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Character strengths and virtues of young internationally adopted Chinese children: A longitudinal study from preschool to school age

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Character Strengths and Virtues of Young Internationally Adopted Chinese Children: A Longitudinal Study from Preschool to School Age

by

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ABSTRACT

Shifting from traditional deficit-based psychological research, the current study aimed to broaden the understanding of post-adoption development through a strength-based approach and further explore the recently developed Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths among a particularly resilient population of young children—internationally adopted Chinese children. Archival longitudinal data of parents' descriptions about their adopted Chinese children's positive characteristics were analyzed from two time points two years apart. Data on 179 children ages 4 - 5 years old (M = 59.67 months SD = 6.60 months) in Time 1 from 172 families were analyzed with content analysis coding procedures. Overall, the profile of character strengths among young Chinese adoptees was very comparable to that of a general sample of young children assessed in a previous research study: Both samples had 11 of the 24 character strengths from the VIA Classification represented among 10% or more of the children, while the remaining character strengths were rarely represented in the children's data. The five most prevalent character strengths for Chinese adoptees were Love, Kindness, Humor, Zest, and Social Intelligence. The biggest difference between adopted Chinese children from this study and non-adopted children was that Zest and Social Intelligence

were represented at much higher rates. There were no significant changes over time in all but one of the prevalence rates for character strengths (i.e., Love decreased from Time 1 to Time 2) and for the more broadly categorized virtues (i.e., Courage increased from Time 1 to Time 2). The two most prevalent virtues, Humanity and Courage, were associated with lower levels of externalizing and internalizing problems, respectively, which may point to the positive traits particularly related to this population's marked resilience. Results serve to provide a broader understanding of post-adoption development and offer the first longitudinal data on character strengths among young children.

Chapter One

Introduction

For decades, research and practice within psychology have involved the identification and treatment of distress and disorder. From these approaches, a child's well-being is determined by the absence of these negative conditions. Some children are exposed to risk factors that increase the likelihood of distress and disorder, but children who overcome exposure to identifiable risk factors and avoid the development of various psychological disturbances are described to be resilient (Hauser, Vierya, Jacobson, & Wertreib, 1985). Promoting the absence of disturbance and the recovery from adversity are certainly important objectives; however, this deficit-based approach may be missing other dimensions of a child's development and well-being.

The positive psychology movement within recent years has offered a shift within psychological research to complement the traditional deficit-based approach through the exploration and promotion of what is going right in the lives of individuals (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Within positive psychology, the effort to explore positive individual traits has been one of the fields primary focuses, as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi have called for the development of "a science of human strength whose mission will be to understand and learn how to foster these virtues in young people" (p. 7). Studying positive individual traits among young children is valuable in its own right as they help broaden our understanding of human development and well-being, but these

traits may also have important pragmatic implications. Learning about positive individual traits may help us learn how to buffer against or prevent psychological disturbances (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and parents, educators or mental health practitioners could learn how to use these traits as assets to be capitalized on to help resolve psychological problems (Park & Peterson, 2008).

Advancing our understanding of positive traits among young children in a way that adds to the knowledge ascertained from deficit-based approaches can be done by exploring the traits of children who have been particularly resilient. Exploring the development of positive traits among resilient children can not only broaden the understanding of their overall development beyond their absence of distress, but also can provide insight into the types of strengths that could be fostered among general populations of young children. The current study, therefore, aimed to explore positive traits within a sample of internationally adopted Chinese children, as research to be described on these children have demonstrated particularly favorable adjustment and resiliency from their early experiences of pre-adoption adversity.

Character Strengths in Youth

The field of positive psychology is still in its early stages, particularly with younger children. However, there is a real demand to explore the development of positive traits among youth. Perhaps foremost, the goals for raising children are broader than what gets captured within a deficit-based goal of seeking an absence of disturbance. Parents, educators, and society ultimately want their children to develop into happy, healthy, and morally good individuals (Park & Peterson, 2008). The demand for

understanding and promoting children's positive traits can also be seen by the fact that positive character building is very frequently identified as a central goal in youth development programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), and by the fact that there has been an expansion of character education movements specifically designed to help teach various traits of good character (e.g., Character Education Partnership, Character Education Network, the Aspen Declaration of Character Education, and Character Counts; Park, 2004).

While there is a demand for empirical understanding of good character, only recently has a framework been proposed to scientifically conceptualize the broad family of morally valued individual traits that comprise good character. The research endeavor to create a science of positive individual traits evolved into the creation of the Values in Action Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), likened to a strengths-based version of the deficit-based *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* or the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)*. Created through a process of brainstorming among leading positive psychology scholars and broad-based inventories of various cultural and historic depictions of good character and moral virtues, a classification system of 24 individual character strengths was created. Each of the character strengths are also classified within six more broadly described virtues that represent core characteristics valued across moral philosophers and religious thinkers. These virtues (and their composite character strengths) are Wisdom and Knowledge (including Creativity, Curiosity, Open-Mindedness, Love of Learning, and Perspective), Courage (including Authenticity, Bravery, Perseverance, and Zest),

Humanity (including Kindness, Love, and Social Intelligence), Justice (including Fairness, Teamwork, and Leadership), Temperance (including Forgiveness, Modesty, Prudence, and Self-Regulation), and Transcendence (including Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, and Religiousness).

Exploring how these character strengths manifest among young Chinese adoptees could advance research on the VIA Classification in its application to a unique and resilient population. Thus far, there have been limited peer-reviewed studies on the assessment of character strengths in general populations of youth only. One study has been conducted through the use of a 189 item self-report questionnaire for children designed for children ages 10 to 17 years (Park & Peterson, 2006a) and one has been conducted through the content analysis of parental descriptions for children between the ages of 3 and 9 (Park & Peterson, 2006b). While different methods were used based on developmental appropriateness (i.e., completing self-reports demands levels of cognitive maturation greater than that of young children), both studies yielded results regarding the degree to which character strengths are prevalent among youth samples.

In the older sample (10 and 13 year olds), among the most prevalent character strengths (i.e., those with higher mean ratings) were Love, Creativity, Teamwork, Gratitude, and Humor while among the least prevalent were Prudence, Self-Regulation, Forgiveness, Authenticity, Appreciation of Beauty, Modesty, and Leadership (Park & Peterson, 2006a). With younger children, the character strengths of Love, Creativity, and Humor were among the most prevalent characteristics described by parents, however, Curiosity and Kindness were also among the most described strengths (Park & Peterson,

2006b). Gratitude, which was one of highest rated strengths in the study with older children, was only described for 2% of the young children. Another strength that was much less prevalent in the younger sample was Hope, which was also found among only 2% of the sample with young children. Differences between these studies in terms of the character strength profile indicate developmental differences, but these conclusions are cross-sectional in nature. Park and Peterson (2006a; 2006b) called for further longitudinal studies in order to more closely examine the development and correlates of character strengths over time.

A Resilient Population of Young Children: Internationally Adopted Children

The annual number of international adoptions in the United States has approximately tripled over a 15 year time period, and since 2000, the leading source for adoptions into the United States has been China (USDS, 2007). As the population of internationally adopted children has increased, including those adopted from China, so has the need to explore their post-adoption development, as these children experience a unique set of early adversities. Varying degrees of adversity are experienced by children prior to their adoption placements, including inadequate prenatal and perinatal medical care, maternal separation, psychological deprivation, insufficient health services, neglect, abuse, and malnutrition (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005). Discovering how these children fare following placement into their adoptive families is significant for those with vested interests in the children's development (e.g., current and potential adoptive parents, adoption agencies, service providers with internationally adopted clients). Additionally, however, studying the post-adoption development of this unique population

can provide important implications to developmental research in general. Investigations into the development of international adoptees serve as "natural experiments," allowing for issues of child resilience related to exposure to early adverse conditions to be addressed (O'Connor, 2003).

A most predominate objective addressed within international adoption research has been to determine the population's level of risk following their adoptive placements, which parallels the deficit-based inquiry found across traditional psychological research. Much of the literature has looked at behavioral and developmental outcomes for international adoptees originally born in Romania, Russia, or other Eastern European countries (e.g., Albers et al., 1997; Chisholm, 1998; Groothues, Beckett, & O'Connor, 2001; O'Connor et al., 2000), since China only became a leading source for adoptions within the past few years. A meta-analysis of research studies on international adoptees' behavior problems and use of mental health services showed that international adoptees did exhibit more internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behaviors when compared to non-adopted children; however, the overall effect sizes were small and international adoptees were still well within normal ranges of problem behaviors (Juffer & van IJzendoorn 2005). Therefore, despite the fact that results indicated small differences from the norm, the current body of evidence suggests that international adoptees as a whole are a relatively resilient and well-adjusted population when examining various types of problem behaviors.

Are Chinese adoptees different from adoptees from other birth origins? Evidence suggests there may be some important differences between Chinese adoptees (who have

comprised roughly one fifth to one third of all international adoptions into the U.S. in recent years; USDS, 2009), and international adoptees from other birth origins. Gunnar, Dulmen, and the International Adoption Project Team (2007) collected parent ratings data on the behavioral adjustment of 1,948 internationally adopted children representing birth origins from varying regions of the world, including China (55% were from Asian countries; however, exact percent from China specifically was not reported). Their analysis indicated adoptees born in Russia and other eastern European countries exhibited higher levels of behavior problems than all other regions (i.e., Asia, Latin America/Caribbean, and Other). Based on this finding, birth location appears to have an association with later outcomes.

Moderating variables tied to birth location are likely factors that account for differences in post-adoption outcomes. For example, higher rates of prenatal alcohol exposure among Russian children may contribute to the higher levels of problem behaviors, as the prevalence of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome among Russian orphans has been estimated to be approximately 14% (Warren et al., 2001). Notably, children adopted from China are characterized by a fairly unique set of pre-adoption conditions. Specifically, large numbers of infants are abandoned in China, with estimates ranging between 100,000 to 160,000 per year, with the majority of these children being healthy, non-disabled girls (Johnson, Huang, & Wang, 1998). Johnson and colleagues found the parents who abandon these young girls were typically married with occupations involving agricultural work in rural areas of the country. The primary reason for their abandonment was based on population control laws that have put restrictions on the

number of children families are allowed to have (i.e., 'One Child policy'). The Chinese culture places preference on sons rather than daughters based on the practice of having males carry on the family name and becoming responsible for the care of elderly parents. The combination of the preference for sons and the strict birth planning laws has led to otherwise healthy daughters being abandoned by their parents. Although some of these parents try to leave these children on the doorsteps of other couples' houses who they believe may decide to care for the children, many end up in child welfare institutions. Abandonment and institutionalized care provide adverse environmental conditions prior to the child's adopted; however, unlike what is found in other countries, the majority of these Chinese children do not suffer from adverse prenatal care conditions.

Although research on Chinese adoptees is not extensive, results appear very positive thus far. For instance, while statistically significant differences were found to indicate slightly higher levels of problem behaviors among international adoptees in comparison to non-adopted peers (Juffer & van IJzendoorn 2005), results on Chinese adoptees suggest levels of internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problems to be similar to or lower than those for non-adopted peers (Tan & Marfo, 2006). Additionally, while older age at adoption has been correlated to poorer behavioral outcomes in international adoptees (e.g., Meese, 2005; Gunnar, Van Dulmen and the IAPT, 2007), age at adoption does not appear to be a related factor to behavioral adjustment samples of Chinese adoptees (e.g., Rojewski, Shapiro, & Shapiro, 2000, Tan & Marfo, 2006). Adoptees from China, therefore, appear to be particularly resilient. Identifying a group to be resilient in overcoming the impact of adverse conditions provides an opportunity to

examine the positive characteristics of that group, which may help complete the puzzle as to how children may thrive and flourish.

The Current Study

The objectives of the current study sought to extend two fields of research. First, in recognition of the favorable behavioral and emotional adjustment determined through deficit-based assessments of internationally adopted Chinese children, this study sought to advance the understanding of this populations' post-adoption development through a strengths-based approach that explores the development of character among young children of this population. The second aim stems in part from the fact that positive psychology is geared towards learning from groups of individuals who thrive so that we can learn how to foster their strengths in other young people (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Because international adoptees from China appear to being doing well despite their early adversity, examination into this unique population's character strengths and virtues, as opposed to those of the general population's, may offer distinctive, albeit preliminary implications regarding how children become resilient and experience optimal human functioning.

The methodology used to analyze character strengths among the young adopted children in the current study closely followed the methodology used in the only other study of the VIA Classification of Character Strengths among young children by Park and Peterson (2006b). While Park and Peterson specifically asked parents to provide information about their child's characteristics and individual qualities, the current study capitalized on and used an existing question within a widely used questionnaire, the Child

Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000) that asks parents to "Please describe the best things about your child." The focus of both prompts is to elicit parents' spontaneous descriptions of positive characteristics regarding a child. An archival longitudinal data set on a large sample of internationally adopted Chinese children already had been collected and included the CBCL as one major instrument. Rather than collecting new data, this source was selected for secondary data analysis. The responses to the CBCL prompt were coded through content analysis procedures that were also closely aligned with the procedures described by Park and Peterson.

