

## CHAPTER 15

# Beliefs in Chinese culture

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In the previous edition of *The Oxford handbook of Chinese psychology*, I presented a review of the literature on beliefs among the Chinese people. The study of beliefs is important because in addition to values, norms, and personality, beliefs are a major antecedent of social behaviors (Bond, 2009). This chapter provides an update of the earlier chapter by integrating research that has emerged thereafter. The two major objectives of the current review are to consolidate what we know about beliefs in Chinese culture, and to identify fruitful directions for future research on this important topic. As in the earlier review, I exclude personality traits, because they typically contain some beliefs mixed together with other constructs. Readers interested in this topic are referred to the relevant chapter in the present handbook by Cheung, Zhang, and Cheung, as well as elsewhere (McCrae, Costa, & Yik, 1996; Yang, 1986).

### A typology of beliefs

Following Katz (1960) and Bar-Tal (1990), beliefs are concerned with propositions about an object or a relation between objects or concepts. The proposition can be causal or correlational, and may involve any content. A belief can be judged with regard to its likelihood of being true or correct. We note that beliefs are different from values, because values typically refer to the importance or desirability of a construct (e.g. peace is important or good). Beliefs are different from norms because norms refer to a preferred mode of behavior or action (e.g. you should work hard). An example of a belief is: 'Working hard leads to success.' Note that the importance or desirability of 'hard work' represents a value, and the statement 'you should work hard' refers to a norm; a belief is conceptually different.

Schwartz (1992) has argued that values function to help individuals meet three universal requirements of human existence: needs of the individual, needs for coordinated social interaction, and needs for the survival and well-being of the group. Leung and Bond (1992) proposed that this functional framework is applicable to beliefs, in that beliefs also function to help individuals meet these three requirements of human existence. Following this functionalist framework, beliefs can be classified into three major types based on their functional domain. Psychological beliefs are concerned with the characteristics of individuals; social beliefs are concerned with the beliefs about social interactions and social groups; and environmental beliefs are concerned with the beliefs about the physical world or supernatural context. These beliefs are assumed to help individuals interact effectively with other people and thrive in their physical and social environment across the lifespan. In the following review, salient beliefs in Chinese societies are organized by these three major types of belief.

### Chinese traditional beliefs

Chinese culture is rich in the variety and quantity of traditional beliefs because of its long history, but few of these rich belief constellations have been explored by psychologists. For the sake of

comprehensiveness, a few major traditional beliefs deemed important for future psychological research are briefly reviewed in the following.

### Psychological beliefs

The assumption in Confucianism that individuals are basically benevolent (Chien, 1979) has exercised a major impact on the social practices and structures of Chinese societies. For instance, the Confucian emphasis on education regardless of social class and background reflects the basic belief that all individuals have the potential to be developed. The emphasis on effort by Chinese, which will be discussed in a subsequent section, is related to the Confucian belief of self-cultivation and self-perfection. The Taoist belief of following the way of nature as ideal may be related to optimism and coping behaviors (see Cheng, Lo, & Chio, this volume).

The Buddhist belief that desires are root causes of unhappiness may be related to self-management and anti-materialism, which may have important implications for psychotherapy (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006; see also Liu & Leung, this volume). Interestingly, Tsai, Knutson, and Fung (2006) found that Chinese valued low-arousal affect (e.g. calm) more than Americans, and this difference may be linked to Buddhist beliefs (Tsai, Miao, & Seppala, 2007). There is not much psychological research on Chinese traditional belief systems, and more work is needed to probe how they are related to the social behaviors of Chinese people.

### Social beliefs

In Confucian thought, individuals are believed to have the ability to cultivate their morality and self-control. The social and political organization of traditional Chinese societies is primarily based on this belief, which emphasizes individual morality and diminishes the role of legal regulations (Pye, 1984). This belief in individual morality is often invoked to account for the lack of a systematic, objective legal system in traditional Chinese societies (Ju, 1947). In fact, Chinese traditionally resist rigid rules and prefer flexibility in their social life. For instance, Pugh and Redding (1985) found that firms in Hong Kong were less likely to use rules and procedures to regulate work behavior than British firms. Jiang, Lambert, and Wang (2007) found that Chinese university students who endorsed a Confucian belief concerning law and punishment with its emphasis on individual exercise of self-control, were favorable towards informal means for social and crime control. The belief in the capacity for individual morality may also explain why Chinese authority figures tend to resist objective systems for monitoring their own behavior and performance (Bond & Hwang, 1986). Such monitoring is often seen as an affront to their moral face and trustworthiness.

The Taoist belief of following the way of nature has implications for social interaction as well. One interesting consequence of this philosophical orientation is that rules and the notion of morality are de-emphasized (Sun, 1991), which in fact contradicts Confucianism. In Taoist thought, the most effective government governs through *wu wei* (non-action) (Pye, 1984). A better understanding of this belief may shed light on political and managerial behaviors in Chinese societies. Chinese people are jointly influenced by Taoism and Confucianism, and we do not know much about how the interplay of these two traditional thoughts influences work and political behaviors of Chinese people.

### Environmental beliefs

*Feng shui*, which refers to the influence on people exercised by the relative position of buildings and furniture in relation to each other and in relation to the physical environment, is a complex of supernatural beliefs widely shared by traditional as well as modern Chinese (Pye, 1984). To avoid bad luck and to enhance good luck, some people hire *feng shui* masters to advise them on decorating homes, shops, factories, and offices. Some research has been conducted on this centuries-old Chinese belief. Masuda and Nisbett (2001) have argued that the holistic thinking style of East Asians as opposed to the analytical thinking style of Westerners is related to the popularity of *feng shui* beliefs in East Asia,

a belief system which emphasizes the importance of the context. Tsang (2004) found that paying attention to *feng shui* helps Chinese business people to cope with the anxiety associated with uncertainty. *Feng shui* masters actually offer more than *feng shui* advice to their clients, and may also play the roles of consultant and counsellor.

