



5-1-2011

Cultural Psychology and Cross-Cultural Psychology: The Case of Chinese Psychology

Carl Ratner

Institute for Cultural Research & Education, California; Psychology Dept., Imam University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,
cr2@humboldt1.com

Recommended Citation

Ratner, C. (2011). Cultural Psychology and Cross-Cultural Psychology: The Case of Chinese Psychology. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1015>

Cultural Psychology and Cross-Cultural Psychology: The Case of Chinese Psychology

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

This paper discusses ways that cultural psychology can complement cross-cultural psychology to achieve a deeper understanding of culture, psychology, and their relationship (see Ratner, 2008, 2011a, b, c, for further discussion). Cross-cultural psychology is accomplished in clarifying, operationalizing, and testing issues related to culture, psychology, and their relation. Cross-cultural psychology utilizes standardized tests and measures and variables most successfully when prior research has identified the parameters of the issues to be tested. Without this prior research, standardized content of standardized tests and measures may not fully reflect the complexity of culturally variable issues.

I propose that cultural psychology can elucidate this complexity. Cultural psychology draws on rich social science theory and “thick” description from ethnographic and qualitative methodologies. Cultural psychology draws upon sociological, historical, and anthropological theories of culture to identify the rich, varying, cultural-historical content of cultural and psychological factors in particular societies. Cross-cultural psychologists can take this complex, nuanced information about culture and psychology and standardize it in measurable variables, instruments, and even experimental conditions. However, standardized cross-cultural psychological methodology is not adept at discovering complex, nuanced information about culture and psychology. It requires a symbiotic relationship with cultural psychology to make its instruments ecologically and psychologically valid.

Cross-cultural psychologists have acknowledged the importance of emic descriptions to complement etic variables, and this article deepens this point through an extended example (Berry, 1980). I shall present a corpus of evidence from cultural psychological research on Chinese psychology. This evidence comprises important new information which has not been discovered by tests and measures that have been standardized for given content. Moreover, the evidence challenges certain mainstay assumptions about Chinese culture and psychology held by cross-cultural psychologists – e.g., that China epitomizes collective society and psychology. Recent work by culturally-immersed cross-cultural psychologists (e.g., Bond, 2010) indicates some changes in Chinese psychology. However they do not describe this with the detail that the following cultural psychological research does. The new evidence from cultural psychology about Chinese psychology is a fertile direction that cross-cultural psychologists can explore through their methodology.

Psychologists Goh and Kuczynski (2009) researched ways that Chinese parents are becoming more child-centered, and children are consequently becoming more demanding and assertive. They emphasize the one-child policy that led parents to spoil their single child, in contrast to having to spread their largesse among several children as in the past. The language is revealing: “As the number of children in each household has decreased, traditional children as old age insurance, i.e. economic value, has been replaced by the emotional and psychological value of children” (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009, p. 507). “Children are few in number—in contrast to the larger families of previous generations—allowing the child to have one-on-one personal relationships with caregivers. Each adult caregiver has an emotional stake with the child” (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009, p. 525).

The emotional ties that parents have with single children “means that the child’s relationships with multiple caregivers increase the child’s relational resources, which can be exploited to meet the child’s goals” (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009, p. 525, emphasis added).

The authors obtained reports from family members about obedience, e.g., which adult the child obeyed more. From these accounts, the authors conclude that “the little emperor was found to be an agentic child” (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009, p. 504). “Agency was displayed in sometimes subtle and creative ways, in overt resistance that exploited weaknesses in each of their different relationships, in behavioral compliance accompanied by private rejection of parental messages, in creative attempts at evasion and delay, and in strategically using relationships with some adults to offset the influence of others” (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009, p. 525).

Sociologists and anthropologists working in the area of cultural psychology on the topic of Chinese psychology, illuminate important, additional cultural pressures that have generated rising individualism in China.

Sociological ethnographies by Yan (2010) document the decline of organized sociality such as mass rallies, collective parties, and volunteer work for the public good; and the dissolution of the social safety net that guaranteed jobs and housing for all. This individualization of social policy fostered a popular sense of individualism in a wide range of social activities – from finding a job to a house to a spouse.

