The transition from childhood to adolescence can be a significant stressor for youth, leading to increases in internalizing problems for those who are vulnerable. Compared to the mounting research conducted on U.S. youth, children and adolescents in China have received little attention on their psychological adjustment. As Chinese youth constitute roughly 15% of the world’s population (World Health Organization, 2010), and the disproportionate quantity of longitudinal literature on Chinese youth psychological functioning, understanding the influence of risk and protective factors, and their interactive effects on internalizing problem trajectories among rural Chinese youth is critical.

According to Life Course Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Risk and Resilience Framework, we need to look beyond one snapshot, one risk or protective factor and analyze the interactions among multiple factors nested in multiple environments across time. Unfortunately, the longitudinal investigation of perceived family and school experiences on youth psychological functioning in rural China is rare. Thus, this study investigated four research questions: 1. What is the nature of internalizing problems among rural Chinese youth? 2. Are gender and perceived school experiences associated with internalizing problems in childhood among rural Chinese youth? Are they associated with changes in internalizing problems from childhood to late adolescence? 3. Do perceived parental behaviors moderate the effect of gender on changes in internalizing problems among rural Chinese youth? 4. Do perceived parental behaviors moderate the effect of perceived school experiences on changes in internalizing problems among rural Chinese youth?

This study used the data from Wave I (2000) to Wave III (2007) of the Gansu Survey of Children and Families, which is one of the first project to obtain data at the individual and village levels in four waves from 2000 to 2009 in rural China. The time-varying dependent variable was internalizing problems measured by a summative scale adapted from the Child Behavior Checklist and Youth-Self Report. Level-1 time-variant predictor was youth age. Level-2 time-invariant predictors was child gender, and time-variant predictors included perceived parental warmth, lack of teacher support, and adverse classroom climate. Research questions were examined using two-level growth curve modeling with time nested in individuals. All multivariate data analyses were conducted using PROC MIXED in SAS v9.1.4.

The results from the growth curve modeling showed that levels of internalizing problems decreased over time among rural youth from childhood to late adolescence, with variation in childhood and in the trajectory. In addition, youth gender has not been found to be associated with internalizing problems and changes in the problems. There is evidence showed that perceived lack of teacher support and adverse classroom climate predicted levels of internalizing problems in positive directions, but only lack of teacher support predicted rate of changes in internalizing problems. Furthermore, parental warmth interacted with lack of teacher support to predict levels of internalizing problems, and interact with adverse classroom climate to predict the trajectory. Specifically, the protective effect of parental warmth was more salient when the level of lack of teacher support was low. The current investigation adds to the literature by examining the unique and interactive effects of individual characteristics, family, and school experiences on internalizing symptoms from childhood to late adolescence. Results of the current study emphasize the importance of fostering responsive and supportive relationships within the family and school contexts early
on and continually. Implications for research, policy, and social work practice were discussed.