



Young Chinese children's beliefs about the implications of subtypes of social withdrawal: A first look at social avoidance

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The goal of this study was to examine young Chinese children's beliefs about the implications of different subtypes of social withdrawal (e.g., shyness, unsociability), including for the first time, social avoidance. Participants were 133 children in kindergarten ($n = 58, M_{\text{age}} = 70.85$ months) and grade 1 ($n = 75, M_{\text{age}} = 83.49$ months). Children were presented with vignettes describing hypothetical peers displaying shy, unsociable, avoidant, and socially competent behaviours and were then asked a series of questions to assess their beliefs about the implications of these different behaviours. Young children made distinctions between social withdrawal subtypes in terms of underlying motivations and emotions. Children also appeared to hold differential beliefs about the implications of different forms of social withdrawal: Of note, they anticipated that socially avoidant peers would experience the most negative outcomes. These findings provide some of the first evidence to suggest that social avoidance represents a distinct form of social withdrawal among young Chinese children. Results are discussed in terms of the importance of distinguishing between different subtypes of social withdrawal in Chinese culture.

Social withdrawal refers to the process whereby children remove themselves from opportunities for social interactions and frequently display solitary behaviours in social contexts (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). It also has been described as an umbrella term that encompasses different *reasons* why children might choose to remain alone in the company of peers (Coplan & Rubin, 2010). In this regard, the distinction can be further made between shyness (i.e., social fear/wariness), unsociability (i.e., preference for solitude), and social avoidance (i.e., actively seeking to avoid social interaction) (Coplan & Armer, 2007).

Culture plays a critical role in children's social development, and it is now widely accepted that the adaptive value of specific social (and non-social) behaviours may vary

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across cultural contexts (Chen & French, 2008). As such, researchers have begun to explore the meaning and implications of different forms of social withdrawal in non-Western cultures (Chen, Wang, & Cao, 2011). The primary goal of the current study was to examine young Chinese children's beliefs about the implications of different forms of social withdrawal.

Overview of social withdrawal subtypes in Western cultures

Contemporary theory and research distinguishes three subtypes of social withdrawal in childhood characterized by differences in their underlying motivational and emotional substrates (Coplan & Rubin, 2010). *Shyness* is a temperamental trait characterized by wariness and unease in the face of social novelty and perceived social evaluation (Rubin *et al.*, 2009). Shy children appear to experience an approach-avoidance conflict, whereby their desire to interact with peers is simultaneously inhibited by emotional reactivity in the form of social fear and anxiety (Asendorpf, 1990). From early childhood to adulthood, shyness is concurrently and predicatively linked with indices of maladjustment (Rubin *et al.*, 2009), including deficits in social and academic competence, internalizing problems, and peer rejection (e.g., Coplan, Arbeau, & Armer, 2008; Hughes & Coplan, 2010; Ladd, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Eggum, Kochel, & McConnell, 2011).

Unsociability refers to the non-fearful preference for solitary activities and is thought to reflect the combination of both low social approach and low social avoidance motivations (Asendorpf, 1990). From an emotional perspective, unsociable children are not prone to negative affect in social situations and their more frequent engagement in solitary activities is thought to reflect a heightened attention span (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004). Moreover, unsociable children are considered to be capable of engaging in competent social actions when called upon and would not be expected to actively reject attractive social bids (Asendorpf & Meier, 1993). Indeed, Bowker and Raja (2011) speculated that unsociable children may engage in 'just enough' social interaction to avoid the negative consequences of social isolation. Unsociability appears to be a relatively benign form of social withdrawal (Rubin *et al.*, 2009). For example, unsociability is not associated with indices internalizing problems (Coplan & Weeks, 2010; Coplan *et al.*, 2004) or social cognitive skills (Harrist, Zaia, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1997). Furthermore, results from some recent studies also suggest that unsociable children do not evidence significant difficulties maintaining friendships and are not prone to peer victimization (e.g., Coplan *et al.*, 2013; Ladd *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, *social avoidance* refers to the combination of both the desire for solitude (low social approach motivation) and actively seeking to avoid social interaction (high social avoidance motivations) (Asendorpf, 1990). Comparatively little is known about this form of social withdrawal. It has been suggested that social avoidance may be a manifestation of early depressive symptoms (Coplan & Armer, 2007) or arise in response to repeated negative peer experiences (Bowker & Raja, 2011). In this regard, socially avoidant children might be expected to demonstrate both heightened negative affect and blunted positive affect in social situations. Socially avoidant children have also been speculated to be at the greatest risk for social and emotional maladjustment (Asendorpf, 1990). However, there have been only a handful of previous empirical studies of social avoidance in childhood and adolescence. For example, Coplan *et al.* (2013) reported that socially avoidant children reported significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety than their shy and unsociable counterparts. Social avoidance has also been linked to loneliness and

