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COLLECTIVISM OR INDIVIDUALISM?

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ABSTRACT

One of the significant features of the national culture of the Chinese in China and other Chinese-majority societies is "collectivism" or "low individualism" (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Hofstede, 1993). Does it imply that the Chinese at work are collective subjects, with "group orientation"? Different people may have different views on this question. This paper challenges such popular assumptions about Chinese work behavior of "collectivism". Drawing on studies from P.R.C., Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, it questions whether the logic of Chinese Confucian collectivism, prevailing in traditional Chinese family, still applies in today's work organization. Based on the studies of collectivism and individualism in Chinese-majority societies, the controversial issue of collectivism is discussed, and implications for future studies of collectivism and individualism are also derived.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1978, economic reforms in China allow the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs) and a series of policy to attract foreign direct investment. Since then, the PRC is viewed as an international management site for studying. One of the advantage is that there are a number of "predominantly Chinese" societies (such as PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore,) as well Chinese communities all over the world, researchers studying management in the PRC can make comparisons of political and economic variables in which the impact of culture is controlled (Shenkar, 1994). It means that China presents us with research opportunities for examining the universality of the Western-developed theories and research instruments.

One way of examining organizational behavior across cultures and explaining the differences that exist is to look at important dimensions of culture. One of the significant features of the national culture of the Chinese in China and other Chinese-majority societies is "collectivism" or "low individualism" (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Hofstede, 1993). Does it imply that the Chinese at work are collective subjects, with "group orientation"? Different people may have different views to this question. This paper challenges such popular assumptions about Chinese work behavior of "collectivism". Draw on studies from P.R.C., Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, it questions whether the logic of Chinese Confucian collectivism, prevailing in traditional Chinese family, still applies in today's work organization. The aim of the paper is to investigate why there are such inconsistent research findings and contradictory views and what are its implications. Hence, a cluster of relevant questions will be examined in this paper, including the followings:

(1)   Are Chinese societies "collectivist" or "individualist"?

(2)   Suppose there is "collectivism" among Chinese, then what are the causes, forms and characteristics of such "collectivism"? Are there any differences between the "collectivism" among Chinese and that in other countries?

(3)   What are the significance and implications of the "collectivism" and "individualism" among Chinese to the study of group culture of organization in China and in other countries?

(4)   How might we establish greater conceptual clarity by distinguishing different types of collectivism, which may different from one another and from individualism?

INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM

Hofstede (1991, P.5) defined "culture" as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from those of another. In a huge study involving 116,000 respondents, Hofstede (1980) found highly significant differences in the behavior and attitudes of IBM employees from seventy countries. Since all his data were collected from one company, the study has been criticized for not being representative of the different countries. Since the cultural influences on management are clearly recognizable at the national level, Hofstede had identified four dimensions of national culture (Hofstede, 1980): power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity.

The dimension of collectivism-individualism is one of the major cultural variabilities discussed by theorists across disciplines (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Hui and Triandis, 1986; Triandis, 1986). It has been widely used in behavioral studies in different contexts and in different countries (e.g., Dyne et al., 2000; Gelfand and Realo, 1999; Ramamoorthy and Carroll, 1998). According to Hofstede (1994), "individualism" is the degree to which people in a country prefer to act as individuals rather then as members of groups. The opposite of individualism is "collectivism". In collectivist societies, a child learns to respect the group to which it belongs, usually the family, and to differentiate between in-group members and out-group members (that is, all other people). When children grow up they remain members of their group, and they expect the group to protect them when they are in trouble. In return, they have to remain loyal to their group throughout life. In individualist societies, a child learns very early to think of itself as "I" instead of as part of "we". It expects one day to have to stand on its own feet and not get protection from its group anymore; and therefore it also does not feel a need for strong loyalty (Hofstede, 1994).

For many years, the Chinese-majority society like PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore were classified by Hofstede as "low individualism" or "collectivism" (see Table 1 and Table 2), and had a relatively high degree of collectivism.   However, inconsistent research findings and

contradictory views regarding the "collectivism" and "individualism" of the Chinese at work have been found. These will be discussed below.


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STUDIES OF COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM
IN CHINESE-MAJORITY SOCIETIES

Many research findings confirm that the Chinese are collective subjects, with the characteristics of "group orientation". For instance, Chinese-majority society has been found with the characteristics of collectivism (Hofstede, 1984). Leung and Bond (1984) also found that the concern of collective Chinese subjects was more oriented toward enhancing in-group harmony. Besides, group orientation is considered as a key feature of Chinese culture, and is common to the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas Chinese (Lockett, 1988). One of the implications of the group orientation of Chinese is that the cultural assumptions of Western management theories become less applicable to Chinese organizations. For instance, Redding (1980) reported research findings from Hong Kong managers of higher scores for "social needs". Nevis (1983) also proposed for a "Chinese hierarchy of needs" in which "self-actualization in the service of society" replaced Maslow's individually-defined need for "self-actualization." In addition, basing on the scores of low individualism of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, China is also estimated to be country of low individualism (see Table 1 and 2). Hence, most of the studies of individualism-collectivism have classified the Chinese-majority societies as collectivist societies, and the Chinese at work are assumed to be collective subjects with the characteristics of high collectivism (Earley, 1989; Earley, 1994).