For instance, the Chinese Sports Federation used to pay for athletes’ training and therefore set the rules for training, arranged their travel, and also kept most of athletes’ monetary winnings. The Federation recently changed its official policy and now allows athletes such as tennis players to keep 88% of their earnings, hire their own coaches, train on their own, and plan their own trips to international competitions. This official policy changes the collective sense of personhood into an individualistic sense.

Yan (2010) demonstrates that “the rise of the individual and the consequential individualization of society should be viewed as a reflexive part of China’s state-sponsored quest for modernity.” (p. 489). “China and Western Europe were both forced into the current round of individualization through the impact of globalization, especially due to the global triumph of neoliberalism and the capitalist mode of production.” (Yan, 2010, p. 507).

Whenever individualization and privatization became necessary, the party-state did not hesitate to use its power to launch institutional changes...the three major reform projects since the late 1990s, namely, the privatization of housing, the marketization of education, and the marketization of medical care, are all institutional changes launched by the state to force individuals to shoulder more responsibility, to more actively engage in market-based competition, and to assume more risks and to become more reflexive. [One blunt way that the State forced individualization was to fire millions of State employees and force them to fend for themselves in market activities.] Chinese official data recognize that between 1998 and 2003 more than 30 million workers were laid off from the State Owned Enterprises, representing a 40 per cent cut in the state owned enterprise workforce. [Foreign data double this figure.] The lifestyle of the laid-off workers

changed immediately once they lost both their jobs and their sense of security. (Yan, 2010, pp. 498-499).

In keeping with Bourdieu, Yan (2010) illustrates Vygotsky's statement that psychology is a product of historical forces:

While experiencing the radical changes in her/his life situation and biographic pattern over the last three decades, the Chinese individual has also gone through an equally radical breakthrough in the subjective domain, that is, a re-formation of the self and a search for individual identity. The institutionalized changes in the labour market, education, and career development, for example, have led to the rise of what Nicolas Rose calls the 'enterprising self', meaning the calculating, proactive, and self-disciplined self that is commonly found among the younger generations of Chinese labourers. (Yan, 2010, p. 504).

This culturally induced change in self concept brings the same psychological pressures as in the West.:

The pressure to remake the self in one way or another created not only an additional responsibility but also a new psychological burden for the Chinese individual. Squeezed between the increasing market competition on the one hand and the decreasing support from family, kinship, and state institutions on the other, many Chinese individuals suffer from various degrees of mental illness. According to a recent report, doctors at the National Center for Mental Health quote the startling figure of 100 million Chinese suffering from mental illness. Another noteworthy trend is that many individuals have turned to telephone hotlines, talk therapies, and psychological counseling for professional help instead of seeking support from relatives, friends, and family members as most people did in the past. (Yan, 2010, pp. 505-506).

In addition, consumerism has fostered a strong sense of individualism. Individuals were encouraged to consume by government policy as a way of stimulating the economy, fostering social content, and distracting people from social injustice and autocracy. Government policy encouraged banks to make consumer loans at low interests with low down payments. The media praised consumerism. "Chinese consumers' enthusiastic embrace of commercial opportunities and products has accentuated the role of individual choice and diversified the venues in which individuals from a broad spectrum of urban society socialize." (Yan, 2000, p. 185). "The ideology of consumerism, which simply encourages people to indulge themselves in the pursuit of personal happiness, effectively dilutes the influence of communist ideology." (Yan, 2000, p. 185).

Mundane and commercialized activities of consumption provide the concrete content, the specific form, and the particular space that make this new kind of

[individuality] possible” (Yan, 2000, p. 185). All of this was deliberately cultivated by the government to regain social stability after the Tienanmen uprising in 1989: “The triumph of consumerism has drawn the public’s attention away from the political and ideological issues, overshadowed the increased social inequality and widespread corruption, and eased the legitimacy crisis of the CCP after 1989 (Yan, 2010, p. 188).