However, *feng shui* beliefs may be fading among young Chinese, as Lee and Bishop (2001) found that Chinese Singaporeans endorsed *feng shui* beliefs only to a limited extent in terms of etiology and treatment of psychological problems. Lee and Bishop (2001) attributed their findings to the dominance of English-language education in Singapore. Studies of the modernization process may help illuminate the distribution of these beliefs across time and demographics in Chinese societies (see e.g. Yang, 1996). The beliefs reviewed above have not received much attention from psychologists, but they probably have important implications for the behavior of Chinese and should definitely be explored in future research. In the following, beliefs that have received more empirical attention are reviewed.

## Psychological beliefs

### Locus of control

Locus of control is a widely researched belief complex in Chinese societies. Internal control refers to the belief that reinforcements are under the control of the individuals, whereas external control refers to the belief that reinforcements are under the control of external forces, such as fate, luck, or chance (Rotter, 1966). Because of the collectivistic orientation and the Confucianist/Buddhist/Taoist traditions of Chinese people, it is widely accepted that Chinese possess a stronger belief in external control than do Westerners (e.g. Bond, 1986). However a careful review of the literature suggests that this conclusion is an over-simplification.

Several studies support the widespread belief that Chinese are more external than Westerners. Based on Rotter's Internal-External Control of Reinforcement Scale (I-E scale), Hsieh, Shybut, and Lots of (1969) found that Hong Kong Chinese were more external than American-born Chinese, who in turn were more external than Anglo-Americans. Hamid (1994) found that university students in Hong Kong were more external than their counterparts in New Zealand. Spector et al. (2002) found that Chinese from Hong Kong, mainland China, and Taiwan scored in a more external direction on the Work Locus of Control Scale than samples from North America and Europe. Chia, Moore, Lam, Chuang, and Cheng (1995) found that American university students reported higher internal locus of control than their counterparts in Taiwan. However, the results of a study that is often cited to support the externality of Chinese are ambiguous. Using Rotter's I-E scale, M. S. Tseng (1972) reported that Asians in the United States were more external than Caucasian-Americans. However, it is unclear whether Chinese were included in Tseng's sample and it is not sure whether the results are relevant.

On the other hand, a few studies have cast doubt on the stereotype that Chinese are more external. Tsui (1978) found that, based on Rotter's I-E scale, Hong Kong Chinese undergraduates were actually more internal than American-born Chinese undergraduates in the United States. Hung (1974) reported that, based on Rotter's I-E scale, undergraduates in Taiwan did not differ from American undergraduates in internality, as had been reported by Parsons and Schneider (1974). Liu and Yussen (2005) compared mainland Chinese and American primary students with regard to control beliefs measured by the Revised Control, Agency, and Means-End Interview, and found no systematic evidence for the externality of Chinese students. Smith, Trompenaars, and Dugan (1995) reported data collected from employees of business organizations from forty-five countries using Rotter's I-E scale. Their use of a large, multi-cultural sample gives greater credence to their findings that the internality of Chinese respondents from mainland China and Hong Kong was similar to that of respondents from quite a few Western nations (e.g. Netherlands, Belgium, Austria), and was actually higher than that of persons from several other Western countries (e.g. UK, Sweden). Smith et al. (1995) did not perform statistical tests on the national differences observed, but it is clear from their results that Chinese are not necessarily more external than all Westerners.

Studies employing a more complex conceptualization of control points to the possibility that the externality of Chinese is context-specific. Levenson (1974) proposed that locus of control consists of three facets. General internality refers to the belief that reinforcements are controlled by personal factors; powerful others refer to the belief that reinforcements are controlled by various powerful others; and chance refers to the belief that reinforcements are controlled by chance factors. In a comparison of undergraduates in Taiwan and the USA, Lao (1977) found that Chinese females were more external than American females with regard to general internality, but that Chinese of both sexes were more internal with regard to powerful others than were Americans. There was no difference between the two groups with regard to the chance dimension. In contrast, Chia et al. (1995) found that American university students were higher in internality and lower in chance than were Chinese students in Taiwan, but there was no difference in powerful others. Leung (2001) reported that Chinese overseas students and migrants in Australia showed higher external locus of control with regard to chance and powerful others than did Anglo-Australians, but there was no difference in internal locus of control between these two groups. In sum, no consistent pattern has been established across studies.

Chan (1989) administered Rotter's (1966) I-E scale to undergraduates in Hong Kong and compared the results reported by Parsons and Schneider's (1974) in eight countries. Parsons and Schneider (1974) have classified the I-E items into five content areas: luck-fate, respect, academics, leadership-success, and politics. It turned out that the Hong Kong Chinese were actually more internal in respect, academics, and leadership-success than were respondents from several Western nations (USA, West Germany, France, and Italy). They were more external than respondents from these Western nations only in luck-fate. Chen (1989) further observed that, after comparing the I-E scores of Americans reported in studies in the sixties and the seventies, Americans seem to be getting more external over time.

Spector, Sanchez, Siu, Salgado, and Ma (2004) argued that one reason why Chinese are found to be more external than Westerners is because Western instruments may omit practices used by Chinese to control their environment. To address this potential bias, they created a scale to measure *socioinstrumental control*, which refers to the use of social means to influence the environment for goal attainment. A sample item of this scale is: 'You can get your own way at work if you learn how to get along with other people.' As expected, Chinese from Hong Kong and mainland China scored higher than Americans in socioinstrumental control, but lower in work locus of control. Interestingly, higher socioinstrumental control was related to positive job attitudes for both Chinese and Americans. Consistent with the notion of socioinstrumental control, Chia, Cheng, and Chuang (1998) found that, based on the Shapiro Control Inventory, Americans reported higher overall control and control from the self, but Chinese from Taiwan reported higher control from others, family, and government, all of which are forms of indirect control through other people.

In summary, the general conclusion that Chinese are more external than Westerners has not been consistently demonstrated and probably represents an oversimplification of the control concept. The externality of Chinese is likely to be context-specific, and a few well-researched contexts are reviewed below.

