self-perceived criteria of entering adulthood and to describe their own status. As mentioned above, none of the participants feel that they have completely reached adulthood or achieve the criteria they believed signal attaining adulthood. All twelve participants defined themselves as in-between adolescence and adulthood which means they do not feel like an adolescent anymore, but they do not feel like an adult either. For instance, Mary stated: “I’m definitely not an adult. But I don’t feel like an adolescent. I feel like I’m more mature than that. So I guess I’m more of an in-between status.” In this part, participants’ responses were coded and divided into the following three aspects:

- Self-perceived criteria of entering adulthood

- Not feeling like an adult
- Not feeling like an adolescent

Several examples regarding the three aspects will be provided to illustrate how the sample participants experience their adult identity formation process.

Self-perceived criteria of entering adulthood. Self-perceived criteria of entering adulthood means the criteria participants believed to be necessary for a person to be considered as an adult. It provides a personal definition of what it means to be an adult for oneself and important others (Hayford & Furstenberg, 2008). In the current research, participants proposed a number of different criteria of becoming an adult including: financial independence, independence of thought, taking responsibilities for one's action, maturity in dealing with relationships, freedom or control over life and support parents financially (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3

Self-perceived criteria of attaining adulthood

Criteria	Frequency	Descriptions
Financial independence	9	Self-sufficiency; To not rely on somebody else's financial assistance
Independence of thought	7	To think independently; to have independent judgments; to make independent decisions and choices; solve problems independently; to not always just follow ones' selfish or impulsive wills
Taking responsibility for one's action	3	To be aware of and willing to take on the responsibility of one's action
Maturity in dealing with social relationships	3	To be able to express thoughts and emotions appropriately; behave properly; to talk to parents on the same level
Freedom or control over life	1	To have the freedom to do what one wants in one's life and to make free choices.
Support parents financially	1	To give financial assistance to parents

Financial self-reliance is, among the others, the most frequently mentioned criterion of entering adulthood. Nine out of twelve participants believed financial independence is one of the most important criteria of becoming an adult. For example, Cindy mentioned that financial independence would offer her better control over life:

I think financial independence gives me better control over my life... If you're still financially dependent, all your money comes from your parents, and you can only take whatever amount they are willing to give you. So you don't have the autonomy to decide how to spend your money, and you'll feel largely restricted.

Similarly, Rebecca placed financial independence as one of the most important criteria of entering adulthood, and emphasized the freedom and control resulting from self-sufficiency by stating: "I think financial independence is the fundamental element. Only if you are financially independent, you can do whatever you want."

Emma held a similar idea which also attaches importance to full-time jobs, one of the traditional transition events:

I think financial independence is the most important aspect. Though it doesn't mean everything, but if I were to look for a criterion, I think this is a good one. When you get a full-time job, and are able to be self-sufficient, I think, it means you have become a grown-up.

Further, the sample students also consider independence of thought as an important criterion of achieving adulthood. In participants' narratives, independence of thought refers to the ability to think, to judge and to solve problems independently. It also involves making independent decisions and choices. For instance, Mary believes that to obtain independent thoughts is the most important criteria of attaining adulthood:

At first, a person should have independent thoughts ... (By independent thoughts, she means) the ability to think independently, to have one's own unique opinions or ideas and do not just follow other people's orders... The person should have independent judgments towards different things, and have a calm and mature attitude.

Diana also views the ability of thinking independently as one of the most important criteria of entering adulthood. She stated: “I think the most important feature (of attaining adulthood) is the ability to think independently, and solve problems independently.”

Emily thinks that the external factors such as marriage or full-time jobs do not play a decisive role in determining one’s adult status; instead, the subjective statuses such as inner strength and maturity are of great importance in judging whether or not a person has entered adulthood:

The most important criterion of entering adulthood is probably to think maturely and independently. I think this is very subjective. It is not the external events that decide whether or not one has become an adult including marriage or full-time jobs. I think inner maturity is the most important thing... It shows in the aspect of how to view an issue and how to judge it.

In addition to the most frequently mentioned criteria such as financial independence and inner independence, participants also reported that taking responsibilities for one’s action, maturity in dealing with social relationships and supporting parents financially serve as important criteria of achieving adulthood. Several examples from participants’ discourses will be provided to illustrate each one of the criteria. The first example is from Britney who believes that knowing the consequence of an action and willing to take the responsibilities also signals that a person has attained adulthood.

(To be an adult, a person should have) behavioural competence, by which I mean the acknowledgment of potential consequences of everything that he/she is planning on doing, legal or illegal, moral or immoral... Whether or not an action is going to be across the boundary of moral acceptance or to be illegal should be taken in to consideration.

The second example is used to illustrate the idea of “maturity in dealing with social relationships” which refers to attaining a certain level of maturity, skills and proficiency in interactions with different people. Britney explains that from her perspective, it means: “an adult

must have an idea of how to associate with different kinds of people... An adult has to be able to express one's thoughts and emotions, and behave properly."

The third example is to illustrate the criterion of supporting parents financially. It is also called making financial contribution to the family of origin. Emily believes that though inner maturity is the most important sign for her to be considered as an adult, to be able to support parents financially is more of a tangible criterion of convincing parents that she has become an adult:

If you can send a certain amount of money to your parents regularly, it means you have already had the adult ability. I think financial contribution is concrete enough to convince my parents that I have become an adult. Maturity of thoughts on the other hand is for me to make the judgment. Nobody else except for me knows for sure how much I have grown-up mentally. Even my parents don't know everything in the process either.

Not feeling like an adult. Based on the proposed criteria, all twelve participants expressed that they do not feel like an adult completely and they could not achieve their own criteria of adulthood. Some of them seem to be really confused about their current status. For instance, Mark described his current status as follows:

I have well-prepared mentally for becoming an adult, for the transition from a boy to a man. But other than that I'm not an adult at all. I'm not financially independent, to begin with. Secondly, from the aspect of being a human and dealing with all kinds of interpersonal relationships (Wei Ren Chu Shi), I'm not mature enough to handle that. Except for a steady mind of accepting all of these, I don't have anything actually to show myself as an adult.

Diana has similar feelings of not like an adult:

I feel like I am a kidult ("wei cheng nian"), which means in terms of my age, I have been legally an adult (by which I mean biological maturity) for a long time. But I have not achieved adulthood financially or psychologically.

Likewise, Cindy found her current status was really ambiguous and hard to describe:

In which ways do I feel like an adult? I don't know; it feels really not clear at all. In some ways, well, I think I can think maturely... I don't know. I think now, it really feels like a transition period. Everything seems so ambiguous to me.

In participants' narratives, the researcher found that participants feel a lack of control or autonomy in their lives, still intentionally avoid working or taking on responsibilities and exhibit a lack of social experience, which could all contribute to their feeling of not being an adult. Several examples will be provided to explain how participants feel about their adult status. The first is from Linda who feels that there are too many things that are out of her control, especially in terms of which university to go to and what area to study:

What you have learnt is not according to what you're interested in. It all depends on which university is willing to accept you and which area the university wants you to learn... We are not the one who makes choices; instead, we are chosen by them.

Besides the choice of universities and field of study, the interactions with parents such as parents treating participants like children and interfere too much in their lives (see the first part "separating from parents") could be another reason why children do not have sense of self-governance. For instance, Judy mentioned that if her parents treated her like an adult more, she could probably feel more like an adult:

If on the contrary, my parents need my suggestions on family issues or their own problems, they discuss those with me, and they believe I'm trustworthy, I'll be more convinced that I have grown up.

The third example is also from Judy, who reported that though she knows that she has to grow up, deep inside, she still hopes she can just stay in childhood forever.

I don't feel like an adult, but I don't feel like a child or adolescent anymore. I think I wanted to grow up mentally, but when things really happen to me, I wasn't mature enough to deal with them. Sometimes, I just don't want to be an adult, and I want to stay in childhood, so I don't need to worry about anything. It is really contradictory.

Linda stated that the only reason she chose to continue education was to avoid working directly after finishing her undergraduate studies. She thought that she was not well-prepared for the adult world and society.

When I prepared for the post-graduate study entrance exam, it is not because I really wanted to continue education. It is actually a way of avoiding working directly. Why didn't I want to work? It is because I didn't think I had been mentally mature enough to enter the society... On the one hand, entering the society means facing a lot of pressure and fierce competition. On the other hand, I have been staying in school for all my life. A sudden change of environment is really hard to accept for me... I need to prepare for it psychologically.

Emma on the other hand, mentioned that she does not feel like an adult, and she attributes this feeling to a lack of social experiences:

I'm not an adult. Firstly, I'm not independent. Though I have some mature thoughts, these thoughts have not been converted into actions. For example, a real adult can handle complex social problems. But I always stay in school and never really enter society, so I'm lacking in these social experiences and abilities.

