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## Toward the Theoretical Constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology

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# Toward the Theoretical Constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology

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## Abstract

The core values of traditional Chinese Confucian culture such as “five virtues”, “five cardinal relationships”, and the thought of “golden mean” exert significant influence on East Asian culture, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultures. In recent years, with the rapid development of the studies of cultural psychology in East Asian cultural circles, it is necessary to conduct the theoretical constructs to integrate the common psychological characteristics in East Asian cultural circle. The theoretical constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology regard the impacts of traditional Confucian culture on East Asian culture and the individual as its core, and focus on self-construal, self-esteem, self-enhancement, collectivism, the differences of relationship and class, and the thinking of “golden mean” among the East Asians as the key constructs of the theoretical framework.

## Introduction

Good deals of research have been conducted comparing the West and the East in the field of cross-cultural psychology. So far studies of cross-cultural psychology mainly focused on the cultural differences between the East and the West and they found some cultural differences between the East and the West in several important aspects, such as individualism/collectivism (*e.g.*, Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995), cultural self-construal (*e.g.*, Markus & Kitayama, 1991), self-esteem (*e.g.*, Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), and self-enhancement (*e.g.*, Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin,

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2004). Chinese ancient traditional Confucian culture had a profound impact on the East Asian cultural circle. Currently, the study of cultural psychology in East Asian cultural circles has undergone rapid development and progress. Research of cultural psychology regarding East Asian Cultural circle lacks a theoretical framework and an integration of psychological features within the East Asian cultural circle in recent years. It is necessary to conduct further research on theoretical integration and constructs.

### **The core values and historical influences of Confucianism**

In the different levels of historical traditions, social cultures, and individuals, as the foundation of East Asian culture, traditional Chinese Confucian culture not only has a crucial impact on Chinese culture, but also has far-reaching influence on Japan, Korea, and other East Asian cultures. Countries in East Asia mainly take Confucianism as foundation to their culture, sharing similar socio-psychological features (*e.g.*, Huang, 2012). Confucianism, featured by “five virtues” (*wu chang*), “five cardinal relationships” (*wu lun*), and the thought of “golden mean (*zhong yong*)” originated from the Spring and Autumn Period (about 500 B.C.) in ancient China and representative figures were Confucius and Mencius. “Five virtues” stands for “benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), courtesy (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and trust (*xin*)”. “Benevolence” means kindness; “rightfulness” means dealing with problems properly; “courtesy” means normal guidelines of interpersonal relationships; “wisdom” means telling right from wrong; “trust” means honesty and trust (Confucian, 2008; Mencius, 2010). “Five cardinal relationships” refer to five important ethical relationships of parents-offspring, monarch-subjects, husband-wife, among siblings and among friends. Mencius held the view that there are blood relationships between parents and offspring, courtesy between monarch and subjects, love and division of labor between husbands and wives, and trust among friends. These are basic principles of interpersonal communication (Mencius, 2010). The thought of “golden mean” (the Doctrine of the Mean) means individuals should hold the attitude of moderation and avoid being extreme (Legge, 1991). “Five virtues” and “five cardinal relationships” of Confucianism emphasize the class of interpersonal relationships and harmonies. The thought of “golden mean” represents the ways of thinking and behavior to maintain harmonious relationships. From the Han Dynasty (around 200 B.C.), almost all Chinese emperors took Confucianism as national faith. Confucianism was the core value of the country and Chinese society. Confucianism was also seen as a symbol of Chinese traditional culture in the world.

For over two thousand years of the region’s history, the East Asian countries communicated in a dominance and submission relationship, which was characterized by inequalities among the countries. Before the 20th century, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were the “three pillars” of the structure of traditional Chinese culture with the Confucianism-centered Chinese culture occupying the dominant position in East Asia. Anchored in Confucianism, traditional Chinese culture exerted enormous influence on

most stratifications of East Asian society, including common people, intelligentsia, and government. From the Tang Dynasty (around 700 A.D.) in Chinese history, Japan began to study traditional Confucianism-centered Chinese culture. Korea's ancient emperors governed the country and the people in accordance with Confucian concepts. East Asian countries, mainly Japan and Korea, were the both learners and practitioners of Confucianism (*e.g.*, Huang, 2012). Besides, Confucian culture had a strong influence on local people's values, thinking, and living habits in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Vietnam, and other areas inhabited by Chinese. In modern times, Confucianism and Buddhism found their way to combine with Japanese Shinto religion and became an important part of Japanese indigenous culture (Gao, 2008). In post-20th century East Asia, China's dominant influence over the area has abated and is now shared with Japan's and the USA's influence on the culture.