While only a single open-ended question was used to elicit descriptions of children's positive characteristics, similar methodology of using open-ended parental descriptions and content analysis has been used successfully to verify Big Five personality traits among young children (e.g., Kohnstamm, Halverson, Mervield, & Havill, 1998). In a review of studies investigating the role of parents in the detection of child problems, Glascoe and Dworkin (1995) found parents' descriptions of their concerns offered reliable insight into emotional, behavioral and developmental problems. Moreover, their findings suggested that gathering parent concerns was one of the best methods for utilizing parents' observations and understanding of their children. Because parents' descriptions can be used to effectively identify personality traits and emotional, behavioral and developmental problems, it can be reasonably expected that parents are reliable informants of their children's strengths.

In order to gain an understanding of the development of character strengths over time, parent descriptions from the archival data source were analyzed from when the

children were of preschool ages (i.e., 4 and 5 years old) to when they were of early elementary school ages (i.e., 6 and 7). These two developmental time periods were selected primarily based on previous data indicating higher levels of behavior problems among school-age adopted Chinese children in comparison to preschool-age adopted Chinese children (Tan & Marfo, 2006). Considering that there is evidence of behavioral change within this population that occurs between these developmental ages, it would be beneficial to explore whether this population also undergoes a changes in the development of character strengths and virtues across these time points.

While differences in the prevalence of character strengths and virtues were examined longitudinally, logistic regression analysis at each time point was also used to determine how child, parent, and family factors may relate to the likelihood that certain characteristics were described. Serving as a proxy for the extent of time spent in adverse pre-adoption conditions and length of time away, age at adoption has been a factor correlated to differential behavioral outcomes in international adoptees (e.g., Meese, 2005; Gunnar, Van Dulmen and the IAPT, 2007), though this finding was not found within samples of Chinese adoptees (e.g., Rojewski, Shapiro, & Shapiro, 2000). Age at adoption is therefore an important variable to attend to within adoption research. Chronological age of the child was also selected for analysis at each time point in order to further detect possible developmental differences. Parents' age, household income, single versus two-parent household, and the presence of other siblings in the home were also selected as a parent and family variables, with the possibility that these factors could

influence how parents' perceive their child's strengths or the type of character traits that are valued and reinforced within their families.

Additionally, child internalizing and externalizing behaviors, which have been the traditional focus in much of international adoption research, were also examined in relation to character strengths. It is valuable in its own right to explore constructs of positive psychology like character strengths and virtues. However, linking the assessment of positive strengths to traditional deficit-based constructs within a single study can help bridge the gap between deficit-based and strengths-based approaches to develop a more complete understanding of children's development. If negative predictive relationships between certain problem behaviors and particular elements of good character can be established, implications could be made with respect to the prevention of behavioral and emotional disturbances.

Research questions. In order to achieve the aims of the current study, the following research questions were used to guide data analysis:

1. What character strengths and virtues do parents perceive in their internationally adopted Chinese children when their children are a) preschool-age and b) early school-age?
2. Do parents' perceptions about their adopted Chinese children's character strengths and virtues change over time from preschool-age to early school-age?

3. What parent, child, and/or family variables hold significant associations with parents' perceptions of their child's character strengths and virtues at preschool age and early school age?

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The following chapter begins with an overview of the developmental outcomes of international adoptees. After establishing this broader context, the relatively unique pre-adoption experiences of international adoptees from China will be discussed as well as behavioral findings specific to this population. Despite early adversity, the relatively positive adjustment of international adoptees in general, and particularly those from China, that will be highlighted in this literature review provides an impetus for moving beyond the deficit-based approach to exploring strengths of international adoptees. One study on Romanian adoptees that investigated behavioral and emotional strengths will be discussed in detail as it was the first study to focus solely on international adoptees' strengths. This will be followed by a discussion of the emerging field of positive psychology and a significant project within the field involving the development of the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths and Virtues. With a new classification system for studying character strengths across the lifespan, investigations of the VIA classification with populations of youth will be thoroughly reviewed, and an argument will be presented for why this classification system should be investigated further with children adopted from China.

Internationally Adopted Children

According to the U.S. Department of State (2007), during the 1990's the leading sources of adoptees into the United States included Korea, Russia, and Romania. Other top countries of origin for internationally adopted children in the United States include Guatemala, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Colombia, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, India, Paraguay and Peru. Beyond obvious geographic, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, these countries differ with respect to the other pre-adoption environmental contexts (Pomerleau et al., 2005). For instance, many children who become wards of the state in South Korea are placed into foster care prior to being adopted, which constitutes a very different pre-adoption experience than placement into an orphanage (Miller, 2000; Tarullo, Bruce & Gunnar, 2007). This family-based system contrasts the institutional settings found in many other countries like Russia, Romania, and China where infant to caregiver ratios are much higher. While the particular pre-adoption conditions across countries may differ, varying degrees of adverse factors characterize the international adoptees' experiences prior to adoption placements, including inadequate prenatal and perinatal medical care, maternal separation, psychological deprivation, insufficient health services, neglect, abuse, and malnutrition (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005).

With regard to post-adoption developmental outcomes, many studies have focused on behavioral and emotional problems of this population. Juffer and van IJzendoorn (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of research published between 1950 and 2005 that examined adoptees' behavior problems and use of mental health services. In the analysis of international adoptees compared to non-adopted controls, a total of 47

studies on total behavior problems, 29 studies on externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, delinquency, hyperactivity), 30 studies on internalizing problems (e.g., withdrawn, anxious, depressed), and 7 studies on mental health referrals (e.g., receiving clinical psychiatric treatment, placement into a residential setting or mental health facility) of international adoptees were reviewed. Important to note, however, only one small scale study on children adopted from China was included (Rojewski, Shapiro, & Shapiro, 2000), making the results of this study not representative of this specific population. Across the studies reviewed, international adoptees exhibited more internalizing, externalizing and total problem behaviors than those of non-adopted controls, though degree of problem behaviors in most international adoptees was within the normal range. Overall, from a traditional deficit-based model, international adoptees from countries other than China appear to have overcome their early adversity to become relatively well-adjusted.

Juffer and van IJzendoorn (2005) found a moderate effect size (d= 0.37) for the overrepresentation of international adoptees with mental health referrals. These authors believed that the higher rates of referrals may have served to prevent behavior problems among international adoptees from increasing to above average rates. It may be that a more proactive approach is taken with these children, giving families and their children greater levels of skills early on to counteract problems related to early adversity. Little data to date, however, exist to examine the levels and types of strengths that these children have to support this conjecture.

Children reared in deprived institutional settings appear to present with delays in physical development, social, cognitive, motor and language skills (Gunnar, Bruce, & Grotevant, 2000; Meese, 2005). However, following arrival into their new environments, investigations of internationally adopted children have provided evidence that they experience accelerated rates of growth so that these developmental dimensions reach approximately average rates. Meese (2005) commented that this catch-up across skill areas typically occurs by 2 to 4 years after adoption for children who are adopted before the age of 2. Children whose age at adoption is greater than 2 years have been shown to be at greater risk in these areas. However, these conclusions were presented with a cautionary note and a call for further inquiry. Meese's conclusions were based primarily on longitudinal data collected on internationally adopted children originating from Romania. While Romanian adoptions once represented a large percentage of internationally adopted children in the early 1990s, these adoptions have steadily decreased and it is Chinese adoptions that now comprise a larger percentage of U.S. adoptions (USDS, 2007); thus there is a greater need to focus on Chinese adoptees as they have increased in numbers.

In a recently published large scale study of behavioral adjustment among internationally adopted children, Gunnar, Van Dulmen and the International Adoption Project Team (IAPT; 2007) collected data on 1,948 internationally adopted children between the ages of 4 and 18 years using the Child Behavior Checklist to address questions regarding the impact of institutionalization and age at adoption. Fifty-five percent of children in the sample were from Asian countries, but a further breakdown

describing how many of those children were from China versus other countries included in the sample (e.g., Japan, Philippines, India) was not provided. In comparing results between post-institutionalized (PI) and comparison (CO) children, Gunnar, Van Dulmen and the IAPT indicated that early institutional care was correlated with increased risk of behavior problems. Older age at adoption was also correlated with an increased risk of behavior problems. In particular, elevated scores were reported for attention problems among the internationally adopted children.

Unfortunately, descriptive statistics regarding chronological age were not provided by Gunnar, Van Dulmen and the IAPT (2007). Time in family, which could serve as a proxy for chronological age, was shown to correlate with higher levels of behavior problems. Therefore, the results indicating older age at adoption to be associated with increased risk for behavior problems may have been confounded by the ages within each category. For example, if the children adopted after 24 months were systematically older than the children adopted before 24 months in their sample, the results indicating more behavior problems for the children adopted at older ages could be attributed to the sample's older chronological age more so than the older ages at adoption. Controlling for these age variables is important for adoption researchers to consider in their analyses in order to reduce the possibility of conflated results and imprecise conclusions.

Internationally Adopted Children from China

Literature on international adoptions across various origins of birth provides an overall awareness of how international adoptees from particular countries, like China,

fare following adoption. However, the findings from this literature might be misleading in some cases as the results are not necessarily generalizable to those adopted from China. In the recent study by Gunnar, Dulmen, and the IAPT (2007), analysis by region of birth provided evidence that children adopted from Russia/Eastern Europe were more likely to exhibit behavior problems than children adopted from elsewhere. Many factors could result in such a difference. One potential difference that was cited may be that children from these countries experience higher levels or prenatal toxins and alcohol. Many possibilities are worthy of exploration of why such a difference occurs, but this difference itself has made an impact on the field. Though the argument may have been inferred from logic, this study provides empirical evidence within a single research design (i.e., comparisons were made across the same study, using a uniform set of procedures and data collection) to suggest that outcomes of international adoptions from one birth origin do not necessarily align with those from other birth origins.

With China leading all other nations in birth origin of international adoptions in the United States for several years (USDS, 2007) efforts to study adoptees from China are becoming more and more essential. The amount of literature on international adoptions from China has only recently been developing and makes up a more limited fraction of the entire international adoption literature. Nevertheless, the body of work is emerging, with similar types of investigations being conducted with this particular population as those conducted with populations from other countries of origin.

Abandonment of Chinese children. An important difference between Chinese adoptees and those from other countries is that most infants who are adopted from China

were abandoned shortly after their birth. The number of Chinese infants who are abandoned in China every year is not clear, but estimates from government officials and civil affair publications reported rates ranging between 100,000 to 160,000 (Johnson, Huang, & Wang, 1998). Abandonment has historical roots in Chinese culture, but the most recent rise of abandonment began in the early 1980's with the advent of birth planning laws, commonly referred to as the 'one-child policy.' These laws were put into place to reduce population growth. The one-child policy states that families are limited to having only one child born into their family, but this policy has not been uniform across regions of China. In many rural areas of China where agricultural work is the primary occupation, the policy in place is a one-son-or-two-child policy. This policy allows couples to have two children but only if their first child was female. Enforcement of this policy is rather stringent with heavy fines and sterilization serving as consequences for births outside of this rule (Johnson, Huang, & Wang, 1998).

Johnson, Huang, and Wang (1998) located and collected information from 237 Chinese families who had abandoned a child to gather evidence regarding who abandons children and why children are abandoned. The details of family recruitment for the study were limited to stating that the participants were found through informal networks and word of mouth, so the conclusions drawn from this study should be considered cautiously as the sample may not be representative of all families who have abandoned a child. Nevertheless, the situational factors surrounding early abandonments appear to be quite different from those that might occur in other countries. In their sample, 99% of birth parents were married at the time of abandonment, with a majority of the parents' ages

ranging from mid-to-late 20s to late 30s. Eighty-eight percent of birth parents were from rural areas, level of education was average for their age and region (i.e., primary school or junior middle school education), and economic conditions were approximately average for their region.

Relating to the Chinese culture's preference for sons, nine out of ten children abandoned were girls (Johnson, Huang, & Wang, 1998). In China, sons remain permanent members of their father's family and provide the source of support for elderly parents, whereas daughters join their husband's family following marriage and must support the husband's parents rather than their own. This cultural preference for sons in combination with the one-son-or-two-child policy has led to the high ratio of girls being abandoned. However, because these factors are contributing reasons for child abandonment, the girls who are abandoned are typically healthy and without known disabilities (86% of the sample). Most of these children are abandoned within their first six months, with a third being abandoned within the first two months. Overall, these results show that the typical child abandoned is a healthy girl who is less than six months old.