Not feeling like an adolescent. The feeling of in-between also indicates that the participants do not feel like an adolescent any more. One of the most important reasons is their biological age and physical maturity (participants are aged from 20-25 years). Some participants also reported that though they have not achieved the adult maturity and independence, they stop acting like rebellious adolescents anymore and they are making progress of gaining maturity and independence. Several examples will be offered to illustrate this phenomenon. The first example is from Britney, who stated that she already has a relatively mature way of dealing with social relationships:

If I were to measure my age, I think from the aspect of dealing with all kinds of social relationships, I'm like a twentysomething... For example, when I was young and I disliked someone, I would refuse to talk to them or deal with them. But now I know this is not the best way of dealing with interpersonal relationships. You can still avoid too much interaction with the person, but you need to at least remain polite and be just friends.

Mary mentioned that, unlike in adolescence, she has already formed a philosophy about life and love, stopped acting rebellious and has become more down-to-earth:

Well, in some occasion, I can think and act as an adult. Like some naive mistakes that are often made by adolescents such as being rebellious won't happen to me... I think I have already formed a sense of worth, and the philosophy about love and life. Unlike adolescents who might only have a vague idea of what love is and have unrealistic ideals and dreams, I think I'm more down-to-earth.

Emily also states that because of her biological age, she could not see herself as an adolescent:

On the other hand, I feel like I have certain knowledge and I understand most of the things, and besides, I'm already 23, so I don't feel like a child or an adolescent anymore.

In addition, Emma claimed that she knows to care about other people's feelings make some independent decisions, which differentiate her from adolescents:

When I think about something, I can think more maturely. I would consider what I want to do with my future and I would make decisions for myself. Basically, in these decisive issues, I have my own considerations and ideas. I know that I have to shoulder something for my family. A child only cares about oneself, but I will think about and care about other people.

Self-exploration. Erikson (1968) and Levinson (1979) both agree that in the transition to adulthood, exploration is a necessary means of finding the right path of life and forming a coherent sense of identity. Erikson argues that identity crisis is characterized by extensive self-exploration and analysis. Since emerging adulthood could be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium that happens during an identity crisis, according to Arnett (2004), emerging adults are prone to self-explorations. Some participants reported that they have engaged in a certain level of self-explorations, but others did not intentionally explore their identity, interest or strength. Most of the participants maintain that they need more time to think about what they really like and really want. The participants' responses are coded as follows:

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- Beginning self-exploration (participant in school activities to gain better self-understanding)
 - Needed more time to understand the self
 - High school restriction on development of interest and talent

Beginning self-explorations. The first example is from Rebecca who believed that the university context provided her a platform to engage in different activities and gain more knowledge about herself:

There are a lot of student activities and organizations on campus. I think by working in these organizations, I met various people. Everybody has something that they're really good at, and something that they can't handle. In comparison with different people, I started to realize what I'm bad at and what my weaknesses are. I found that I'm awkward in communicating with strangers or doing public relations. So I guess I'm not very good at doing jobs that involve complicated interpersonal relationships... I guess I'm just too obedient and well-behaved and lacking in spirit. For example, if we had to plan a big event and we had a huge design, I would think about the personnel, the funding and I thought we didn't have the ability to do such a big event. Some people say I'm not ambitious, but I think I'm just very realistic.

Similarly, Emma claimed that the activities in university and in the internship she engaged in helped her uncover weaknesses and strengths that she has not noticed before:

I'm aware of my strength and weaknesses. I figured that out from taking part in activities, and observe other people's behaviours and performances. I have my strength, but I don't think these strengths would give me obvious advance in fierce competition... I found that I still need to work on my interpersonal skills and on better use of language. Sometimes, I couldn't really catch other people's point and I found myself not smooth in expressing myself. Especially in front of strangers, I was shy and reluctant to talk. Before, I think I was trapped in an ivory tower, so I didn't know my problem very well. And during the internship, I realized that I need to expand my range of knowledge.

Sarah said that she was lucky because her two internships both went successfully and that this gave her confidence, better self-understandings and confirmed her future direction as a journalist.

I'm lucky, because the two internships I have had were very successful. The journalists who trained me were very nice, so as the working environment. ... (After that) I think I

have a clear outline of myself. I'm aware of my advantages and disadvantages. I have a preliminary idea of which direction I should take in the future.

Needed more time to understand the self. Though a few participants reported that they have started some self-explorations in university, a majority of them feel that these explorations were not enough and they still need more time to deal with identity issues and obtain better self-understandings about what they really want out of their life and who they really are. For instance, Cindy reported that in order to form a better understanding of herself, she needs more time to experience society:

Cindy: I think I need more time. After all, I'm doing my undergraduate studies now. I think I'll really need to interact with people in the work place to see what I'm lacking.

Researcher: you mean you still don't have a clear idea of your self-position or self-value.

Cindy: that's right. I think I'm unclear about that.

In addition, Emma also stated that she wanted to have more time to thinking about her unique strengths, form an ideological system and find something to focus on in her post-graduate studies:

I haven't found a strong advantage of myself which could give me enough confidence in career and work when I'm doing my undergraduate study. Since I haven't prepared well enough for work, I can find my real strength in postgraduate study. In that sense, I think I would be more advantageous in the future... I just wanted to give myself more time to prepare through the postgraduate study. I hope to form my own ideological system, and find an area or something that I can focus on.

Meanwhile, Emily mentioned that she has to really start working to look for what she really wanted and liked:

My currently status is that I have not found one thing that I am really passionate about and I really want to do. So I'll just go for some ordinary jobs right now, not the ones I really loved.

High school restrictions. Different from the university admission-policy in most western societies, in which universities accept applications from high school students directly and grant offers of admission, in China, taking the nation-wide college entrance examination is the only

way to be admitted to a university. The score of this competitive entrance examination is the only proof of candidates' personal ability, based only on which universities recruit students. Given the significance of the final score, high school students are encouraged to focus only on academics in order to receive a good result (Nelson & Chen, 2007). In the current study, some participants complained that the huge pressure in high school discouraged their self-exploration in their interests and personality which leads to a blindness in choosing majors and universities. For instance, Mark described that he did not have time to do self-exploration in high school:

In high school, I really didn't have time to think about interest. I was overwhelmed by piles of homework and endless exams. As long as you don't force me to do more examination papers, I would do anything. So there was no such thing as a strong interest for me.

Another example is from Emily, who stated that her focus in high school was just the score of the college entrance exam. Her interest and future major were not taken into consideration:

Everybody was just busy preparing for the final exam and hoping to enter a prestigious university. As for the major or field of study, students didn't think too much about it. At least the people I know didn't consider that as an important issue... (When I chose my major), I didn't know what it is really about. The choice of major is basically out of my imagination or other people's comments

Emma confirmed that her choice of Journalism is not the result of self-exploration or careful contemplation in high school. She completely focused on the college entrance examination and did not have time to think about that:

When I filled the (selection of universities and majors) form, I didn't know what I'm exactly going to learn under the name "Journalism" or "Economics". I only have a very vague idea of what journalism is and what I can do if I studied journalism. If I talked to anybody else about our major, probably most people would assume it is about how to host a TV show. I thought it was something similar when I filled the form. In the discourses, I had only an incomplete or false idea of this area. The only thing I knew is that people said it is a good field to study.

No clear sense of self. As analyzed above, most of the participants' initial attempts of self-exploration including interest and personality, which according to Erikson's (1968) theory should take place in high school, were largely restricted or confined due to the intense pressure and homework resulted from the ideal of getting a good score in college entrance examination. Though some students have reported a certain level of self-exploration in university, most participants believe that they have not formed a clear sense of self yet. Mary's statement gives us a better idea of her own identity development status:

I don't usually do self-analysis. Until now, I still don't have a clear idea of who I am and what is my future plan. I'm not sure what type of job is suitable for me...I'm not certain about myself including the position of myself, future life directions or advantages. I really don't know. I think that I don't need to make everything crystal clear. I'm satisfied with my current situation... As for the future career, a person is probably not able to get everything she/he wants, so just let nature take its course, and don't think or plan too much. There is always a door open for me. That's what I always believe.

Rebecca also asserted that she did not have clear sense of self:

I think I'm the kind of person who doesn't have a clear understanding of herself. I don't know what I like. I think if you ask me to learn economics or management, I can do it. If you want me to learn history, I can also do that. I don't have a particularly strong interest in anything.

Additionally, Mark said he was not interested in his own field of study, and had never really thought about what he wants for his future before the third year of undergraduate studies.