peer exclusion among adolescents in India (Bowker & Raja, 2011). However, to date, there have been no previous studies of social avoidance in early childhood.

Social withdrawal in China

In Western societies, assertiveness and expressiveness are strongly encouraged (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). In contrast, in traditional Chinese society, wariness and behavioural restraint may be more positively evaluated and encouraged and are thought to reflect social maturity, mastery, and understanding (Chen, 2010; Tamis-LeMonda *et al.*, 2008). For example, Xu, Farver, Chang, Zhang, and Yu (2007) reported that *regulated shyness* (defined as a form of self-controlled social restraint characterized by non-assertive and unassuming behaviour) was associated with positive outcomes in China.

Results from a series of earlier studies have also indicated that 'anxious' shyness (i.e., defined in this case as social fear and wariness) was associated with indexes of positive adjustment, including peer acceptance, psychological well-being, and academic achievement (e.g., Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1995). However, recent years have witnessed large-scale economic reforms and dramatic societal changes in Chinese society. Indeed, there is now evidence to suggest that the adaptive value of shy behaviour has declined and that shy children are starting to experience various adjustment problems (e.g., Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005; Ding *et al.*, 2014).

Given that children in Western countries are socialized to be assertive and autonomous, unsociability may be construed as an autonomous expression of personal choice (Coplan & Armer, 2007). In contrast, as interdependence and group affiliation are still highly emphasized in China, children need to develop a sense of belongingness and commitment to the group and to contribute to collectivistic interests (Chen & French, 2008). Accordingly, it has been suggested that unsociability in this cultural context may conflict with group orientation and that children who display no interest in group interaction may be viewed as selfish and deviant (Chen, 2010). In support of this notion, there is growing recent empirical evidence indicating that unsociable children in China are likely to report social, emotional, and school difficulties (e.g., Chen *et al.*, 2011; Ding, Weeks, Liu, Sang, & Zhou, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2014). Of note, there have been no previous studies of social avoidance in China.

Young children's beliefs about social withdrawal

Early childhood is characterized by the rapid development of self-regulatory, social cognitive, and social skills that contribute towards increases in both the frequency and quality of young children's social interactions (Coplan & Arbeau, 2009). As we have noted, these increased social expectations and opportunities may pose particular and unique challenges for different subtypes of socially withdrawn children (Coplan *et al.*, 2008). However, observed differences in the adjustment outcomes of different forms of social withdrawal may also be due in part to differences in peers' *beliefs* about these different behaviours.

In this regard, early childhood also represents an intriguing developmental period for examining such beliefs. For example, young children may have difficulties describing internal states such as motivations and emotions (e.g., Harris, 2008; Thompson, Goodvin, & Meyer, 2006). In support of this argument, young children have previously been reported to have more difficulty remembering details about socially withdrawn children

as compared to other more ‘overt’ types of problematic behaviours such as aggression (e.g., Younger, Gentile, & Burgess, 1993).