Table 3 shows the major studies of collectivism and individualism in Chinese-majority societies. Inconsistent and contradictory research findings of individualism-collectivism have been found in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. For instance, empirical evidence of the Hong Kong Chinese altruistic and individualistic attitude toward their work, occupation and organization (Ng, 1975; Ng, 1983) has been found. Besides, the individual conflict of Hong Kong Chinese is observed to be more significant and notable than collective conflict (Wong, 1990). In addition, the managerial values of young managers in PRC are also changing. For instance, Birnbaum-More, Wong and Olve (1995) found that the acquisition of individualism of younger managerial trainees was higher in the PRC than in Hong Kong. And a growing spirit of "Chinese-style" individualism is noted and more Western ways of thinking are being adopted by young Chinese managers in PRC (Ralston, Gustafson, Terpstra and Holt, 1995).

Insert Table 3 about here

Even though both the Chinese and Japanese have been classified as collective subjects (see Table 2), differences in factors that make up the individualism value dimensions of Singaporean Chinese and Japanese managers have been found, and the differences in work values between them have be explained by both cultural and national factors (Chew and Puttic, 1995). Another study also shows that although the Chinese in Taiwan are in favour of collectivism, they do not carry their loyalty to their workplace (Yeh, 1988a and 1988b). This implies that there are differences between the "collectivism" among Chinese and that in other countries.

THE CHINESE AT WORK: COLLECTIVISM OR INDIVIDUALISM?

The inconsistent findings of both collectivism and individualism in Chinese-majority societies show that the popular assumptions about Chinese work behavior of "collectivism" is controversial. But most of the previous studies just accept such assumptions without questioning. The discussion below attempts to investigate the underlying reasons for the inconsistent findings of collectivism. Some implications for further researches are also derived.

The Traditional Chinese Culture and Collectivism of Chinese

The Chinese have a cultural history which dates back for more than four thousand years. The cultural values still have certain impacts to the behavior of today's Chinese. For instance, Lockett (1988) suggests that four key elements can be identified to be common in the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and probably among overseas Chinese. The four elements are respect for age and hierarchical position, group orientation, concept of face and importance of relationships. Tan (1990) had also identified some significant values in Chinese culture, including the importance of the family or kinship groups, respects for elders, obligations toward friends and relatives, the avoidance of conflict, the need for harmony and the concept of face. Some of these values can be used to explain the "collectivism" of traditional Chinese. For instance, in a Chinese society, relationships begin with the immediate family as an in-group and are then radiated to the extended family and village. In such a collectivist society, an honor bestowed upon a family member is shared by the family and beyond. Due to the obligations towards relatives, it is common for relatives brought in to help in various positions in a family owned business. It can be seen that most early studies of individualism-collectivism of Chinese basing on the cultural explanation tend to agree or conclude that the Chinese are collective subjects with the group orientation (Hofstede, 1984; Leung and Bond, 1984; Shenkar and Ronen, 1987; Lockett, 1988). However, the findings of Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung and Terpstra (1993) indicate that often times both culture and the business environment interact to create a unique set of managerial values in a country. It suggests that for studying the Chinese behavior in workplace, the factor of business environment should not be neglected.

The "Passive Fatalism" of the Chinese

Ng (1990) suggested the concept of "passive fatalism" as an explanation of the apparent collectivist orientation of the Chinese. Basing on the evidence from P.R.C., Hong Kong, and Taiwan, Ng suggested a psychological adaptability of the Chinese toward reforms initiated and directed from above at work. He argued that the quiescent readiness of the workers to reconcile themselves with authority does not represent a group spirit of teamwork. Rather, he suggested that the psychology of "passive fatalism" is rooted in the religious values of Buddhism and Taoism. Ng (1990) also argued that the work altruism of the Chinese does not imply an unquestioned and total readiness to sacrifice for the collective good of the enterprise or a cultural preference for team and group, as in the case of Japanese workers. The concept of "passive fatalism" can help explain the co-existence of collectivist orientation and individualistic orientation of the Chinese in workplace to a certain extent. However, it has not yet specified under what circumstances will the Chinese behave as collective subjects or individual subjects.