### **Externality and performance outcome**

Because of the influence of Confucianism, modesty is a salient norm in Chinese societies (e.g. W. S. Tseng, 1972). Consistent with a modesty norm, Farh, Dobbins, and Cheng (1991) found that Chinese employees in Taiwan evaluated their performance less positively than did their supervisors, a pattern opposite to that commonly observed in the USA. The modesty norm is in conflict with externality beliefs with regard to negative outcomes. In fact, consistent with the modesty norm, Chinese are likely to take responsibility for negative outcomes. McCormick and Shi (1999) found that compared to mainland Chinese teachers, Australian teachers were more likely to attribute their occupational stress to causes distal to self, such as the Department of Education, and less likely to attribute it to more proximal causes, such as self and superiors.

Anderson (1999) found that compared to American students, mainland Chinese students accepted more responsibility for interpersonal and non-interpersonal failures, and took less credit for interpersonal success. Rogers (1998) found that, compared to their UK counterparts, mainland Chinese secondary students were less likely to attribute success to ability, and more likely to attribute failure to effort. Chiu (1986) administered the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility (IAR) questionnaire to children in sixth to eighth grades in Taiwan and in the USA. The IAR questionnaire consists of thirty-four forced-choice items describing either a positive or a negative achievement experience and two explanations for each experience, with one explanation attributing the event to internal factors, and the other to external factors. American children selected a larger number of internal explanations for successful than for failure situations, whereas Chinese children selected more internal explanations for failures than for successful situations.

Crittenden (1991) administered the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) to undergraduates in Taiwan and the USA. The ASQ asks respondents to make causal interpretations for six affiliative events involving interpersonal relationships and six achievement events, as if the events had actually happened to them. Results showed that compared with American undergraduates, Taiwan undergraduates were more external in their attributions for achievement events, and were more self-effacing in their attributional pattern. In other words, Taiwanese students were more likely to make external attributions for successes, and internal attributions for failures. With regard to affiliative events, there was no difference in externality between these two groups, but the Taiwanese women were more self-effacing than were their American counterparts.

Lee and Seligman (1997) administered the ASQ to three groups of undergraduates: Americans, Chinese-Americans, and Chinese in mainland China. Their results showed that compared to the two American groups, mainland Chinese were more inclined to make external attributions for both negative as well as positive events. To compare their results with those of Crittenden (1991), their data were transformed to obtain a score to reflect overall internality and another score to reflect self-effacement. Although no statistical tests can be performed on these transformed scores, it was found that, consistent with Crittenden's (1991) results, Chinese were more external in their attributions and more self-effacing than the other two American groups.

In line with the link between the modesty norm and the tendency for Chinese to make external attributions for successes and internal attributions for failures, Bond, Leung, and Wan (1982) found that Hong Kong Chinese who followed the modesty norm in explaining their success or failure were in fact better liked by other Chinese observers. Consistent with the impression management interpretation, Wan and Bond (1982) showed that Hong Kong Chinese made self-effacing attributions for their performance in public, but self-enhancing attributions in private, at least for the attribution category of luck. Kemp (1994) also found that secondary-school children in Hong Kong reported a higher level of self-concept in an anonymous situation than in an identifiable situation.

It seems clear that the internality beliefs of Chinese are qualified by the nature of the outcome, and Chinese do not show across-the-board externality beliefs. Two interesting issues are noteworthy in my review of this literature. First, while Chinese are less likely to make self-serving attributions, there is evidence to show that Chinese make group-serving attributions in that they attribute high group performance to internal attributes and low group performance to external attributes (Ma, 2003). Ng and Zhu (2001) also found that New Zealanders made more internal attributions for social behaviors than Hong Kong and Beijing Chinese but only in individual-acting conditions, not in group-acting conditions.

Second, it is interesting to consider the psychological consequences of self-effacing attribution. While it seems able to generate liking from others in the Chinese cultural context, and elicit striving and effort exertion for task accomplishment, it may incur some psychological cost. Anderson (1999) has presented some evidence that the self-effacing attributional style of Chinese is related to their higher levels of loneliness and depression than Americans. Rogers (1998) found that ability attribution for success and effort attribution for failure are correlated positively with self-esteem in British secondary students, and these correlations are in a similar, but somewhat weakened, direction for mainland Chinese secondary students. Man and Hamid (1998) found that for student-teachers in

Hong Kong, participants with high self-esteem were more likely to make external attributions for failures in classroom management than were low self-esteem participants. These findings suggest that self-effacing attributions may lower the self-esteem of Chinese, and their net effect on the overall well-being and performance of Chinese is a very interesting topic for future research.

### **Effort and ability attributions in academic settings**

Stevenson and his collaborators have consistently found that compared with Americans, Chinese believe that academic achievement is more strongly related to effort. For instance, Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Stigler, Hsu, and Kitamura (1990) found that Chinese parents of primary students in Taiwan stressed the importance of hard work more, and the importance of innate ability less, than did American parents in explaining their children's academic performance. Watkins and Cheng (1995) found that when university students in Hong Kong were asked to explain their academic performance, over 80 per cent chose effort as the explanation. The importance of effort was confirmed with students at various levels as well as teachers in Hong Kong (Hau & Salili, 1996). Hess, Chang, and McDevitt (1987) compared mothers' attributions for their children's performance in mathematics in three groups: Caucasian-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and Chinese from China. As expected, in explaining why their children did not do better than they did, Caucasians attributed to ability most, followed by Chinese-Americans, and then by Chinese. In a similar vein, Chinese mothers attributed to lack of effort most, followed by Chinese-Americans, and then by Caucasian-Americans. This pattern of attributions was also found when children were asked to explain their poor performance. Kinlaw, Kurtz-Costes, and Goldman-Fraser (2001) found that, compared to European-Americans, Chinese-Americans rated effort more highly, and ability less highly, as causes for academic success. The importance of effort is beyond academic achievement. Ho (2004) found that Chinese teachers in Hong Kong were less likely than Australian teachers to make ability attribution, but more family attribution, for the misbehavior of students.

Chen and Uttal (1988) have suggested that the emphasis on effort is rooted in the belief of human malleability endorsed and advocated in Chinese philosophy, especially Confucianism. This philosophical perspective has been ingrained in the minds of Chinese, as reflected in the common adage, 'Genius comes from hard work and knowledge depends on accumulation' (Tong, Zhao, & Yang, 1985). Bond (1991) has referred to this emphasis on effort in Chinese societies as the 'cult of effort'. Chen and Uttal (1988) concluded that 'according to the Chinese perspective, innate ability may determine the rate at which one acquires knowledge, but the ultimate level is attained through effort' (p. 354).

