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## The Effect of Friendship Alienation on Mental Health: The Buffering Effects of the Chinese “Yuan” and “Fen” Beliefs

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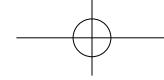
Friendship alienation is a common dilemma experienced by many Chinese people in life. It especially has negative impacts on the mental health of the alienated party, which cannot be ignored. The role of “yuanfen” (緣分) in adapting to relationship dilemmas has already been put forward and yuanfen has recently been subdivided into beliefs in “yuan” (緣) and “fen” (分). However, yuan and fen beliefs were for the most part hypothesized in the past to have respective effects on psychological adaptation. This paper first proposes the hypothesis that yuan and fen belief can work together (interact) to buffer the negative effects of friendship alienation on mental health. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the roles of the yuan and fen beliefs following friendship alienation, including the effect of “friendship alienation” on “mental health” and the moderating role of yuan and fen beliefs. In this study, adults aged 18 and above were adopted as subjects. Data was collected through online questionnaires. Participants were requested to fill out assessment scales measuring friendship alienation experiences, their yuan and fen beliefs, sense of loneliness, satisfaction with life, subjective happiness, etc. The results show that compared with those without experiences of friendship alienation, people who had experienced estrangement from their friends within two years indeed showed poorer mental health. The research results with greater significance show that 1) If the yuan and fen beliefs operate simultaneously, they play a buffering role on the negative impacts of alienation experience on mental health. If they both operate independently however, they do not have a buffering effect on the negative impacts of the alienation experience on mental health; and 2) It is worth noting that in situations where belief in yuan is low, and the belief in fen is higher, the more likely an experience of alienation would jeopardize subjective happiness and satisfaction with life. Overall, the joint operation of the beliefs in yuan and fen may play a buffering role in the negative effects of friendship alienation. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that under specific circumstances, yuan and fen do not always have positive effects on negative relationships as mentioned in the preceding literature. Finally, the research results were targeted for further discussion. The research limitations and directions were also indicated.

**Keywords:** mental health, friendship, friendship alienation, yuanfen, psychotherapy

### Extended Abstract

Friendship alienation is a predicament encountered by many people. In Chinese culture, when it becomes difficult for good friends to maintain their friendship, they are likely to become estranged (Dong, 2009; Huang, 2005). Compared with the party who initiates the distancing, the alienated party may experience a stronger, more negative impact on their mental health and ability to adapt to the alienation (Dong, 2009; Lai & Huang, 2013).

In the study of Chinese interpersonal relationships, the adaptive role of *yuanfen* (緣分) in relationship dilemmas has been proposed (Chang & Jou, 2004; Heger, 2015; Yang, 2005). Recently, *yuanfen* has been subdivided into *yuan* (緣) and *fen* (分) (Lee & Chen, 2009). *Yuan*, defined as “fate” and “external control,” suggests that interpersonal relationships are predetermined. *Fen*, defined as “agency” and “internal control,” suggests that



interpersonal relationships are one's own responsibility (Hsu, 2012, 2016; Lee & Chen, 2006, 2009). *Yuan fen* beliefs can be seen as a form of cultural wisdom that helps people take appropriate actions to cope with relationship difficulties (Hsu & Hwang, 2016). While most studies have differentiated between *yuan* and *fen* to explore their independent effects, this differentiation likely does not conform with reality (Hsu, 2012; Hsu & Hwang, 2016; Lee & Chen, 2006). Therefore, this study is the first to put forward the hypothesis that *yuan* and *fen* work together to mitigate relationship troubles. It postulates that their interactions buffer the negative impact of friendship alienation on a person's mental health. More precisely, this study explores the effect of friendship alienation on mental health and the moderating effect of a belief in *yuan* and a belief in *fen*.

According to the literature, which has focused on either the process by which *yuan fen* operates (Chang & Jou, 2004; Heger, 2015; Hsu, 2016) or the flexibility of *yuan fen* as a coping mechanism (Cheng et al., 2014; Hsu, 2016; Hsu & Hwang, 2016), the joint effect of *yuan* and *fen* may allow the alienated person to adapt more effectively. Therefore, it can be deduced that when an alienated person believes in *yuan* and *fen*, the two beliefs' mitigation of the impact of friendship alienation is multiplied and helps to keep the person mentally healthy. Specifically, the hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: People who have experienced alienation from friends have poorer mental health (i.e., experience greater loneliness, less subjective happiness, and lower life satisfaction) than those who have not experienced this alienation.

