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# *Media Portrayal of Adolescent Depression and Parental Psychological Control: A Content Analysis of a Little Reunion*

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***Abstract.*** Adolescent depression and anxiety have become significant public health concerns, particularly in high-pressure academic environments where family expectations and educational competition may intensify psychological distress. This paper examines the portrayal of adolescent depression and parental psychological control in the Chinese television drama A Little Reunion, focusing on Episodes 37–41 and the character Qiao Yingzi. Through a review and analysis of selected episodes, this paper explores how insomnia, persistent sadness, survivor guilt, loss of interest, self-harm, and suicidal ideation are represented in relation to academic pressure, parental control, family conflict, and loss of autonomy. Relevant research on adolescent depression, developmental psychopathology, parental psychological control, and media representations of suicide is used to contextualize the portrayal. The paper finds that A Little Reunion presents adolescent psychological distress as a complex outcome of interacting family, academic, and interpersonal stressors rather than an isolated individual problem. The analysis also suggests that the drama highlights the importance of adolescent autonomy, early recognition of warning signs, supportive family communication, and professional mental-health intervention.

***Keywords:*** Adolescent depression, public health, family education, mental health

## 1. Introduction

Adolescent mental health has become a pressing public health concern, particularly in high-pressure academic cultures. According to the World Health Organization [1], one in seven adolescents globally experiences a mental disorder, with depression being a leading cause of illness and disability in this age group. The onset of mental health problems peaks during adolescence and young adulthood [2], yet young people frequently encounter barriers when seeking professional help [3]. This paper analyzes the Chinese television drama *A Little Reunion* (2019), focusing on Episodes 37–41 (approximately 3 hours) to critically examine how adolescent depression and anxiety are portrayed. The health topic of interest is adolescent depressive disorder and anxiety, operationally defined for this analysis as observable and verbal indicators including chronic insomnia, persistent crying, expressions of guilt and self-blame, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities (e.g., astronomy), and suicidal ideas.

The probable intended audience for *A Little Reunion* is twofold: adolescents (middle and high school students) and their parents. The narrative centers on three families with children preparing

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for the Gaokao (national college entrance examination); students may watch to see their own experiences reflected, while parents may gain insight into their own parenting. Media narratives offer one window into how young people understand emotional distress, and digital platforms are increasingly being used to deliver mental health interventions for this population [3].

*A Little Reunion* (Season 1, Episodes 37–41) is set in Beijing and follows three households during their children's final year of high school (senior year). The selected episodes total approximately three hours and focus intensively on the protagonist Qiao Yingzi (age 17), her mother Song Qian (a teacher), who is divorced with Yingzi's father Qiao Weidong, and their interactions with neighbors and peers.

The rationale for selecting this specific three-hour segment is that it captures the full escalation of Yingzi's mental health crisis: from worsening insomnia after encountering a peer in distress to the revelation that a beloved neighbor (Aunt Liu Jing) has cancer, culminating in Yingzi's suicide attempt on a bridge in Shenzhen and her subsequent clinical diagnosis. This concentrated narrative provides dense material for in-depth research in this field.

## 2. Critical analysis of media content

### 2.1. Target audience and character dynamics

The show targets both youth and parents. Factors contributing to this identification include the age of the protagonists (17–18 years), the urban Beijing setting, and the centrality of the Gaokao—a universally recognized stressor for most of the Chinese families. Characters are tightly interdependent. Yingzi and Song Qian share a loving but enmeshed bond. Song Qian, a strict former teacher who has produced many top students, demands Yingzi attend Tsinghua or Peking University, while Yingzi desires to study astronomy at Nanjing University. Their interactions follow a pattern in which Song Qian imposes control and Yingzi suppresses distress. Song Qian holds the most visible power; Yingzi's father, Qiao Weidong, is well-meaning but ineffective—he acknowledges that Song Qian will not permit Yingzi to go to Nanjing, highlighting parental discord as an additional stressor. Importantly, Song Qian and Qiao Weidong divorced because of past misunderstandings and do not have a good relationship; this family breakdown becomes one of the major underlying causes of Yingzi's later severe depression. That Song Qian is a teacher who has trained many outstanding students and also intensifies her sense of control and her fear of Yingzi not meeting her expectations.

### 2.2. Operational definition in context

Depressive behaviors appear centrally and frequently throughout the three hours. The action unfolds primarily in the family home, the school, and finally in Shenzhen.

#### 2.2.1. Control and pressure

Yingzi's insomnia begins after she recalls her mother's past controlling behaviors—establishing a clear causal link between control and distress. At a "hope balloon" ceremony, Song Qian writes "Tsinghua" on the balloon and tells her she "must score 700 points" (Beijing Gaokao has a full mark of 750 ). She also imposes a rigid time frame, reminding Yingzi that"with 278 days until the Gaokao, there are only 46 days per subject".Additionally, she forbids leisure. When Yingzi pleads to go to the planetarium, Song Qian opposes her. She throws away Yingzi's photos and, in a classic form of emotional manipulation, claims she has always supported everything Yingzi ever liked—

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even as she refuses to let her attend the Nanjing University winter camp. As Yingzi herself later summarizes, her mother's refrain is that she has "always supported everything [Yingzi] ever liked"—a claim belied by her actions.