The emphasis on effort by Chinese is supported by a global study on social axioms which refer to general beliefs about the material, social, and spiritual world (Leung et al., 2002; Leung & Bond, 2004). A five-dimensional structure was initially identified at the individual level, and subsequently confirmed in forty cultural groups around the world. *Reward for application* is one of the five dimensions identified, which refers to the belief that the investment of effort, knowledge, careful planning, and other resources will lead to positive outcomes. In general, Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China showed higher endorsement of reward for application than did people from Western nations, especially Chinese from mainland China and Taiwan. As effort is an internal attribute, Chinese are therefore not more external than Westerners in domains where the role of effort is salient. In fact, Munro (1977) concluded that 'it is accurate to describe the Chinese position as a belief that inner causes (correct thoughts, wishes) can have important effects in changing the material world' (p. 18). In the academic setting, Chinese are in fact more internal than Westerners in failure situations and in their association of effort with academic achievements.

### **Control, psychological adjustment, and social behavior**

Many studies have shown that, similar to US results, externality in locus of control is related to poor adjustment and psychological health among Chinese. For instance, Kuo, Gray, and Lin (1979) found

that Chinese-Americans who were more external as measured by the Personal Efficacy Scale showed a higher level of psychiatric impairment and depression, and manifested more problems such as low esteem, apprehension, insomnia, headaches, and other psychophysiological symptoms. Chien (1984) found that primary students in Taiwan who were internal as measured by the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale were better adjusted personally and socially. Van Haaften, Yu, and Van de Vijver (2004) reported that external locus of control as measured by the Spheres of Control Scale was related to lower resilience (depression, stress, and marginalization) in China. Hwang (1979) reported that primary-school pupils in Taiwan who were high in internality as measured by the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale scored higher in self-acceptance and emotional maturity. Chan (1989) showed that Chinese undergraduates in Hong Kong who were external as measured by Rotter's I-E scale had a higher level of adjustment problems as measured by the General Health Questionnaire. Leung, Salili, and Baber (1986) found that Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong who were external as measured by the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale reported more adjustment and health problems. Lau and Leung (1992b) also found that Chinese adolescents who were external as measured by the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale reported a lower self-concept, more delinquent behaviors, and poorer relationships with school and parents. Liu, Tein, Zhao, and Sandler (2005) found that external locus of control as measured by the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale was related to suicidal ideation among rural youths in China. Gan, Shang, and Zhang (2007) reported that external locus of control as measured by Rotter's I-E scale was predictive of burnout among university students in China. Using the Back Pain Locus of Control Scale, Cheng and Leung (2000) found that in Hong Kong, while internal locus of control did not predict pain intensity, it was negatively related to perceived disability. In summary, the negative impact of externality on psychological adjustment and health seems to be generalizable across Chinese societies and the USA.

In contrast, the relationship between control beliefs and social behavior seems to show some cultural variation. Hamid (1994) found that for university students in both Hong Kong and New Zealand, the relationship between control and number of social interactions was similar. Externals reported a larger number of social interactions than internals when their level of self-monitoring was high, but the pattern was the opposite when their level of self-monitoring was low. However, when the level of self-disclosure of these interactions was analyzed, cross-cultural differences emerged. Internals reported a higher level of self-disclosure than externals for New Zealanders, whereas the opposite was true for Chinese.

Aryee, Lo, and Kang (1999) found that in contrast to Western findings, internal work locus of control on the part of protégé in the work setting was not related to protégé-initiated mentoring relationships and mentoring received in Hong Kong. Hamid and Cheng (1995) found that in contrast to Western findings, locus of control was not related to the intention to sign an anti-pollution petition in Hong Kong. Spector et al. (2004) found that external work locus of control was correlated negatively to interpersonal conflict for Chinese, but this relationship was positive in the USA.

In summary, locus of control seems to be related to social behavior in a complex way among Chinese people, and internals do not necessarily fare better in terms of exhibiting more positive social behavior than externals. Future work is obviously needed to explore the relationship between control beliefs and different types of social behavior among Chinese people.

### **Other control constructs**

Locus of control is a construct initially identified and operationalized in America, so there is always the possibility that it may not capture all the important control-related beliefs held by Chinese (see Lu, this volume, for a similar concern about the concept of happiness). In fact, there is some evidence that under some circumstances, the internal-external distinction is not applicable to Chinese. Luk and Bond (1992) found that when the causes of illnesses provided by university students in Hong Kong were factor analyzed, external and internal items loaded in the same factor. As suggested by Luk and Bond (1992), Chinese may endorse an interactionist perspective in their attribution style, at least with regard to the causes of illnesses.

This notion is supported by the global project on social axioms mentioned before (Leung et al., 2002; Leung & Bond, 2004). *Fate control* is one of the five axiom dimensions identified, which asserts that life events are predetermined by external forces, but that there are ways for people to foretell and influence the negative impact of these forces. Thus, the distinction of internality and externality is fuzzy in the notion of fate control, because the fatalistic part is obviously external in nature, but the belief that fate can be improved by active intervention involves an internality belief.

This conflation of internality and externality is not unique to Chinese, as its construct validity is supported in many cultural contexts, including the West. It is possible that the distinction of internality and externality is more salient for researchers than for people in their social environment. When asked to do so, people can respond to questions that are based on a sharp contrast of internality and externality, but this distinction is often fuzzy when people assess their social world naturally and without a structure provided by researchers. Consistent with the interactionist notion suggested by Luk and Bond (1992), Chinese from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are relatively high in fate control when compared with Western groups, especially Chinese from mainland China and Taiwan. We do not know much about the consequences of fate control, a topic which represents an intriguing and novel line of research that may complement the research guided by the internality-externality distinction.

### Self-concept

Chinese culture is described as group-oriented, and individuals often believe that the group rather than the individual is the basic unit in society (e.g. Hsu, 1981). Based on an analysis of traditional thoughts and the Chinese culture, Hsu (1971b) has proposed that social relationships and roles constitute the core of the self in Chinese culture. In line with this reasoning, Yang (1991) has criticized the use of Western instruments to measure self-concepts in Chinese societies because these instruments fail to capture the social components of the self in Chinese societies. This argument has high face validity, but the empirical evidence in its favor is equivocal (see also Kwan, Hui, & McGee, this volume).