I should say that I was never really interested in my major from the beginning. I was always in a floating status. When there are other classes in other fields, I would go there and just sit down and listen to the lectures. But before my third year of university, I had no plans or thoughts about my future. I didn't care what I was studying and whether I should continue studying it, all I wanted was to get good scores.

Finding a Place in the Larger Society

According to Erikson (1968), growing up is also a social process in which young people engage in role experimentation to “find a niche in some section of society” (p. 156). Similar to Erikson’s statement, Levinson (1979) also believes that to fully enter adulthood, a young person has to “make a place for oneself in the adult world and to create a life structure that will be viable in the world and suitable for the self” (p. 72). By niche and place in the society, Erikson and Levinson both refer to the commitments to occupation and marriage-family. According to their theories, getting a full-time job, accumulating social experience and making commitments to marriage and other stable relationships are significant signs of entering adulthood. In the current research, all twelve participants reported that they have not engaged in full-time employment or stable relationships such as marriage and parenthood.

Employment. Work or employment is a major part of a person’s life, which exerts influence on one’s income, socioeconomic status, available choices and resources and one’s interpersonal relationships (Levinson, 1979). An occupation could facilitate individual identity formation by providing a platform, on which an individual can fulfill one’s dreams and extend one’s capacity, or it can be a mismatch of a person’s biological and psychological development which results in one’s identity confusion. Since all the participants stated that they have not yet engaged in full-time or part-time employment, the following section was coded and divided into two domains to investigate the attempt of Chinese emerging adults in exploring their occupational commitments:

- *Exploring occupational possibilities*
- *Career planning*

Direct quotes will be drawn from the participants’ interviews to illustrate these domains.

Exploring occupational possibilities. Generally speaking, most of the participants reported that they have started a certain level of explorations to search for the possible directions for their future career. Interestingly, most of their explorations, despite some exceptions, were limited to the areas that are directly related to their current field of study. Another finding is that, even though participants have started some explorations, these explorations did not seem to make their career plan clearer and participants were still confused about what to do in the future.

The first example is from Emily, who believes that her current field of study actually limited her explorations in future occupations:

Now for me a job or a career is the most important thing... I have not found one thing that I am really passionate about and I really want to do... I was interning in different newspaper offices to experience and to see whether or not I liked this job. I didn't do too much experimentation in other areas, because the chances are also limited by my own field of study... I think I still wanted to do something related to media; especially I have studied this for several years. It is impossible to experiment in some areas that are not related at all.

Similarly, Cindy has done some initial explorations within her own field of study:

I am studying Broadcasting and Television journalism which covers many areas. So I have practiced in a lot of fields to try out every one of them. For example, I participated in the student broadcasting station in university to see what is broadcasting and how I like it. I also went to make films with my fellow students to see if film creation is suitable for me. In addition, I went to the TV station as an intern to experience the working environment... The internship makes me realize that things are different in the real world. Reality and imaginations are really different... I found there is a good side and a bad side for each one of these areas, so I'm still confused.

In addition, Judy mentioned that her internship in a newspaper agency confused her about her future career, but she was planning on starting another exploration:

My internship in newspaper offices made me realize that journalist is different from what I thought. Then I started to be really confused about what I should do in the future... I didn't want to be a journalist and to report news. I have had no idea what I wanted to do, and what suits my ability. But just a while ago, I actually found something I could do in the future. When I was watching TV shows, I found that I really hate the inconsistency of scenes in the TV program. Besides, I was passionate about the films and TVs. So I

wanted to try the position of “Second Assistant Camera” during the production of a TV program or a film.

Different from the above mentioned participants who have only engaged in limited occupational explorations, Mark, who was originally studying electrical engineering, had an extensive exploration ranging from finance to hardware design:

When I was in the last year of my undergraduate study... I formed a strong interest in finance, by which I mean stocks. I have read a lot of books in this area... (because) I think probably finance is the quickest way of getting (money)... But in the end, I found that really unrealistic, so I gave up and went back to technology... (At first) I didn't think I have the advantage to compete with other people in the software development... So I gave up on this area, and then I turned to software designing with higher requirements, like designing hardware drivers. But after a while, I found that... my efforts have to be based on the things that have already developed by someone else which I felt out of control. Then I switched again to hardware related techniques.

Though Mark has spent the last year of his undergraduate study thinking about what he should do and he has explored so many areas at school, he was still not sure about what he is going to do later in the future. He only had a general idea about running his own business: “I'll do whatever makes money.”

Career planning. Although participants mentioned that they have engaged in different levels of occupational explorations, only a few of them have formed a systematic career plan. A career plan is, according to Gould (1979), a goal set by individuals to achieve in selected areas or occupations, which influences greatly one's career behaviours, satisfaction and self-esteem. Gould suggested that a clear career plan helps people uncover their career potential and also signifies the readiness of a person to enter the job market and take on social roles. A majority of the participants reported that they only have a general idea or a vague plan for their future. The

first example is from Emma who is preparing for the post-graduate study entrance exam believed that her current effort did not make her plan clearer:

To be honest I don't think what I'm doing right now such as preparing the entrance exam make my career plan clearer. I still have only this vague idea, a general direction... If I can work several years in newspaper offices, I think it'll be great. But I don't want to stay too long in a newspaper office... If possible, I want to get a job offer from other companies... I actually prefer to work in a company.

Mary claimed that she did not have a clear career plan, and she believed that she did not need one to live her life.

I don't have a clear career plan (but) I'll definitely do something related to media... I think every task, whether it is from teachers or from friends, as long as I do it with all my heart and thoughts, I don't really care about if it is something I liked or it is something suitable for me.

Similarly, Rebecca who is studying international politics had no career plans, because she has not found what she is really interested in or good at. She has an ambitious short-term plan to try out different things that cover various choices and areas:

I don't have a career plan, I guess that's because I have never really worked before. It is like choosing a major. I don't have a strong interest in any area and I can study anything... So I really wanted to do an internship. Maybe after that I would figure out what I'm good at. .. My plan is to finish the IELTS test first, then the exam for qualification of working in securities, then intern in a company and then take the civil service exam... I think I can do financial management or do accounting. Also, I wanted to be a consultant, a financial consultant. And I think human resources management is also what I wanted to do.

In addition, Cindy mentioned that she had a short-term plan but it is subject to change:

I have some short-term plans, but I don't have a big general plan. I wanted to go to Hong Kong to continue my graduate studies. After graduation, I may think about doing other things, after all plans are always subject to change. In the future, I think I'll still do something related to media and communication. Whether I will work for newspaper or for a television station, I'll decide when the time comes... If I am tired, I'm going to do an administrative work in universities and college, or if my future partner has a good and busy job, I'll choose administrative job directly after finishing the graduate studies in Hong Kong.

Marriage and parenthood. Marriage is believed by anthropologists to be the most salient and worldwide standard of becoming an adult in traditional non-western cultures (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Many studies also found that a stable marriage is associated with higher psychological well-being, lower substance use and antisocial behaviours than being unmarried (e.g., Bachman et al., 2002; Gove, 1974; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998; Waite, 1995). According to participants' responses, none of them have engaged in marriage or parenthood, but 11 out of 12 participants reported that they are definitely going to get married one day and have children. Linda, for example, stated that she definitely wanted marriage: "I hope it is going to be when I'm 31 or 32 years old." Britney also expressed that she would definitely get married and have children one day:

It is really impossible to remain single all the time... I like children. But I don't have the sense of responsibility now, so even if I got married, I still need to wait for a while to see when I should have children.

Similarly, Mark said that he was thinking about getting married and preparing for marriage:

I haven't thought about that (marriage) before, but now, I'm thinking about it every day... It is not only necessary but also costly... I think after two or three years, when I have a stable job by which I mean I work at a fixed location. This is because if I am going to get married, I need to buy a place or a house that belongs to both of us. I can't ask a girl to live in a rented place with me and just get married like that.

Mary was highly positive about marriage and parenthood. She hoped that she could get married when she turns 27 years old:

I will get married at the age of 27 years... I'll graduate at 25 years old. After two years working, I think it's the right time to make sure whether or not I could be married. Another important factor is that I believe the age of 28 is right for women to have children. Once over 30 years, it is too late for women to have children.

Participants also talked about the roles they are going to play in their marriage and family.

Nearly all of the female participants believed that family to them outweighs their career, while

the male participant attached greater importance to career. Mark, the only male participant, said:

“career is the most important thing for me right now. Love has to always build upon bread.”

Cindy, on the other hand, reported that she would definitely devote more time and energy in family instead of work. She said: “I’ll spend more time on supporting my husband and teaching my children. I think family is very important to me.”

Similarly, Linda was willing to take care of all the housework and support her future husband:

If I have a husband who has the ability to support the family, I can stay at home and be a full-time housewife. But if he is not able to support the family, I can work outside and still take care of the housework after work.