Behavioral outcomes. Of the literature on internationally adopted children from China, behavior problems have received the greatest focus. Most of these studies have used standardized behavior rating scales for parents to report their perceptions of problem behaviors. The earliest known study that focused specifically on adoptees from China used the Behavior Assessment Scale for Children (BASC) Parent Rating Scale as a measure of behavioral adjustment with a sample of 45 international adoptees from China

(Rojewski, Shapiro, & Shapiro, 2000). The children in the sample ranged in age from 22 months to 9 years, 8 months, with a mean age of 46.9 months. Ninety eight percent of the internationally adopted Chinese children in the sample scored within the normal range for all 9 of the behavior constructs of the BASC behavior checklist (i.e., Hyperactivity, Aggression, Conduct problems, Anxiety, Depression, Somatization, Atypicality, Withdrawal, and Attention problems). Age at adoption was also found to be insignificant in relation to behavior scores, with children adopted before and after 18 months having similar scores in the normal ranges. Therefore, this initial study indicated positive results for this population. Within the group, however, behavioral profiles differed by chronological age. Adopted girls ages 3 years and older (n = 22) were reported to have higher levels of hyperactivity and aggression than the adopted girls under age 3 years (n = 17). Conversely, the younger girls were reported to have higher levels of withdrawal behavior than their older peers. Because of the larger range of ages in the older subsample, it is difficult to interpret when the behavioral adjustment shifted to become less withdrawn but more aggressive and hyperactive. Of note, the BASC has items that assess some areas of strength to produce subscales scores beyond deficit-based clinical problems in the areas of Adaptability, Social Skills, Leadership, and Study Skills. Had these behavioral skill areas been analyzed, a broader view of the adoptee's developmental outcomes could have been explored as data on strengths could have been analyzed.

Studies conducted by Tan and colleagues (e.g., 2006; 2007) utilized the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) with much larger sample sizes. Unlike the BASC, the CBCL reports a summary scale score to provide a measure of an overall behavioral profile for

children. Data for these studies were drawn from data sets of 695 (Tan & Marfo, 2006) and 1122 (Tan, Dedrick, & Marfo, 2007) Chinese adoptees. With the larger samples, Tan has been able to not only conduct data analysis at the whole group but also divide his sample into groups based on variables such as chronological age, pre-adoption adversity, and age at adoption without losing power since these groups still have large numbers. In the first data set, parent ratings of 695 adopted Chinese girls ranging in age from 1.5 to 11 showed that 92% of these children scored within the normal range (Tan & Marfo, 2006). This finding is very similar to the findings of Rojewski, Shapiro, and Shapiro (2000).

When this sample was broken down into preschool age girls (M = 43.7 months, SD = 15.2) and school-age girls (M = 89.8 months, SD = 16.5), both groups scored significantly lower on internalizing, externalizing and total problems behavior scales when compared to the CBCL normative reference group (Tan & Marfo, 2006). Internalizing behaviors include feelings of anxiety and worry, depression, and withdrawal. Eternalizing behaviors include outwardly aggressive and delinquent behaviors. The total problems construct is a combination of internalizing, externalizing and other problems (e.g., thought problems) and provides a general indication of behavior problems present. Interestingly, the school age group had higher total problem scores than the preschool age group.

This same pattern of older children having greater levels of behavior problems was seen again with an even larger sample (N = 1095) of Chinese adopted children in both special needs and non-special needs adoptees (Tan, Marfo, & Dedrick, 2007). As a

group, special needs adoptees (i.e. adopted at older ages and disabled) had statistically more total behavior problems than non-special needs adoptees for the preschool age sample only, but the larger difference was shown between preschool age and school age samples. For the preschool age sample (n = 754, M = 43.7 months), 91% of special needs children scored in the normal range, and 94% for non-special needs children. For the school-age sample (n = 341, M = 89.8 months), only 80% of special needs children scored in the normal range and 83% for non-special needs children. While these findings lack the strength of a longitudinal design, the repeated findings across cross-sectional comparisons showing older children scored lower than younger children implies that a change occurs in adopted Chinese children's behavioral adjustment with age.

In a study on the relation between internationally adopted children's behavior adjustment and adoptive parents' cultural socialization and preparation for bias (N = 193 55% from China, 45% from Korea), Johnston and colleagues (2007) found more cultural socialization (i.e., parents' emphasis on ethnic pride, heritage, and diversity) related to fewer externalizing behaviors. With a greater focus on socialization, it may be that parents promote particular strengths within their children that serve as a buffer towards externalizing problem behaviors. Much remains to be explored regarding the types of factors that are associated with this population's favorable behavioral outcomes.

Shift in Research: A New Focus on Strengths

The focus of research efforts on internationally adopted children from China and other countries has primarily used a deficit-based approach. This approach has actually revealed that the adoptees are relatively well-adjusted after a period of time in their

adoptive families. In recognition of this general finding in the literature, one recent study has shifted to explore the children's strengths as perceived by their parents. Pearlmutter, Ryan, Johnson, and Groza (2008) argued that while children do experience unique difficulties as they relocate from deprived pre-adoption conditions to improved settings with their adoptive families, the challenges they endure do not characterize the majority of adopted children and their families, and they do not serve as a full representation of adoptive family life. They also contended that through the identification of adoptees' strengths and an exploration of variables associated with those strengths, implications could begin to be drawn regarding how adoptive families and adoption workers could better use these strengths to the benefit of the children.

A total of 91 surveys collected in 1995 on children adopted from Romania from a convenience sample of adoptive parents were analyzed to determine the children's pattern of strengths, the associations between strengths and pre-adoption variables, and predictive factors of this population's strengths (Pearlmutter, Ryan, Johnson, & Groza, 2008). The adoptive families had high household incomes (M = $118,514) and an average of 1.47 other children living in the home, and half of the children were female, between the ages of 5.75 and 16.83 years old (M = 10.06 years), and adopted between the ages of less than a month old to 10.5 years old (M = 21.24 months). The method used to assess strengths was through the parents' completion of the Behavioral Emotional Rating Scale (BERS; Epstein & Sharma, 1998). The BERS was designed to measure positive behavioral and emotional skills and competencies through response items linked to five dimensions of strengths—Interpersonal Strength (i.e., ability to control emotions or

behaviors within social settings), Intrapersonal Strength (i.e., views of the child on personal competence and accomplishments), Family Involvement (i.e., engagement and relationships of the child with the family), School Functioning (i.e., competence with school and classroom tasks), and Affective Strength (i.e., ability to accept affection and express emotions towards others).

As a group, the adoptive children scored statistically similar to the normative sample of non-emotionally/behaviorally disturbed children in terms of Interpersonal Strength and School Functioning while scoring statistically higher than the normative sample in terms of Family Involvement, Intrapersonal Strength, and Affective Strength (Pearlmutter, Ryan, Johnson, & Groza, 2008). In examining how institutionalization was related to strengths within their sample, children placed into family settings between birth to six months were reported to have similar levels of strength to those still in institutional settings during that time. Children still in institutional settings at ages six to 12 months, however, scored significantly lower in Family Involvement than children in family settings by that age, while children in institutional settings at ages 12 to 24 months scored significantly lower in Interpersonal and Affective Strengths than children in family settings by that age. For children not placed in family settings until after 24 months of age, their scores were lower than those in family settings by that age on all five strength subscales. Adoption into family settings at later ages appears to negatively influence the level of strengths.

In conducting regression analysis, the strength of the parent-child relationship (as measured by a summative score of seven four-point Likert-scale items on how well

parents and children get along, communicate, feel close to one another; the parents respect and trust for the child; the relative impact the relationship has had on the family; and the amount of time they spend together) was significantly correlated—in a positive direction—with all five subscales of the BERS (Pearlmutter, Ryan, Johnson, & Groza, 2008). This finding suggests that a more positively perceived parent-child relationship is a significant predictor of higher levels of child strengths. Regression also indicated that older children were more likely to score lower than younger children on each subscale. Interestingly, girls were less likely to score lower only on the School Functioning scale, which may indicate the difference in Interpersonal Strength based on gender shown through the *t*-test may have been confounded by other variables not taken into account (i.e., age, parent-child relationship and pre-adoption history).

Unlike other assessment measures that may include items or some scales on competencies or strength areas, the BERS is an empirically validated measure (e.g., Epstein, 1999; Epstein, Cullinan, Ryser, & Pearson, 2002; Trout, Ryan, La Vigne, & Epstein, 2003) with a sole focus on strengths. The BERS was developed to reflect behavioral and emotional skills identified within the behavioral and emotional research literature, with the practical purpose of developing and validating a measurement tool that could document students' strengths and competencies (Buckley & Epstein, 2004). However, strengths can be and have been conceptualized in different ways other than as behavioral and emotional skills. Within the emerging field of positive psychology, research efforts have focused on scientifically identifying, measuring, and exploring good character. As opposed to competencies and strengths of skills, strengths of character are

considered a broad family of individual traits that are morally valued and that manifest across thoughts, feelings and behaviors. The following section will explore in greater depth the emergence of positive psychology and the development of the classification system for character strengths.

Character Strengths and Virtues

Deficit-based approaches are not only found in adoption research but traditional psychological research in general. However, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) advanced an argument for expanding the field of psychology to focus on three primary topics--positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions that serve to improve qualities of life and prevent pathologies. Rather than concentrating on a deficit-based model of human functioning focused on how individuals can heal themselves, positive psychology shifts away from traditional psychological research with an aim at understanding positive human functioning among those who are thriving and use that knowledge to help individuals flourish.

Recognizing the advantages that psychologists have experienced with the existence of empirically-based classification schemes for understanding deficit-based mental health pathologies like the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* and the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD),* Peterson and Seligman (2004) sought to advance a similar classification for the positive characteristics of individuals by more scientifically exploring what goes into *good character*. Such a classification was proposed to help in achieving positive psychology's goals of understanding and promoting positive individual traits through the establishment of a

common vocabulary that could be explored empirically and applied to clinical practice. In developing such a classification system that would identify measurable positive traits, Peterson and Seligman noted that they needed to address several important issues such as how character is defined; whether there are universal traits of character or whether it is primarily socially constructed with distinctive cultural values; and whether character is a singular or multidimensional trait.

The process with which the classification system for character developed began with brainstorming among a group of leading scholars associated with aspects of positive psychology research (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Additionally, inventories of virtues and strengths were drawn from an incredibly diverse range of sources across time in order to identify all potential strengths of character, which ended up including such things as writings from historical figures like Benjamin Franklin, statements from Boy Scouts of America, goals from character education programs (e.g., M.W. Berkowitz, 2000), messages found in Hallmark greeting cards, popular song lyrics, and profiles of Pokémon characters. In examining this wide array of sources, the brainstormed positive characteristics began falling into groups of similar traits that were described to capture the "family resemblance" of a strength. The initial groupings fell within what became the intermediate level of the classification system, developing into what are now referred to as *character strengths*. The classification system developed to include a hierarchical depiction of different levels of abstraction, however, to include levels of virtues, or broader categories representing core characteristics that have been valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers; character strengths, or the intermediate level of

psychological processes or mechanisms that were the "distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues" (p. 13); and situational themes, or the more specific habits that manifest character strengths in given situations.

C*riteria defining the strengths*. In clarifying how character strengths would be determined in this process, a series of 10 criteria were developed to more clearly describe the qualities of a character strength (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The first criterion stated, "a strength contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others" (p. 17). This criterion emphasizes that character strengths add to an individual's quality of life, moving beyond the traditional focus of psychology that emphasizes the factors that lead individuals to cope with adversity and only resolve distress or disorder. Another important distinction of this first criterion is that a strength *contributes*, rather than *causes* fulfillment. The example used to depict this line of reasoning was that doing a favor for someone is an act of kindness that involves an inherent satisfaction of being helpful, rather than causing a person to feel satisfied with himself/herself at a later point in time.

The second criterion states that "although strengths can and do produce desirable outcomes, each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes" (Peterson & Seligman, 2006, p.19). This criterion establishes that while character strengths could have significant correlations or causal relationships to outcomes such as reduced likelihood of mental health challenges, the outcomes are not a defining feature of character strengths. It also emphasizes that a strength is a quality that is morally valued, one that all people can aspire to develop. Building off this point, it

was contended that people tend to admire the display of character strengths and become elevated in witnessing them, rather than feel jealous or experience negativity in their presence. With this in mind, the third criterion states that "the display of a strength by one person does not diminish other people in the vicinity" (p. 21).

More linguistically based, the fourth criterion states that "being able to phrase the 'opposite' of a putative strength in a felicitous way counts against regarding it as a character strength" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 22). The premise behind this criterion was that a character strength should have a clear antonym that has negative connotations, rather than antonyms that could be more positive. For example, flexibility was given as an example of potential strength, but its opposites could be inflexibility (negative) or steadfastness (positive).