Triandis, McCusker, and Hui (1990) found that the collective self was more salient for participants from mainland China than for Americans. Specifically, when participants were asked to complete twenty statements that began with 'I am ...', the number of responses made by mainland Chinese in the collective category (e.g. I am a member of a specific group) was almost three times as many as that of the Americans. The problem is that Chinese from Hong Kong responded at a level similar to Americans, making it difficult to conclude whether the difference between American and mainland Chinese was due to cultural or political and economic differences. However, using a procedure similar to that used by Triandis et al. (1990), Ip and Bond (1995) provided results that support the social nature of the self-concept of Chinese. Self-descriptions and social roles were used more frequently by university students in Hong Kong than by American undergraduates.

There are at least two studies that cast some doubt on the conclusion that the self in the Chinese culture is more social in nature. Using a similar procedure to that of Triandis et al. (1990), Bond and Cheung (1983) found that Hong Kong Chinese undergraduates actually reported *fewer* statements that fell into the collective category than did American undergraduates. Yu, Chang, and Wu (1993) adopted the same procedure as Triandis et al. (1990) with college students in Taiwan and found that over 90 per cent of the attributes used for self-description were individual attributes, and social attributes were mentioned at a very low frequency. Yu et al. (1993) concluded that there seems to be no evidence in support of the position of Yang (1991). Note that both Bond and Cheung (1983) and Yu et al. (1993) used an open-ended format to obtain self-descriptions from participants and the results are not biased by instruments that are individual-oriented. To sum up, the proposal that the conception of the self entails more collective elements among Chinese appears to be an oversimplification. Ip and Bond (1995) have suggested that the nature of the coding scheme may affect the results obtained. This complex issue has not been resolved and should be examined systematically in future work.



There is a different line of research in the educational setting that argues for the multidimensional structure of self-concept, consisting of such facets as physical abilities, physical appearance, academic ability, relations with peers, relations with parents, and relations with school (e.g. Marsh, Relich, & Smith, 1983). This complex view of the self-structure seems to be applicable to Chinese, and has been confirmed with secondary children from Hong Kong (Kemp, 1994; Leung & Lau, 1989) and Beijing (Watkins & Dong, 1994). However, it is possible that the self of the Chinese may entail components that are not observed in the West. For instance, Yeung and Wong (2004) found that verbal self-concept can be broken down into different components for teachers in Hong Kong, who are typically multilingual, which is not found among monolinguals, who are common in the West. This topic has not received much attention and provides a fertile ground for future research.

### Beliefs about the self-concept

A number of studies have shown that Chinese hold a less positive view about the self than do Americans (see also Kwan, Hui, & McGee, this volume). Bond and Cheung (1983) analyzed the spontaneous statements about the self provided by Hong Kong Chinese and American undergraduates, and found that Chinese reported a less positive ratio of statements about the self than did Americans. Similar results were obtained by Ip and Bond (1995). Stigler, Smith, and Mao (1985) administered the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC) to primary students in Taiwan and the USA. The PCSC taps three distinct domains of perceived competence: cognitive (or academic), social, and physical, as well children's general self-esteem. Stigler et al. (1985) found that the factor structure of these four subscales was highly similar across the two cultural groups, and that Chinese children scored lower in three subscales: cognitive, physical, and general self-esteem. Turner and Mo (1984) reported that Chinese primary students in Taiwan scored lower on self-image than American primary-school students. White and Chan (1983) found that Chinese-American graduate students and professionals regarded themselves as less active, attractive, sharp, and beautiful than did Caucasian-Americans. Paschal and Kuo (1973) found that Chinese undergraduates from Taiwan reported a lower level of self-esteem than did American undergraduates. Huang (1971) found that Chinese undergraduates in the USA reported a lower self-esteem than did American undergraduates.

Studies involving other Western groups show similar cultural differences. Kemp (1994) found that Chinese secondary students in Hong Kong reported a lower level of self-concept than their Australian counterparts across all the facets of self-concept measured by the Self Description Questionnaire developed by Marsh et al. (1983). Chen, Willy, and Franz (1997) found that, based on the Self Description Questionnaire, mainland Chinese children generally reported lower self-concept than did Dutch children. Watkins and Dong (1994) reported that secondary-school children in Beijing reported a lower general self-concept than their Australian counterparts. Interestingly, the Chinese children also scored higher than the Australian children in some facets of self-concept, including physical appearance and mathematics. Unexpectedly, Wang and Ren (2004) found that with a Chinese self-concept scale, Chinese children from Beijing reported higher self-concept than did American children. In sum, despite some contradictory findings, we may conclude that Chinese tend to report a lower level of self-concept than do their counterparts in the West.

The reason for the lower self-concept of Chinese as compared to their Western counterparts is not entirely clear. Bond and Hwang (1986) attributed this pattern to the humility norm emphasized in Chinese societies, and suggested that 'in the absence of further research, one cannot assume that low self-esteem in the Chinese has the same implications for social functioning as the same level in respondents from some other cultures' (p. 236). Given the emphasis on effort by Chinese, an alternative explanation is plausible, one which asserts that Chinese *actually* have a less positive self-concept than Westerners. Research has shown that compared with Americans, Chinese are more likely to attribute failure to a lack of effort rather than to some external factors. Research in the USA and Australia has shown that effort attributions for failures are related to a lower self-concept (for reviews,

see Marsh, 1984; Marsh, Cairns, Relich, Barnes, & Debus, 1984). Huang, Hwang, and Ko (1983) also found that Chinese undergraduates in Taiwan reported a higher level of depression when they made internal attribution for failures. In a similar vein, Chung and Hwang (1981) found that in Taiwan, the attribution of failures to stable and internal factors was related to poorer self-esteem and a lower level of well-being. These empirical findings suggest that the lower self-concept of the Chinese may be attributed to their greater tendency to attribute negative outcomes to internal factors. Unfortunately, this possibility has not been directly tested.