Zhang and Shavitt (2003) demonstrate how cultural values reflected in Chinese advertisements promote individualism and modernity values. The authors compared Chinese X-Generation market with the mass market. The results showed that modernity and individualism values predominated in Chinese advertising and they were more prevalent in advertisements directed toward the X-Generation than in those directed toward mass audience. Then, this study suggests that advertising in China is promoting more individualistic values to the X-Generation market than the mass market. Moreover, people’s exposure to individualistic advertisements tended to elicit more favorable private-self thoughts and individualistic choices whereas an exposure to collectivistic advertisements tended to elicit more favorable collective-self thoughts (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003).

Anthropologist Emily Ng (2009) amplifies the macro cultural-political changes that replaced Chinese style collectivism with modern individualism.

In Maoist China, personal problems were moralized and politicized rather than medicalized and psychologized as in the West. Time outside of work became highly regulated. Leisure took place in group settings, and failure to participate in state-sanctioned leisure activities provided grounds to criticize individuals for “cutting themselves off from the masses” and “lacking collective spirit”.

In the 1980s, the new leadership under Deng loosened state control over most domains of social, cultural and personal life. New urban sites including billiard parlors, bars and beauty shops have shaped patterns of consumption and city culture. *Economic and sociopolitical decentralization have opened new physical and social spaces for personal autonomy and subjective experience.* Parallel changes in the socioemotional landscape have also been documented in rural areas in China...Broadly speaking, social life in both urban and rural areas has become increasingly depoliticized, and public discourse on mood and emotion has become less dangerous and more commonplace. Ordinary citizens could now openly express opinions, hopes and fears on an individual level. Popular media and professional literature have begun to utilize terms such as psychological (xinli), stress (yali), mood (xinqing) and depression (youyu) more regularly.” (pp. 424-425, emphasis added).

An important macro cultural factor in the individualizing of Chinese psychology has been the psychobiologizing of experience such as depression under the direction of capitalist

pharmaceutical corporations: “With the influence of foreign pharmaceutical companies, availability of glossy psychology magazines at newsstands, popularization of psychology talk shows on television and radio, increased mental health education campaigns by the government and easy access to pirated foreign films and soap operas, many Chinese in Shenzhen are well aware of the concept of depression” (Ng, 2009., p. 426).

Ng (2009) refers to the macro cultural forming of psychology as a way of comprehending the psychology expressed in psychiatric narratives:

To better understand the four interviewees’ narratives of distress, it might be helpful to note the changing relationships between individuals and work in China across the decades. Major structural changes to the workplace in the reform era have led to increased flexibility and mobility for both employers and employees, in contrast with the stability and rigidity of Maoist-era work units (*danwei*). For workers of the Maoist era, one’s work unit was not individually chosen, and it defined one’s identity for all legal and bureaucratic purposes, as well as many aspects of one’s social life. Although some may not have been too satisfied with their allocations, the posts were seen as “iron rice bowls” one could count on, usually for life. Thus, the relationship to the workplace was one of restraint, yet also one of reliability and support. The obligation was mutual. The transition toward a market economy in the reform era has seen the dismantling of this model. (pp. 438-439).

While the work unit still exists, its influence has been diminished due to the increasing influence of privatization. Workers and employers can now “negotiate” employment, particularly in the private sector. Fewer promises are made from both ends. “This has led to a related shift of attitude in younger workers, who prioritize the well-being of their personal and (often nuclear) family lives over that of the greater community and workplace. In this context, Mr. Tian’s narrative of frustration toward national policies and younger employees can be seen as a response to the changes in both workplace structure and worker psychology in the post-Mao era.” (Ng, 2009, p. 439)

Shifts since the 1990s toward a neoliberal model of funding have led to many reductions or outright termination of pension benefits, leaving some older workers and retirees nostalgic and bitter about promises made in the Maoist past. Across the country, workers and retirees have organized public protests over the depletion or denial of benefits. “Lacking reliable safety nets in the socioeconomic domain, many younger workers and students feel that they must indeed ‘rely on themselves’ for their own welfare and livelihood, as the availability of employment and benefits remains in constant flux, particularly for migrant laborers. Thus, in experience of bipolar disorder, “the contents of complaints are very much in step with the socioeconomic atmosphere of their times.” (Ng, 2009, p. 439).