Though Linda did not mind to be a full-time housewife, most of the female participants expressed that they will need to have their own career even after marriage. For instance, Emily said that: “I’ll still work, because only if I have an independent earning, can I get a better status in my family.” Although Mary believed that family is more important than career to her, she still needs to work at a job:

I definitely don’t want to be a full-time house wife. I need a job and I’ll work. Once I get married, my family definitely outweighs my career. But I don’t want to sacrifice too much in my career either. When they are in conflict, my choice is going to be family.

Diana also mentioned that she is going to work even after she gets married, but she wanted her husband to make the major earnings for the family:

I’ll definitely work. I want my husband to be the person to support the family. I would save the money I earn in the event that anything could happen.

Stable relationship. Since the participants have not engaged in marriage or parenthood, cohabitation or other stable relationships could also be viewed as important commitments which both signal and promote the completion of transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2004). According to participants’ interviews, there are only four currently engaging in romantic relationships. Within

the four participants, most of them expressed that their current relationships are not stable and are highly subjective to change. For instance, Rebecca believed that there were too many variables in her relationship, so it is not stable at all:

We haven't really talked about marriage yet. This is the first time I had this relationship with a guy. We have only been together for about 6 months, and we didn't go so deeply. I think there are still a lot of variables in our relationship, and it is always subject to change.

Cindy also stated that she is situated in a transitional period, during which everything seems not stable including her relationship with her current boyfriend:

We all believe it is too early to think about marriage. So we won't think too much about getting married or having children. I should say we are not daring to think about it, because everything is changing so fast right now that no one can guarantee anything... He thinks that long-distance love is impossible, but I disagree.

Summary

A qualitative thematic analysis with twelve Chinese university students revealed many interesting subthemes about their experiences in emerging adulthood under three main themes which are generated from Erikson's and Levinson's theories, including the aspects of separating from parents, forming an adult identity and finding a place in the society. In general, participants demonstrated low completion level of each of the three developmental tasks. These results are discussed further in the following chapter, examining the significance of these findings in the context of Chinese culture, and exploring the implications for the study of emerging adulthood.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter will offer an analysis and a discussion of the key findings presented in the previous chapter. It will discuss the findings within the context of Chinese sociocultural background and the theoretical framework for this study. Possible links between Chinese emerging adults' unique experience embedded in the Chinese culture and society will be uncovered and discussed.

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of Chinese emerging adults (university students, in particular) transitioning to mature adulthood. Specifically, the research focused on the study participants' experience of separating from family of origin, forming an adult identity and finding a place for the self in the larger society, the three major developmental tasks that are derived from the theoretical framework. According to Erikson (1968) and Levinson (1979), the completion of the developmental tasks of one stage signals an individual's capability of and readiness to move on to the next stage. According to the theory, successfully loosening the parent-child tie, forming a clear sense of identity in the adult world and making commitments in love and work indicate a person has entered full-fledged adulthood. For the sample participants in general, all between the ages of 20 and 25 years, it was found that (a) a majority of them had low levels of separation from parents; (b) all of them define themselves as somewhere in between adolescence and adulthood; and (c) few of them have made enduring commitments to full-time work, marriage or stable relationships. The findings suggest that the participants are typical emerging adults who are taking an extended period of time preparing for adulthood.

Given the low completion level of each developmental task, it is speculated that the Chinese context and culture could play a role in postponing the maturity of its young adults.

Inconsistent with Badger, Nelson and Barry (2006), who argue that Chinese culture contributes to a shortened emerging adulthood, this study suggest that it may be the uniqueness of the Chinese society that lengthened the road of its young people (from a certain social class) to mature adulthood. However, owing to the limited scope and the small sample size of this study (e.g., mostly university students from middle class families), the results cannot be applied to Chinese young people from other groups, but these results do extend our understandings of emerging adulthood in China, and provide a basis on which future work could further explore this interesting developmental issue.

Separation from Parents

Generally speaking, the study participants report a relatively low level of separation from their family of origin. A majority of the participants reported that: (1) their parents did not treat them as equal adults, and (2) they were highly dependent on their parents. The researcher speculates that this low level of separation may result from some aspects of Chinese cultural and social factors. The following section will discuss how Chinese cultural and social context makes their separation from parents hard to achieve.

Chinese parenting style. The results show that Chinese parents of the participants tend not to discuss important familial decisions with their adult children, overly interfere with their personal issues, and do not expect their children to take on adult responsibilities or to face the complexity of the adult world. This result is consistent with previous literature which suggests that many Chinese parents, under the influence of the Confucian doctrine, adopt an authoritarian or controlling parenting style in which parents tend to exert “governance” (Guan) or control over their children’s lives and expect their children to be obedient and respectful (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; Chiu, 1987; Lin & Fu, 1990; Stewart et al., 1998; Xu et al., 2005). Previous studies have

revealed that excessive parental control or an authoritarian parenting style is seen as an inhibiting or intrusive parent-child interaction which impedes children's individuation and autonomy (e.g., Barber, 1996; Baumrind, 1966; Grolnick, & Ryan, 1989).

Instead of expecting mature behaviours from their children or encouraging open and two-way communications between parents and children, many Chinese parents emphasize selfless devotion and investment of money, concern and care in their children (Xu et al., 2005). As suggested by Chao (1994), it is regarded as traditional role responsibilities or requirements of Chinese parents to govern or control children's behaviours and development. Thus, the culturally accepted parenting style (discouraging independence and autonomy of children) could explain why parents are overly involved in their children's lives and decision-making processes, both of which may contribute to low separation levels of young adults from parents.

On the other hand, the findings also indicate that Chinese emerging adults are highly dependent on their parents financially and emotionally. Though many participants reported that they can independently deal with daily trivial things and make insignificant decisions, 11 out of 12 participants are currently dependent on their parents to pay for all the expenses of their studies and lives. Previous research suggests that it is typical in Chinese culture that parents provide full financial support to their children until children have the ability to support themselves (Li, 2006; Lu, 2009; Tsui & Rich, 2002). However, as the popularization of higher education and, accordingly, the increasingly extended years of schooling grows, emerging adults, especially those who pursue higher education, now have a longer period of time remaining financially dependent which postpones their overall independence, autonomy and formation of a separate identity. Even if children have finished school and had a full-time job, if they cannot make ends meet, a majority of the Chinese parents are still willing to give adult children financial assistance,

which leads to even less financial independence and development of autonomy (Li, 2006). This phenomenon, which is characterized by young adults moving back to their parents' home after graduation, still spending their parents' money in their mid-20s or early 30s, and withdrawing from the labour market, has been identified by many Chinese media under the name of "Living on the Elderly". The young adults who live on the elderly can be seen as an extreme case of emerging adulthood and many groups blame them for their excessive dependence and the potential negative effects on parents' psychological well-being, traditional family dynamics and economic growth (Sun, 2004).

Confucian-Collectivistic values. In addition, the significance Confucianism attached to family, Hsiao (filial piety) (see chapter two) and interdependence contribute to a strong parent-child tie (Mei, 2008), which makes the separation from family of origin even harder to achieve for Chinese emerging adults. In Chinese society, family (rather than individuals) --considered as the basic unit of the social hierarchy --has played a core role and served as the sustaining force for hundreds of years (Saso, 1999). The concept of filial piety is one of the most important social values in family dynamics. For the idea of filial piety, according to Lang (1968), children are not only required to respect and care about their parents, but also are required to do so in a way that is full of warmth and love, in order to keep their parents happy. As the idea of filial piety is a social norm, it is harder for Chinese emerging adults to not consider their parents' feelings and opinions and to make completely independent decisions. This strong sense of filial piety was clearly identified among participants in this study.

Additionally, in the current Chinese society, family, especially adult children, still serve as the primary provider of care for the elderly, in return for their parents giving birth to them and bringing them up (Chen & Silverstein, 2000; Shi, 1993; Yuan 1987). This is in sharp contrast to

the use of institutional care of the elderly (e.g., seniors' residences) throughout the Western world. The importance of interdependence between generations is derived from Confucian doctrine and is reinforced by Chinese authorities in a form of contemporary Chinese moral standards (Fong, 2004). This strong emphasis on interdependence of parents' and children's lives could be another factor that contributes to a tightened parental tie. In the study participants' responses, it was a common perception that their lives are interwoven with their parents' lives; thus, it is better to include their parents in the decision-making process (e.g., career, future partner), because how the adult children choose their future also influences how the parents live their older years.