Vertical Collectivism and Horizontal Collectivism of Chinese

There are four kinds of self: independent or interdependent (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) and same or different. The combinations of these four types can be categorized as horizontal individualism (independent/same) and horizontal collectivism (interdependent/same), vertical individualism (independent/different) and vertical collectivism (interdependent/different).

These horizontal and vertical dimensions of individualism and collectivism help us have a better understanding of the Chinese "collectivism". For example, Chen and Meindl (submitted) found that Chinese who were vertical collectivists supported reforms introduced by the Communist party, whereas the horizontal collectivists were opposed to these reforms. It should be noted that the horizontals have fundamentally Confucian values of cohesion and thus consider the reforms as weakening solidarity. In addition, horizontal collectivism was found correlated -.13 ($p< .05$) with preference for differential rules for composition in an organization. It implies that the study of collectivism of Chinese in Chinese-majority societies is needed carefully divided into vertical collectivism and horizontal collectivism.

Chinese Collectivism and Japanese Collectivism

Hofstede have classified both China and Japan as collectivistic societies in most of his studies (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Hofstede, 1993). It should be noted that the collectivism of Chinese and collectivism of Japanese may probably be different in certain aspects. For instance, Yeh (1988) has criticized that Hofstede's analysis of Chinese and Japanese values is inadequate because Japanese and Chinese may either have different interpretations of the same value scale. One of the differences is that Chinese will show loyalty to their families but not to non-family organization. On the contrary, the Japanese have no difficulty in shifting their loyalties from family to working institutions. Yeh (1988) also concluded that for a societal or a firm's perspective, the Chinese are very individualistic, which is in contrast to Hofstede's findings for Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Chew and Putti (1995) also raise the question of whether individualism-collectivism dimension can be interpreted in the same way across cultures, because they find that the collectivistic nature of the Chinese in Singapore is reflected in loyalty toward the family whereas the Japanese reflect a higher allegiance to the workplace. In studying three collectivist nations, Japan, India and Iran, Tayeb (1994) found that only in Japan where the collectivism of Japanese has been carried over into its companies. It has a clear implication that the construct of individualism-collectivism is needed to be further divided into individualism-collectivism in family and individualism-collectivism in workplace.

Changing Patterns of Individualism in China

In the past, Chinese and Japanese peoples are characterized by collectivism; and the British and Americans are characterized by individualism (Hofstede, 1980; Bond and Hwang, 1986; Tayeb, 1988). But, there are changing patterns of individualism and collectivism in some of these countries. For instance, social changes in the United States and Japan have changed the nature of the individualism-collectivism dimension in the American and Japanese cultures (Matsumoto, Kudoh and Takeuchi, 1996). By using a nationwide longitudinal survey, Ishii-Kuntz (1989) also reported a trend toward more individualistic attitudes among the Japanese.

It is noted that also changing values of Chinese managers in China in recent years. For instance, after examining there is the apparent evolution in work values among young Chinese managers in Shanghai over a 2½- year period, Ralston et al. (1995) suggested a growing spirit of "Chinese -style" individualism and more Western ways of thinking are being adopted by these young Chinese managers in China. Birnbaum-More et al. (1995) also found that younger PRC managerial trainees who had values that were closet to those of Hong Kong managers of all ages, and the acquisition of individualism was even higher in the PRC than in Hong Kong. Hence, it is reasonable to challenge the stereotypic notion of collectivism among the Chinese today.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Most Western studies on Chinese culture have accepted the stereotypic notion of collectivism of the Chinese (Hofstede, 1984; Leung and Bond, 1984; Shenkar and Ronen, 1987). This paper challenges such popular assumptions about Chinese work behavior of "collectivism". Based on the studies of collectivism and individualism in Chinese-majority societies, the controversial issue of collectivism is examined and discussed.

As a conclusion, we have to acknowledge that the traditional Chinese culture has its impact on the development of collectivism among Chinese. But the Chinese collectivism is mainly reflected in loyalty towards the family whereas the Japanese can reflect a high allegiance to the workplace. Besides, the study of Chinese collectivism should be categorized into the dimensions of vertical collectivism and horizontal collectivism in different Chinese-majority societies.

With a population of about 1.2 billion inhabitants in the People's Republic of China together with the great number of Chinese scattered in other Chinese-majority societies, the study of collectivism and individualism of Chinese is significant and has the following implications. Firstly, it is too simplistic to accept the popular assumptions of Chinese work behavior of collectivism. Further and in-depth study of the "apparent collectivism" of the Chinese at work is needed. Secondly, it is suggested to redefine and modify Hofstede's construct of individualism-collectivism by incorporating the vertical and horizontal dimensions (Singelis et al., 1995). It is also proposed to divide the construct of individualism-collectivism into behavior in family and behavior in workplace. The impact

of Chinese culture on Chinese collectivism in family have been emphasized in the past, future researches should be devoted to examine the effect of reward systems or reward allocations on the Chinese individualism and collectivism in workplace. The studies can be conducted by comparing samples taken in China and samples taken from other Chinese-majority societies, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Finally, due to the changing patterns of collectivism and individualism in some countries, it is meaningful to note the impact of industrialization on the managerial value and growing spirit of "Chinese-style" individualism in the new generation of modern Chinese.