Criterion five states that "a strength needs to be manifest in the range of an individual's behavior—thoughts feelings, and/or actions—in such a way that it can be assessed. It should be trait-like in the sense of having a degree of generality across situations and stability across time" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 23). In other words, strengths need to be exhibited in more than just one type of situation or point in time; however, the criterion is flexible enough to include strengths that could be described as either "tonic" (i.e., constant across variety of settings; e.g., kindness) or "phasic" (i.e., increasing or decreasing in intensity based on relevant settings; e.g., bravery) .

The sixth criterion relates to keeping the character strengths sufficiently distinct from one another, as Peterson and Seligman (2006) described "the strength is distinct from other positive traits in the classification and cannot be decomposed into them" (p.

24). This also relates to their efforts to keep the character strengths similar horizontally and leaving the categories of virtues as a vertical level at which a given virtue could be "decomposed" into disparate strengths. "Tolerance" was given as an example of a potential character strength, but because its definition consumed aspects of other character strengths of open-mindedness and fairness, it did not meet this criteria and was not included in the classification.

Criterion seven describes that character strengths are "embodied in consensual paragons" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.24). This criterion serves almost like a check, in which there should be real, apocryphal, or mythic models that exemplify the character strength in order for it to be included in the classification system. While many of the criteria did not specifically mention children in the development of the classification, this criterion did in describing that children grow up learning about character through paragon role models. Additionally, the authors pointed out that a character strength is one in which people can easily identify someone who truly exemplifies that strength from within their own social networks. That is, if a person was asked to identify a person who typified a given strength in the classification system, such as humor, or kindness, or hope, they would be able to identify someone without any significant trouble. This speaks to the fact that individuals are described to have signature strengths, ones that an individual feels ownership towards and conveys frequently.

Somewhat related is criterion eight, in which Peterson and Seligman (2004) proposed that for at least some of the strengths there is "the existence of prodigies with respect to the strength" (p. 25). Similar to how children can be mentally advanced with

regard to specific domains like music or athletics, the same was argued to be plausible, though admittedly based on anecdotal evidence due to a lack of empirical evidence, for character strengths. Similar to the issues discussed in relation to criterion seven regarding whether paragons of some strengths are more prevalent than others, the same was unknown regarding which strengths are more apt be displayed precociously in children. For both issues, there is also little known about the developmental course of character strengths during childhood, and more is needed to begin answering these types of questions.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from criterion seven and eight, criterion nine states "the existence of people who show—selectively—the total absence of a given strength" is another aspect that defines character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 26). This extends the notion that character is plural and consists of a family of traits by establishing that people can have some character strengths but be lacking one or more other strengths.

The last of the criteria was borrowed from the theory of Erikson's (1963) psychosocial stages. Criterion ten states that "the larger society provides institutions and associated rituals for cultivating strengths and virtues and then for sustaining their practice" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 27). According to this final criterion, social agents (e.g., parents, school programs, Little League baseball team) help in the development of character strengths, but the social context are also important in maintaining character strengths. In returning to the issue of tonic versus phasic strengths, tonic strengths were described as being able to adequately carry on in a person as long as

they were not punished in by others as these have more stability across situations. For phasic strengths, like teamwork, appropriate ways for enacting this strength may need more explicit communication or instruction and reinforcement to develop. Taken together, these criteria helped create the classification to include 24 character strengths and serves to depict what the key components are to good character in psychological terms. The resulting character strengths are presented in Table 1, along with their corresponding definitions.

Table 1

VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (adapted from Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, p.606; Park & Peterson, 2005, p. 21-22)

1. Wisdom and knowledge-cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge.
    - *Creativity:* Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it.
    - *Curiosity:* Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience; finding all subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering.
    - *Open-mindedness:* Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; *not* jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
    - *Love of learning:* Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add *systematically* to what one knows.
    - *Perspective:* Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to the self and to other people.
2. Courage-emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal.
    - *Bravery: Not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it.
    - *Perseverance:* Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks.

- *Authenticity:* Speaking the truth but, more broadly, presenting oneself in a genuine way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.
- *Zest:* Approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated.

3. Humanity-interpersonal strengths that involve "tending" and "befriending" others (Taylor et al., 2000).
    - *Kindness:* Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them.
    - *Love/intimacy:* Valuing close relations with others, in those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people.
    - *Social intelligence:* Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and the self; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
4. Justice-civic strengths that underlie healthy community life.
    - *Teamwork:* working well as member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share.
    - *Fairness:* Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; *not* letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.
    - *Leadership:* Encouraging one's group to get things done and, at the same time, encouraging good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.
5. Temperance-strengths that protect against excess.
    - *Forgiveness/mercy:* Forgiving those who have done wrong; giving people a second chance; *not* being vengeful.
    - *Modesty:* Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; *not* seeking the spotlight; *not* regarding oneself as more special than one is.
    - *Prudence:* Being careful about one's choices; *not* taking undue risks; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted.
    - *Self-regulation:* Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions.
6. Transcendence-strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning.
    - *Appreciation of beauty and excellence:* Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience.
    - *Gratitude:* Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks.
    - *Hope:* Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about.

- *Humor:* Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes.
- *Religiousness:* Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.

VIA Classification applied to youth populations. To assess character strengths in youth populations (i.e., ages 10 to 17 years), the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth) was developed. The VIA-questionnaire underwent revisions over a 3-year time period that was influenced by focus groups with 459 high school students (Steen, Kachorek, & Peterson, 2003), guidance from developmental psychologists and teachers, and psychometric adequacy data on versions of the measure (Park & Peterson, 2006a). The resulting measure included 189 items using 5-point scale responses, with seven to nine items corresponding with each of the 24 character strengths.

Following the determination of substantial test-retest reliability of the measure over a period of 6 months with a sample of 250 youth (119 youth were 10 years of age, 131 youth were 13 years of age), Park and Peterson (2006a) explored the prevalence of each strength and several demographic correlates. Overall, the average scores for all character strengths were rated above the median rating of 3 (i.e., "somewhat like me"), ranging between 3.29 and 4.02. Those with higher mean scores were considered more prevalent than those with lower mean scores. The least prevalent character strengths (in ascending order) were Prudence, Self-Regulation, Forgiveness, Authenticity, Appreciation of Beauty, Modesty, and Leadership, which had average scores ranging from 3.29 and 3.42. The most prevalent character strengths (in ascending order) were

Love, Creativity, Teamwork, Gratitude, Humor, which had average scores ranging from 3.77 and 4.02. The remaining character strengths had average scores ranging from 3.50 to 3.71.

When compared to a sample of adults (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006) to determine some developmental profile differences in the prevalence of character strengths, Hope, Teamwork, and Zest were relatively more common within the youth sample than the adult sample (Park & Peterson, 2006a). On the other hand, Appreciation of Beauty, Authenticity, Leadership and Open-mindedness were relatively less common within the youth sample than the adult sample. These results provide evidence for differential profiles of character based on age, which the authors suggested could be arguably attributed to levels of maturation. When compared within the sample, however, the average character strength profile (i.e., the order of least prevalent to most prevalent character strength) was highly comparable between 10 year old and 13 year old youth ($\rho = .82$, $p < .001$), indicating little developmental change within a three year period. Nevertheless, these results are based on cross-sectional data, not longitudinal data, which leaves the finding open to limitations such as cohort effects. Park and Peterson acknowledged that longitudinal research could bring needed clarity to the change and stability of character strengths and their manifestations over time.

The average character strength profile was also found to be highly comparable on the other demographic variables assessed, though these only included gender and Whites versus non-whites. When comparing specific mean scores, males scored lower on scales of beauty, fairness, kindness, and perspective, and Whites scored lower than non-Whites

for religiousness. Further exploration on various demographic variables is needed to determine the extent to understand which factors may influence the development of character strengths and virtues.

Park and Peterson (2006a) also explored the relation between character strengths and various other psychological constructs. In particular, a different sample of 134 middle school students who completed an earlier version of the VIA-Youth also completed a Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), from which the authors were able to compare character strengths to internalizing and externalizing problems. With regard to internalizing problems, moderate negative correlations were found for hope, zest, and leadership. With regard to externalizing problems, moderate negative correlations were found for perseverance, authenticity, prudence, and love.

While research has explored these character strengths in relation to older children, only a single study to date has applied the VIA Classification to young children. Park and Peterson (2006b) explored character strengths manifested within children between the ages of three and nine years. Recognizing that young children would not be able to provide self-report ratings to measure character strengths in the manner that is used to assess older children and adults, Park and Peterson relied on free parental descriptions as their data source. Using such a data source has been carried out previously in personality research, where the analysis of parent descriptions confirmed Big Five personality traits among children ranging from two to thirteen years old (Kohnstamm et al., 1998). Specifically, the researchers asked parents to describe their child's personal characteristics and individual qualities in an effort to allow the researchers know their

child well. These responses served as the data for the subsequent content analysis in which a coding framework based on the VIA Classification of Character Strengths was used.

Park and Peterson (2006b) obtained descriptions for 680 children between the ages of 3 and 9 years from a convenience sample of parents recruited through notices distributed electronically and posted in toy stores, daycare centers, and pediatrician offices. Gender was evenly distributed (51% boys, 49% girls) and the ethnic composition was mostly White (85%). About half (49%) of the sample was reported to be upper or upper-middle class, with another 40% reporting to be middle class, and only 10% reporting lower or lower-middle class. Mean age was not reported, but the frequency of each of the seven ages were relatively equivalent, ranging between 12% and 16% of the sample.

Result of the content analysis demonstrated wide variability in the prevalence of character strengths among this sample of young children (Park & Peterson, 2006b). Thirteen of the 24 character strengths were described for 8% or less of the sample—Authenticity, Gratitude, Modesty, Forgiveness, Open-Mindedness, Hope, Appreciation of Beauty, Perspective, Religiousness, Fairness, Leadership, Bravery, and Prudence. The authors noted that among the more rarely described character strengths was theoretically aligned with the developmental notion that the degree of cognitive maturation differed across the various character strengths. However, with the exception of gratitude which the authors explored based on its empirically known relationship with life satisfaction, the authors did not explore if there were higher rates of these less prevalent character

strengths in the older versus younger children in the sample. Such an analysis of age differences could serve to elucidate when such cognitive maturation, or moral development, begins to emerge.

The 11 character strengths that were prevalent in 10% or more of children were Zest, Teamwork, Social Intelligence, Self-Regulation, Perseverance, Love of learning, Curiosity, Humor, Creativity, Kindness, and Love (Park & Peterson, 2006b). The authors attempted to summarize the results by stating that based on parent perceptions, a "modal child" at this young age range would demonstrate to be loving, kind, creative, humorous, and curious, as those characteristics represented the five most prevalent character strengths in the sample.

In addition to the coding for character strengths, Park and Peterson (2006b) also coded each case on a happiness scale, ranging from 1 to 7, based on the degree to which parents spontaneously provided descriptions denoting the level of their child's happiness. Of the 24 character strengths, Love, Hope, and Zest were the three strengths found to have positive correlations, with Love and Zest exhibiting a more moderate relationship ($r = .31$ for both strengths) and Hope exhibiting a smaller relationship ($r = .12$). However, when separate analyses were run for children seven years and older in the sample, Gratitude also had a modest positive relationship with happiness ($r = .16$).

Two other positive characteristics were coded for within the parent description data, Intelligence and Attractiveness, which were found to be prevalent among 49% and 8% of the sample, respectively (Park & Peterson, 2006b). For the most part, there was no relationship between either of these two positive characteristics and the character

strengths, with exception of a reportedly modest relationship between Love of Learning and Intelligence. While the authors noted such a relationship was understandably interpretable, similar significant relationships that could also have seemingly understandable relationships with intelligence, such as Creativity, Perspective or other strengths within the virtue of Wisdom and Knowledge, were not found.

Beyond the correlation analyses with Happiness, Intelligence, and Attractiveness, no further analyses were explored in relation to the character strengths. Instead, relationships with other child and family demographic variables were only tested for Happiness, not character strengths. Delving into family and child variables in relation to character strengths could bring further insight into possible why certain strengths are perceived to develop more frequently for some children but not others. Additionally, exploring the connection between character strengths and negative indicators of mental health, such as problem behaviors, rather than positive indicators of mental health, such as happiness, could expand our understanding of how positive character strengths may influence a child's overall mental health and adjustment.

Bridging Two Fields of Research

The literature on the international adoptee populations demonstrates their overall resilience in terms of behavioral adjustment within a deficit-based approach of assessment, with children from China faring particularly well. Thus far, only one known study within international adoption research moved from the traditional approach of assessing problem behaviors to a strengths-based approach assessing behavioral and emotional skills and competencies. Within the positive psychology movement, however,

a call has been made to build a science of human strengths. As a result, the VIA Classification of Character Strengths was created to reflect universally accepted positive traits of good character that exist across the lifespan; however, limited research have assessed character strengths among youth and only among general populations. The current study seeks to advance the research on international adoptee's childhood development through a strengths-based approach and advance the research on the development of character strengths in young children by assessing children known to be particularly resilient.