This research by Yan (2010), Ng (2009), Zhang and Shavitt (2003), as well as that by Hansen and Svarverud (2009) is sensitive to changes in the culture and psychology that have occurred in recent decades. It explores the concrete character of cultural factors,

including their political-economy; it explores the diversity of cultural factors such as housing, jobs, commerce, consumerism, family; and it explores the interrelation of these factors in a cultural system.

This research comprises fertile evidence to be tested by cross-cultural psychologists. However, the changing character of diverse cultural factors and psychology since the 1980s was not detected in cross-cultural psychological variables and standardized tests and measure – which have characterized Chinese culture and psychology as collectivist. This illustrates the relative strengths and weakness of cross-cultural psychology and cultural psychology that require their symbiosis.

Agency

The research of Chinese cultural psychology indicates that agency is a cultural phenomenon that derives its character from the kind of society in which it functions. The research on changes in Chinese psychology demonstrate that individualistic agency is developed through conducive cultural pressures; it is not a natural, universal tendency, as it is often construed by psychologists (Ratner, 2008). While individualism is oriented toward the individual and away from society, individualism is actually a cultural phenomenon that is engendered by cultural forces, not individual ones. Individualism is thus a paradoxical form of agency, for by assuming that it freely constructs itself and is responsible for itself, it denies the cultural forces that engender it.

Yan (2009, 2010) and Ng (2009) demonstrate that dramatic changes in state policy *engendered* the blossoming of individualistic agency throughout China in the 1990s onward. “Villagers, after they were untied from the collective regime [by the government’s privatizing land and housing in the 1980s], began to make independent decisions and to engage in various self-chosen activities...These traits of individual agency continued to develop in the subsequent 20 years” under pressure from social policy. “Modern social structures compel people to become proactive and self-determining individuals who must take full responsibility for their own problems and who develop a reflexive self.” (Yan, 2009, pp. xxi). This is “compulsive and obligatory self-determinism,” not the natural eruption of endogenous self-determining agency (Yan, 2009, p. 275).

An interesting and important way that individualistic identity was fashioned at the cultural level was through the issuance of personal identity cards by order of the National People’s Congress in 1985. Prior to this, only families received identity cards which identified people as members of families or work units. There were no cards identifying people as individuals (Yan, 2009, p. 277-278). The personal identity cards bestowed an official, public, objective, objectified individual identity on people. This is a telling example of a public creation of a psychological phenomenon. The society defined people in new terms. This was reflected in the way people referred to themselves linguistically. For four decades,

..self-identity did not exist in public life, and therefore the individual could never be an unit in public discourse. Consequently, people tended to use the plural term to

substitute for the singular “I”, such as “we,” “our work unit,” etc., instead of saying “I,” “my work unit,” or “my family.” This customary usage of the plural “we” gradually disappeared in the 1990s and, by the late 1990s, a new Chinese phrase, “wo yi dai” (the I-generation or the me-generation), was coined to describe those were born in the 1970s and who had grown up during the reform era because of their proud usage of the first person (Yan, 2009, p. 280).

This generation expresses its culturally formed individualistic agency in culturally appropriate individualistic behavior. Not only do young adults take to the free market in labor and business opportunities, they also live in their own dwellings after marriage, instead of living with in-laws as in former times. Filial piety in the family is being replaced by individualism (Yan, 2009).

Qualitative Methodology

Detecting changes in culture and psychology requires widespread, flexible, probing, intensive, “thick” investigation. This is not the forte of cross-cultural methodology whose standardized tests and measures are better suited to testing and measuring established issues. Researching novel developments outside established issues is the forte of qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology probes deeply into the cultural and personal quality of psychological phenomena (see Ratner, 1997, 2008).