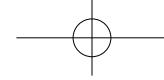
Hypothesis 2: A belief in *yuan* moderates the effect of friendship alienation on mental health. The more one believes in *yuan*, the less the impact of alienation on one's mental health.

Hypothesis 3: A belief in *fen* moderates the effect of friendship alienation on mental health. The more one believes in *fen*, the less the impact of alienation on one's mental health.

Hypothesis 4: A belief in *yuan* and a belief in *fen* interact to mitigate the impact of friendship alienation on mental health. They work complementarily to have a multiplicative mitigating effect.

## Method

According to the research on *yuan fen*, individuals develop this concept in their early adulthood or university years (Yang, 2005). Accordingly, students and adults over the age of 18 were selected as the research population. A total of 281 participants completed an online survey and valid sample size was 254. Drawing on the finding of Bowker (2011), we included the participants who had experienced friendship alienation within the past two years. Furthermore, only those who identified their friendship as "good", "very good" or "the best" were included ("ordinary" level was excluded), such that 194 people were included in the final sample. This study used a quasi-experimental between-subjects design. The independent variable was the experience of friendship alienation (yes vs. no). Referring to Bowker (2011) and the definition of friendship alienation in indigenous psychology (Dong, 2009; Lai & Huang, 2013), the participants were asked the following question on whether they had had any experiences of friendship alienation: "Have you ever been unilaterally alienated or neglected by a good friend (A good friend refers to the other party in a friendship that is not one-sided, romantic, or ambiguous.) and are currently still being alienated? (The state of being alienated refers to when the other party is no longer actively approaching you, and when you usually receive an indifferent response upon taking the initiative to approach the other party. You do not want to lose this relationship and you feel that you have been pushed away.)" The respondents were asked to answer "yes" or "no". Next, they were asked "how long has it been since the above experience?" The options include: within six months, within one year, within one and a half years, within two years, and more than two years. The moderating variables were the belief in *yuan* and the belief in *fen*. The dependent variables were mental



health indicators, namely feelings of loneliness, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness. To rule out possible confounding variables, this study also collected various demographic variables and the most likely confounding variable, general friendship state, which includes “overall relationship quality”, “number of friends” and “having friends to share or talk to”.

## Results

First, we examined the differences in demographic and related variables between the participants who had been alienated from friends and those who had not. The results showed that there were no significant differences in the variables of gender, age, education, occupation, marriage, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs. In addition, there was no significant difference in general friendship state. This suggested that there were no systematic differences in the likelihood that the participants experienced alienation from friends, regardless of their background and friendship state.

Next, the correlations between the independent and dependent variables were analyzed. The results showed that experiencing friendship alienation was significantly and positively correlated with loneliness and significantly and negatively correlated with subjective happiness and life satisfaction. Compared with those who had not experienced friendship alienation, those who had experienced this alienation reported a higher degree of loneliness and a lower degree of subjective happiness and life satisfaction. This result preliminarily supported Hypothesis 1. In addition, there was no significant correlation between a belief in *yuan* and mental health indicators, whereas a belief in *fen* was significantly positively correlated with subjective happiness and life satisfaction.

Hierarchical regression was then used to analyze the effects of experiencing friendship alienation, a belief in *yuan*, and a belief in *fen* on mental health indicators. The results showed that experiencing friendship alienation had negative effects on mental health. Specifically, it led to a higher degree of loneliness, a lower degree of life satisfaction, and a lower degree of subjective happiness.

These results again supported Hypothesis 1. The results also showed that the relationship between experiencing friendship alienation and mental health was not moderated by a belief in *yuan* or a belief in *fen* alone. Therefore, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were not supported.

Most importantly, under the joint operation (interaction) of *yuan* and *fen*, the negative effects of experiencing friendship alienation on mental health were buffered. This result supported Hypothesis 4. For example, when a belief in *yuan* and a belief in *fen* were both high, the negative effect of friendship alienation on loneliness was mitigated (as shown in Figure 1). It should be noted that in the case of a low degree of belief in *yuan* and a high degree of belief in *fen*, experiencing friendship alienation was not conducive to subjective happiness and life satisfaction.

