

## Chinese Positive Psychology Revisited

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### Abstract

This paper argues that since Chinese culture is complex and profound, an uncritical transplant of American positive psychology to Chinese soil may not be fruitful. It proposes that a more promising approach to Chinese Positive Psychology (CPP) calls for research programs that meet the needs of the Chinese people in their unique cultural and political context. More specifically, it first describes the defining characteristics of the Chinese culture and then outlines three related tracks of research: (1) Basic psychological research based on Chinese yin-yang dialectics, (2) the indigenous psychology movement, and (3) cross-cultural psychology research. This paper concludes that Wong's (2011) dialectical perspective of Positive Psychology 2.0 may provide a more culturally appropriate framework for a productive CPP and a hopeful future for China.

*Keywords:* Cross-cultural psychology, positive psychology, Chinese positive psychology, indigenous psychology, second wave positive psychology

### Introduction

Chinese Positive Psychology (CPP) has gained much momentum as a result of several current trends. First, China's recent unprecedented economic growth and political influence in the world has generated a great deal of interest in the psychology of the Chinese people (Bond, 2010). Second, the psychology department in Tsinghua University, re-established by Kaiping Peng, focuses on positive psychology (PP) (Kuhn, 2013). Third, three international PP conferences have been held in China. Finally, there is also a state-sponsored happiness campaign in China (J. Yang, 2014).

While Wong (2010) has affirmed the potential benefits of PP for China, he has also cautioned against the uncritical and wholesale transplant of American PP to Chinese soil for two main reasons. First, American PP has its own inherent limitations, as pointed out by various scholars (e.g., Chang, Downey, Hirsch, & Lin, 2016a; Chang, Downey, Hirsh, & Lin, 2016b; Wong, 2011). Second, what works in America might not work in China and vice versa; for PP to take root in China, it needs to be culturally sensitive.

In a similar vein, J. Yang (2014) has pointed out that millions of marginalized and displaced urban workers in China, resulting from national economic restructuring, do not have the necessary resources and skills to create their own jobs and reconstruct their own happiness. In other words, a state-sponsored happiness campaign that focuses on individual responsibility, without the government providing job opportunities and mental health services, may have the opposite effect of generating resentment towards the state.

A stronger case against the uncritical transplant of American PP is that PP is inherently culture-bound (Wong, 2013). What constitutes happiness or a good life depends on *a priori* value judgments based on cultural norms (Ho, Duan, & Tang, 2014; Lu, 2008, 2010). The experience of what is meaningful is also grounded in historical and cultural contexts (Zevnik, 2014). This

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article argues that a more fruitful approach to CPP is to develop research methodologies that are sensitive to traditional Chinese cultural values and to incorporate the best from Western psychology and Chinese indigenous psychology.

### Key Characteristics of Chinese Cultural Values

Culture is a multidimensional construct that encompasses people, history, geography, politics, customs, languages, and influential philosophies and religions. The accumulated wisdom from the historical lessons and teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism has laid the foundation for the Chinese mentality.

### Three Dominant Chinese Philosophies

**Confucianism.** Confucianism is most responsible for shaping the Chinese culture. Witnessing the decay of social order and the escalation of wars, Confucius sought to realize the ideal of social stability and world peace through the cultivation of individual virtues. Confucius taught that educated gentlemen should practice the following five virtues in order to live a happy and harmonious life: *Ren* (benevolence), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (propriety), *Zhi* (wisdom), and *Xin* (integrity). In sum, the good life consists of finding one's proper place in society and dutifully performing one's role according to the above five cardinal virtues. Such emphasis on collectivism may have been responsible for holding the country together throughout its long history.

**Taoism.** Taoism advocates the ideal of returning to the simple and natural way of life to cope with hardships and uncertainties. It was founded by Lao Tze and elaborated on by Zhung Tze. The word *Tao* literally means "the way" or "the way of nature"—the ultimate creative principle that gives birth to the universe and nourishes everything in the cosmos.

One of the profound insights of Lao Tze is the duality of nature. All things in nature exist in duality or dialectics. The two opposites complement each other and make each other's existence possible. Goodness does not exist without evil. Happiness does not exist without unhappiness. Lao Tze observed, "Fortune owes its existence to misfortune, and misfortune is hidden in fortune" (quoted by Chen, 2006, p. 92).