The use of individual interview assessments that employ pictorial aids and limited verbal responses have been effective in assisting young children to provide reliable and valid reports of internal constructs, including social motivations (e.g., Coplan, Ooi, Rose-Krasnor, & Nocita, 2014). Indeed, results from research employing such methodologies (e.g., hypothetical vignettes) suggest that children may possess more knowledge about social withdrawal than previously indicated (Goossens, Bokhorst, Bruinsma, & van Boxtel, 2002). Moreover, Coplan, Girardi, Findlay, and Frohlick (2007) reported that 5- and 6-year-old children expressed greater liking, a greater desire to play with, and more sympathy towards the hypothetical shy peer as compared to the unsociable peer.

To date, there has been only one previous study of children’s beliefs about social withdrawal in China. Coplan, Zheng, Weeks, and Chen (2012) examined young children’s responses to hypothetical shy, unsociable, and socially competent peers in China and Canada. Children from both countries appeared to understand the vignettes’ depictions of the different motivational and emotional underpinnings of shyness and unsociability. In terms of cultural differences, Chinese children viewed the behaviours of the unsociable child as less intentional and characterized the unsociable child as having a greater desire to play with others than Canadian children. The authors speculated that culturally specific pressures for group affiliation might lead Chinese children to be less likely to accept that a child would *intentionally* choose to not interact with others.

The current study

There is at least some preliminary evidence to suggest that young children are able to distinguish between hypothetical shy versus unsociable withdrawn peers both in Western samples (Coplan *et al.*, 2007) and in China (Coplan *et al.*, 2012). However, to date, there have been no previous studies of children’s beliefs about the third type of social withdrawal, namely social avoidance. Indeed, the construct of social avoidance has not previously been examined at all among children in China. Thus, we adapted the previously used measure (Coplan *et al.*, 2012) describing hypothetical children displaying shy, unsociable, and socially competent behaviours (for comparison purposes) to also include a new vignette depicting social avoidance.

The first goal of this study was thus to examine validity of this adapted measure for use with young Chinese children. We then sought to explore Chinese children’s beliefs about the potential differential implications of social withdrawal subtypes. In this regard, we also extended previous work (pertaining just to shyness and unsociability) by examining a broader range of children’s views, including beliefs about the stability of these behaviours, characteristics of children who display these behaviours (e.g., intelligence), and additional consequences in the classroom (e.g., relationships with teachers).

As described previously, different subtypes of social withdrawal are characterized by different motivational and emotional underpinnings (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan & Rubin, 2010). The vignettes depicting these subtypes offer explicit cues in this regard (e.g., ‘...likes to play alone’; ‘...afraid to talk to other kids’). Accordingly, we assessed the validity of the adapted measure by explicitly assessing children’s beliefs about the unique motivational and emotional substrates associated with each form of social withdrawal.

Specifically, the shy peer was expected to be perceived as having the lowest intentionality (i.e., acting *on purpose*) and highest social motivation (i.e., *wants* to play with others), followed by the unsociable and then the avoidant peer. Further, both the shy and avoidant peers were expected to be characterized as feeling less positive emotions (i.e., *bappy*) than the unsociable peer.