It will be instructive to present a detailed example of qualitative cultural psychological research on Chinese psychology. Lee, Kleinman, and Kleinman (2007) examined depressive experiences of participants by open-ended, in-depth, ethnographic interviews which were content-analyzed. These methods revealed six categories of affective experiences among the participants: Indigenous affective lexicons, embodied emotional experiences, implicit sadness, preverbal pain, distress of social disharmony, and centrality of sleeplessness. For instance, embodied emotional experiences combined affective distress with bodily experiences.

The compound terms nearly always involved the heart—xinhuang (heart panic), xinjing (heart dread/frightened), xinfan (heart vexed), xintong (heart pain), and xinyi (heart dysphoric/depressed/ clutched/compressed). Some informants were adamant that emotional distress could be felt right inside or over the heart. Other compound terms showed that xin (heart) could be both the anatomical heart and the metaphysical mind, as xinxing (heart wakeful) and xinlei (heart exhausted) indicated. It has been suggested that “heart-mind” is the best formulation of xin as an embodied term. (...) “I felt my head swelling, very distressed and painful in the heart [xin hen xinku], my heart felt pressed . . . So . . . [sighing] . . . I felt my heart very irritated [xin hen fan], very upset . . . I felt my heart clutched and dysphoric [xinyi] . . . My brain swollen, so swollen inside. It is heart pressed and brain swollen [xinyi naozhang]” (Lee et al., 2007, p. 4).

Qualitative methodology revealed the cultural-psychological quality of depression in a rich way. It revealed that the cultural quality of psychological depression is essential, not peripheral.

“Bodily complaints” are not best thought of as figurative or disguised symptoms. Rather they are bona fide experiences, as true as any other symptoms of depression, that deserve the same level of recognition and attention. Instead of regarding embodied symptoms, such as head swelling or chest pain, as atypical, metaphorical, or rudimentary, clinicians should view these expressions as windows that cast light on the deep sensibilities, personal and cultural, of being depressed. The failure to respect embodied affect can lead to therapeutic non-engagement. The failure of conventional diagnostic instruments to detect and capture embodied affective experience, as well as other ethnocultural expressions of depression, may explain the unusually low prevalence of depression reported in lay interviewer–administered epidemiological surveys among urban Chinese and in other societies. (...) We would like to emphasize that we are not presenting a critique of the DSM per se, but rather of psychiatry in general. We want to point out that contemporary psychiatric knowledge—as captured in the textbooks and diagnostic criteria—more accurately depicts depression in the West than in China. This result is unsurprising, given that the criteria and textbooks are based on Western patients. Nonetheless, we hope that the readers are aware that the phenomenology of depression is different in China and doubtless other non-Western societies. Hence, psychiatrists and researchers working with non-Western patients need to ask different questions in order to elicit the depressive symptoms and illness experience (Lee et al., 2007, p. 7).

The interesting field known as ethnopsychopharmacology has revealed that physical reactions to medication are culturally shaped and culturally variable just as psychological symptoms are (Lim, 2006)

Anthropologist Rick Shweder recently employed qualitative, ethnographic methodology to elucidate the cultural qualities of emotions. Although the research does not directly address Chinese psychology, which we have been discussing, it does illustrate the usefulness of the methodology for discovering complex, subtle, nuanced aspects of psychology that are prerequisite to standardized cross-cultural research.

Shweder, et al. (2008) identified 8 dimensions of emotions which are axis for comparing analogous emotions in different cultures. The authors employed qualitative methodology to identify the features of each axis. This yields a comprehensive qualitative portrait of all the dimensions of a particular emotion in different cultures. For instance, American anger is compared with its analog lung lang in Tibet. On the dimension of somatic experience, research reveals considerable overlap or similarity. Feelings of tension, anxiety, and heat were common to both cultures. However, affective phenomenology manifested significant qualitative differences. Americans were far more likely to experience anger lingering after the provocative event, whereas Tibetans were

likely to have dissipated lung lang and replaced it with dysphoric feelings such as shame, regret, and unhappiness. This undoubtedly stems from differences in another emotional dimension, “normative social appraisal”: Tibetans regard lung lang as morally bad and leading to bad karma, whereas Americans regard their anger as morally ambivalent, neutral, or natural. Americans frequently emphasized the positive aspects of anger such as giving people energy to respond to problems or injustice. The different social appraisals of anger and lung lang also were the likely root of differences in another dimension, “self-management.” Tibetans were likely to believe that anger could be controlled and prevented; Americans did not believe this was possible or desirable. Americans felt that anger is natural and should be expressed for the benefits it yields. Tibetans felt their emotion is harmful and so it can and should be controlled and prevented. This also explains why Tibetans were quick to forget about anger while Americans continued to experience and recall it.

