



Explaining lower rates of sexual abuse in China[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Accumulating research suggests that rates of child sexual abuse are comparatively low in China. This commentary is an effort to evaluate whether it reflects a true lower prevalence or alternatively the effect of inhibited disclosure by victims. We conclude that while some estimates have almost certainly been affected by inhibited disclosure, the overall magnitude of the contrast between Chinese and international rates, particularly for girls, and its consistency with other indicators do suggest a true lower prevalence, although the evidence is equivocal. We discuss some factors that could account for such lower rates including Confucian family values, definitions of masculinity and a collectivist culture that may be protective.

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Three international meta-analyses have shown lower rates of childhood sexual abuse for Asia and China:

Pereda, Guilera, Forns, and Gomez-Benito (2009), based on 65 community and student studies in 22 countries, found a rate of 10.1% for Asia as a whole compared to 14% for all countries. The rate for Chinese women specifically was 10.8% vs. 19.7% for women in all countries. For males the Chinese rate was 4.8% vs 7.9% for males in all countries.

Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2011) in another meta-analysis found rates for Asian women (based on 11 Asian studies, 4 of them from China) 11.3% vs. 18.0% for all countries. For men, the comparison was 4.1% (8 studies) for Asia vs. 7.6% for all countries.

Ji, Finkelhor, and Dunne (2013) found 27 Chinese prevalence studies of sexual abuse, many of them in Chinese and not in earlier reviews, and confirmed that that pooled rates for women for contact and penetrative sexual abuse (9.5% and 1.0%) were significantly lower than comparable international estimates.

In addition, other comparative studies have also pointed to low rates among Asians. In a survey of 1,052 undergraduate students at the University of British Columbia in which 43% had Asian ancestry (85% Chinese), the Asian female students reported lower rates of sexual abuse than those with European ancestry, 25% vs. 40%. There was no difference among boys (11% vs. 11%) (Meston, Trapnell, Heiman, & Carlin, 1999). A study of students in Malaysia (Choo, Dunne, Marret, Fleming, & Wong, 2011) found that Chinese and Indian students were less likely to be victims of child sexual abuse than ethnic Malays (with odds ratios of 0.46 and 0.23 respectively). Reviews of sexual abuse and ethnicity in the US have consistently found rates among Asians to be lower (Hall, Windover, & Maramba, 1998; Zhai & Gao, 2009).

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It is important to study cultural contexts where sexual abuse is relatively low for their potential prevention implications. Lower rates have also been found in some other regions. Rates in Europe as a whole appear to be somewhat lower than in Australia and North America (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Low rates have been found in the Balkan area studies (George Nikolaidis, personal communication, September 10, 2012). But China holds particular interest. The great majority of the Asian studies with the low rate finding are on Chinese populations. Moreover there is quite a large group of more than two dozen general population studies in China.

There are some additional reasons to focus on China. Any search for answers about the source of low rates needs to consult a considerable number of sources of evidence. China not only has many studies of sexual abuse. China also has a considerable amount of social scientific research on sexual behavior, other kinds of sensitive behavior and other social problems, like mental health. China, taking into account Hong Kong and Taiwan, also has contrasting cultural and political environments, on which to test explanations.

Chinese surveys have a wide range of prevalence estimates

Although Chinese rates, when pooled, seem lower in international comparisons, it is important to recognize that Chinese studies have tremendous variability. At one extreme, a survey by Yen et al. (2008) of 1,684 Taiwanese high school students estimated that only 2% of females experienced any CSA events. A nationally representative survey of 2,994 people ages 20–64 in Mainland China (Luo, Parish, & Laumann, 2008) also reported prevalence of just 3.3% for females. These both contrast with several surveys of students by Chen, Dunne, and Han (2004, 2006) and Chen, Dunne, and Wang (2002) that found prevalence of any kind of CSA for females up to 25%. Even so, it is noteworthy that this upper range for Chinese samples is lower than the upper range for international samples, which top out as high as 40–50% in some surveys (Pereda et al., 2009).

The degree of disparity between China and the rest of the international community also appears to vary according to the definition of CSA being studied and perhaps also by gender. For example, the Chinese girls' rate for contact and non-contact CSA from the Ji et al. (2013) meta-analysis is 15.7% (CI = 12.8–18.9), not that much lower than the 19.7% (CI = 16.7–23.0) from Pereda et al. or the 19.1% (CI = 16.3–22.2) for the broad definition from Stoltenborgh. However, in the Ji et al. (2013) meta-analysis, the rate for female contact CSA is 9.7% (CI = 7.8–11.7), considerably lower than international estimates for contact abuse. Moreover, the rate for female penetrative CSA was 1.0% (CI = .7–1.3), tremendously lower than the worldwide penetrative estimates from Stoltenborgh, 15.1%, or from Barth, 9.0%.

Moreover, the picture is less clear cut for boys. The Pereda et al. (2009) and Stoltenborgh et al. (2011) meta-analyses did find lower rates for boys in Asia. But the Ji et al. (2013) meta-analysis with many China specific studies found that for males the risk of contact CSA was 7.7% (CI = 6.3–9.1%). This estimate was equivalent to the international prevalence for males: Pereda 7.4% (CI = 5.7–9.4) and Stoltenborgh 7.6% (CI = 6.6–8.8). However, the Ji et al. (2013) pooled estimate for penetrative abuse for males (1%) was much lower than the international estimate from Stoltenborgh of 6.9%.

So overall the lower risk for Chinese girls compared to the International data is best supported, particularly for contact and penetrative abuse. Even the range appears relatively lower than the international range. The picture for boys is somewhat different. Despite the low risk of penetrative CSA, the estimate for boys of contact as well as contact plus non-contact may not be comparatively low.

Survey features make a difference

The Ji et al. (2013) meta-analysis of the Chinese studies did show that various features of the studies and their populations were associated with higher or lower prevalence. Estimates for females were lower in studies from urban areas and non-mainland areas (Hong Kong and Taiwan), in surveys with larger and probability samples and multiple sites, and those that used face-to-face interviews compared to self-completion questionnaires. Higher prevalence was generally found in studies that used the detailed instrument developed by Chen et al. (2002). There was considerable overlap among these dimensions. The urban–non-urban distinction was particularly strong in differentiating the contact CSA rates. The age of the respondents, younger or older, did not make a difference.

Some of these findings coincide with the international literature. Self-administered questionnaires tend to elicit higher rates, as do more detailed instruments. Pereda et al. (2009) also found that among women at least, at the international level, local samples had substantially higher rates than national samples (22.0% vs. 14.7%). Although this could be publication bias, it may also relate to the investigator being better able to exert organizational control and strongly motivate respondents in a single site as opposed to collecting data over a larger and multi-site area where researchers are reliant on contracted surrogates.

Is there evidence for inhibited disclosure?

A variety of researchers confronting the relatively low rates among Chinese populations have posed the question of whether cultural factors inhibit disclosure or acknowledgment of CSA (Chan, Yan, Brownridge, & Ip, 2013; Luo et al., 2008). Similar questions were asked when low rates have been found for other experiences, such as mental disorders (Kleinman & Lin, 1981; Shen et al., 2006). At the same time, a large number of surveys of sexual behavior have been conducted in China, including questions about sensitive subjects like masturbation, pornography usage, extramarital affairs, going to prostitutes

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