The next set of hypotheses concerned children's beliefs about the implications of social withdrawal. Drawing upon the extant literature (Giles & Heyman, 2004; Graham & Hoehn, 1995), we posited that the behaviours of all three subtypes of withdrawn peers would be perceived as less stable than socially competent peers. However, we expected Chinese children to report differences in their anticipated implications for shyness, unsociability, and social avoidance. To begin with, despite recent societal changes that appear to have rendered *shyness* less adaptive in China (Chen *et al.*, 2005), we expected this form of social withdrawal to be viewed least negatively. In keeping with recent research in China (Liu *et al.*, 2014), we anticipated *unsociability* to be viewed as more maladaptive than shyness. Last, we speculated that *socially avoidant* children's active resistance of social interactions would be viewed as particularly maladaptive in a culture that places such a high value on social cohesion and connectedness (Chen, 2010). Accordingly, it was expected that young children in China view social avoidance the most negatively. Thus, for example, we predicted that children would report the highest friendship preference for the shy peer, followed by the unsociable and avoidant peer. As well, the avoidant peer was expected to be viewed as causing the most problems in class and as having the worst relationship with teachers, followed by the unsociable and shy peer. Finally, as a comparison, the hypothetical socially competent peer was expected to be viewed the most positively across all domains.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 133 children (78 boys, 55 girls) in kindergarten ($n = 58$, $M_{\text{age}} = 70.85$ months, $SD = 3.81$) and grade 1 ($n = 75$, $M_{\text{age}} = 83.49$ months, $SD = 3.66$). Children were attending a public kindergarten (two classrooms) and elementary school (two classrooms) in Shanghai, China. All children were of Han descent (the predominant ethnic group in China). Approximately 5% of mothers and 4% of fathers had not completed middle school, 22% of mothers and 17% of fathers completed high school, 52% of mothers and 55% of fathers had university degrees, and 12% of mothers and 15% of fathers had postgraduate degrees. Preliminary analyses indicated that parental education was not significantly associated with the study variables and was thus not included in subsequent analyses. The demographic data for the sample were similar to those reported by the China State Statistics Bureau concerning urban populations in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011).

Measures

Child interviews

Children were interviewed individually by trained psychology postgraduate students and presented with four hypothetical vignettes depicting hypothetical same-sex peers displaying either shy, unsociable, avoidant, or socially competent behaviours. This

measure was adapted from a previous study (Coplan *et al.*, 2007), with the vignette wording derived from young children's own open-ended descriptions of their socially withdrawn peers (Gavinski-Molina, Coplan, & Younger, 2003). The child behaviour vignettes have previously displayed good psychometric properties, and strong evidence of validity in Western samples (Coplan *et al.*, 2007; Goossens *et al.*, 2002) was recently translated for use with young Chinese children (and also demonstrated similar evidence of validity) (Coplan *et al.*, 2012). For the present study, the interview further included an additional vignette describing *social avoidance*. The content of the avoidant vignettes was derived from previous studies of this subtype of social withdrawal (e.g., Bowker & Raja, 2011; Coplan *et al.*, 2013). The complete text of each vignette is displayed in Table 1. After hearing each vignette, children were asked several questions and asked to respond on a three-point scale (no = 1, maybe/sometimes = 2, yes = 3) by pointing to different sized circles. The order of the vignettes was counterbalanced by a Latin square design to control for stimulus order effects.

The first three questions were meant to assess the validity of the adapted vignette measure. Accordingly, children were asked about the different motivational and emotional states explicitly depicted in the vignettes. These included questions pertaining to children's attributions of behavioural *intentionality* ('Do you think ___ acts that way on purpose?'), as well as beliefs about the hypothetical peers' *social motivation* ('Does ___ want to play with other kids?') and *positive emotional state* ('Is ___ happy?').

Subsequent questions focused on children's beliefs of the implications of the various behaviours described. Two questions were related to children's prediction of the *stability* of hypothetical peer's behaviour ('Do you think ___ has always acted this way?'), ('Would it be easy to stop ___ being this way?'). Responses to these two questions were combined to create an index of stability. These two items were quite strongly and positively correlated across the four scenarios (average $r = .51, p < .001$). Others questions concerned children's *friendship preference* for hypothetical peers ('Would you want to be ___'s friend?'), as well as children's beliefs of the potential *negative impact* of behaviours in the classroom ('Do kids who act like ___ cause a problem in your class?') and the hypothetical peer's *relationship with the teacher* ('Does the teacher like ___?'). The final question assessed children's beliefs about the peers' *intelligence* ('Is ___ smart?').