This qualitative research reveals how an emotion is an integral complex of qualitatively congruent dimensions that have an internal logic.

These examples demonstrate how qualitative methods apprehend the rich cultural-psychological quality of psychological experience/states (see Ratner, 2011d for further discussion). Since the objective of psychological science is to thoroughly comprehend the full complexity of psychological phenomena, qualitative methods may be said to be objective. They are far more than suggestive, impressionistic “reportage;” rather, they are substantive, rigorous, rule-governed psychological descriptions.

“Thick” qualitative methodology and “rich” social science theory about culture and psychology, are cornerstones of cultural psychology. They provide invaluable material for cross-cultural psychologists to research.

References

- Berry, J.W., (1980). Introduction to methodology. In H.C. Triandis & J.W. Berry (Eds.), *Handbook of cross-cultural psychology: Vol. 2* (pp. 1-28). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bond, M. (2010). *The Oxford handbook of Chinese psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goh, E. & Kuczynski, L. (2009). Agency and power of single children in multi-generational families in urban Xiamen, China. *Culture & Psychology, 15*, 506-532.
- Hansen, M., & Svarverud, R. eds. (2009). *China: The rise of the individual in modern Chinese society*: Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Lee, D., Kleinman, J., & Kleinman, A. (2007). Rethinking depression: An ethnographic study of the experiences of depression among Chinese. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 15*, 1-8.
- Lim, R. (2006). *Clinical manual of cultural psychiatry*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Publishers.
- Ratner, C. (2011a). *Macro cultural psychology: A political philosophy of mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Ratner, C. (in press). Macro cultural psychology. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of culture and psychology* (ch. 10). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ratner, C. (in press). Cultural psychology. In Robert Rieber (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the history of psychological theories* (ch. 28). New York: Springer.
- Ratner, C. (in press). Review of Liamputtong, *Performing qualitative cross-cultural research*, and Matsumoto & Van de Vijver, *Cross-cultural research methods. Qualitative Research in Psychology*.
- Ratner, C. (2008). Cultural psychology and qualitative methodology: Scientific and political considerations. *Culture & Psychology, 14*, 259-288.
- Ratner, C. (1997). *Cultural psychology and qualitative methodology: Theoretical and empirical considerations*. New York: Plenum.
- Shweder, R., Haidt, J., Horton, R., & Joseph, C. (2008). The cultural psychology of emotions: Ancient and renewed. In M. Lewis, J. Haviland-Jones, & L. Barrett (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions, 3rd edition* (pp. 409-427). New York: Guilford Press
- Yan, Y. (2010). The Chinese path to individualization. *The British Journal of Sociology, 61*, 489-512.
- Yan, Y. (2009). *The individualization of Chinese society*. Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Yan, Y. (2000). The politics of consumerism in Chinese society. In T. White (Ed.), *China briefing, 2000: The continuing transformation* (pp. 159-193). Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Zhang, J., & Shavitt, S. (2003). Cultural values in advertisements to the Chinese X-Generation: Promoting modernity and individualism. *Journal of Advertising, 32*, 23-33.

Questions

- a) How can cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology be further integrated? What are specific congruities and complementarities between them?
- b) Are there incompatibilities between cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology?
- c) What are the intellectual roots of cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology?
- d) What are the congruities and complementarities between qualitative methodology and positivistic methodology?
- e) Are there incongruities between qualitative methodology and positivistic methodology?
- f) What are the intellectual roots of qualitative methodology and positivistic methodology?