One-child policy. Further, the one-child policy, to some extent, intensifies the traditional Chinese parent-child bond. Because of the one-child policy, as pointed out by Xu et al. (2005), the parent-child relationship plays a dominant role in the current family system as sibling relationships become unavailable in most families and the marital relationships were traditionally ranked in the second place. Since there is only one child in the family, parents can devote all their love, attention and care to their only children, which was reported by Jing et al. (1987) to be associated with parents' over-protection of and over-investment in single children. In a positive sense, parental attention and involvement can contribute to an enhanced parent-child relationship. In the current study, nine out of twelve sample participants are single children and generally reported a positive relationship with parents without excessive anger, anxiety or resentment. However, in a negative sense, due to the strong and tightened parental tie, it can be speculated that Chinese emerging adults may experience a more difficult and prolonged process of separation from their parents than their counterparts in western societies, whose parents are

actually reported to encourage and support independence and autonomy from children (Lin & Fu, 1990).

Forming an Adult Identity

Participants' self-perceived criteria of entering adulthood and self-report of their current status were both collected for further analysis. The current research found that a majority of the participants have not formed a self-perception of adult status which, according to Erikson's (1968) definition, is considered as a key component of adult identity. Further, the study found that, in general, the sample participants had engaged in little self-exploration, which may explain their lack of self-knowledge and unclear sense of identity.

Self-definition as “in-between”. All twelve participants defined themselves as in-between adolescence and adulthood. Specifically, they reported that they were no longer rebellious or childish like an adolescent, but that they were not mature and independent enough to be considered as a full adult. Nelson et al. (2004) argues that this “in-between” description from young people's own narratives could be seen as a piece of convincing evidence which supports Arnett's (2000) argument that emerging adulthood should be examined as a distinct developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood. Since all participants did not feel like adults, their self-perceived criteria of entering adulthood and the possible reasons why they define themselves as in-between become interesting. These will be discussed next.

Self-perceived criteria of entering adulthood. The self-perceived criteria of entering adulthood are an interesting finding of this research, which reflect the co-existence of individualistic and collectivistic values in Chinese society as described in Chapter two. In the current research, financial independence, independence of thought, taking responsibility for

one's action, and maturity in dealing with social relationships were the most frequently mentioned criteria of attaining adulthood. These criteria suggest what it means for Chinese young people to become an adult. Interestingly, the first three criteria are highly similar to the perceived criteria among American college students (e.g., Arnett, 1994; 2004), who endorse criteria such as making independent decisions, taking responsibilities for one's action and becoming financially self-sufficient as indicators of the attainment of adulthood. This result is consistent with Nelson et al. (2004) who also identified a certain level of similarity between Chinese and American students' self-reported criteria of entering adulthood, such as accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions and becoming financially independent from parents.

The similarity of these responses could reflect the common endorsement of some universal values across cultures, such as independence and sense of responsibility (Nelson et al., 2004). With China's development of a market economy and opening up to world trade, more western individualistic values have been accepted by Chinese people in recent years (Sigley, 2006). Research also reveals that Chinese young people embrace individualistic values such as personal achievement and freedom in Chinese culture, values which contrast with those that are more Chinese such as collectivism (Garrott, 1995; Lau, 1992). The last criterion, maturity in dealing with social relationships, reflects the importance Chinese cultural values put on social relationships and connections with others. According to Triandis (1995), this exceptional emphasis on relationships reflects a collectivistic orientation.

In addition, Badger et al. (2006) found that Chinese emerging adults view supporting parents financially as an important criterion of attaining adulthood. This finding sounds convincing especially in the context of Chinese culture, which is known for its emphasis on

family obligations. However, only one participant in the current study identified it as a marker of entering adulthood. Many other participants reported that though it is indeed an important and required action during adulthood, it cannot be achieved as soon as one enters adulthood. In China, the intense competition for the job market and the difficulty posed by the current economic situation make supporting parents financially hard to achieve in the first several years of full-time employment (Sun, 2004); thus, many participants do not see this as an important criterion of moving into adulthood, though it is seen as ultimately essential for adulthood.

Limited self-exploration. Erikson (1968) and Levinson (1979) both argue that identity exploration is an important developmental task in the transition to adulthood. The process of identity exploration in the domains of love, work and ideology is, according to Arnett (2006), also a self-evaluating and self-exploring process during which emerging adults gradually clarify their identities. Specifically, this process involves obtaining more knowledge about who they are, what they like and can do and how they want to live in the future. Interestingly, the researcher found that participants generally have a low level of self-knowledge and self-exploration which may become one of the reasons why the sample participants reported to have an unclear sense of identity.

One possible reason of the lack of self-exploration may lie in China's current educational model, which is characterized by "rote learning" or "teaching to the test" (Ross, 1991, p. 74). As pointed out by Wu and Singh (2004), Chinese students need to take standard exams for the admission to virtually all levels of schools, from elementary school all the way to university and even higher education. The scores of each test are usually the only proof of candidates' personal ability, which also serve as the major criteria that teachers, parents, peers and even the students themselves use to judge or evaluate an individual (Qi, 1998; Zhang & Wei, 2001). As pointed

out by Chen and Chang (2007), Chinese students' academic performance is positively related to the acquisition of social status, peer relationships and psychological well-being, while academic failure (low scores) is found to be related to peer rejection and other school related social problems. Hence, numerous exams become not only the turning points of students' lives, but also the major way to appraise their performance and ability in each level. Relying on the test scores and other external appraisals may discourage Chinese students from spontaneously engaging in extensive self-evaluation.

In addition, so many exams also bring huge pressure and busy school lives for students who now lack the time to develop their interests and explore the self. Erikson (1968) argues that identity explorations and the accompanying self-exploration should most likely take place during adolescence, especially mid-adolescence which is about the same time as high school. However, this period of time is also considered as the most stressful period in Chinese students' lives due to the heavy pressure of study and exams (Siegel, 2007). Especially the nation-wide College Entrance Examinations, as Chen and Chang (2007) argued, are highly competitive, in which, fewer than 20 per cent of the high school graduates could successfully make it to university each year. The intensive pressure leaves high school students little time or chance to ponder and explore the most important identity questions such as "who am I?" and is reported to be related to students' increasing suicidal rate and mental problems (Siegel, 2007).

Further, due to the importance of performing well in each life-determining exam, teachers' efforts are mainly focused on designing didactic classes based on text books or the test itself, aiming to put knowledge "from the books into students' heads" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 432). As argued by Maley (1983), this way of obtaining knowledge and using books is different from the western style in which books are generally used for interpretations and settling disputes. The

passive, one-way pedagogy has received considerable criticism including that it reduces students' interest in learning, limits creativity and discourages critical thinking (e.g., Murphy, 1987; Nelson, 1995; Tsui, 1996). Besides, many teachers and parents discourage students' exploration of interests in different fields by constraining their participation in extra-curricular activities because other interests would be viewed as distractions from getting good exam result (Guo, 2005). All these sociocultural factors added up may deprive the opportunity for self-exploration which could explain the results of current study that most participants only engage in their initial self-exploration once they have entered university.

Finding a Place in the Society

The results suggest that Chinese emerging adults (university students) have not made systematic commitments towards occupations or marriage. None of the participants (aged 20-25 years) have had a full-time or part-time job and none of them have engaged in marriage or parenthood. Although a majority of the participants reported positive perceptions of marriage and parenthood, few of them were engaged in stable relationships with a love partner. In addition, most participants have started a certain level of explorations in the domains of work and society, but these explorations seems to be limited to their own field of study and generally have not helped participants make their career plans and future directions clearer.

Limited exploration in love and work. In Chinese society, Children's marriage was traditionally dominated and arranged by parents (Parish, 1975). Under this tradition, young people one or two generations ago usually entered marriage directly without any explorations of love. As the marriage law in the People's Republic of China (which took effect in 1951) was made, this old fashioned practice was announced to be abolished (Parish, 1975). Chinese young people have gradually been allowed to choose their own marriage partners, which grant them the

freedom to explore areas of love and romantic relationships before they develop stable relationships and finally enter marriage. One of the key findings of this study, that Chinese emerging adults tend to postpone their exploration of love and romantic relationships to university or even later, could be associated with China's current educational mode. As revealed by Chen and Chang (2007), dating and romantic relationships are strongly discouraged or even forbidden for middle school and high school students in China, though the restrictions are relatively loosened in colleges or universities. As mentioned above, Chinese teachers and schools tend to discourage anything that distracts students, and especially high school students, from academic achievement, including romantic relations which are even seen as a threat and a risk factor leading to unstable academic performance (Guo, 2005; Xu, 2009). Thus, many Chinese students are likely to postpone their initial attempt to explore love and romantic relationships to college or university years. This exploration might take years to accomplish; thus, a delayed exploration of love (to university or even later) could be seen as a reason why most participants reported that they have not engaged in stable relationships.