Table 1. Hypothetical vignettes (boys version) depicting shy, unsociable, avoidant, and socially competent children

<i>Shy</i>	This is <i>name</i> . <i>Name</i> is afraid to talk to other kids. When other kids are playing, he just watches them
<i>Unsociable</i>	This is <i>name</i> . He likes to play on his own. When other kids are playing, he plays by himself
<i>Avoidant</i>	This is <i>name</i> . He does not like playing with other kids. He plays by himself even when other kids ask him to play with them
<i>Socially competent</i>	This is <i>name</i> . <i>Name</i> is really nice. When he plays with other kids, they have lots of fun

Results

A series of mixed repeated-measures ANOVAs was conducted, with Vignette (shy, unsociable, avoidant, socially competent) serving as a within-subjects variable, and Grade (kindergarten, grade 1) as a between-subjects variable. The dependent variables were constructs assessed through children's interview responses after each hypothetical vignette. Relevant means for the effects of Vignette are displayed in Table 2.

Validity of the adapted vignettes

Intentionality

The first analyses concerned the children's perceived *intentionality* of the hypothetical peers. The results indicated significant main effects of Vignette, $F(3, 393) = 16.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$, and Grade, $F(1, 131) = 27.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$. There was no significant Vignette \times Grade interaction, $F(3, 393) = 0.20$, ns , $\eta^2 = .00$.

Follow-up *post-hoc* analyses (LSD tests) indicated that overall, children in kindergarten ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.52$) rated hypothetical peers as being more intentional than children grade 1 ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.41$). In terms of the main effect of Vignette, the hypothetical avoidant peer was described significantly more intentional than other three types. The unsociable peer was perceived to be more intentional than the socially competent and shy peers (who did not differ significantly from one another – See Table 2).

Social motivation

For the inferred *social motivation* of the hypothetical peers, results indicated a significant main effect of Vignette, $F(3, 393) = 136.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .51$, but no main effect of Grade, $F(1, 131) = 3.16$, ns , $\eta^2 = .02$. There was also a significant Vignette \times Grade interaction, $F(3, 393) = 2.87$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Follow-up *post-hoc* analyses indicated that overall, the hypothetical socially competent peer was attributed the highest social motivation, followed by the shy peer, the unsociable peer, and the avoidant peer, with significant differences found between all four hypothetical peers (see Table 2).

Table 2. Means (*SDs*) of child interview responses for each vignette

Variable	Vignette			
	Shy	Unsociable	Avoidant	Socially competent
Intentionality	1.40 _c (0.73)	1.67 _b (0.84)	1.89 _a (0.91)	1.35 _c (0.71)
Social motivation	2.63 _b (0.69)	1.81 _c (0.77)	1.66 _d (0.79)	2.96 _a (0.23)
Positive emotional state	1.44 _c (0.62)	2.50 _b (0.67)	1.44 _c (0.64)	2.92 _a (0.26)
Stability	2.05 _c (0.57)	2.17 _b (0.60)	2.19 _b (0.56)	2.51 _a (0.58)
Friendship preference	2.44 _b (0.79)	2.16 _c (0.91)	1.82 _d (0.90)	2.91 _a (0.38)
Negative impact	1.44 _c (0.68)	1.66 _b (0.73)	1.92 _a (0.82)	1.17 _d (0.44)
Relationship with the teacher	2.05 _b (0.74)	1.98 _b (0.75)	1.66 _c (0.74)	2.83 _a (0.40)
Intelligence	2.20 _b (0.72)	2.18 _b (0.71)	1.89 _c (0.75)	2.79 _a (0.44)

Note. Means with differing subscripts in the same row differ significantly at $p < .05$.

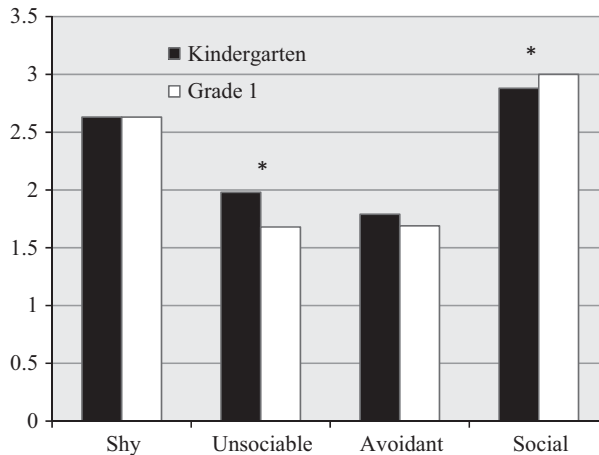


Figure 1. Interaction between grade and vignette in children's perceived social motivations.