### **The meaning of theoretical constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology**

Currently, the study of cultural psychology in East Asian cultural circles has undergone rapid development and progress. Because of these developments, it is necessary to conduct further research on theoretical integration and constructs. From the broad influence of traditional religions, the world cultures can be divided into several religious circles, which include the Christian and Confucian circles (*e.g.*, Yang, Huang, & Yang, 2008). In each circle, there is a dominant system of religious culture. In the Christian cultural circle Christianity dominates, and in East Asian Confucian cultural circle Confucianism dominates. Cultural psychological systems have been formed in each cultural circle accordingly. For example, in East Asian cultural circles, the East Asian cultural psychological system was mainly constructed on the foundational values found in Confucianism. There are four important meanings of the theoretical constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology.

First, it will help to strengthen the cohesion of core values of the East Asian culture. Because of the far-reaching impact of the Confucian culture, common features such as collectivism, interdependent self-construal, the differences of relationships in distance and grade, and the thinking of "golden mean" have been formed in the East Asian cultural circle. However, these features need to be integrated in a theoretical framework. Second, the theoretical constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology could enrich and perfect the psychological systems of all mankind in the worldwide context. From the macro-level, it is necessary to construct inherent and unique cultural psychological systems in every religious culture circle to develop a balancing human psychology (Yang *et al.*, 2008). Third, surrounding their definitions, connotations, and range of applications, some concepts such as "self-esteem" and "self" that originated from Western psychological theoretical systems, need to be redefined and reinterpreted in the East Asian Confucian cultural circle. Fourth, it helps to provide a perspective to solve the inherent problems and internal or external conflicts caused by the emphasis of stratification and relationships under the influence of traditional East Asian Confucian culture. Due to the

emphasis on the distance and grade of relationships, social injustice phenomena may happen, such as discrimination and relationalism. Based on the context of East Asian Cultural Psychology, the studies of social problems could provide feasible advice and suggestions to understand and solve inherent conflicts in East Asia.

## **The key concepts and theories of the constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology**

The theoretical constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology are derived from two kind of studies. One kind of research refers to the reflections of East Asian cultural psychological features in three levels, *i.e.* micro-level, individual level, and macro-level. Research at the micro-level using the methods of social cognitive neuroscience (*e.g.*, Harada, Li, & Chiao, 2010; Zhu, Zhang, Fan, & Han, 2007), at an individual level such as in the fields of personality psychology and clinical psychology (*e.g.*, Wang, 2012), and at a macro-level of East Asian culture (*e.g.*, Yamaguchi, 2003; Yang *et al.*, 2008) have a considerable accumulation of data. Other kind of research explores cross-cultural comparisons between the East and the West, common psychological features in the East Asian cultural circle, and differences of inherent psychological features among East Asian countries and regions. The theoretical constructs of East Asian Cultural Psychology supply a theoretical framework, focusing on cultural self-construal, self-esteem and self-enhancement, which are derived from theoretical systems of Western psychology, collectivism, the differences of relationships in distance and grade, and the thinking of “golden mean” of East Asians, which reflect the inherent psychological features of the East Asian culture.

### **Collectivism of East Asians**

Individualism/collectivism is an important distinction in cross-cultural psychology. Hofstede (1980) gained four dimensions of cultural comparison (individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity) from a survey of 66 nations. According to Hofstede (1980), individualistic cultures stress “I” consciousness. The core assumption in a culture like this is that individual is unique and independent of one another. In contrast, collectivistic cultures emphasize “we” consciousness. In a collectivistic culture, people are expected to be interdependent and to conform to the group’s norms and values. The core assumption in this culture is that groups bind and mutually obligate individuals.

Triandis (1995) further defined four attributes of individualism/collectivism, which are the definition of the self, personal goals, the emphasis on exchange or rationality, and the importance of attitudes and norms as determinants of social behavior. Moreover, Oyserman, Coon and Kimmelmeier (2002) pointed out that individualism has seven elements which are independent, goals, compete, unique, private, self-know, and direct communicate. Collectivism has eight elements which are related, belong, duty, harmony, advice, context, hierarchy, and group.

In contrast to the West's emphasis on individualism, collectivism plays a significant role in shaping East Asian cultures. This is due to the far-reaching influences of "five virtues" and "five cardinal relationships" on East Asian social culture. In general, East Asians address the concepts of family, relationship, authority, reputation, and group. The Chinese culture possesses each of these five features (*e.g.*, Yang & Lu, 2009). That the culture of East Asia is strongly influenced by collectivist ideas is substantiated by a lot of research (*e.g.*, Triandis, 1995).