Chapter Three

Method

The current study examined parents' perceptions on positive characteristics of their internationally adopted Chinese children over time as a means to further explore aspects of this unique population's development. Specifically, this study sought to explore how the positive characteristics of children may differ over time from preschool-age to early school-age, and determine how potential child, parent and family variables relate to the prevalence of character strengths and virtues. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods selected to accomplish the goals of this study. The chapter opens with a description of the research design. This is followed by a description of the data collection procedures for the archival data source that was used within the current study. Sample characteristics are then provided, followed by a description of the specific measures used in this study. Finally, there is a description of the steps taken to code the qualitative data and a discussion of the statistical analysis used to further explore the coded content.

Research Design

The current study falls within a larger program of research on the long-term development of children adopted from China. The main goal of the current study is to explore the development of young internationally adopted Chinese children from a strength-based perspective using the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues. This

study aims to not only focus on a resilient population with a unique set of early childhood experiences but to extend the limited research on character strengths and virtues with young children across developmental time points. To achieve these goals, data from a longitudinal study were analyzed to (a) to understand the strengths that adoptive parents perceive in their children and (b) to examine the adoptive parents' perceptions over time from preschool age to early school age.

Data were collected from the same adoptive parents when their adopted children were between 4 and 5 years of age (i.e., preschool ages) and then when the children were between 6 and 7 years of age (i.e., early school ages). Using a longitudinal panel design (i.e., one that follows the same cohort of participants over time) provided the benefit of being able to draw better conclusions about change and consistency over time since data reflect change in perceptions of the same children and are less affected by confounding variables associated with cross-sectional designs.

Archival Data Source

The original procedures used to collect the archival data source used in the current study began in early 2005 when participant recruitment was conducted through adoption-related internet discussion groups and adoption agencies. For the internet discussion groups, a group moderator was contacted and information regarding the research project was provided. The moderator was then asked to write a short introduction to the research project and post that introduction with a recruitment letter for the members of their respective groups. Directors of 10 adoption agencies in the U.S. (e.g., Chinese Children's Adoption International, China Adoption with Love, Inc., Alliance for

Children, Children's Hope International, Great Wall China Adoption) also were contacted and asked to disseminate the same recruitment letter.

The study was endorsed by at least 120 internet discussion groups and 6 adoption agencies. The focuses of the internet discussion groups were varied—some were for adoptive families in general (e.g., Families with Children from China, Raising China Children), others were for adoptive families with children from specific regions of China, and others were for adoptive families to discuss specific aspects of development (e.g., attachment, special needs, identity, general adjustment). Many families belonged to multiple discussion groups and reported receiving information regarding the study more than once. If parents were interested in participating in the study, they were instructed to contact the research program via email with information regarding the number of biological children, number of children adopted from China, ages of each child, and their mailing address.

Important to note is that the nature of the sampling procedure involved volunteer participants rather than random sampling. This must be taken into account when interpreting the results, as these volunteer participants may be distinctly different from participants who did not volunteer to participate. Additionally, although two methods were employed to reach potential parents of adopted Chinese children, the use of technology may have biased the sampling by excluding those who do not use internet discussion groups.

An envelope containing a family background survey, child background survey, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), instruction sheet, consent form, and stamped

return envelope was mailed to each family that expressed interest in the study (families with more than one adopted and/or biological child in the home received a CBCL and child background survey for each child). Beyond a description of the study's purpose and estimated length of time for completing the surveys (i.e., 20 to 30 minutes), the instruction sheet assured the parents of confidentiality for the information they provided. The parents were then instructed to complete the background surveys first, followed by the CBCL assessment.

Of the 1,092 families who requested surveys (1001 from United States, and 91 from Canada, Australia, and the UK), 853 families returned the surveys. This resulted in a considerably high return rate for survey research of approximately 78.1%. Of the 853 families who returned surveys, data were provided for a total of 1,122 children adopted from China. Each of those children was assigned a family and child code number that served as their unique identifiers.

Following data collection in 2005, periodic thank you letters, newsletters, and updates on international adoption research were sent out to the families through email. This served both as a way to give back to the participants and as a means to keep participants' contact information up to date as the primary investigator of that study requested that families inform him of any changes to facilitate communication. In the spring of 2007, the same families who completed surveys in the 2005 study were asked to participate in a follow up study to collect the first wave of longitudinal data. Contact was first attempted via email. In cases when there were no responses to the emails or when email addresses were no longer correct or in use, the investigator sent letters out to

families using the most up-to-date mailing addresses on file. A majority of families were reached, with a majority also expressing interest in continuing to participate. The materials parents received in this second wave of the study included an instruction sheet, CBCL, Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) questionnaire, child background survey for those families with any new children, and stamped return envelope. The surveys were marked with the same code numbers that were used to identify the families and children in the 2005 data collection. This coding allowed for data to be matched across data collections.

Current Study

Sample. Following approval from University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board, the current researcher obtained access to the parent surveys and data files from Dr. Tony Tan on the adopted Chinese children from the 2005 and 2007 data collections. Separate files that included positive characteristics, CBCL scores, and demographic data of interest were merged into a single spreadsheet. Children whose parents only participated during the first wave of data collection were removed from the data set, along with children who were either younger than 4 or older than 5 years old.

The resulting sample included a total of 172 parents who reported on 179 children (i.e., seven parents reported on two children) who were preschool ages at Time 1 (i.e., 48 to 71 months; M = 59.57 months, SD = 6.60 at Time 1) and who were school ages at Time 2 (i.e., 72 to 95 months; M = 83.57 months, SD = 6.60). The ages of adoption for the children ranged from 7 to 55 months, with a median age of 13 months (M = 15.66, SD = 9.16). The mean age of parent respondents at Time 1 was 45.18 (SD = 5.12), and

ranged from 34 to 58, and the same parent respondents completed the questionnaires at both time points. Additional demographic data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Parent and Child Demographic Characteristics (N=179) at Time 1

Characteristic	*Frequency*	*Percentage*
Gender		
Male	7	3.9
Female	172	96.1
Income ($)		
<29,999	4	2.2
30,000 – 59,999	33	18.4
60,000 – 89,999	55	30.7
90,000 – 119,999	38	21.2
120,000 – 149,999	12	6.7
>150,000	37	20.7
Marital Status		
Married	108	60.3
Living with Spouse/Partner	9	5.0
Separated or Divorced	16	8.9
Widowed	1	0.6
Never Married	44	24.6
Highest Educational Attainment (Respondent)		
High School	2	1.1
Some College	16	8.9
College	57	31.8
Masters	73	40.8
Doctorate	27	15.1
Post Doctoral	4	2.2
Special Needs Adoption		
No	158	88.3
Yes	21	11.7
Other Children in Home		
Only Child	53	29.6
Child has Siblings	126	70.4

Measures and procedures. Portions of the archival data source were used in the current study. In the 2005 data collection, demographic variables were gathered from the

child and family background surveys. For the current study, items regarding the adoptive parents' marital status at the time of adoption (i.e. married, not married, separated, divorced, widowed, living with same-sex partner, living with opposite-sex partner), whether other biological or adoptive children were living in the home, household income (1 = under $19,999 to 15 = over $150,000), and parents' age were selected as variables in regression analyses. Demographic information about the adopted child was also collected from the parents. Relevant information for the current study's analyses included the child's date of birth, date of data collection, and age at adoption. The child's date of birth and date of data collection were used to calculate chronological age in months.

The Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000; 2001), a widely used scale for the study of children's behavior, was also administered in both 2005 and 2007 data collections. The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) is the parent form measure from the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA) and is used to collect information on and assess a child's adaptive and maladaptive functioning. Two versions were used to collect data from parents including one designed for preschool ages (CBCL/1.5-5) and one for school ages (CBCL/6-18). Studies have frequently use this measure to obtain quantitative results regarding internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behaviors as parents are asked to rate a series of behaviors (i.e., 99 behaviors on the CBCL/1.5-5 and 118 behaviors on CBCL/6-18). For more exploration of the results from the CBCL with this sample of adopted Chinese children, see Tan, Marfo and

Dedrick (2007). For the purposes of this study, the internalizing and externalizing scores served as predictor variables in the logistic regression analyses.

In addition to these questions, both versions of the CBCL include open-ended items. The item was used to elicit free parental descriptions of the positive characteristics of their children from which the current study coded in terms of character strengths and virtues ask parents to, "Please describe the best things about your child." The CBCL provides a space of about 1.5 by 8.5 inches for parents to respond. This prompt has not specifically been used in the past to assess character strengths; however, a prompt expressing a similar sentiment, though more detailed, was used in the only other study assessing character strengths in young children:

> *"We are interested in your child's personal characteristics and individual qualities. What can you tell us so that we might know your child well? Even small details are of interest. Please type your answer in the box below. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. An answer of at least several hundred of words would be most useful to us, but you can write as much as you wish. If you want, you can share a story about your child that captures what he or she is all about." (Park & Peterson, 2006b, p. 327-329).*

Free parental descriptions have also been used to assess personality traits in samples of young children, serving to successfully verify Big Five personality traits (Kohnstamm, Halverson, Mervield, & Havill, 1998).

Coding procedures. Coding the qualitative data on the adoptive parents' responses about what they viewed as their child's best positive characteristics occurred through a series of steps. The qualitative data were first read and re-read multiple times to obtain a sense of the scope of positive characteristics that the adoptive parents reported. A content analysis procedure was then selected to systematically analyze the

data. Bazeley (2003) identified content analysis as a method of analysis for narrative data that involves categorizing segments of the text so that segments within each category are similar to each other and different from segments in other categories.

The specific coding framework that was applied to the content analysis procedure was informed by positive psychology literature on character strengths. Specifically, Peterson and Seligman (2004) put forth the Values in Action (VIA) Classification purporting a set of 24 positive traits of good character that have been grouped into six more broadly defined core virtues—courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom. These character strengths have been empirically validated through self-assessment measures for adults and youth (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Park & Peterson 2006a). For preschool-age children, self-assessment would not be considered suitable. However, the recent study on parents' descriptions of their children's strength by Park and Peterson (2006b) provides support for the application of the VIA classification with this population. Specifically, Park and Peterson (2006b) analyzed written narratives from parents (N = 680) about their children. The two authors independently coded each description for the presence or absence of each of the 24 character strengths. Because the character strengths were initially developed for adult populations, the VIA classification was elaborated on to include ways in which parents might describe those strengths for their young children (i.e. for Zest, parents might describe their child as being "full of energy"). The reported *kappa* reliability between the two authors was .70 or higher for all cases. In the present study, a similar framework was used, which included making adaptations to the original VIA classification by including

behavioral indicators of strengths that were developmentally appropriate for this age group.

A stringent coding procedure employing three independent raters (i.e., the author, a graduate student, and a faculty member) was then used to code a part of the data. While conventionally two raters are required in coding qualitative data, three raters were used in the current analysis because 1) data were collected with one open-ended questions, thus leaving more room for different interpretations in some cases; 2) three-rater agreement, instead of inter-rater agreement, can potentially further validate the themes emerged from the data. The graduate student and the faculty member were trained by the current researcher with the codebook, guided discussions, and an on-site tryout.

First, each code was reviewed separately by describing the title of the code, the meaning of the code, and the defining features and examples of the code. An abbreviated version of the codebook is presented in Table 3, in which examples of behaviors and traits are presented. These examples include ones described in Park and Peterson (2006b), as well as examples developed by the current researcher based on preliminary readings of the adoptive parents' data. The complete codebook also incorporated the descriptions of the character strengths that are included in Table 1 of Chapter Two, which were drawn from definitions presented in Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) and Park and Peterson (2004). The codebook also noted that descriptions relating to a child's intelligence, physical or athletic talents, physical attractiveness, and level of happiness were not to be coded as character strengths, as these characteristics do not represent aspects of good character but other positive attributes or subjective well-being.

