

Harmony, Hierarchy and Conservatism: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Confucian Values in China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan

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This study examined 1,631 college students' endorsement of traditional Confucian values in four East Asian cultural contexts (i.e., China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan). Findings showed that young people endorsed values of interpersonal harmony the most, followed by the relational hierarchy and traditional conservatism respectively. Results also indicated that participants in China provided the highest ratings for interpersonal harmony and relational hierarchy among the four cultures. Finally, results demonstrated that Japanese females were more conservative than Japanese males and females in China and Taiwan. Results were discussed in the philosophical tradition of Confucianism, globalization and culture change in the East Asian cultures.

Keywords: Confucian Values; China; South Korea; Japan; Taiwan; Harmony; Hierarchy; Conservatism; Gender

Introduction

The major interest of cross-cultural studies tends to focus on how cultures differed in the outcome variable (e.g., conflict management style) than in the input variable (i.e., cultural values). Cultural values are frequently treated as a post-hoc explanation to

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The authors thanks Dr Karen Anderson for constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

offer validation of the significant results on how cultures differed in the outcome variable (e.g., Lee & Rogan, 1991). While lumping countries together based on their geographical and/or cultural proximity is still a common approach in cross-cultural research (Cross, 1995), Bond (1996) cautioned the danger of taking a bi-cultural continuum (i.e., Western–Eastern) perspective ignoring multiple variations within Western or Eastern world. Extending research on culture values within the East Asian cultures, the current study explored similarities and differences in young people’s endorsement of Confucian values in China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan in the 21st century. By examining the ways in which different Confucian dimensions are endorsed in these East Asian cultures, perhaps we can begin to disentangle the fuzziness of abstract label of Confucianism and focus on specific value dimensions in relation to societal development in each culture.

Cultural values are collective ideas that serve as standards or criteria of conduct (Singelis & Brown, 1995). Interpersonal harmony, relational hierarchy, and traditional conservatism are values that are generally emphasized more in the East Asian cultures (e.g., China, Japan, Korea) than in other parts of the world (e.g., Xu, 1998). According to Confucius, in order to seek harmonious relationships with others, which are the precondition of social integration and stability, individuals should respect and follow tradition and social hierarchy (rules, status, and authorities) (Chinese Cultural Connection, 1987). These values reflect the core principles of Confucianism, which has influenced Chinese people’s attitude toward life and served as standards and rules for social interaction (Bond, 1996).

In the process of civilization, Confucianism has spread its influence to neighboring countries of mainland China (e.g., Korea, Japan) for thousands of years (Chang, 1997). Deliberate efforts to promote and maintain Confucianism are evident in these societies. Confucian principles are permeated in media, taught in schools, and praised by officials (Tu, 1996). Although some traditional Confucian values are encountering increasing competition from alternative sets of values (e.g., pleasure, individual achievement) in an age of globalization (Zhang & Harwood, 2004), Confucianism has remained, to a large extent, what it means to be Chinese in particular (e.g., China, Taiwan) and East Asian (e.g., Japan, Korea) in general. Hence, many scholars have identified these societies as high-context and collectivistic (e.g., Hofstede, 1980) rooted in Confucianism. Yet, each society has gone through different political reforms and social changes in the process of technological innovation and modernization. Bond’s (1996) review of several cross-cultural value surveys (e.g., CVS, The Hofstede’s Project, the Schwartz Value Survey) suggested varying degrees of value endorsement within some East Asian societies. Consistent with the literature, we proposed our first hypothesis:

H1: Confucian values will still be upheld in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, but with varying degrees.