These scenes construct Song Qian's control through both language and routine: she frames her demands as love ("for your own good") while simultaneously inducing guilt. Psychologically, such control—manipulating a child's emotions, invalidating their autonomy, and conditional approval—has been linked to adolescent depressive symptoms. Empirical research using nationally representative Chinese survey data [4] demonstrates that parental control acts as a moderator of the parent–child relationship's effect on adolescent mental health, with stronger moderating effects observed among girls [4]. Thus, the study situates Yingzi's suffering not as individual weakness but as a systemic product of "tiger parenting," wherein control interacts with relational quality to shape psychological outcomes.

### 2.2.2. Insomnia and survivor guilt — Ding Yi's death

One night, unable to sleep, Yingzi encounters Ding Yi, a former student of Song Qian's. Shortly afterward, Ding Yi dies by suicide. His father reveals that Ding Yi had struggled with severe insomnia and emotional instability after being forced to study finance instead of his preferred subject, geology. This deeply unsettles Song Qian because she recognizes a parallel between Ding Yi's experience and her own control over Yingzi's academic choices.

After Ding Yi's death, Yingzi develops intense guilt, believing that she could have prevented his death if she had stayed and talked to him longer. In her audio diary, she describes persistent crying, loss of happiness and meaning, and 34 consecutive days of insomnia. Although these are significant indicators of psychological distress, she conceals them from her family and friends, allowing her symptoms to worsen. Her thoughts about death and freedom further suggest the progression of suicidal ideation.

Ding Yi therefore functions as a narrative mirror, connecting parental coercion with the deterioration of adolescent mental health. Yingzi's survivor guilt adds another layer to her depression by turning an external tragedy into personal responsibility. Research on media portrayals of suicide also suggests that such representations can influence adolescent mental health outcomes. Cooper et al. [5], for example, found an increase in adolescent suicide-attempt admissions following the release of 13 Reasons Why. Notably, *A Little Reunion* does not directly show Ding Yi's suicide; instead, the scene cuts to black before the act and resumes with its aftermath. This visual restraint reduces explicit depiction while preserving the emotional significance of the event, demonstrating the importance of responsible suicide representation.

### 2.2.3. Vicarious trauma — Aunt Liu Jing's illness

Yingzi also experiences vicarious trauma when she learns that Aunt Liu Jing, a beloved neighbor who encouraged her to pursue her dreams, has cancer. Deeply distressed, Yingzi cries and bites her own arm. Just two days earlier, the two had visited a dessert shop together, where Liu Jing comforted her. That evening, after calling the Nanjing University winter camp and being told it was too late, Yingzi resolutely buys a plane ticket and books a hotel in Shenzhen, leaving without telling anyone. She hopes that seeing the stars and the ocean will ease her pain; instead, she feels nothing.

Liu Jing's illness removes one of Yingzi's few sources of unconditional support, deepening her sense of isolation. The self-harm (biting her arm) is a concrete behavioral marker of the operational definition. Her solo trip to Shenzhen represents an attempt at self-rescue through escape. The show's

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depiction of Yingzi's escalating emotional distress in this arc resonates with developmental research on adolescent depression. Cicchetti and Toth [6] emphasize that depression in children and adolescents must be understood within a developmental psychopathology framework, as the disorder manifests differently across stages and is shaped by accumulating interpersonal stressors—precisely the pattern the show illustrates through Yingzi's layered losses.

#### 2.2.4. Climax and diagnosis in Shenzhen

After Yingzi's friend discovers her whereabouts by decoding her computer, her parents rush to Shenzhen. The moment they approach her, Yingzi runs to the riverbank and climbs onto the railing. Both parents plead with her to come down. In a cathartic outpouring, she tells them that they have always decided her life based on their own ideas; when Song Qian insists, "Mom does everything for your own good," Yingzi cries that these are their desires, not hers. She clarifies that her wish is not really Nanjing University but escape: "I just want to get away from you." She says she has not slept a single good night in 34 days, and that seeing the stars in Shenzhen brought no relief. As she prepares to jump, she apologizes for not being the daughter they wanted. Her father pulls her down, and the family goes together to see a psychologist, who diagnoses moderate depression and moderate anxiety, with self-harm and suicidal ideation.