Table 3

Abbreviated Character Strength Codebook

Character Strengths (by Virtues)	Example codebook descriptions
Wisdom & Knowledge	
Creativity	imaginative; talented at music, arts, dance, writing, etc.
Curiosity	inquisitive; always asks questions; is interested in everything
Open-Mindedness	always considers all the angles; is a critical thinker
Love of Learning	loves to read all the time; loves school (or a particular subject)
Perspective	has a good awareness of the world, settles disputes among friends
Courage	
Authenticity	always tells the truth, takes responsibility for her or his actions
Bravery	not afraid to do things; not afraid to try new things
Perseverance	persistent; works hard at things; never gives up
Zest	full of energy or life; spirited; outgoing; enjoys physical activity
Humanity	
Kindness	helps out around the house; good natured; wants to please others
Love	loving; affectionate; has close friends
Social Intelligence	understands and is sensitive to others emotions; good social skills
Justice	
Fairness	insists on equal treatment
Leadership	followed by other children; is an alpha child
Teamwork	cooperates well with playmates
Temperance	
Forgiveness	never holds a grudge
Modesty	lets others shine
Prudence	cautious; careful about her decisions
Self-Regulation	follows rules well; is easy going and flexible with change
Transcendence	
Appreciation of Beauty	loves to look at paintings, listen to classical music
Gratitude	always says thank you
Hope	always looks on the bright side
Humor	playful; funny; good sense of humor; makes me laugh
Religiousness	enjoys bible stories; reminds the family to pray

Communication included more than simply didactic training, as the author encouraged the raters to ask questions when explanations seemed unclear. These discussions helped clarify features for different codes. For example, it was not initially clear how 'outgoing' (a descriptor that was observed in parent responses in the initial readings of the data) would be coded, but through group discussion, it was determined that this characteristic fit most closely under the code Zest, as 'outgoing' was seen as an enthusiastic approach to daily life. After going through each code and having such discussions, approximately 15 sample cases of parent description data were analyzed by the three raters. After the author read aloud each data entry, the raters looked through the codebook independently to determine which code(s) applied to the data. After coming to independent decisions, the raters shared their coding decisions with each other and discussed the reasons for their choices.

Discussing the reasoning was particularly important in refining the codes and establishing reliability as this provided an opportunity to identify differences of interpretation and understanding. This was especially important given that data were collected using one open-ended question and some responses were somewhat ambiguous. Through this collaborative reviewing process, the three raters clarified the original coding framework to more suitably address descriptors that potentially could be given different codes or were ambiguous. For example, one parent described his/her child as "charming," and this resulted in discrepant independent coding. Because charming is associated with pleasing others, the codes of Kindness and Social-Intelligence were discussed as being possible codes. Through this discussion, it was agreed upon that

"charming" implied the ability of knowing how to please or delight others in different situations and that one may display charming behaviors for purposes other than trying to be kind; thus, 'charming' was considered to be a descriptor of Social Intelligence.

Following this training session, the three raters independently coded 50 randomly selected cases. The three raters' codes were then compared with each other, as well as against the codebook, to determine agreement across raters. When initially combining the raters' codings, a total of 181 codes (3.62 codes per child) were endorsed by at least one rater within the data. Agreement on each code between any of the two of the three raters was high (i.e., 75.1%), although the three-rater agreements were understandably lower (i.e., 58.0%). Instances in which raters had questions or in which there were discrepancies across raters were then discussed in person, similar to the initial try-out discussions described above. Through these discussions, further clarity was brought to the types of characteristics and behaviors that fall into each category of codes. The raters discussed the codes until mutual agreement across the three participants was achieved. As a result, the final number of codes endorsed was 144 (2.88 codes per child). Guided by the insights gained from the discussions, the author coded the rest of the dataset.

Statistical analyses. The frequency counts of each coded character strength provided data used to determine the percent each characteristic was described within the sample at Time 1 and Time 2. Nonparametric statistical testing was used to determine if significant differences existed between prevalence rates at Time 1 and Time 2. Because data were collected on the same children at two different times, the data were dependent. Therefore, the McNemar test of marginal homogeneity was used as this statistical test is

used for nominal data with matched pairs of subjects. The McNemar test utilizes a 2 x 2 classification table to determine whether a significant difference exists between the presence of a particular characteristic in children from preschool to school age. This test assessed whether a significant change over time occurred in the proportion of character strengths over time.

Recognizing that the likelihood for a Type I error would have been relatively high if 24 separate tests were conducted for each of the character strengths within the VIA Classification, the character strengths were re-coded into smaller categories prior to running further analyses to determine significant predictive relationships with child, parent, and/or family variables. Specifically, the 24 character strengths were grouped in accordance with the VIA Classification's six virtues—Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence (see Table 1 or Table 3 for information on which character strengths comprise each of these virtues). Character strengths data were re-coded for each virtue based on the presence or absence of any one or more character strengths associated with a virtue. When none of the character strengths within a virtue category was coded for a child, the virtue was coded 0 (not present), but when one or more character strengths within a virtue category were coded for a child, the virtue category was coded a 1 (present). For example, if a child received codes for Kindness and Love, that child received a code of 1 for Humanity. A child who received a code for Love only was given a code of 1 for Humanity. Similar to the character strengths, virtues became dichotomous variables, not summative scores. Frequency counts, percentages of prevalence, McNemar tests, and percentages of

consistency from Time 1 to Time 2 were calculated for virtues in the same manner as was done for character strengths.

With a decreased likelihood for Type I errors, virtues (as opposed to character strengths) were selected as criterion variables for logistic regression analysis. Logistic regression rather than multiple regression was used due to the fact that dichotomous criterion variables (i.e. presence or absence of virtues) were analyzed rather than continuous variables. Predictor variables included in the analyses were selected to reflect child, parent, and family variables. Specifically, child's age, age at adoption, CBCL internalizing problems, CBCL externalizing problems, family income, single or two parent household, parents' age, and presence or absence siblings served as the predictor variables of interest. Correlation analyses were run to evaluate multicolinearity among the predictor variables. Correlations among the majority of these variables at Time 1 were very low, ranging from -.152 to .187. While the correlations between CBCL internalizing problems and CBCL externalizing problems at both time points were not as weak as the associations between other variables (r = .631 at Time 1, r = .625 at Time 2), the relationship between these problem behavior scores in this sample indicate them to be sufficiently independent for logistic regression analyses.

Chapter Four

Results

Frequency of Codes per Case

At Time 1, there were an average of 2.92 (*SD* = 1.62) character strengths (*Range* = 0 -8); in Time 2, the average was 2.94 (*SD* = 1.25; *Range* = 1- 6). (Strengths data were missing for two children in Time 1 and for eight children in Time 2. Cases with missing data were excluded in relevant subsequent analyses.). The number of character strengths per case between the two time points was moderately correlated ($r = .38$; $p < .05$), suggesting that parents provided descriptions with a similar number of character strengths at both time points.

Frequency of Character Strengths and Virtues

Table 4 provides a summary of the frequency of character strengths at Time 1 and Time 2, with the character strengths organized in ascending order based on the prevalence of the character strengths at Time 1. The number of children with the same character strength endorsed at both time points is also presented to denote the consistency in parent descriptions. The percentage of consistency represents the percent of children with the strength at both time points from those who had that strength at Time 1. It should be noted that cases in which there were data missing at Time 1 or Time 2 were removed in calculating these percentages.

Table 4

Frequency of Character Strengths at Time 1 and Time 2

Character Strength (*Virtue*)	Time 1 (*N* =177)	Time 2 (*N* =171)	In Both Times
	N (%)	*N* (%)	*N* (%)
1. Gratitude (TR)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
2. Forgiveness (TE)	0 (0)	1 (0.6)	0 (0)
3. Modesty (TE)	0 (0)	1 (0.6)	0 (0)
4. Prudence (TE)	0 (0)	1 (0.6)	0 (0)
5. Appreciation of Beauty (TR)	1(0.6)	1 (0.6)	1 (100.0)
6. Perspective (WK)	2 (1.1)	7 (4.1)	1 (50.0)
7. Fairness (J)	3 (1.7)	0 (0)	0 (0)
8. Leadership (J)	3 (1.7)	2 (1.2)	0 (0)
9. Religiousness (TR)	3 (1.7)	2 (1.2)	0 (0)
10. Hope (TR)	3 (1.7)	5 (2.8)	2 (66.7)
11. Open-Mindedness (TR)	3 (1.7)	5 (2.8)	0 (0)
12. Authenticity (C)	3 (1.7)	8 (4.7)	1 (33.3)
13. Teamwork (J)	7 (4.0)	6 (3.5)	1 (16.7)
14. Bravery (C)	20 (11.3)	20 (11.7)	5 (29.4)
15. Love of Learning (WK)	23 (13.0)	15 (8.8)	3 (14.3)
16. Self-Regulation (TE)	23 (13.0)	24 (14.0)	5 (22.7)
17. Perseverance (C)	26 (14.7)	29 (17.0)	10 (41.7)
18. Curiosity (WK)	27 (15.3)	25 (14.6)	9 (33.3)
19. Creativity (WK)	36 (20.3)	39 (22.8)	14 (40.0)
20. Social Intelligence (H)	41 (23.2)	38 (22.2)	9 (23.1)
21. Zest (C)	58 (32.7)	56 (32.7)	23 (42.6)
22. Humor (TR)	62 (35.0)	65 (36.7)	40 (65.6)
23. Kindness (H)	69 (38.9)	83 (48.5)	48 (69.6)
24. Love* (H)	103 (58.2)	68 (39.8)	47 (47.5)

NOTE: WK=Wisdom and Knowledge; C= Courage; H=Humanity; J=Justice; TE=Temperance; and TR=Transcendence

*Significant difference between Preschool Age and School Age prevalence (χ^2; $p < .05$)

As seen in Table 4, considerable variability existed concerning the prevalence at which each character strength was represented in the sample. Thirteen of the 24 character strengths at both time points were found in less than 5% of the sample. The remaining 11 character strengths ranged in prevalence from 11.3% to 58.2% at Time 1 and a slightly smaller range of 8.8% to 48.5% at Time 2.

As described earlier in the data analysis section, data were re-coded so that if any one or more character strengths of a virtue category were coded present, then that virtue received a single frequency count (i.e., A child with three character strength codes of Bravery, Perseverance, and Love would be given virtue codes of Courage and Humanity). Table 5 displays the prevalence of the six virtues from the VIA Classification, which are organized in ascending order based on prevalence at Time 1, just as the character strengths were presented. This table also includes the number of children whose descriptions continued to include the same virtue at Time 1 and Time 2 along with a percentage of consistency over time, which was calculated by dividing the number of children who continued to have the same virtue at Time 2 by the total number of children who had that virtue at Time 1. Further description of the individual character strengths are provided within the descriptions of their associated virtue categories to which they belong within the VIA Classification.

Table 5

Frequency of Virtues at Time 1 and Time 2

Virtue	Time 1 (*N*=177)	Time 2 (*N*=171)	In Both Times (%)
	N (%)	*N* (%)	*N* (%)
1. Justice	12 (6.8)	8 (4.7)	1 (10.0)
2. Temperance	23 (11.9)	26 (15.2)	5 (22.7)
3. Transcendence	65 (36.7)	72 (42.1)	43 (70.3)
4. Wisdom	69 (39.0)	72 (40.1)	38 (57.6)
5. Courage*	79 (44.6)	89 (52.0)	51 (70.8)
6. Humanity	137 (77.4)	125 (73.1)	101 (75.9)

*Significant difference between Preschool Age and School Age prevalence (χ^2; $p < .05$)

Virtue of Justice. As seen in Table 5, the least prevalent virtue at both time points was Justice. The three character strengths that comprise this virtue, Fairness, Leadership, and Teamwork, ranged in prevalence from 0% to 4.0% in the sample. Fairness emerged among only three children at preschool ages, whose parents' descriptions included the children negotiating with others to make sure no one was left out, having a strong sense of justice, and trusting. The few who received codes for Leadership were described explicitly as being a leader or being "eager to lead." Children who were coded to exhibit Teamwork, the most prevalent character strengths of the virtue of Justice, were described as being cooperative, sharing, and playing well with others.

Virtue of Temperance. The second least prevalent virtue was Temperance, which is comprised of Forgiveness, Modesty, Prudence, and Self-Regulation within the VIA Classification. However, Forgiveness, Modesty, and Prudence were only endorsed for one child each during Time 2 and no children during Time 1. Self-Regulation, however, was endorsed for 13.0% and 14.0% of the sample at Time 1 and Time 2, respectively. Self-Regulation in the sample was mostly characterized to include children being able to adjust, adapt, and maintain good behavior in new situations or conditions. One child who exemplified various components of this strength was described as "a good eater and fairly well behaved. She sleeps well and maintains a regular routine, but is fairly flexible too."

Virtue of Transcendence. The virtue of Transcendence and the virtue of Wisdom and Knowledge differed in rank ordering of prevalence between time points. At Time 1, Transcendence was less frequently described than Wisdom and Knowledge, but at Time 2 it was the opposite; however, the difference in prevalence that separated these two

virtues at both time points was approximately two percent, making these two virtues represented at about the same frequency.

Five character strengths comprise Transcendence in the VIA Classification. No children were described as being appreciative or thankful, making Gratitude the only character strength to be not present at either time point in this sample of young children. A single child was described to have an Appreciation of Beauty at both time points, going from a simple description of loving music and ballet at Time 1 to a description of being "passionate about the arts—ballet, Irish dance, music, playing violin, drawing and coloring. She loves to go to symphony concerts, dance performances and plays." Religiousness was also rarely described, and was manifested in parents' descriptions as either being spiritual, enjoying saying prayers, or having a "religious bent." Hope also was rare but manifested in parents descriptions as children having a positive outlook or attitude. Humor was present in a little more than a third of the children at both time points, making this the third most prevalent character strength overall at both time points. Cases that were coded for Humor mostly involved the parent describing their child as being funny or having a good sense of humor.