Relevant means for the interaction between Vignette and Grade are displayed in Figure 1. Results from follow-up simple effects analyses indicated that grade 1 children rated unsociable peers as having lower social motivation than kindergarten children. Grade 1 children also rated socially competent peers as having higher social motivation than kindergarten children. No significant grade differences were found for the shy and avoidant hypothetical peers.

Positive emotional state

For children's beliefs about the hypothetical peer's *positive emotional state*, results indicated significant main effects of both Vignette, $F(3, 393) = 258.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .66$, and Grade, $F(1, 131) = 4.95$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$, but no significant Vignette \times Grade interaction, $F(3, 393) = 1.04$, ns , $\eta^2 = .01$. Overall, children in kindergarten ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.37$) rated peers as significantly happier than children in grade 1 ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.30$). Follow-up *post-hoc* analyses further indicated that the socially competent peer was rated as feeling significantly happier than the other hypothetical peers, and the unsociable peer was perceived to be significantly happier than both the shy and avoidant peer (who did not differ from each other) (see Table 2).

Children's beliefs about the implications of social withdrawal

Stability

The next analyses involved the anticipation of the *stability* of the hypothetical peers' behaviours. Results indicated only a significant main effect of Vignette, $F(3, 393) = 22.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$. There was no significant main effect of Grade, $F(1, 131) = 3.52$, ns , $\eta^2 = .03$, nor Vignette \times Grade interaction, $F(3, 393) = 0.43$, ns , $\eta^2 = .00$. Follow-up analyses indicated that children believed that the behaviours of the socially competent peer would be the most stable as compared to the other three vignettes. The behaviours of the unsociable peer and avoidant peer (who did not differ significantly from one another) were also seen as significantly more stable than the behaviour of the shy peer (see Table 2).

Friendship preference

For children's *friendship preference* for the hypothetical peers, results again indicated only a significant main effect of Vignette, $F(3, 393) = 69.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .35$. There was no significant main effect of Grade, $F(1, 131) = 2.41, ns, \eta^2 = .02$, nor Vignette \times Grade interaction, $F(3, 393) = 0.84, ns, \eta^2 = .01$. Overall, the children expressed the greatest tendency to be a friend of the socially competent peer, followed by the shy peer, unsociable peer, and avoidant peer (with significant differences between all vignettes – See Table 2).

Negative impact

For the perceived potential *negative impact* of the hypothetical peers' behaviours, results again indicated only a significant main effect of Vignette, $F(3, 393) = 32.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$. There was no significant main effect of Grade, $F(1, 131) = 3.65, ns, \eta^2 = .03$, nor Vignette \times Grade interaction, $F(3, 393) = 0.28, ns, \eta^2 = .00$. Overall, the children reported that avoidant peer would cause the most problems in class, followed by unsociable peer, shy peer, and then socially competent peer (with significant differences between all vignettes – See Table 2).

Relationship with the teacher

For children's estimated *relationship with the teacher* of the hypothetical peers, results also indicated only a significant main effect of Vignette, $F(3, 393) = 109.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .46$. There was no significant main effect of Grade, $F(1, 131) = 2.71, ns, \eta^2 = .02$, nor Vignette \times Grade interaction, $F(3, 393) = 1.38, ns, \eta^2 = .01$. Follow-up analyses indicated that children estimated that the socially competent peer would be the one the teacher like the most, followed by the shy peer and the unsociable peer (who did not differ from each other), followed by the avoidant peer (see Table 2).