A third plausible explanation is based on the indigenous Chinese concept of *yuan*, which refers to the belief that interpersonal outcomes are determined by fate or supernatural forces. Yang (1982) argued that because *yuan* is an external explanation for interpersonal outcomes, the use of *yuan* attributions by those who enjoy a positive interpersonal relationship will protect the face of others who enjoy less favorable interpersonal outcomes. It should be noted that this argument contrasts sharply with the empirical results obtained in the USA, which typically document a pattern of ego-defensive attributions—external causes are more likely to be attributed to failures than to successes (Zuckerman, 1979). For negative interpersonal outcomes, Yang (1982) and Lee (1982) argued that *yuan* attributions function as a defense mechanism, shielding an individual from the negative emotions associated with negative interpersonal outcomes, such as divorce. In fact, the process of attributing *yuan* to negative interpersonal outcomes is equivalent to ego-defensive attributions frequently observed in the West. *Yuan* is similar to the notion of bad luck in the West in terms of their ego-enhancing function in the face of negative outcomes.

To evaluate the ego-defensive function of *yuan* attributions, Huang et al. (1983) divided their undergraduate participants in Taiwan into high- and low-depression groups, and found that the high-depression group indeed was less likely to make *yuan* attributions for negative interpersonal outcomes. In support of the face-saving function of *yuan* for other people, Huang et al. (1983) also found that both groups made more *yuan* attributions for positive than for negative interpersonal outcomes.

These empirical results suggest that the belief in *yuan* may lead Chinese to attribute positive interpersonal outcomes to an external cause, thus weakening their self-esteem. In fact, Huang et al. (1983) reported that Chinese who made external attributions for positive interpersonal outcomes indeed showed a higher level of depression. Thus, the belief in *yuan* may be a two-edged sword. It serves as a defense against negative outcomes, but in the case of positive outcomes, its face-saving function may come at the expense of one's self-esteem. *Yuan* thus functions as a moderating personal force, of crucial importance to the Chinese search for moderation in all things. This intriguing possibility should be explored in future research.

### Correlates of self-esteem

The relationships between self-concept and a wide array of variables in Chinese societies are similar to those identified in the USA. The general pattern is that a positive self-concept is related to better psychological adjustment. For instance, among Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong, positive self-esteem is related to a lower level of anxiety, social dysfunction, and depression (Chan & Lee, 1993), a higher level of psychological well-being (Leung & Leung, 1992; Yang, 2002), fewer delinquent behaviors (Leung & Lau, 1989), and better relations with parents and school (Cheung & Lau, 1985; Lau & Leung, 1992a). Chang (1982) found that, in Taiwan, a positive self-concept is related to more satisfactory interpersonal relationships.

However, some evidence shows that some antecedents of self-esteem may vary across cultures. Marsh, Hau, Sung, and Yu (2007) found that for Chinese children, in contrast to Western results, body fat was not related to global self-esteem, and was positively related to health self-concept. In a similar vein, Lau, Lee, Ransdell, Yu, and Sung (2004) reported that actual-ideal body-size discrepancy was not predictive of global self-concept and global self-esteem among Chinese children in Hong Kong. In other words, the self-concept of Chinese children seems less affected by obesity and

body image than that of Western children. This line of work has not received much attention and may yield results that lead to major revision of Western theories of self-esteem.

## Social beliefs

### Collectivist beliefs

Chinese culture is characterized as collectivistic (e.g. Bond & Hwang, 1986; Hofstede, 1980; Hsu, 1981). There is some research on the belief system of Chinese that is related to collectivism, and a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, the basic belief underlying Chinese collectivism is that individuals from the same in-group are interrelated and their well-being depends upon their collective effort. If each person follows the norms of the group and acts in the interest of the group, that group will be harmonious and prosperous. This reasoning has been supported by empirical findings. For instance, Leung and Bond (1984) found that Chinese from Hong Kong allocated a larger share of a group reward to in-group members than did Americans. Earley (1989) found that Chinese displayed less social loafing, the tendency to reduce one's input on a group task, than did Americans.

Second, the collectivism of Chinese leads them to believe that an effective way to get things done is often through one's *guanxi*, or interpersonal connections (e.g. King, 1991; Hwang, 1987, 2000). For instance, *guanxi* has been shown to affect a member's effectiveness in a team in Taiwan (Chou, Cheng, Huang, & Cheng, 2006). Hu, Hsu, and Cheng (2004) found that people allocated a larger reward to others who had good *guanxi* with them in Taiwan. *Guanxi* seems to engender trust in a target person, which results in positive behaviors toward the target person, and these behaviors are reciprocated (Chou et al., 2006; Peng, 2001).

Third, Chinese tend to believe that out-group members are less dependable and trustworthy. For instance, Leung (1988) found that Chinese from Hong Kong were more likely to sue a stranger than were Americans. Li (1992) found that, compared to Americans, Chinese in Taiwan regarded strangers as less likable, less likely to be from the same group, and less fair. However, Zhang and Bond (1993) found that there was no difference among American, Hong Kong Chinese, and mainland Chinese university students with regard to their trust level towards relatives. But mainland Chinese students showed a higher level of trust towards both friends and strangers than both American and Hong Kong Chinese students. Perhaps the tendency for Chinese to harbor negative beliefs about out-group members may not be straightforward, and this issue should be explored in future work.

Fourth, Triandis et al. (1990) found that mainland Chinese perceived Chinese as more homogeneous than other national groups, whereas no comparable results were obtained with Americans. Triandis et al. (1990) interpreted this finding as supporting the argument that the collectivistic Chinese believed that the group is the basic unit of analysis, and thus perceived more homogeneity in their in-group than in out-groups. In a study of Chinese minority youth in the Netherlands, Verkuyten and Kwa (1996) also found that the in-group homogeneity effect was stronger than the out-group homogeneity effect. In contrast, Lee and Ottati (1993) found that both American and mainland Chinese perceived the other national groups as more homogeneous than their own group. In the study of Triandis et al. (1990), homogeneity refers to behavioral standards and norms, whereas in Lee and Ottati (1993), the measure of homogeneity was broader and included such elements as clothing and physical appearance. Thus, it is not certain why these studies yielded divergent results, and further work is needed to examine the beliefs concerning in-group homogeneity endorsed by Chinese people.