## Conclusion

In Chinese culture, when encountering relationship bottlenecks or difficulties, people often think of *yuan fen*. If people re-examine their relationship difficulties with this cultural wisdom, they may reduce their psychological discomfort. This study explored whether the experience of friendship alienation in the Chinese cultural context had negative effects on mental health and whether a belief in *yuan* and a belief in *fen* could buffer this impact of experiencing friendship alienation.

While this study drew on the dual dimensions (two factors) of *yuan* and *fen* in the literature, it is important to note that the purpose of this study was not merely to apply existing theories to a new situation (i.e., friendship alienation) but also to adopt a new perspective for the function of the dual dimensions of *yuan* and *fen*. While most studies have differentiated between *yuan* and *fen* and assumed that each has its own independent effects, this study was the first to hypothesize that *yuan* and *fen* work together to produce a multiplicative buffering effect on the negative impact of friendship alienation on mental health. Although this study also hypothesized that *yuan* and *fen* have their own buffering effects, the results showed that either a belief in *yuan* or a belief in *fen* alone did not moderate the negative effects of experiencing

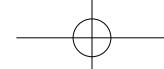
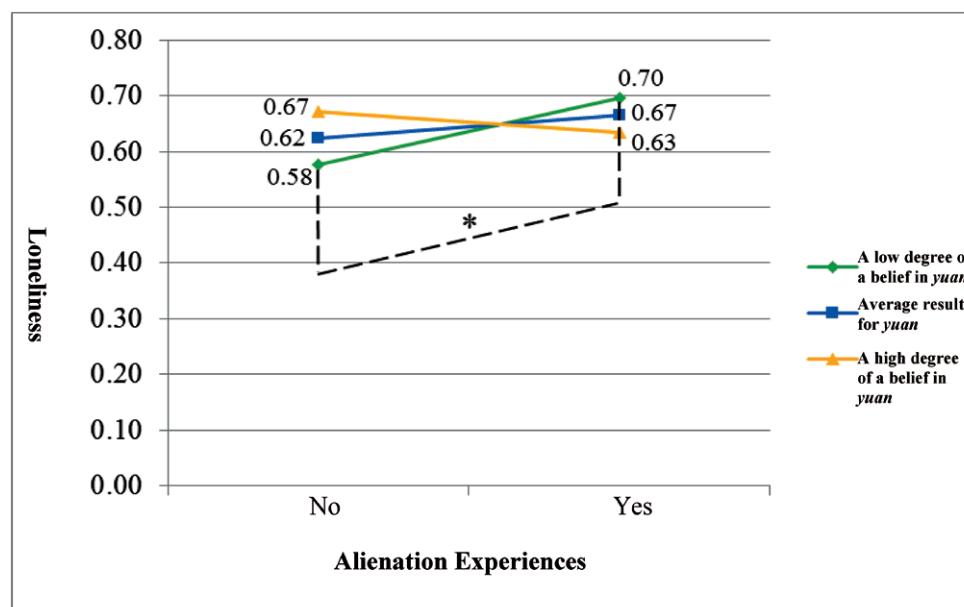
**Figure 1**

Diagram of alienated experience  $\times$  a belief in yuan under the condition that there is a high degree of a belief in fen



\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

friendship alienation on mental health. Future research could further explore the respective roles of *yuan* and *fen* as well as the effects of their interaction.

Finally, in addition to opening up a new direction for *yuan fen* research, the findings of this study have potential for practical application. With the emergence of the indigenization movement in psychology studies, the indigenized psychotherapy and counseling in particular has gained scholars' attention (Hsu & Hwang, 2013;

Leung & Chen, 2009; Wang, 2017). To indigenize psychotherapy in the Chinese cultural context, it may be possible to take into account traditional cultural wisdom and to incorporate beliefs in *yuan* and *fen* into procedures of psychotherapy. This would allow new interpretations to be given to relationship difficulties and allow treatment to go beyond modifying the patient's irrational beliefs and increasing their cognitive flexibility.