In terms of the exploration of different fields of work, Arnett (2004) refers to a feature of "instability" of emerging adulthood and argues that American college students are likely and allowed to change majors when their interests shift, by which means they explore different areas and possibilities in future career directions with the freedom to change their minds. According to Erikson (1968) and Levinson (1979), this exploration of different possibilities is viewed as an important means of finding the right occupation or career that fits a young adult's interest and personal ability. However, it is pointed out that Chinese university students are generally not allowed to change majors once they are admitted to a certain specification (China 100 blog, as

cited in Nelson & Chen, 2007, p. 89). This regulation in Chinese universities may limit young people's explorations in various domains besides their originally assigned areas.

Unclear career plan. Another important finding of this research is that a majority of the participants have not formed a clear career plan which, according to Gould (1979), indicates the readiness of a person to enter the job market. The results suggest that, to some extent, most of the participants are not well-prepared for a future career. One possible reason for this phenomenon is that Chinese emerging adults generally have a certain level of blindness in terms of choosing their major fields of study, which may lead to a mismatch between students and the academic environments and a low satisfaction level of students. Specifically, participants generally recognized the dominant role parents and teachers play in their choice of universities and majors, and admitted that they had little knowledge about their majors before they actually started their studies.

Previous research reveals the link between choice of major and students' satisfactions (Feldman, Smart, & Ethington, 1999; Porter & Umbach, 2006). For example, Feldman et al (1999) argue that a good fit of academic environment and personal interest and ability is associated with higher levels of educational stability, satisfaction, and achievement. Chinese students' lack of knowledge in choosing a major could result in a certain level of dissatisfaction. Due to the difficulty of entering a university, according to the participants' responses, those who experience a "lack of fit" tend *not* drop out of school. Students who are stuck in a wrong major are not able to change it and do not engage in exploration of other areas and thus may develop a sense of confusion with regards to their future career directions. These students therefore may require a longer period of time to figure out what their place in society will be.

Impact of Emerging Adulthood on Chinese Young People

Based on the analysis above, Chinese young people (mostly from urban middle class families) are under a high level of social control and supervision from parents, teachers and schools, especially in the first twenty years of their lives. This intense social control seems to be not loosened until their entrance into college or university when they can actually start engaging in exploration of different areas including love, work and ideology. As Arnett (2000) argues, emerging adults enjoy a high level of freedom in that they are less likely to be controlled by parents than adolescents and to be constrained by adult roles and responsibilities than full adults. In that sense, study participants are typical emerging adults who engage in initial identity explorations. However, since their explorations have been postponed (according to Arnett, these activities should start during adolescence) and also limited (there is a certain level of social control still existing), it seems that they need a longer period of time to finish the developmental tasks and take on the full weight of adulthood.

For Chinese emerging adults, particularly university students, emerging adulthood seems to be both a privileged and a problematic period of time. Unlike many of their parents or grandparents who grew up under greater social control (from parents, teachers, schools and community) and were forced to be settled into certain adult roles or careers at an early age (late teens), Chinese emerging adults now enjoy a certain level of freedom to explore their own interests or possibilities in life. It could be seen as a privileged period for them to gradually gain more knowledge about their self and to find their own place in the society.

However, the uncertainty experienced in emerging adulthood without a settled commitment could be overwhelming. As Erikson (1968, 1975) argues, individuals who remain

uncommitted to certain identity options may suffer from identity confusion which causes stress, anxiety and mental illnesses. Further, Levine (2005) is also concerned that emerging adults who have been “both overindulged and pressured by parents to excel in all life domains”, may become “uncommitted to deep, focused, and detailed learning” of the crucial skills (e.g., interpersonal skills, organizational skills) to prepare for work life and adult world (as cited in Hendry & Kloep, 2007, p. 77). As discussed above, the Chinese educational system, especially the periods before university, are test-oriented. It is also found that Chinese parents generally hold high expectations on their children’s academic performance (Chen, 2003; Fong, 2004; Tsui & Rich, 2002). Under such circumstances, Chinese students are more likely to be trained for good performance in various tests instead of learning all kinds of crucial skills in the work world (Mei, 2008). Especially under the intense competition in the job market, researchers worry that Chinese emerging adults who lack independent thought and social experiences might lose the chance to uncover their full potential and thus may experience some difficulties in the future stages of life (e.g., Côté, 2000; Hendry & kloep, 2007).

From a societal perspective, as discussed in Chapter Two, scholars pointed out that a large number of emerging adults not attending the job market or making a contribution to the economy before the age of 30 might become a serious waste of social resources (Li, 2006). According to the 2009 Chinese College Graduates’ Employment Annual Report, there are more than 165 thousand college graduates who are currently not engaged in employment, education or training (MyCOS, 2009). It means a considerable amount of college graduates who are in their mid- or late 20s are still dependent on their parents’ financial assistance. Relying on parental support in the late 20s is criticized by Chinese media and scholars as a negative action against

filial piety and may exert a negative impact on aging parents' well-being and living conditions (Mei, 2008; Wu, 2009).

In conclusion, Chinese society has been undergoing huge transformations in recent years. Many traditional values have been challenged and many new ideas and beliefs are becoming accepted. This transformation and accompanying changes in social norms, values, educational system, policy and beliefs may serve as the reasons that make the coming of age an even more difficult time for many of its young adults. The Chinese e'merging adults who participated in this study seem to take a longer period of time to accomplish the socially-assigned developmental tasks including separating from their parents, forming an adult identity and finding a place for the self in the larger society. Though they also share some common features with emerging adults in western societies, including the feelings of in-between and a lack of commitment to enduring life choices, there are some culturally and historically constructed reasons that make their experience unique. In this chapter, some of the ways that Chinese culture influences this both privileged and problematic period has been further analyzed. The study's limitations and some suggestions of future research will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This chapter will provide a brief review of the key elements of this study including the purpose, the theoretical framework, the central research questions and the results drawn from the data. Further, the chapter will discuss the limitations of this study, and provide some suggestions for future research of the phenomenon of emerging adulthood in China.

The purpose of the current research was to explore the experience of Chinese emerging adults transitioning to mature adulthood. Erikson's (1968) and Levinson's (1979) developmental theories were used as a theoretical framework. These theories propose three major developmental tasks that are seen as a requirement for young people to achieve in order to attain adulthood, including separating from family of origin, forming an adult identity and finding a place in the larger society for one's self. By using qualitative semi-structured interviews with twelve Chinese university students, the research was designed to answer the central research questions: How do Chinese emerging adults experience the transition to mature adulthood, especially in terms of completing the abovementioned three developmental tasks? From the participants' responses, the researcher found that this sample of Chinese emerging adults generally (a) has a low level of separation from parents; (b) has not formed a clear sense of identity and has not achieved a self-definition in adulthood; and (c) has not made an initial commitment to love and work.

The results were discussed in Chapter Five and the researcher pointed out the possibility that it could be some elements in Chinese society and culture that further postpone its young adults' maturity and independence. It should be noted that this research is limited only to university students, most of whom are from urban middle class families. As argued by Nelson and Chen (2007), emerging adulthood in China is likely to exist in urban middle class families

where young people have greater exposure to the influence of the market economy and western values, while people from other groups, especially those from rural areas, might be “forced by economic necessity to take on roles (such as full-time work) that make them feel more like an adult at an earlier age” (p. 87). It seems that the dramatic social and economic changes (e.g., loosened social control) in Chinese society may provide some young people a certain level of freedom to engage in identity explorations, but the influence of traditional culture and values, to some extent, still limits and helps to postpone these explorations.

Eleven out of twelve participants in the current study have an urban middle class background which provides them an economic base to explore interests, love, work and the self without rushing into adult roles and responsibilities. However, due to some social and cultural elements of Chinese society such as high parental control, restrictions in developing interests and personality and high level of academic pressure, especially before university (Chen & Chang, 2007; Murphy, 1987; Nelson, 1995), a majority of the participants only engaged in initial and limited explorations, and few of them have made identity commitments. This could be one of the reasons why participants generally have low level of completion in each of the three developmental tasks which signal the attainment of adulthood.

It seems that experiencing a prolonged transition to mature adulthood could be both beneficial and problematic for Chinese young adults. On the one hand, they enjoy the freedom to explore their identity and look for the true self during college or university years (Arnett, 2004). Compared with their parents or grandparents who experienced their adolescence and early adulthood under greater social control (Chen & Chang, 2007), Chinese emerging adults now have a better chance to contemplate their choices before making enduring decisions. On the other hand, for those emerging adults who are overindulged by parents, have a lack of social

experiences and are highly dependent, they may not be able to acquire some essential skills for the work world (e.g., independent thinking, interpersonal skills) during this crucial stage of life (Levine, 2005). The prolonged transition from school to work is likely to be painful and problematic for them. At the societal level, a large number of emerging adults who possess high educational credentials but who are not attending the job market until their late 20s or early 30s could be a waste of social resources (Hendry & Kloep, 2007). In the extreme case of emerging adulthood which the Chinese media call it “living on the elderly”, their high level of dependence could pose heavy burden to the aging parents, and create a negative influence on their family relationships (Li, 2006).