Virtue of Wisdom and Knowledge. Compared to Transcendence, the virtue of Wisdom and Knowledge was slightly more prevalent than Transcendence at Time 1 and slightly less prevalent at Time 2. This category was comprised of five character strengths—Curiosity, Creativity, Open-Mindedness, Love of Learning, and Perspective. Least prevalent at Time 1 and represented in less than 5% of the sample were Perspective, followed by Open-Mindedness, while at Time 2 it was Open-Mindedness,

followed by Perspective. Descriptions of Perspective for this sample ranged from children having common sense, to holding unique views on the world, to having "incredible wisdom and insights." A child coded as Open-Minded was described as "works through issues over time and changes her reactions," while other descriptions included being good problem-solvers, deep thinkers, and rational. Love of Learning was the third most prevalent character strength in Wisdom and Knowledge, with most descriptions explicitly stating a child to either have a strong interest, enjoyment, or love for learning, while the next most modal description was a love for books or reading. Curiosity, the second most prevalent in this virtue, was typically described as being curious, inquisitive, or full of questions, but also included descriptions of a general interest in the world or desire to try new things. The most prevalent in this virtue and the sixth most prevalent overall was Creativity. Many of these children were described simply as creative or imaginative, but also there were many instances of children being described to enjoy engaging in the arts (e.g., singing, dancing, playing musical instruments), which were considered to be behaviors indicative of creativity and thus coded under this strength.

Virtue of Courage. The second most prevalent virtue in the sample was Courage. Authenticity was the least represented within this virtue, manifesting in parents' descriptions as being truthful, unafraid to express oneself and opinions, and taking responsibility. Bravery was seen in a little more than one out of every ten children, and included various descriptions of not shying away from difficult situations. Discussions during the coding process led to a broad definition of this category, and included

descriptions of being proud of Chinese background and of being independent as examples of how bravery could manifest in this unique population. Descriptions that were coded as Perseverance were mostly related to the child being self-motivated, focused, and determined, as well as trying hard and being persistent even when things become difficult. Embodying the strength of Perseverance, one parent described, "she…knows what she wants and does her best to get it."

Zest was depicted the most, occurring in about one-third of all descriptions. Many Zest descriptions stated that the child was full of life, energy, or enthusiasm. Several descriptions referred to their child as being "outgoing," which was deemed as a manifestation of a child's enthusiasm and energy. Similarly, behaviors that emphasized how a child enjoyed being active, such as enjoying sports, were also coded as characteristics of Zest.

Virtue of Humanity. By far the most prevalent virtue in the sample was Humanity, with this virtue being represented in approximately three fourths of child descriptions at both time points. Social Intelligence was the least prevalent, though overall it was the fifth and sixth most prevalent character strength at Time 1 and Time 2, respectively. Descriptions coded as Social Intelligence generally described children as enjoying being social, making friends easily, or being empathetic. Kindness was the second most prevalent character strength at Time 1 and the most prevalent at Time 2. Finally, Love was overall the most prevalent character strength at Time 1 and second most prevalent at Time 2. The majority of parents' descriptions that were coded as Love involved descriptions of their child being loving or expressing affection.

Change in Prevalence from Preschool to School Age

McNemar tests of homogeneity were used to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in overall prevalence rates of each individual character strength and each virtue. While a trend was noted that Kindness had a fairly large increase in prevalence from Time 1 to Time 2, the increase was not statistically significant at the .05 significance level, $\chi^2(1, N = 169) = 2.62, p = .106$. The only character strength that did have a significant change over time was Love, which decreased significantly from being represented among 58.2% of children at Time 1 to 39.8% of children at Time 2, $\chi^2(1, N = 169) = 12.33, p < 0.05$. In terms of virtues, Courage was the only virtue that had a significant change over time, increasing from 44.6% of children at Time 1 to 52.0% of children at Time 2, $(1, N = 169) = 4.82, p < 0.05$.

In Tables 4 and Table 5 consistency from Time 1 to Time 2 is also depicted. At both the character strength and virtue levels, considerable variability existed with regard to how consistent the children continued to be described with the same characteristic from Time 1 as in Time 2. While the percent at which there was consistency in the character strengths that were represented in less than 5% of the sample (e.g., Gratitude, Appreciation of Beauty) ranged from 0 to 100%, the low rates at which these strengths were represented in the sample makes these results less reliable.

The percents at which there was consistency in the character strengths among the more prevalent character strengths ranged from 14.3% to 66.7%. While there was not a definitive criterion to determine the strength at which these percentages of consistency

could be determined low or high, the rates did cluster together into relative categories of lower and higher consistency. Love of Learning had the lowest rate of consistency, with only 14.3% of children who were described to love learning at Time 1 continuing to be described to love learning at Time 2. Other character strengths that had relatively low consistency of less than a quarter of the children being described with the same characteristic were Self-Regulation and Social Intelligence. Slightly greater rates of consistency were found for Bravery and Curiosity, in which approximately three out of ten children who were described with these character strengths at Time 1 continuing to be described with those characteristics at Time 2. More moderate rates of consistency were found for Perseverance, Creativity, Zest, and Love, which ranged between 40.0% and 47.5%. Finally, the highest rates of consistency were found for Humor (65.6%) and Kindness (69.6%). Interestingly, the most prevalent four character strengths at both ages (i.e., Zest, Humor, Kindness, and Love) also had the highest consistency over time.

The range of consistency was greater when data were re-coded for virtues. The least consistent virtue was Justice, with only one of ten children who were given a code of Justice at Time 1 continuing to be described as such at Time 2. Also with a rather low rate was Temperance, which was based on the low rate of its character strength of Self-Regulation, since the other three character strengths of that virtue were not present in any of the preschool age children. A large jump was found for the next most consistently coded virtue of Wisdom and Knowledge, where 57.6% of children who were described with this virtue at Time 1 continued to be described this way at Time 2. The remaining

three virtues of Transcendence, Courage, and Humanity had similar high rates of consistency with each other of 70.3%, 70.8%, and 75.9%, respectively.

Variables Related to Virtues

For each virtue, logistic regression was carried out to determine whether the predictor variables of child's age, age at adoption, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, adoptive mother's age, family income, single or two parent household, and presence or absence of other siblings, significantly predicted the presence of each virtue at Time 1 and at Time 2. Results are displayed below in Table 6 and Table 7.

Table 6

Logistic Regression of Virtues at Time 1

	Wisdom and Knowledge		*Courage*		*Humanity*		*Justice*		*Temperance*		*Transcendence*	
Predictors	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Child's Age	.023	.025	.040	.025	-.033	.029	.034	.050	-.043	.038	.033	.025
Age at Adoption	.003	.018	.024	.018	.017	.023	-.006	.033	.005	.024	.001	.018
Externalizing Problems	-.025	.029	.013	.028	-.025	.035	.056	.057	-.046	.048	.008	.029
Internalizing Problems	**.099***	.041	-.027	.040	.091	.051	-.129	.090	-.018	.064	-.007	-.041
Mother's Age	.002	.033	-.019	.032	-.018	.038	.098	.065	.084	.051	-.054	-.034
Two-Parents (1=yes, 0=no)	-.270	.400	.386	.391	**1.122***	.512	-.577	.822	-.479	.597	.276	.400
Household Income	-.024	.045	.046	.044	-.007	.053	.047	.089	**-.201***	.080	.026	.045
Siblings (1= yes, 0 = no)	.387	.380	-.224	.363	-.421	.429	-.661	.687	.571	.611	.334	.381

Note: All variables measured at Time 1.
* $p < .05$

Table 7

Logistic Regression of Virtues at Time 2

	Wisdom and Knowledge		*Courage*		*Humanity*		*Justice*		*Temperance*		*Transcendence*	
Predictors	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Child's Age	**.054***	.026	.000	.025	.020	.029	.034	.065	.032	.034	-.027	.026
Age at Adoption	.004	.018	.000	.018	-.015	.020	-.233	.164	-.021	.029	.008	.018
Externalizing Problems	.001	.020	.034	.020	**-.052***	.023	**-.104***	.053	**-.066***	.029	.025	.020
Internalizing Problems	.013	.021	**-.054***	.021	.040	.024	.068	.049	-.007	.028	-.020	.021
Mother's Age	-.024	.035	-.014	.034	.026	.038	.072	.088	-.030	.047	-.036	.035
Two-Parents (1=yes, 0=no)	.241	.409	-.067	.407	.891	.487	-.121	.974	.485	.582	.601	.410
Household Income	-.040	.046	.058	.046	.010	.051	-.007	.117	.010	.062	.020	.046
Siblings (1= yes, 0 = no)	.730	.395	-.520	.382	-.108	.410	1.209	1.216	-.011	.529	.657	.392

Note: All variables measured at Time 2.
* $p < .05$

As shown in the Table 6 and Table 7, age at adoption, parent's age, and presence or absence of siblings were not significantly related to any of the virtues at either Time 1 or Time 2. Family factors of household income and two parent households were only significant during Time 1. Specifically, children within two parent households were more likely to be described with characteristics of Humanity than those children within single parent households, and children from families with higher household incomes were less likely to be described with characteristics of Temperance. Child's age was significantly related to the virtue of Wisdom and Knowledge at Time 2 only, where older children were more likely to be described with characteristics of that virtue than younger children.

Problem behaviors were the only factors that were significant predictors for more than one virtue, though there were more significant relationships during Time 2 than Time 1. At Time 1, a significant positive relationship was found between internalizing problems and Wisdom and Knowledge, indicating that children with greater internalizing problems were more likely to be described with characteristics of Wisdom and Knowledge. This relationship was not found at Time 2. Instead, a significant negative relationship was found between internalizing problems and Courage, indicating that children with fewer internalizing problems were more likely to be described with characteristics of Courage.

Externalizing problems were not a significant predictor at Time 1 but were at Time 2 for three virtues. Humanity, Temperance, and Justice all had significant negative

relationships with externalizing problems, indicating that children with greater levels of externalizing problems were less likely to have characteristics of those three virtues.

Chapter Five

Discussion

This study utilized a strength-based approach to analyze parental descriptions of the positive characteristics regarding young internationally adopted children from China at ages 4-5 and ages 6-7. Drawing upon recent work from positive psychology, the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues was used as the coding framework for content analysis. The methodology chosen for assessing character strengths was closely aligned with the methodology used by lead researchers of the VIA project Park and Peterson (2006b) in their study of non-adopted sample of young children. As the first longitudinal study of VIA character strengths among young children, and the second study on internationally adopted children to primarily assess strengths as opposed to behavioral or emotional problems, the current study served as a replication study with independent researchers (i.e., those not involved with the team who worked in the development of the VIA Classification).

The current study revealed several similarities and differences in comparison to the only other empirical study on young children's character via the VIA Classification (Park & Peterson, 2006b). Methodologically, the prompt used in the current study elicited responses containing an average of 2.92 and 2.94 codes at Time 1 and Time 2, respectively. Beyond being considerably similar within this study, these averages were also quite similar to the average number of strengths (3.09) found in the non-adopted

children of Park and Peterson's (2006b) study. Such consistency in the average number of codes elicited provides some evidence on the dependability of using spontaneous parental descriptions as a method to identify top strengths in young children.

Rarely Described Character Strengths in Young Children

Of the 24 character strengths, Gratitude, Forgiveness, Modesty, and Prudence were not observed at Time 1 when the children were 4-5 years old, while Gratitude and Fairness were not observed at Time 2 when the children were 6-7 years old. Gratitude was therefore the only character strength not represented at either time points; however, many character strengths were not observed much more frequently. Thirteen character strengths occurred in less than 5% of children at both time points.

In the study of non-adopted young boys and girls by Park and Peterson (2006b) the prevalence for the character strengths showed a similar pattern to the current study. Specifically, 12 of the 13 rarely described character strengths overlapped in the two studies, although the overall range of frequency for less prevalent character strengths were wider in Park and Peterson's sample (i.e., less prevalent character strengths ranged from 1% to 9%, instead of the current sample's 0% to 5%). Therefore, the strengths that appeared to be more rarely described among young Chinese adoptees appear to be the same as those among non-adopted children.

The replication of these findings argues for a systematic explanation as to why these character strengths appear at such low rates. Park and Peterson (2006b) proposed that some character strengths, like Gratitude, were described as more sophisticated or requiring greater psychosocial development and maturation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The fact that the same rarely described character strengths were represented similarly in both samples may primarily be the result of the children's age, with differences in adoption status between samples seemingly not accounting for much variation in terms of when character strengths begin to manifest.