### **The thinking of "golden mean" of East Asians**

The thought of the "golden mean" still significantly influences the cultures of East Asian countries nowadays. As a characteristic of thinking and cognition, modern Chinese show the thinking of "golden mean" which is the thinking patterns of paying attention to the interests of the whole, avoiding being extreme, and trying to keep balance, is derived from the thought of "golden mean" of ancient China (Yang, 2010; Yang & Lin, 2012). The thinking of "golden mean" means that someone needs to take account of interpersonal relationship and not go to extremes. The thinking of "golden mean" is displayed in three levels: a philosophy of life, event handling, and hindsight. The reflection of the thinking of "golden mean" in the level of the philosophy of life refers to concerning the overall situation, avoiding being extremes, taking harmony as important; the reflection in the level of event handling refers to holding a global view, selecting the perfect strategy to solve the problem, and not overdoing something when someone faces specific things; the reflection in the level of introspection after some specific event takes place means someone need to introspect whether being considerate enough to consider everyone's feeling or not, whether overdoing or doing insufficiently. The thinking of "golden mean" is the prevailing pattern of thinking in East Asian cultural circles (*e.g.*, Yamaguchi, 2003).

### **Cultural self-construal, self-esteem, and self-enhancement of East Asians**

Chang, Mak, Li, Wu, Chen and Lu (2011) pointed out that traditional values lead to East-West cultural differences such as the difference in self-construals from the viewpoint of evolutionary mechanisms. Due to the combined influences of traditional Confucian values including "five virtues", "five cardinal relationships", and the thought of "golden mean", which emphasizes the harmony of various ethical relationships, cultural self-construal of East Asians is the "interdependent self-construal", which focuses on interpersonal coordination. By contrast, Westerners hold the "independent self-construal", which focuses on individual independence. The patterns of construct of self between East and West are distinctively different (*e.g.*, Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The cross-cultural differences of self-construal are manifest in the fields of thinking, concepts of morality, cognition, and behaviors (*e.g.*, Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009). Cross, Bacon and Morris (2000) suggested that the "interdependent self-construal" can be divided further into two types: group-interdependent self-con-

strual and relational-interdependent self-construal (e.g., Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003). Group-interdependent self-construal means that the inclusions of important in-group or social roles occupy the very important position in interdependent self-construal; in contrast, relational-interdependent self-construal means that the inclusions of important individual relationship rather than in-group or social roles occupy the very crucial position in interdependent self-construal. Comparing with Japanese, it is likely that Chinese are considered to belong to the relational-interdependent self-construal in general (e.g., Yang *et al.*, 2008).

The cross-cultural differences of self-esteem between the East and the West are manifest in three aspects: inclusiveness, expressivity, and the root of self-esteem (e.g., Huang, 2012). In the aspect of inclusiveness, the range pertaining to the self-esteem of Easterners is larger or more inclusive than that of Westerners. While discussing the structure of Chinese self-esteem, Yang and Lu (2009) suggested that self-evaluations from others, relationships, reputation, authority, family, and group are also parts of the structure of Chinese self-esteem, besides individual self-esteem proposed by Rosenberg (1965). With regard to expressivity, Westerners are more direct in expressing of self-esteem, whereas Easterners are relatively more ambiguous when their self-esteem is expressed. In terms of its roots, the concept “self-esteem” is rooted in the West’s individualistic culture vis-à-vis the collectivist culture of East Asia.

Self-enhancement refers to psychological processes that protect or enhance an individual’s self-esteem. Self-enhancement of Westerners is more direct, explicit, and personal. However, the self-enhancement of East Asians such as Japanese and Chinese is more ambiguous, implicit, and is expressed through the interaction with families, friends, or groups they are from (e.g., Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Yamaguchi, 2003). A convincing interpretation of differences in self-enhancement patterns between East Asians and Westerners is from the viewpoint of the differences of cultures and self-construals between the East and the West. Individuals in individualistic culture who have an independent self-construal are likely to display self-enhancement in more direct ways; in contrast, individuals in collectivistic culture who have an interdependent self-construal tend to display self-enhancement in more indirect ways, since they consider relationships and interpersonal harmony.

### **The relationalism and hierarchical difference of East Asians**

There are two aspects of interpersonal relationships that East Asians emphasize: distance difference and hierarchical difference, which are strongly related to the traditional Confucian values. Fei (1992) described Chinese interpersonal relationships as “the differential mode of association” with a relatively static structure. “The differential mode of association” means that there is distance difference in Chinese interpersonal relationships which could be depicted by concentric circles. The concentric circles are self-centric. Concentric circles from self-center to the outside spread gradually from kinsfolk,

friends and acquaintances, and strangers, decreasing in interpersonal closeness with each of the outer circles. On the other hand, according to Aron's (1991, 1992) model of the self including the other, interpersonal relationships are relatively dynamic and fluid (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The degree of the self including others decreases when the individual becomes farther from the self; consequently, the closeness diminishes. Different from the model of the self including others, which views interpersonal relationships as dynamic and fluid from the viewpoint of intimacy, "the differential mode of association" catches the characteristic better that East Asians regard the interpersonal relationship as more stable. "The differential mode of association" exerts a significant influence on Chinese sense of ethical values, resource distribution model, and cognition (*e.g.*, Zhai, 2009).