Although Confucianism was attacked during Cultural Revolution in the 1960s in China, the fundamental principles remained strong (Zhang & Harwood, 2002). In

addition, China has adopted an “open door” policy to join the global economy in early 1980s, much later comparing with the other East Asian societies or “mini-dragons” (e.g., Taiwan, Japan, and Korea; Tu, 1996), hence has maintained more of its indigenous cultural values. Therefore, we proposed our second hypothesis:

H2: Chinese young participants will endorse the Confucian values more than their counterparts in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

Confucianism emphasizes that things and persons should fall into proper places and order, so that they can relate to each other in a supportive and harmonious manner. One of the traditional social orders in relationships that Confucius specified is gender role with men having more status than women (Pek & Leong, 2003). Research has also demonstrated that Japan is a highly masculine society that has distinct gender roles with female roles de-emphasizing recognition, advancement, and competition, much more so than other East Asian countries (Hostede, 1980). Therefore, we proposed our third hypothesis:

H3: Japanese females' rating of the Confucian values will show that they are more conservative than Japanese males and their counterparts in China, Korea, and Taiwan.

Method

Participants

This survey examined 1,631 college students' (M age = 20.0; age range: 18–27) endorsement of traditional Confucian values in China ($n = 420$; male = 38.1%), Japan ($n = 381$; male = 32.5%), Republic of Korea ($n = 422$; male = 59.2%), and Taiwan ($n = 408$; male = 41.4%). There were a total number of 703 males (43.1%) and 928 females (56.9%). All the participants were volunteers solicited from students enrolled in various universities in major cities of the four regions (e.g., Beijing, Seoul, Fukuoka, Taipei). The majority of the participants were from the capital city of each region, which presumably is the focal point of information exchange and societal development.

Procedures and Measures

The 40-item Chinese value survey (CVS; Chinese Culture Connection, 1987), which measures four constructs (i.e., integration, Confucian dynamism, human heartedness, and moral discipline) central to Confucian philosophy was used in this study. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each value to them personally on a five-point scale (1 = not important at all, 5 = very important). The CVS has both Chinese and English versions. Translation was not required in China and Taiwan where Chinese is the official language. Bilingual Japanese and Korean doctoral candidates translated the English version of the CVS to Japanese and Korean

respectively. Expert opinions were consulted and back translation procedure was adopted.

Reliability coefficients for the four dimensions were neither reported in the original paper (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987), nor in the subsequent publications (e.g., Ralston, Gustafson, Elsass, Cheung, & Terpstra, 1992). In the current data, all the dimensions had very low reliabilities, ranging from 0.22 to -0.22 . Thus, a principal component factor analysis was conducted (Bartlett's test of sphericity: $\chi^2(861) = 15,434.03$, $p < 0.001$). The scree plot indicated that a three-factor solution was appropriate. Items with no loadings greater than 0.30 and double loadings (loadings within 0.15 of one another) on the three factors were removed. The final solution contained 30 items and accounted for 36.4% of the variance. The first factor accounted for 14.53% of the variance (eigenvalue = 8.12) and included 13 items. These values (e.g., harmony with others, solidarity with others, sincerity and tolerance of others, forgiveness) embody the Confucian ideas of seeking harmonious relationship with others. This factor was labeled *interpersonal harmony*. A mean index computed by averaging the items (overall Cronbach's alpha = 0.83: 0.81 for China, 0.84 for Korea, 0.80 for Japan, and 0.85 for Taiwan; $M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.41$) indicated that the interpersonal harmony values were highly endorsed by all the participants.

The second factor contained seven items associated with principles of relational hierarchy in society (11.23% of variance, eigenvalue = 2.37). These values (e.g., ordering relationship by status, filial piety, loyalty to superiors, and having sense of cultural superiority) portray a Confucian person as proud of one's cultural heritage, respectful of tradition (e.g., rites and rituals), and obedient of social hierarchy. In essence, it reflects the concrete codes protecting social hierarchical relations in both family (e.g., obedience to parents) and public (e.g., ordering relationship by status) and was labeled as *relational hierarchy*. A mean index was computed by averaging the items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78: 0.78 for China, 0.79 for Korea, 0.71 for Japan, and 0.75 for Taiwan; $M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.65$). Values of relational hierarchy were not endorsed as strongly as interpersonal harmony values, paired $t(1,576) = -40.85$, $p < 0.001$.