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Table 1

Scores on Five Dimensions for Chinese-majority Societies
in IBM's International Employee Attitude Survey

Country	Power Distance		Individualism		Masculinity		Uncertainty Avoidance		Confucian Dynamism	
	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank
Hong Kong	68	15-16	25	37	57	18-19	29	49-50	96	1
Singapore	74	13	20	39-41	48	28	8	53	48	8
Taiwan	58	29-30	17	44	45	32-33	69	26	87	2

Rank Numbers: 1 = Highest; 53 = Lowest (For Confucian Dynamism; 20 = Lowest)

Source: Adapted from Hofstede and Bond, 1988, p.12-13.

Table 2

Culture Dimension Scores for Ten Countries

PD=Power Distance; ID=Individualism; MA=Masculinity; UA=Uncertainty Avoidance;
LT=Long Term Orientation
H=top third, M=medium third, L=bottom third (among 53 countries and regions for
the first four dimensions; among 23 countries for the fifth)

	PD	ID	MA	UA	LT
USA	40L	91H	62H	46L	29L
Germany	35L	67H	66H	65H	31M
Japan	54M	46M	95H	92H	80H
France	68H	71H	43M	86H	30*L
Netherlands	38L	80H	14L	53M	44M
Hong Kong	68H	25L	57H	29L	96H
Indonesia	78H	14L	46M	48L	25*L
West Africa	77H	20L	46M	54M	16L
Russia	95*H	50*M	40*L	90*H	10*L
China	80*H	20*L	50*M	60*M	118H

* estimated

Source: Hofstede, 1993, p.91.

Table 3

**Major Studies of Collectivism and Individualism in
Chinese-majority Societies**

CHINESE-MAJORITY SOCIETIES

Hofstede (1984)   -   Chinese-majority societies are characterized by collectivism.

Lockett (1988)   -   Group orientation is a key feature of Chinese culture, and is common to PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas Chinese.

CHINA

Nevis (1983)   -   "Chinese hierarchy of needs" in which "self-actualization in the service of society" in China replaces Maslow's individually - defined need for "self-actualization".

Leung and Bond (1984)   -   Collective Chinese subjects were more oriented toward enhancing in-group harmony.

Shenkar and Ronen (1987) -   Mainland Chinese perceived that achievement of efficiency was significantly associated with team effort.

Ralston, Gustafson,   -   A growing spirit of "Chinese-style" individualism and more
  Terpstra and Holt (1995)   Western ways of thinking are being adopted by young Chinese managers.

Birnbaum-More, Wong   -   Support for the converge theory proposition that managerial
  and Olve (1995)   values converge with increased industrialism. The analysis reveals that younger PRC managerial trainees had values closest to those of Hong Kong managers of all ages, and the acquisition of individualism was higher in the PRC than in Hong Kong.

HONG KONG

Ng (1975)   -   Individualistic orientation of Hong Kong Chinese in job expectations and career consciousness.

Redding (1980)   -   Hong Kong managers had higher scores for "social needs".

Ng (1983)	-	Empirical evidence of the Hong Kong Chinese altruistic and individualistic attitude toward their work, occupation and organization.
Wong (1990)	-	Individual conflict of Hong Kong Chinese is more significant and notable than collective conflict.
Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung and Terpstra (1993)	-	The study of differences in managerial values of U.S., Hong Kong and PRC managers indicates that often times both culture and the business environment interact to create a unique set of managerial values in a country.

TAIWAN

| Yeh (1988a, 1988b) | - | Chinese in Taiwan were more in favour of collectivism than the Japanese expatriates, but the Chinese do not carry their loyalty to their work place. |
| McGrath, MacMillan, Yang and Tsai (1992) | - | Survey responses from entrepreneurs in PRC, Taiwan and US suggest that value structures related to individualism - collectivism and to attitudes toward the role of work appear to be much more enduring than power distance and uncertainty avoidance. |

SINGAPORE

| Harrison, Mckinnon, Panchapakesan and Leung (1994) | - | The cultural values of east Asian society, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, are associated with a greater emphasis on group-centered decision-making. |
| Chew and Puttic (1995) | - | Differences in factors that make up the individualism value dimensions of Singaporean Chinese and Japanese managers, the differences in work values between are explained by cultural and national factors. |