The "human relationships and face" model, referring to the theoretical framework of Chinese interpersonal relationship proposed by Guangguo Huang (*e.g.*, Yang *et al.*, 2008), properly describes how the distance differences between relationships influence the corresponding explicit behavior. According to the model, when Chinese meet someone, Chinese first make judgments about the kinds of relationships between them, which results in corresponding different "communicating rules". Then the specific "communicating rules" determine corresponding different "explicit action" (Yang *et al.*, 2008). There are three types of interpersonal relationships in Chinese: emotional, instrumental, and mixed relationships. Corresponding objects are intimate others like parents, unfamiliar others like strangers, and friends or acquaintances, respectively. In the order of emotional, mixed, and instrumental relationships, interpersonal closeness or intimacy is decreasing successively. Individuals conduct three communication rules which correspond with different behaviors. In an emotional relationship, Chinese people obey rules of demand; which means they must respond to demands of any kind. In an instrumental relationship, individuals follow equity rules, which guide judgments and decisions in terms of equity and justice. Human-feeling rules are applicable to mixed relationships that include of both emotional and instrumental relationships, in which individuals make judgments and decisions concerning their friends' feelings. In addition, "benevolence, righteousness, and propriety" of Confucians' "five virtues" correspond to judgment of relationship, communicating rules, and explicit action, respectively. In other words, relationship judgment regarding the extent of emotional components within relationship is equivalent to "benevolence" in "five virtues", communication rule referring to righteousness of corresponding communication rule for a specific relationship is equivalent to "righteousness", and explicit action following corresponding communication rule for a specific relationship is equivalent to "propriety". This is the mind model of Confucianism (Yang *et al.*, 2008). Based on this model, the point of junction between the traditional Confucianism and modern Chinese psychological mechanism has been found. Similar to the Chinese culture, the patterns of the influences of distance differences in interpersonal relationship are also discussed in other cultures of East Asia

such as Japanese culture and Korean culture (e.g., Kashiwagi, Kitayama, & Azuma, 1997; Yamaguchi, 2003).

Due to the influence of “five cardinal relationships”, East Asians emphasize hierarchical relationships. Liu (2013) called the emphasis on hierarchical relationships, such as superior and subordinate in Chinese society, “hierarchical relationalism”. Apart from the hierarchical relationship between superior and subordinate, East Asians also pay attention to the hierarchical relationships that separate groups within East Asian society. In contrast to Western individualistic cultures, East Asians are more likely to view the relationalism and hierarchical difference as a natural thing. It can lead to inequality and discrimination.

### Conclusion

With the rapid development East Asian cultural psychological research, which is based on core values of traditional Confucian culture, the current study made an effort to construct an overall theoretical framework of East Asian Cultural Psychology. The influence of core values of traditional Confucianism on modern East Asians’ cultural psychological features is found in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*The influence of core values of traditional Confucianism on modern East Asians’ cultural psychological features*

Influences on modern East Asians’ cultural psychological features	Core values of Confucianism
	“Five virtues”
	“Five cardinal relationships”
	The thought of “golden mean”
Socioculture and individual	Collectivism
	“Relationalism”
	Difference of hierarchy
Cultural Self-construal	“Interdependent self-construal”
Thinking system	The thinking of “Golden mean”

However, in order to construct a theoretical framework of East Asian Cultural Psychology that is based on both sides of theoretical analyses and empirical evidences, focusing on the similarities and differences in various aspects such as self, self-esteem and self-enhancement, the thinking of “golden mean”, and differences of relationship in distance and hierarchy among subcultures in East Asia, we need further research on East Asian culture in both levels of theoretical and empirical studies.

Focusing on the topics in the area of the East Asian Cultural Psychology, there are

some research directions and possibilities which are very important for the construct of theoretical framework. Firstly, so far the studies of cultural psychological characteristic in East Asian cultural circles have undergone rapid development. It is necessary to conduct meta-analyses on existing empirical research regarding the East Asian cultural psychological characteristics, in order to find out the common features and differences among them further. Secondly, studies of East Asian Cultural Psychology in the future should pay more attention to the psychological characteristics of common people among East Asian countries and regions such as mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, South and North Korea, and other Asian countries or regions through empirical research on micro, individual, and macro level. Thirdly, we need to explore the origin of the common psychological characteristics of contemporary East Asian cultures in traditional Confucian ethics and values, and point out how the traditional Confucian ethics lead the psychological characteristics of contemporary people in East Asia. Fourthly, when conducting a cultural comparison study between the East and the West, it is necessary to take the entire East Asian region as a research unit, rather than a specific East Asian country or region as research unit. In order to meet this condition, research should involve samples of several East Asian countries and regions.

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