The bridge sequence is the emotional climax, and Yingzi's line "I just want to get away from you" reframes her suicide attempt not as a wish to die but as a desperate claim for autonomy—a crucial distinction the show makes explicit. The clinical diagnosis that follows models professional help-seeking: rather than resolving everything at home, the family turns to a psychologist. Ridout and Campbell [3] note that while young people often face barriers to accessing formal mental health support, social networking sites and digital platforms are increasingly used to deliver mental health interventions for this population, highlighting the importance of modeling pathways to care. The "escape" motive thus links the entire narrative arc—from the hope balloon to the rooftop—back to the erosion of Yingzi's agency.

### 2.3. Themes, language, and imagery

Across the three hours, the most recurrent themes are control as causality—depression is narratively linked to the loss of autonomy—and insomnia as visible suffering, as Yingzi's 34-day inability to sleep becomes a concrete marker of collapse. Song Qian's refrain "Mom does everything for your own good" functions as a linguistic tool of guilt and control, while Ding Yi's story and his parting wish that Yingzi "sleep well" haunt her sleeplessness. The show uses the darkening and brightening of the screen at Ding Yi's suicide to mark the traumatic turning point, and close-ups of Yingzi's trembling hands and self-harming arm to visualize distress.

### 2.4. Conflict and resolution framing

The central conflict is framed as a clash between the adolescent's need for autonomy and the parent's need for control. Resolution arrives only after a near-fatal crisis: the family seeks a clinical diagnosis, modeling professional help-seeking. Crucially, however, the three-hour sample ends at diagnosis; the subsequent episodes depicting parental change and peer support fall outside the assigned viewing parts. This is acknowledged as a limitation of the present analysis.

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## 3. Discussion

These findings align with course literature on media and adolescent health. Ridout and Campbell [3] note that young people often face barriers to professional help, yet digital platforms are increasingly leveraged for mental health interventions—a dynamic echoed in Yingzi's initial isolation from formal support. The show also resonates with empirical research on Chinese adolescents: Xu and Ren [4] demonstrate that parental control moderates the effect of parent–child relationships on mental health using nationally representative data, with the moderating effect being more significant among girls. Furthermore, a 12-month cohort study of early adolescents in China identified three distinct developmental trajectories of depressive symptoms—low-risk (27.4%), escalating-high-risk (44.1%), and high-risk (28.5%)—with predictors including female sex, left-behind or reconstituted family status, short sleep duration, long screen time, and low physical activity [7]. These findings directly parallel Yingzi's escalating symptom pattern across the three episodes.

From a developmental perspective, Rikard-Bell et al. [8] argue that recognizing developmental distress in depressed adolescents is essential for accurate assessment and intervention, as adolescent depression often presents with context-specific triggers that differ from adult presentations. This lens helps explain why Yingzi's symptoms—insomnia, guilt, and loss of interest—are tightly interwoven with her familial and academic environment rather than appearing as isolated mood disturbances. Additionally, Cicchetti and Toth [6] emphasize that the development of depression in children and adolescents must be understood within a developmental psychopathology framework, where interpersonal stressors accumulate over time—a framework that maps closely onto the show's layered portrayal of Yingzi's breakdown.

Media portrayals of mental illness and suicide carry measurable influence. Cooper et al. [6] documented a rise in adolescent suicide attempt admissions following the release of a widely viewed Netflix series, highlighting the responsibility that media creators bear in framing such content. Conversely, Kaufman et al. [9] analyzed Reddit discussions of HBO's Euphoria and found that viewers related to its portrayal of mental health and substance use as realistic and personally resonant—though some found certain content triggering. This dual potential—to both resonate and risk—is precisely what *A Little Reunion* navigates in its depiction of Ding Yi's suicide and Yingzi's subsequent crisis.

## 4. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the portrayal of adolescent depression and anxiety in *A Little Reunion* (Episodes 37–41), with particular attention to family dynamics, academic pressure, and the loss of adolescent autonomy. The findings indicate that the drama portrays psychological distress as the result of accumulating interpersonal and environmental stressors rather than as an isolated individual problem. The analysis revealed that insomnia, survivor guilt, loss of interest, self-harm, and suicidal ideation are closely connected to parental control, academic expectations, grief, and emotional isolation. These findings support the initial argument that adolescent mental health is shaped by the interaction between individual experiences and the social environment.

This study contributes to existing research by applying developmental and family perspectives to the analysis of a Chinese television portrayal of adolescent mental health. It also demonstrates how popular media can make complex psychological experiences visible to both adolescents and parents. The study has practical significance for mental-health education and media communication because it highlights warning signs of adolescent distress and the importance of professional intervention and supportive family relationships.

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However, this study is limited to five episodes and therefore cannot fully examine Yingzi's subsequent recovery or the long-term effects of family and peer support. Future research could analyze the full series and compare its portrayal with other Chinese media representations of adolescent mental health. Overall, this study provides new insights into the relationship between family pressure, adolescent autonomy, and psychological well-being, highlighting the importance of early recognition, open communication, and appropriate mental-health support.

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