Finally, Triandis et al. (1990) found that contrary to common stereotype, Chinese from Hong Kong and mainland China regarded the group as less effective than did Americans. However, Triandis et al. (1993) reported that, based on an independence factor which included items comparing the effectiveness of the group and the individual, Americans clearly endorsed independence more strongly than did Chinese from Hong Kong and mainland China. Because the independence factor identified by Triandis et al. (1993) contained items concerning friends as well, this result must be

interpreted with caution. Again, more research is needed to shed light on the beliefs of Chinese about the effectiveness of the group versus the individual.

### **Beliefs related to power distance**

The social structure in Chinese societies is characterized as hierarchical (e.g. Bond & Hwang, 1986; Hsu, 1981; King & Bond, 1985) and exhibits a large power distance (Bond, 1996; Hofstede, 1980). According to King and Bond (1985), the basic belief underlying this orientation is that the ideal way to organize a collective is through a well-defined hierarchy, with clear responsibilities for each role in the hierarchy. So the typical leadership pattern in Chinese societies tends to be paternalistic (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004), ideally benevolent. Not much is known about this important belief complex, which awaits exploration in future research (see Chen & Farh, this volume).

## **Environmental beliefs**

### **Primary and secondary control**

Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder (1982) pointed out that in the West, a major way to attain one's goals and wishes is to attempt to bring about objective changes in the environment, and this type of control is called 'primary control'. Weisz, Rothbaum, and Blackburn (1984) further argued that a different type of control, secondary control, is prevalent in the East. Because of the emphasis on interdependence and harmony in groups, East Asians show a stronger tendency to adjust themselves to fit the environment. Peng and Lachman (1993) administered primary and secondary control scales to American and Chinese-American adults, and, as expected, American respondents scored higher on primary control and lower on secondary control than did Chinese-American respondents. It is interesting to note that primary control was related to positive psychological adjustment for both groups. However, Spector et al. (2004) found that in the work context, mainland Chinese and Americans showed similar levels of secondary control and higher secondary control than Hong Kong Chinese. Nonetheless, secondary control was related to a number of variables in a similar fashion for both Hong Kong Chinese and Americans. Despite the fact that the notions of primary and secondary control have been around for quite some time, the findings in this area are inconclusive and more research is needed.

### **Beliefs about uncertain events**

Wright and his associates (1978) have examined the cultural differences in probabilistic thinking between British and three groups of South-east Asians, including Hong Kong Chinese. Their major finding is that British participants tended to adopt a probabilistic view of uncertainty, and were more accurate in their assessment of the likelihood of occurrence of uncertain events. In contrast, the South-east Asians, including the Hong Kong Chinese, tended to view the world in terms of total certainty or uncertainty, and were less inclined to make a probabilistic judgement of uncertain events. Their conclusion echoes the impression of a team of American decision analysts from the University of Michigan who worked with a Chinese team to control the water pollution of the Huangpu River in mainland China (Pollock & Chen, 1986). They noted that their Chinese counterparts showed a lack of concern for uncertainty, assumed complete certainty for all important information relevant to the decision tasks, and found the necessity of assigning probabilities to events strange and unnatural. This dramatic difference in the dynamics of decision making has sobering implications for the management of intercultural teams.

In the absence of relevant data, however, it is not clear how a less differentiated view towards uncertainty affects the social behavior of the Chinese. This non-probabilistic world view may be related to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, resulting in the extensive use of intuition in Chinese culture (Chou, 1981). The reliance on intuition is in fact common among Chinese business

people, especially among entrepreneurs (Redding, 1978). Another possibility is that a probabilistic view of the world is conducive to a rational approach in decision making, and to the use of facts and figures, which supports the social logic of low power distance. In contrast, a non-probabilistic world view would diminish the importance of objective facts and figures, thus making the role of intuition important and arbitrary authority acceptable. Unfortunately, this area of research has not received much attention in the past decade, and awaits future research to unravel the dynamics involved.

### **Religiosity beliefs**

A dimension of religiosity is identified in the social axioms project orchestrated by Leung and Bond (2004). This constellation refers to the belief in a supreme being and in the positive consequences on people and societies of religion, its institutions and practices. Data from many societies around the world are available, and Chinese are moderate in their religiosity belief. Leung et al. (2007) found that religiosity is moderately related to values in a coherent way. For instance, it is related to tradition, benevolence, and conformity values positively, and hedonism, achievement, and power values negatively. These correlations suggest that the religiosity beliefs of Chinese may have important implications for some social behaviors (e.g. Bond, Leung, Au, Tong, & Chemonges-Nielson, 2004), a topic that needs to be explored in future research.

## **Indigenous beliefs in Chinese culture**

With the exception of *yuan*, the studies reviewed above focus primarily on universal belief constellations that can be found in Chinese as well as Western societies. In this section, a few indigenous beliefs are reviewed.

### **Psychological beliefs: beliefs about death**

Hui, Chan, and Chan (1989) administered a set of thirty statements about death to Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong and extracted five factors. The first factor, Buddhist and Taoist belief, is an indigenous belief constellation and pertains to beliefs about reincarnation. The second factor is just-world belief, which emphasizes the different destinations of the virtuous and the evil-doers. The third factor was labeled naturalistic belief, which suggests that life ends with death. The fourth factor was labeled immortal-soul belief, which asserts that the soul will persist after death. Finally, the fifth factor, Protestant belief, is a Western belief, which suggests that Christians will go to paradise and non-believers will be punished. Hui et al. (1989) also reported that this factor pattern was replicated in a different sample of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.

It is interesting that an indigenous belief, the Buddhist/Taoist belief, and a Western belief, the Christian belief, coexist, which leads Hui et al. (1989) to conclude that Chinese in Hong Kong are under the influence of both traditional and Western belief systems simultaneously. However, this line of research has not been followed up in the past decade, and we do not know if the death beliefs of Chinese have changed as they continue to modernize (see Shek, this volume).