Taoism teaches contentment as a natural way of life. It teaches people not only how to be free from worries, but also how to achieve happiness even when problems are pervasive, chronic, or beyond one's control. Contentment leads to humble and selfless devotion to the well-being of humanity.

**Buddhism.** Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama, is a system of mental cultivation to achieve spiritual liberation from suffering through awakening the mind from delusion and greed. Mahayana Buddhism (literally, "Great Vehicle"), later developed in China, stresses the ideal of Bodhisattvas—enlightened individuals who are moved by compassion to save all sentient beings from suffering.

The basic tenets of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths:

1. The Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha*): Life is full of suffering.
2. The Truth of the Cause of Suffering (*Tanha*): Suffering comes from the craving for happiness and the aversion to pain.

3. The Truth of Liberation from Suffering (*Nirvana*): We can be liberated from suffering by transforming our craving and aversion through enlightenment.
4. The Truth of the Eightfold Path (*Magga*): Liberation through enlightenment can be achieved through the eightfold path; mindful meditation is one part of the eightfold path.

The above sketch of traditional Chinese cultural values presents a rather different view of the good life than that of American PP. The next section briefly discusses six cultural beliefs or worldviews which are rooted in the above values and national experiences.

### **Cultural Beliefs or Worldviews**

The following six cultural beliefs are dominant in the Chinese way of thinking: uncontrollability of the world, ubiquity of change, fatalism, duality of nature, collectivism, and utility of effort.

**Uncontrollability of the world.** People perceive the external world as largely beyond their control. Individuals are not able to prevent or control powerful cosmic, natural, and political forces that impact their lives.

**Ubiquity of change.** Since individuals have little or no control over most events and situations in their lives, they have no way to predict how life will turn out. The vast sweep of Chinese history further reinforces the perception that everything is in flux and life is often characterized by reversals of fortune.

**Fatalism.** Spiritual and cosmic forces decide the fate of individuals and their daily affairs. Since the world is uncontrollable and unpredictable from the perspective of individuals, belief in fatalism seems to be inevitable. One benefit of a belief in fatalism is that unexplainable adversities become more bearable. When one attributes suffering to karma, fate, or bad luck, one is liberated from the bondage of shame, guilt, or anger.

**Duality of nature.** Emphasized by Taoism, the belief in duality recognizes the co-existence of opposites. The yin-yang symbol best expresses the dynamic balance between opposites in human nature as well as in the human condition. Such dualistic and dialectical thinking enables the Chinese to accommodate contradicting ideas and seek compromise. It also enables them to be tolerant of misfortunes, which may be blessings in disguise.

**Collectivism.** Crowdedness and the enormity of life's problems make it necessary for the Chinese people to learn how to get along with each other and how to work together to find solutions. Confucianism has also instilled the imperative of collectivist beliefs into the Chinese mindset. Loyalty to family and friends is highly valued. While expression of gratitude is considered by American PP as an exercise to increase individual happiness, it is considered by CPP as essential for maintaining good relationships. Collective coping (Wong, 1993), which is commonly practiced in China, also stems from the culture of collectivism.

**Utility of effort.** If the first five cultural beliefs make the Chinese people feel helpless and powerless as individuals, belief in the utility of effort reminds them of their personal responsibility to do their very best in areas where they can exercise some control. The utility of effort includes work ethic (being studious and conscientious), self-cultivation efforts (cultivating

and accumulating various virtues), and relational efforts (filial piety, loyalty towards friends, respect for authority, and harmony within the group). Their dialectical thinking allows the Chinese people to simultaneously have two contradictory beliefs: (1) leave everything to fate and heaven, and (2) sincere determination can defeat fate.

Combinations of the above traditional Chinese worldviews have served the Chinese people well in maintaining 5,000 years of uninterrupted existence as a sovereign country, as well as in the prosperity of overseas Chinese around the globe. These worldviews should inform the development of a scientific CPP. It would be a shame for China to import American PP at the expense of its own rich cultural tradition.

### **Basic Psychological Research from a Chinese Perspective**

The above traditional Chinese worldviews have already had considerable impact on research in mainstream psychology. Peng and Nisbett (1999) showed that Chinese thinking is dialectical rather than logical. Similarly, the wisdom of yin-yang dialectics has informed most of Wong's research relevant to CPP.