Intelligence

Finally, for children's estimation of the intelligence of the hypothetical peers, results indicated only a significant main effect of Vignette, $F(3, 393) = 57.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .31$, with no significant main effect of Grade, $F(1, 131) = 0.66, ns, \eta^2 = .01$, nor Vignette \times Grade interaction, $F(3, 393) = 0.85, ns, \eta^2 = .01$. Follow-up analyses indicated that children thought that the socially competent peer was the smartest, followed by the shy peer and the unsociable peer (who did not differ from each other) and then the avoidant peer, who was rated as the least intelligent (see Table 2).

Discussion

The primary goal of the present study was to examine young Chinese children's beliefs about the implications of different subtypes of social withdrawal. First, findings suggest that the adapted vignette measure that depicted different social withdrawal subtypes displayed good evidence of validity. Young children in China demonstrated that they understood the differential descriptions of shyness, unsociability, and social avoidance in terms of internal process variables such as social motivations and emotions. Second,

children expected differential implications and outcomes for the shy, unsociable, and avoidant children depicted in the vignettes. Of particular note, not only did Chinese children distinguish social avoidance from shyness and unsociability in this regard, but social avoidance was also consistently viewed as the least adaptive form of social withdrawal.

Validity of the adapted vignettes

Vignettes measures depicting shyness and unsociability have been used previously in studies of Western (Coplan *et al.*, 2007) and Chinese young children (Coplan *et al.*, 2012). We adapted these measures to also include a vignette depicting a child displaying socially avoidant behaviours. Our results suggest that young Chinese children were able to appropriately interpret the overt cues provided in these vignettes regarding the motivations and emotions that underlie different forms of social withdrawal. For example, even though shy, unsociable, and avoidant children were all depicted in the vignettes as being *alone*, the socially avoidant peer was attributed the highest behavioural intentionality and least desire to play with others. Also, children characterized the hypothetical unsociable peer as behaving more intentionally and as having lower social motivations than the shy peer. Consistent with these beliefs, unsociable children were also characterized as happier than their shy counterparts. These findings are consistent with the theoretical conceptualization of unsociability as a non-fearful preference for solitude, whereas shyness is thought to arise from a social approach-avoidance conflict, and social avoidance refers to actively seeking to avoid interpersonal interaction (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan & Rubin, 2010). Thus, the young children in the current sample were able to take into consideration the explicit cues about emotions and internal motivational states provided in the vignettes – Providing evidence of the validity of this measure.

Children's beliefs about shyness versus unsociability

Consistent with previous studies (Coplan *et al.*, 2007, 2012), young children in the present study appeared to hold different beliefs about the implications of shyness and unsociability. Previous studies (Giles & Heyman, 2004; Graham & Hoehn, 1995) have suggested that children may have a less essentialist view of withdrawal as compared to aggression. Our findings suggest that children make further distinctions among social withdrawal subtypes, as shyness was also considered less stable than unsociability. Giles and Heyman (2004) suggested that children do not use a single and undifferentiated essentialist framework when making inferences about stability but employ psychological essentialism in their reasoning by different situations. The behaviour of the shy peer was perceived as perhaps the easiest one to change – which complements the previous reported finding that the behaviours of the shy peers were perceived as the least intentional. Given that Chinese culture encourages children to have a high sensitivity of interpersonal relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), perhaps Chinese children are more easily able to envision shy children accepting an invitation to join a social activity.

Unsociability was also perceived by children as having more negative implications at school than shyness. As compared to hypothetical shy peer, hypothetical unsociable children were viewed as less attractive friends and predicted to have a greater negative impact in class. These findings are consistent with previous recent research in China,

demonstrating that unsociable children are prone to peer difficulties (Liu *et al.*, 2014). As mentioned previously, due to the rapid process of modernization in urban areas of China, the adaptive value of shy behaviour appears to be declining (Chen *et al.*, 2005) and parents are coming to expect children to become more assertive and display more initiative (Chen & Li, 2012). Notwithstanding, the hypothetical shy peer was perceived to be the most *benign* form of social withdrawal in the current sample.