### **Health beliefs**

The health model states that beliefs about the seriousness of a disease are related to the perceived susceptibility to the disease (e.g. Rosenstock, Strecher, & Becker, 1988). This model has been confirmed among Chinese (e.g. Wang, Borland, & Whelan, 2005; Wong & Tang, 2005). However, a number of uniquely Chinese health beliefs can also be identified. The most researched belief in this area is probably the tendency to somaticize by some Chinese who suffer from psychopathological problems. Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong display a tendency to associate several types of psychosomatic problems with physical causes (for a review, see Cheung, 1986; Parker, Gladstone, & Kwan, 2001). The belief underlying such a somatization tendency is that some psychosomatic problems are

viewed as caused by physical factors only (e.g. Luk & Bond, 1992), which may be regarded as an immature defense against psychological investigation (Chan, 1997). More recent research has suggested that the somatization tendency of Chinese may be related to externally oriented thinking, itself related to a tendency not to focus on one's emotional state (Ryder et al., 2008). Interestingly, Parker, Chan, Tully, and Eisenbruch (2005) found that Chinese in Sydney reported a lower tendency to somatize if they are acculturated to the Australian culture. However, Mak and Zane (2004) found that acculturation was not related to the somatization tendency among Chinese Americans. It remains to be confirmed whether exposure to a Western culture may reduce the tendency of the Chinese to somatize.

In some ancient Chinese writings, the semen of men is regarded as a source of strength and energy, and thus frequent intercourse and ejaculation are believed to be associated with a loss of physical strength (Van Gulik, 1961). Menstruation is also regarded as unclean. In a survey of medical students in Hong Kong, Chan (1986) reported that these two traditional beliefs were strongly endorsed. Despite their training in modern medicine, over 90 per cent of the respondents believed that the following statements are to some extent true: (1) frequent ejaculation leads to a loss of physical strength; (2) frequent masturbation is injurious to health; (3) frequent intercourse is injurious to health; and (4) the healthy vagina is essentially unclean and not bacteria-free.

More recent research has supported the continued influence of these traditional beliefs. Yeung, Tang, and Lee (2005) found that pre-menarcheal teenage girls harbored mostly negative expectations about menarche, and their anticipated emotional responses were more negative than the experiences of post-menarcheal girls (Tang, Yeung, & Lee, 2004). Cain et al. (2003) found that Chinese-American women regarded sex as less important than did Caucasian and African-American women. Luo, Gao, Ye, and Chen (2002) found that secondary-school students who masturbated reported more negative emotions, and Hong, Fan, Ng, and Lee (1994) reported generally negative attitudes toward masturbation among university students in Shanghai. To sum up, traditional sex-related beliefs seem to persist despite the proliferation of modern medical knowledge. It remains to be demonstrated what role they play in the overall belief system, sexual and social behavior of modern Chinese.

### **Social beliefs: beliefs about reciprocity and retribution**

Under the influence of Confucianism and Buddhism, Chinese have developed an indigenous concept of retribution, *bao* (e.g. Hsu, 1971a; Hwang, 1987; Yang, 1957). *Bao* covers both positive and negative events, and thus includes both reciprocity and retribution. With regard to positive outcomes, *bao* requires individuals not to owe others any favors, either tangible or intangible, and to make an effort to repay them. The belief underlying *bao* is that if individuals do not repay the favors of others, then their relationship will become difficult and social harmony hard to sustain (Hsu, 1971a). Consistent with this argument, Cheung and Gui (2006) found that Shanghainese who made job referrals for others are driven by the expectation of reciprocity from the beneficiaries. In Hong Kong, elderly women who had to care for their husbands and daughters who had to care for their elderly parents were also driven by a sense of obligation arising from their sense of *bao* (Holroyd, 2001; 2005).

With regard to negative outcomes, Chinese often believe that retribution towards a harm-doer may not necessarily be delivered by the victim, and that supernatural forces may punish harm-doers to restore a state of justice. For instance, Chiu (1991) analyzed popular Chinese sayings about inequity and classified them into seven types. One type is obviously indigenous, and suggests that retribution may occur to the perpetrator's descendants. It is possible that bad deeds will bring disasters to the descendants of perpetrators or result in their having unfilial descendants. Yeo et al. (2005) reported that Chinese in Australia mentioned *bao* as a cause of cancer, an illness seen as a form of retribution for misdeeds of the patient or his/her ancestors. Likewise, Chinese in Australia with children who faced the risk of cancer mentioned retribution as a cause of the occurrence of faulty genes that may cause cancer (Eisenbruch et al., 2004). These interesting findings suggest that the impact of the *bao* constellation of beliefs, values, and norms on the social behavior of Chinese should be further explored.

## Belief about morality and social influence

In Confucian thought, morality (*de*) is believed to be able to elicit deference from others and to confer greater authority (Pye, 1984; Yang & Tseng, 1988). This belief, which may be termed the morality power belief, has not been empirically verified, but some indirect evidence hints at its prominence in contemporary Chinese societies. In a study of leadership behavior in mainland China, Ling and his associates (Ling, Chen, & Wang, 1987; Ling, Chia, & Fang, 2000) found that in addition to the two traditional leadership dimensions, namely, performance and maintenance, a third and separate dimension was identified. This new dimension, labeled the morality dimension, includes behaviors manifesting such virtues as honesty, integrity, and commitment. This morality dimension is subsequently found to be a core component of a model of paternalistic leadership for Chinese (Cheng et al., 2004), which is able to elicit a variety of positive reactions from subordinates (Cheng, Li, & Farh, 2000). Thus, research on paternalistic leadership supports the notion that high perceived morality is indeed associated with positive social influence and group performance.

## Conclusion

There is a gap of over ten years between the first edition of this chapter (Leung, 1996) and the current version. In the previous edition of the handbook, I concluded that there was a dearth of theorizing and data on the belief systems of Chinese. While there is notable progress in a few areas, my current review shows that there are still many gaps in our knowledge about beliefs among Chinese and how they function to influence social behaviors. The tripartite classification of beliefs used to organize the current chapter continues to be a useful scheme for organizing the diverse findings in this area, however. Finally, I have identified a number of directions for future research, which I hope will stimulate more empirical work to address the major gaps in this important topic area for psychologists.

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