Wong and Sproule (1984) argued that the Chinese people can hold an external and internal locus of control simultaneously. Therefore, their locus of control beliefs can only be measured by a two-dimensional space with external and internal locus of control as two independent scales. Such dialectical thinking poses a challenge to any psychological measure that depends solely on unidimensional rating scales.

According to the same dialectical thinking, pessimism and optimism can co-exist, resulting in tragic optimism (Wong, 2009). Death fear and death acceptance can co-exist, resulting in the multidimensional Death Attitude Profile (DAP-R; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). Resources and deficits can co-exist, as conceptualized in the Resource-Congruence Model (Wong, 1993). Thus, the family can be a resource for coping, but intra-family conflict can also be a deficit or stressor (Wong & Ujimoto, 1998).

The same kind of dialectical reasoning is also behind Wong's (2011) development of second wave PP (PP 2.0), which posits that every positive emotion or experience has its downside, and every negative emotion or experience has its upside. PP 2.0 provides a dialectical, balanced, and cross-cultural perspective—a blueprint more relevant to the Chinese culture. More recently, Wong's Dual-Systems Model (Wong, 2012) spells out the mechanisms whereby the good life can be achieved, not by accentuating the positive and avoiding the negative, but by embracing and integrating both positive and negative experiences.

### **Indigenous Chinese Positive Psychology**

On the basis of the above Chinese worldviews and values, it seems natural that CPP would follow a different direction than American PP. Thus, balance and moderation are more valued than achieving optimal levels of individual functioning and happiness. Group harmony is considered more important than individual success. Contentment is the key to lasting happiness. The ideal life, according to the average Chinese person down through the years, is to live a simple life in peace and harmony with family members and neighbours.

K. Yang (1988) and Ho (1996, 1998) identified the Confucius value of filial piety as the foundation for virtue, well-being, and social harmony in China. More recently, Hwang's (2011,

2012) research on Confucian relationalism captures the essence of the relational self and ethical responsibility in the Chinese mentality.

Sundararajan (2014), another leader in indigenous psychology, critiques American PP from a Confucian perspective. She argues that in the Chinese cultural context, negative emotions can serve as a motivational force toward the enhancement of empathy and the pursuit of virtue. Thus, in certain situations, reflection on one's negative emotions can result in more positive outcomes than focusing only on positive emotions.

### **The Cross-Cultural Psychology Approach to Chinese Positive Psychology**

Cross-cultural research is interested in discovering both the universal principles (etic) and culture-specific aspects (emic) of behaviour. The dominant methodologies in cross-cultural research have been critically evaluated (Sue & Sue, 1987; Zane & Sue, 1986). The assumption of universality in the constructs and assessment instruments of mainstream American psychology has been questioned. Triandis (1972) called such an ethnocentric approach 'pseudo-etic' rather than etic because it imposes the categories of Western culture (which is emic rather than etic) on other cultures. Such criticism is especially valid with respect to CPP.

Cross-cultural research needs to be more balanced and more sensitive to emic differences in non-Western cultures. For example, Wong and Reker (1985) found that, compared to Anglos, Chinese elderly people used qualitatively different coping strategies and experienced lower psychological well-being. Yang and Bond (1990) conducted research on implicit personality theories with indigenous or imported constructs in a Chinese sample. In a multi-national, cross-cultural research project, Lun and Bond (2013) employed different measures of religion and spirituality in different national contexts. Their research represents a significant improvement in cross-cultural research, as compared to using different translations of the same American constructs and measures in different nations.

### **Conclusion**

The above review argues that while scientific research based on the positivist paradigm helps unpack the mysteries of happiness and well-being in the Euro-American context, such findings may not fit in the unique cultural and political context of China. The three related tracks of research indicate that traditional Chinese cultural beliefs have great potential to influence CPP as well as mainstream psychology. In addition to individual research programs, we may benefit from a national research agenda that systematically investigates indigenous Chinese worldviews, values, and practices that best serve the Chinese people and their national interest. Wong's (2011) dialectical PP 2.0 may provide a culturally appropriate conceptual framework for a more productive CPP and a more hopeful future for China.

Beyond its benefits for a better China, CPP is important because it complements Western PP with its emphasis on yin-yang dialectics and its uniquely Eastern yin approach to coping and flourishing. A global PP needs to incorporate both Eastern and Western approaches.

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