The wider range of frequency among rare character strengths found in Park and Peterson's (2006b) sample may be a reflection of the fact that older children were included in their sample. Gratitude became significantly related to ratings of happiness only within a subsample of children seven and older. While they did not report the change in frequency across ages, it could be that gratitude was more prevalent among the older children in the sample to allow for a significant relationship to emerge. The current study did not include children as old as Park and Peterson's study, and it may be that these more rarely described strengths were actually beginning to be represented at higher levels among the oldest children in the sample. If so, this could explain the slightly wider range in prevalence, as they may have been slightly more frequently described among older children. Further longitudinal research is needed to continue exploring when certain character strengths begin emerging at greater levels. Nevertheless, the fact that a narrower age range of children was assessed in the current study should be taken into account when comparing this sample with that of Park and Peterson's study.

Most Frequency Described Character Strengths in Young Children

Similarly, the more prevalent strengths among the Chinese adoptees were also comprised of mostly the same strengths as the children from Park and Peterson's sample. Eleven character strengths were described in 10% or more of parental responses in the

non-adopted sample and the adopted Chinese sample at Time 1(Love of Learning fell to 8.8% at Time 2, but the other 10 strengths remained above 10%), and 10 of these 11 more prevalent character strengths were the same across studies. Another close similarity, seven strengths were described for 20% or more of Park and Peterson's non-adopted sample while six were described for 20% or more of the current study's adopted Chinese sample.

Within these more prevalent character strengths, however, was greater variability in rates, which makes the similarities and differences between samples in the rank ordering and actual rates of character strengths more interpretable than within the rare character strengths that varied considerably less in terms of frequencies within that group. The top two strengths at both time points, Love and Kindness, were the top two strengths among non-adopted young children. Humor was the third and fourth most prevalent character strength among adopted and non-adopted children, respectively. While the character strengths of the Wisdom and Knowledge virtue (i.e., Love of Learning, Curiosity, and Creativity) were prevalent at lower rates among Chinese adoptees when compared to the non-adopted children, the order of prevalence for these character strengths within both samples was the same (i.e., Love of Learning was less than Curiosity, which was less than Creativity). The most dramatic difference appeared with respect to Zest and Social Intelligence, which were much more prevalent among the adopted children (i.e., 32.7% and 23.2% at Time 1, respectively) compared to nonadopted children (i.e., 10% and 12%, respectively). Zest and Social Intelligence were among the

top five most prevalent character strengths at both time points among the adopted children, while only the ninth and eleventh most prevalent among non-adopted children.

Character and Age

With the benefit of the longitudinal design, insight can be drawn regarding the temporal sequencing of character development. Within the two year time period in which the children developed from preschool-ages to early school-ages, there were very few differences in the rates at which each character strength and virtue were present. The exceptions were the significant decrease in Love over time at the character strength level and the significant increase in Courage over time at the virtue level. In terms of Love, it is important to note that it while it decreased in frequency, it was still the second most prevalent character strength when the children were of school ages. One interpretation to why this character strength witnessed a greater decrease could relate to a greater sensitivity to establishing a loving relationship with an adopted child early in their post-adoption lives. A concern for the development of an attachment disorder, of which an inability to give or receive love and affection is an associated outcome (e.g., Levy & Orlans, 2000), in an adoptive child could lead adoptive parents to being particularly vigilant about their child's expression of love early on but become less focused on this particular characteristic as children get older. The decrease in Love also makes sense from a developmental perspective, as the expression of love through affection for a caregiver is something that can be seen from infancy. With older age, and the cognitive maturation, more strengths can begin to develop, which could lead parents to describe these characteristics more and describe Love less.

Courage, a virtue comprised of Authenticity, Bravery, Perseverance, and Zest, became more prevalent among parents' descriptions for children of school ages. Courage involves "the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, either external or internal" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 199). The longitudinal data provide evidence that of the six virtues, Courage may be expected at this age to develop. The less prevalent virtues (i.e., Justice, Temperance, Transcendence) appear to increase at older ages not assessed in the current study.

The longitudinal design of the current study allowed for the opportunity to determine the adopted children's character strength during the period of transitioning into school entry. Children from this population appear to hold some character strengths more consistently over time, while others are not as stable. Humor and Kindness were held the most consistently (of the 11 more prevalent strengths for which the frequency was high enough to be meaningfully interpreted), indicating a higher likelihood that humorous or kind children in their preschool years will continue to hold those traits in their early elementary school years. Preschool age children who were described in ways to indicate Self-Regulation, Social Intelligence, and Love of Learning, however, were much less likely to be described similarly at school age. These three less consistently held character strengths are more context specific than Humor and Kindness, and it may be that while a child may have appeared to display characteristics indicating Self-Regulation earlier in life, the demands for associated behaviors increase as children must become more regulated in their academic and social behaviors within school classroom contexts. Similar statements could be made for Social Intelligence and Love of Learning.

Another key age variable to consider in adoption research is the age at which the child is adopted. Among Romanian adoptees, children adopted after 24 months were at greater risk for higher levels of problem behaviors (Meese, 2005) and lower levels of behavioral and emotional strengths (Pearlmutter et al., 2008). Nevertheless, knowing a child's age at adoption in this sample did not help to predict any of the virtues for preschool or school age adoptees. This finding parallels deficit-based findings for Chinese adoptees that demonstrated no significant relations between age at adoption and behavior problems. This finding may have been influenced by the relatively young ages at adoption. Only 13% of the sample was adopted at ages above 24 months. While there were children adopted at ages up to 55 months, the limited variation in ages at adoption may have reduced the likelihood of picking up any significant associations with the virtues.

Relations with Virtues

A few relations emerged from the logistic regression at each time point. Humanity, the most prevalent virtue in the sample, was related to lower rates of externalizing behaviors at Time 2. A similar finding in previous research with older children found Love, one of the character strength of Humanity, to be correlated with lower levels of externalizing behaviors (Park & Peterson, 2006a). Because Humanity was represented in nearly three quarters of the sample, this particular link to lower levels of externalizing problems is a salient finding to help account for the favorable levels of behavioral adjustment reported for this population in previous research (e.g., Tan & Marfo, 2006).

Similarly, the second most prevalent virtue of Courage was related to lower levels of internalizing problems at Time 2. Zest, a character strength of Courage, has been found to be related to lower levels of internalizing problems among older children (Park and Peterson, 2006a). The strengths of the virtue Courage, which were represented highly in this sample due in large part to the relatively higher frequency of Zest, may be another important factor contributing to the population's positive adjustment.

Surprisingly, the character strengths associated with Wisdom and Knowledge were positively related to higher rates of internalizing problems. A positive relation between positive characteristics and negative behavior problems was not anticipated. However, as noted earlier, the character strengths of this virtue are represented at lower levels than are found within non-adopted children. While a positive relation may exist with internalizing problems, not as many children in this sample were perceived to hold this virtue; thus, the relation has less of an impact on the overall levels of internalizing problems, which could help keep internalizing problems from being significantly elevated in comparison to non-adopted peers.

Justice and Temperance also had significant relations to lower levels of externalizing problems, but the rates at which these two virtues were present in the sample were quite low. So while there may be a relationship, relatively few children in the sample would have been impacted. Nevertheless, these may be two rare virtues that if promoted and developed among young children could help prevent externalizing problems from developing.

For the most part, parent and family variables were not significantly related to virtues, and not at all related during school ages. When children were preschool ages, however, children in two-parent families were more likely to be described with the character strengths of Humanity, and children in families of higher socioeconomic status were less likely to be described with the character strengths of Temperance. Taken together, parent and family variables were more related to virtues at preschool age while child variables were more related to virtues at school age, implying a potentially weaker influence of environmental contexts on character development as children get older. Importantly, however, causal relationship cannot be assumed based on the non-experimental design and regression results.

Limitations

Several limitations should be kept in mind when evaluating the conclusiveness of the current study's findings. For one, the sample was collected through non-random, convenience sampling procedures. The parents self-selected their participation in the study, and parents who chose not to participate may have systematically responded differently in describing their perceptions of strengths, held different demographic variables (e.g., children adopted at later ages), or reported different levels of problem behaviors). Given this design limitation, it should also be noted that of the parents who received study survey materials in the original data collection, there was a78% response rate at Time 1. Of those who participated at Time 1, 87% of those parents continued to participate at Time 2. These are considerably high response rates for mail-based survey research, and may help mitigate the potential biasing effects of self-selection procedures.

Another limitation is the fact that the method of data collection used to gather parent descriptions of character strengths was a single item prompt with limited space for written response without follow-up questioning. Had the area for written response been larger and provided additional guidelines similar to that used in Park and Peterson's (2006b) content analysis (e.g., "An answer of at least several hundred of words would be most useful to us, but you can write as much as you wish. If you want, you can share a story about your child") longer responses would likely have been elicited, which could have led parents to describe a greater range of character strengths per response. However, in comparison to the results from Park and Peterson's study in which there was an average of approximately three codes per case, roughly the same average was found at both time points in the current study. Furthermore, Park and Peterson described, "even the very short descriptions were useful for our purposes because they invariably listed traits" (p. 329) and while their responses varied considerably in length (*Range* = 3 – 1351 words), the length of responses was reported to be unrelated to any of their results. Given these findings, the relatively short responses in the current study may not have provided significantly different resulting codes.

Nevertheless, while the current study may have yielded similar average number of codes, it was also similar in that only a single method was used to assess character strengths in a sample of young children. Observational, experimental, and ratings scale assessments could all be helpful tools in learning more about the manifestation of character in these young children as well as serve as a validation check for the method used in the current study. Additionally, while three raters were used in the refinement of

codes and building consensus, additional inter-rater reliability checks for the final independent coding could further support the validity of the codes.

Directions for Future Research and Practice

While this study provides initial data on the development of character strengths overtime in young children, much more research is needed to understand when particular strengths tend to become more or less prevalent across ages of youth. The larger program of research from which the data for this study were taken is designed to follow the same children throughout their development every two years. The same procedures to analyze parents' descriptions should be carried out once again for the third wave of data collection when the children are 8 and 9 years old. By the fourth wave of data collection, these same children would be old enough to complete the VIA-Youth self-report measure. Tracking character strengths and virtues over the course of a child's development would help pinpoint times at which certain aspects of character become more or less pronounced. Continuing to follow these children could help answer several important research questions—Do parents' perceptions of character strengths during early childhood relate to self-reported strengths during adolescence? Are some character strengths more consistently held than others (e.g., if Forgiveness, Kindness, and Creativity are each described for a preschool age child, are each of these character strengths equally likely to be scored highly when that child completes a VIA-Youth measure during adolescence)? Do the variables related to virtues at early ages continue to have similar predictive relationships at later ages?

Families of children in the current study and in Park and Peterson's (2006b) study shared several similar characteristics. Both samples included families of mostly, Caucasian parents (i.e., 85% in Park and Peterson's study and approximately 95% in the current study) of middle to high socioeconomic status. While the children in the current study are Chinese by birth, they were raised in families with similar demographic composition post-adoption. Future research is needed to further explore the impact of culture on the development of character strengths among young children. How do children born and raised in China compare to children adopted from China? What character strengths are most prevalent among young children raised in families of lower socioeconomic status or of other ethnic minority backgrounds?

While the content analysis of free parental descriptions provided one means for assessing character strengths and virtues in young children, additional methods will need to be developed for assessing character in young children. The parental description methodology is geared more to depicting a child's most pronounced character strengths, while a parent or teacher rating scale would help assess the degree to which each character strength manifests for a child. For older children and adults, a self-report rating scale measure already exists that assess the same 24 character strengths, but different forms are used in order to include age-appropriate items. A similar type of scale to be filled out by parents or teachers could be informed in part by the qualitative results from this study in order to write developmentally appropriate items that capture how character strengths manifest at young ages. Rating scales would facilitate the ability of practitioners interested in assessing a child's strengths, and could be administered to not only help

inform interventions but also as an additional outcome measure following the implementation of interventions.

Conclusion

Examining positive characteristics of internationally adopted Chinese children broadens our understanding of their post-adoption development. This unique population that appeared to be thriving from a deficit-based perspective also appears to hold a very similar profile of character strengths in comparison to non-adopted children. The findings of this current study helped to further validate the line of reasoning that certain character strengths do not manifest to a large extent at very young ages. As this classification system was designed to be used across the lifespan, the assessment of character strengths across a two year time period and the analysis of age as a predictor variable provided results contributing to this aim. With its longitudinal nature, the study found little overall change in character strength profiles from preschool to early school ages within this population. The most notable differences were found in the higher rates of Zest and Social Intelligence. As both of these strengths are part of the virtues Courage and Humanity, which were the most prevalent virtues and associated with lower levels of problem behaviors, Zest and Social Intelligence should be explored further as potential traits that could be promoted to foster resilience.

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