Children's beliefs about social avoidance

The present results are the first to suggest that social avoidance represents a distinct form of social withdrawal among young Chinese children. Of note, avoidant children also elicited the most negative responses from children. As compared to the shy and unsociable peers, children were least likely to want to be friends with the avoidant peer. In addition, the avoidant peer was expected to cause the most problems in class and to have the worst relationship with teachers, as well as to be the least intelligent. These negative views may be attributable to the emphasis on interdependence and group affiliation in Chinese culture (Chen, 2010). Indeed, if children are encouraged to develop a sense of belongingness and commitment to the peer group beginning in early childhood (Chen & French, 2008), children who actively avoid the group are overtly violating social norms. Chen (2010) suggests that children who do not display an interest in group activities will be thusly viewed as selfish and deviant.

These findings suggest that the construct of social avoidance merits future attention in the Chinese culture. Indeed, substantive negative implications were anticipated for young children who displayed this subtype of social withdrawal. For example, avoidant children were predicted to have the most negative relationships with peers and teachers. Problems with peer relations and poor teacher–child relationships are by themselves important indicators of concurrent and future difficulties in socio-emotional and academic functioning (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Also, academic achievement has traditionally been very highly valued in Chinese culture and defined as one of the most important goals for Chinese children (Li, 2011). Moreover, academic achievement may also play a particularly important role in the socio-emotional functioning of withdrawn children in China (Chen, Yang, & Wang, 2013). Accordingly, the finding that avoidant peers were rated by children as having the lowest intelligence would also raise concern about such children. Unfortunately, taken together, our results do not *bode well* for socially avoidant children in China.

Age differences

Although not the primary focus in this *t* study, some age differences were observed. For example, across all vignettes, children in kindergarten rated peers as being more intentional in their behaviours as well as feeling happier than children in grade 1. Graham and Hoehn (1995) reported a similar decrease in overall ratings of child intentionality from ages 4 to 6 years. A significant interaction between grade and vignettes was also observed for children's characterizations of the social motivations of the hypothetical peers. Grade 1 children perceived unsociable peers as having lower social motivation but socially competent peers having higher social motivation than kindergarten children. This result is in keeping with the notion that older children may be more likely to explicitly consider children's motivations (e.g., Hicks, Liu, & Heyman,

2015) – And specifically their social motivations for their peer behaviours (e.g., Younger *et al.*, 1993). No age differences were indicative with regard to children's anticipated consequences of the different forms of social withdrawal at school. This suggests that although the children in kindergarten were somewhat less competent than their older counterparts at interpreting cues pertaining to internal processes, they similarly reported clear differences in the expected outcomes of different types of socially withdrawn children.

Limitations and future directions

The sole reliance on hypothetical vignettes does place limits on the generalizability of these results. Children's responses may be prompted by specific wording of phrases in the vignettes (e.g., afraid, like), which might implicitly influence their subsequent beliefs ratings. Future research could employ naturalistic assessments (e.g., Chen, DeSouza, Chen, & Wang, 2006), which include no overt descriptions of motivations and feelings (e.g., videos of behaviours). Moreover, different subtypes of social withdrawal may serve different adaptive functions in rural areas of China, which have yet to be as affected by societal changes (e.g., Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2009). As well, it remains to be seen if our findings might generalize to nearby urban centres such as Hong Kong and Taiwan (which possess unique cultural components from mainland China, e.g., Lin & Ho, 2009), as well as other Asian countries.

Finally, child gender was not examined as a between-subject variable because participants were only asked to respond to the behaviours of same-sex peers (which confounded gender of rater and gender of hypothetical child). Although same-sex play is predominant among kindergarten children (Martin & Fabes, 2001), children's responses may have differed if vignettes also depicted mixed-sex social exchanges. Moreover, there is growing evidence to suggest that social withdrawal may be more acceptable among girls than boys in Western cultures and in China (see Doey, Coplan, & Kingsbury, 2014, for a recent review). Accordingly, these potential gender differences should be explored directly in future research.

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