The current research is largely grounded in family and interpersonal communication and intercultural communication studies. According to Vangelisti (2004), family communication examines “how communication affects, and is affected by, family members and their relationships” (p. ix). This thesis focuses a great deal on parent-child communication and relationships (emerging adults’ perceived separation level from their parents), especially how the perceived communication with family members influences emerging adults’ development of an independent identity. Some of the key aspects of family communication including family structure and resources, parental control, closeness and conflict, family hierarchy and shared responsibilities (Benson & Johnson, 2009) are also important dimensions that have been discussed in this thesis. Some changes of family dynamics -- especially the increased mutuality and reciprocity and reduced conflict between parents and children -- are seen as important indicators of emerging adults’ increased independence and autonomy in this study (De Goede et al., 2009; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986).

Another key concept throughout the current research is identity and identity development. According to identity theories, young adults' exploration and formation of an adult identity is closely related to their interaction with significant others and the social contexts within which they are embedded in (Erikson, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1994) and thus are communicational in nature. Young adults' communication with significant others (e.g., parents, partners and friends) and the formation of a sense of self (differentiation from others) through communication are domains that have received considerable attention from interpersonal communication scholars (e.g., Daly, 2002). Participants in this study have also reported that their self-definition and self-knowledge are gradually formed through their interactions with others such as their peers, teachers and parents.

In addition, Chinese culture, as another key factor that influences emerging adults' experience and identity development, has been further discussed in the current research. As mentioned in Chapter One, culture is socially constructed through people's interactions and communication (Fiske, 2002; Keesing, 1974). In turn, as a communication product, culture influences people's behaviours, views and attitudes through their "internal models of reality" (Keesing, 1974, p. 89). As a research that is conducted in a non-western culture, this thesis discusses some of the ways that Chinese culture may influence emerging adults' identity development, all of which are seen as communication related issues; Thus, this thesis can be considered as a part of the intercultural communication studies.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. It should be noted that, firstly, the conclusions were drawn from a small sample (N=12) of Chinese university students who are mostly single children from urban middle class families. The contents and characteristics of the responses may

vary from those given by participants from a different group (e.g., rural residents who only received limited education), and patterns may have differed if a larger sample size had been used. In spite of the high level of cultural homogeneity in Chinese society, as pointed out in Chapter two, there are still disparities or inequality existing between urban and rural areas, eastern coastal and western inland areas and different regions in terms of the income level, available public facilities, educational resources and so forth (Wang & Wan, 2008). According to Arnett (2006), people who live under different living conditions and receive different educations may have different beliefs, behaviours and experiences in emerging adulthood (some people may not have emerging adulthood at all); thus, the results of this research may not be applicable to other groups in China.

The unbalanced number of male and female participants (1:11) could be another limitation of this research. The researcher did not have the preference for female participants but this result may originate from the fact that the facilitators, who themselves are female students, placed recruitment letters near the female student dormitories where the female students have more opportunity to read the letters. Once students participated in the research, these female students tended to invite their friends who are also female students to contact the researcher. Recent research on the gender differences of emerging adulthood suggests that there are more similarities than differences in terms of female and male emerging adults' perceptions and behaviours (e.g., Cheah, Trinder & Gokavi, 2010) and identity development processes (e.g., Schwartz, 2005). On the other hand, there are indeed variations that have emerged with respect to the values and perceptions of female and male emerging adults. For instance, female emerging adults are reported to attach greater importance to relationships and closeness than male emerging adults (Josselson, 1996; Montgomery, 2005). Luckily, the researcher conducted one

interview with a male student; though not thorough enough, it makes the gender differences available to be examined.

Consistent with previous literature, the researcher found that the male participant has generally lower level of emotional dependence on parents, though he demonstrated a similar level of financial dependence as the female participants. Another important finding is that the male participant exhibited a clearer direction of future career and a greater emphasis on career than the female participants who, on the contrary, tended to attach greater importance on family and close relationships. Further, it should be noted that the male participant reported a considerably higher level of anxiety about his current situation (having not entered adulthood or full-time employment). He was more eager to finish the transition to adulthood and achieve financial independence, while the female participants generally reported that they were under no pressure of moving on from this transitional period. This could be explained by the prevalent perception in Chinese society which indicates that men have to take on more family obligations, especially in the financial domains, than women (Zhou, 2006). The female participants also mentioned that even though they prefer to work after marriage, they still hope their future husbands will attain higher achievements and earnings.

Further, all of the interviews were conducted in Chinese and later the researcher translated and transcribed them into English. The translations were subjective to the researcher's language ability in both English and Chinese. Though the researcher tried to translate the interviews word-by-word and to maintain their accuracy, there were inevitably some untranslatable expressions and terms. For those, the researcher used paraphrasing in an attempt to maximize the closeness of meanings. Thus, an analysis built upon the translation may contain some limitations and inaccuracies. In addition, the interviews were not conducted face-to-face,

which means a part of information could not be transmitted through nonverbal means such as the gestures, eye contact, body languages (Kiesler et al., 1984). Despite the disadvantages, it is possible that exchanging information only through audio calling avoided the embarrassment of meeting a stranger in person. It may enhance a sense of security for the participants to open up to the researcher and discuss their personal events and stories.

As a qualitative study designed to understand Chinese emerging adults' transition experience, this research has taken some measures to ensure its authenticity and strengthen the qualitative inquiry including using rich descriptions and clarifying researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Erlandson et al., 1993, as cited in Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) proposes eight strategies to enhance the validation of a qualitative study, and suggests each study take at least two of them to promote the reliability. This study used rich descriptions from participants, one strategy suggested by Creswell (2007), which is argued to allow readers to decide whether or not the findings can be transferred to other settings and contexts. Rich description, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), means that the description of a phenomenon is in sufficient details so that it could be further evaluated. The researcher has engaged in interactive and in-depth conversations with each participant and mainly used direct quotes from participants' responses in the thesis in an attempt to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Another strategy adopted in the study was that the researcher clarified her roles and background in the current study (see chapter three). This strategy, according to Merriam (1988) would help readers understand the researchers' position and clarify some potential assumptions that could shape the research differently.

Future Research

Emerging adulthood in China is a relatively new phenomenon, and has only received limited attention from researchers. This current study is an exploratory research that only uncovers parts of young people's (20-25 years old) experience in a different culture. The level of social control has been found to be closely related to Chinese young people's experience and perception of a delayed adulthood, but this research has only proposed a few possible reasons why participants showed limited accomplishment of each developmental task, based on previous research or literature. The causal relationships between the socio-cultural elements and Chinese emerging adults' experiences, if there are any, need to be further revealed by conducting empirical studies. For instance, how China's educational model has developed and changed in recent years, and how these developments influence young people's self-explorations and identity development processes needs further research.

Further, as mentioned above, there are significant disparities in various aspects between college students and non-college students' groups, urban and rural residents and people from different regions in China. This research only focused on a sample of university students who are mostly single children from a privileged social group and do not need to rush into adult roles and responsibilities. However, other groups, such as young people not attending universities, young rural Chinese people and students from sibling families and post-university young adults who have not entered adult roles have been left unexamined. Given the differences between each group (e.g., college students and non-college young adults, rural and urban residents) in China, it would be interesting to do comparative studies on the phenomenon of transitioning to adulthood between these within-culture groups. Each of these is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Previous research named young people who do not attend college or universities the "forgotten half" (W. T. Grant Foundation, 1988), indicating that this group of young people

usually receives less attention from researchers, and this is true for the issue of emerging adulthood (Tanner, 2006). College or university is also recognized as a context that enhances and supports identity explorations and delays adult commitments (Arnett, 2006). As argued by Tanner (2006), college-bound and non-college-bound emerging adults may share some common features such as explorations and instability, but college as a context may influence individuals' pathways of development and their adjustment during and after the stage of emerging adulthood. Thus, future research could focus on the "forgotten half" in China, and uncover their life experience in the coming of age.

According to 2011 statistics, approximately 51 per cent of China's total population lives in the rural areas (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011), but little research has been done to examine the experience of these young adults. Given the enormous income gap between urban and rural areas, as argued by Nelson and Chen (2007), Chinese young people from rural areas may face greater economic pressure to support their family financially; consequently, they may be forced to take on adult roles at an early age which could shorten their emerging adulthood or even prevent young people from experiencing emerging adulthood. It is also found that rural adolescents from China hold a stronger endorsement of the traditional values including family obligations than adolescents from urban regions (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). It would be interesting to further examine the role culture plays in influencing rural young adults' experience transitioning to adulthood. Future research could investigate whether or not emerging adulthood exists for rural Chinese young people, and how they experience their acquisition of adult roles.

In addition, young adults from sibling families may experience emerging adulthood differently from young adults who are single children. Falbo and Polit (1986) found that except for firstborns and people from two-child families, only children scored higher in achievement

and intelligence than people from sibling families, and single children also surpass all the non-only borns in character and positivity of parent-child relationships. In the transition to adulthood, non-only borns may find it easier to separate from parents than single children whose parents devoted all the attention, care and control to them. However, on the other hand, non-only borns may receive fewer resources from parents that may accelerate the transition process. Future research could conduct investigations on the differences of experience and duration of emerging adulthood caused by the implementation of one-child policy in China.

To sum up, this thesis focuses on the perceived transition experience of Chinese emerging adults (university students aged from 20-25 years) to mature adulthood. Using Erikson's (1968) and Levinson's (1979) developmental theories as a theoretical framework, three main developmental tasks (separating from family of origin, forming an adult identity, and finding a place for the self in the larger society) were studied to help understand the necessary criteria of entering adulthood. It was found that this sample of Chinese emerging adults (university students aged from 20-25 years) generally reported limited completion of the developmental tasks. In addition, it was speculated that China's sociocultural context may play a role in postponing its young adults' transition to mature adulthood. This thesis is expected to contribute to future research in the following ways: (a) As a qualitative study, the results of this study lend support to Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood by providing rich descriptions of Chinese emerging adults; (b) The use of a theoretical framework provides insights into the criteria of entering adulthood and enhances understandings of how Chinese emerging adults conceptualize these necessary criteria of entering adulthood; (c) As argued in the previous chapter, emerging adulthood seems to be a both privileged and problematic period for Chinese young

adults. This understanding may broaden the perspective of the current research of emerging adulthood by identifying both positive and negative aspects of this phenomenon.

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Appendix A

General Interview Guide

The interview questions are designed based on the Identity Status Interview: Late Adolescent College form (Marcia & Archer, 1993, p.303-317).

General information

1. If I may ask, how old are you?
2. Do you have any brothers or sisters?
3. What are your parents' education backgrounds? What types of work do they do?

Education

4. What is your current university? How do you like it? Why do you choose this university over others?
5. What is your major for your university study? Why did you choose it? What may have helped your choice?
6. Would you consider continuing in higher education after graduation?
7. What is your decision making process of choosing universities and majors? Do you think your parents have a preference for one field over another? In which ways did they influence you in terms of what the university you should go to, or what major you should choose?

Family

8. Can you describe your current relationship with your parents? In which ways would you describe yourself as independent from your parents (psychologically, emotionally)?
9. What kind of influence would your parents exert on your choices of your future partner? Have they discussed this with you?

Vocational plans

10. Do you have a job right now? Do you support your own study or your parents partly or fully support you?
11. If not, do you feel like choosing a career is something you are trying to work out now? What are your plans about your future career?
12. When did you first become interested in that type of work or those types of work?
13. Have you ever considered any other types of employment besides the one you've mentioned?
14. What are you currently engaging in that may assist you with your own vocational plan? Or what are you doing to make your plan clearer or more suitable for you? What do you parents or your friends think about your plan and the things you are doing?

Romantic relationship

15. Are you currently in romantic relationship with someone? If yes, how do your and his/her ideas about marriage compare?

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16. Have you changed your love partners or living arrangement since 18 years old? In which ways?

Marriage

17. Have you married? Have you had your own children?
18. If not, would you like to get married one day? Do you have plans for having children?
19. What kind of influence would your parents exert on your choices of your future partner?
Have they discussed this with you?

Others

20. What are the criteria you believe signals one becoming an adult?
21. How do you describe your current age status? In which ways do you feel like an adult?

Appendix B

Ethical clearance documents

Recruitment Text

Dear _____,

I'm a communication student from the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Canada who is currently doing her master's thesis on the experience of Chinese emerging adults transitioning from higher education to adulthood. If you are currently a university student, if you are aged from 18-30, if you are hesitating about your future life directions, love and career path, and/ or if you find yourself still dependent on your parents, I would like to invite you to participate in an online interview on your personal experiences. The goal of this research project is to explore the transition experience of Chinese emerging adults, and the potential factors that may play a role in this process. Ethical clearance for this research study was received from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board.

Your participation will last approximately 60 minutes and you will only be asked to participate in this one interview that will be conducted online through live callings.

The interview will take place at your dorm or anywhere else that gives you an access to a computer, microphone and internet, and at a time convenient to you. No further requests will be made of you with respect to this research project or your participation in the project. The questions posed in the interviews might make you feel insecure of disclosing personal

information, but strict steps will be taken to protect the confidentiality and anonymity. Any personal information will not be disclosed to the third party.

The answers that you provide in the interview will be audio recorded and, later, translated into English. It will be then transcribed and printed. Once the data from the completed interviews have been transcribed, any information that could identify you will not be used in any of the analyses or subsequent reports or published articles.

I do hope you will agree to participate in this study. Please note that the selection of participants will be made on a first come first served basis. If you are willing to participate in the interview, please contact me by email, so that we may set up a time to meet. Please let me know the best way to contact you.

Sincerely,

Wuji Pang

Department of Communication

Informed Consent Form

Title of the study: An exploration of Chinese emerging adults' transition experience from higher education to adulthood

Researcher: Wuji Pang; University of Ottawa, Department of Communication

Supervisor: Dr. Jenefer Lennox Terrion; University of Ottawa, Department of Communication

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Wuji Pang and supervised by Dr. Jenefer Lennox Terrion.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to explore and understand the transition experience of Chinese young adults aged from 18-30 who are going through an extended transition process to adulthood.

Participation: My participation will consist of an in-depth online interview lasting approximately one hour, during which open-ended questions will be asked. I may need to answer these questions by giving comments, drawing on my own experiences and providing some family and personal background information to the researcher. I am aware of the fact that the interview will be audio recorded.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer some personal information and comments. This may cause me to feel insecure, but I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize the risk. Researcher has guaranteed that any personal information will not be disclosed to the third party.

Benefits: My participation in this study may not bring direct benefits, but my awareness of emerging adulthood in China might be raised.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only on the purpose of academic research, to study Chinese young people's transition experience to adulthood, and that my confidentiality will be protected. The researcher will not give any information away to a third party, or use it without my permission. I understand that anonymity will be strictly protected in the research by using pseudonyms. No real names or any indicators that would lead participants to be identified would appear anywhere in the research.

Conservation of data: The data collected during the interview will be audio-recorded and preserved in the researchers' password protected computer. Once translated and transcribed into English, the transcripts will be printed out and kept in a special file folder in the researcher's locked drawer. Only the researcher has the access to the folder and her personal computer. Another copy of all data will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet at the research supervisor's office which is locked and located on the University of Ottawa campus. All the data will be preserved for 5 years. After the time period, data will be completely destroyed to prevent disclosure.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any question, without suffering any negative consequences. The relationship between the researcher and I is completely equal. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will not be disseminated. The researcher can use the data only under my permission and supervision.

Acceptance: I, , agree to participate in the above research study conducted by *Wuji Pang* of the *department of communication, university of Ottawa* which research is under the supervision of *Dr. Jenepher Lennox Terrion*.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

Please print a copy of this Consent Form to keep in your personal files.

Participant's signature: Date:

Researcher's signature: Date:

Appendix C

Demographic information of Participants *

Table 4

Graduate Students (N=8)

Name	Emily	Judy	Diana	Mark	Mary	Olive	Linda	Britney
Age	23	23	23	24	24	25	25	24
Sex	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female
School	Jinan University	Jinan University	Southwest University	Southwest University	Communication university of China	Communication university of China	Communication university of China	Zhongnan University of Economics and Law
Field of study	Second year	Second year	Second year	Second year	First year	Second year	Second year	Second year
Siblings?	Only child	One sibling	Only child	Only child	Only child	Two siblings	Only child	One sibling

Table 5

Undergraduate Students (N=4)

Name	Cindy	Emma	Rebecca	Sarah
Age	21	20	20	21
Sex	Female	Female	Female	Female
School	Jinan University	Jinan University	Jinan University	Jinan University
Field of study	Third year	Third year	Third year	Third year
Siblings?	Only child	Only child	Only child	Only child

*Names have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the participants