The third factor contained 10 items (7.52% of the variance, eigenvalue = 2.16). This factor did not demonstrate reliability as high as the other two factors (Cronbach's alpha = 0.69: 0.65 for China, 0.75 for Korea, 0.60 for Japan, and 0.77 for Taiwan). Examination of the factor items also reveals theoretically and culturally meaningful constructs. Items such as having few desires, being conservative, keeping oneself disinterested and pure, non-competitiveness, and moderation, are core traditional Confucian conservative principles. This factor was therefore labeled as *traditional conservatism*. A mean index was computed ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.49$). Values of traditional conservatism were endorsed less strongly than the interpersonal harmony values (paired $t(1,574) = -69.61$, $p < 0.001$) and the relational hierarchy values (paired $t(1,572) = -23.77$, $p < 0.001$). Altogether these paired t -tests indicated that interpersonal harmony was upheld the most in the

current sample followed by relational hierarchy and traditional conservatism respectively.

Results

Data Analysis

To test our research hypotheses, a 2 (gender) \times 4 (cultural groups) multivariate analysis of variance with the three value factors as dependent variables was conducted. Results from this analysis revealed a significant cultural group membership main effect ($F(9, 3,784.61) = 155.57, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.23$) and a group membership by participant gender interaction effect ($F(9, 3,784.61) = 2.15, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.02$). Participant gender main effect was not significant ($F(3, 1,555) = 1.38, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.00$). For the group membership main effect, univariate tests were significant for all three dependent measures: Interpersonal harmony, $F(3, 1,557) = 32.79, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = .06$; relational hierarchy, $F(3, 1,557) = 197.13, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.36$; traditional conservatism, $F(3, 1,557) = 15.05, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.03$. For the significant interaction effect, univariate tests were significant for traditional conservatism ($F(3, 1,557) = 3.58, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.01$), but not for interpersonal harmony ($F(3, 1,557) = 1.78, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.00$) and relational hierarchy ($F(3, 1,557) = 3.48, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$). For all analyses, post hoc analysis for the cultural group main effects used Tukey's HSD, while those for the significant interaction effect examined both the simple main effects of cultural group within gender followed by the simple effects of gender within cultural groups. For the pairwise comparisons, Bonferroni adjustments were made to alphas to control for Type I error (Green & Salkind, 2003).

Interpersonal Harmony

Post hoc analysis of the cultural group main effect indicated that Chinese participants rated the interpersonal harmony value as the most important ($M = 4.23, SD = 0.38$), followed by Japanese participants' ratings ($M = 4.11, SD = 0.37$), with both the Taiwanese ($M = 4.01, SD = 0.44$) and Korean participants' ratings ($M = 3.97, SD = 0.40$) in the third place (see Table 1).

Relational Hierarchy

Post hoc analysis of the cultural group main effect indicated that Chinese participants rated the relational hierarchy value as the most important ($M = 4.07, SD = 0.44$), followed by the Taiwanese ($M = 3.42, SD = 0.50$) and Korean participants' ratings ($M = 3.37, SD = 0.60$) (no significant difference), with Japanese participants' ratings ($M = 2.95, SD = 0.46$) as the lowest (see Table 1).

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations for Harmony, Relational Hierarchy and Traditional Conservatism by Participant Gender and Cultural Group

Value	Gender	Cultural group							
		China		Taiwan		Japan		Korea	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Harmony		4.23 ^a	0.38	4.01 ^c	0.44	4.11 ^b	0.37	3.97 ^c	0.40
Hierarchy		4.07 ^a	0.44	3.42 ^b	0.50	2.95 ^c	0.46	3.37 ^b	0.60
Conservatism	Male	3.09 ^b	0.51	3.14 ^b	0.47	3.21 ^{a,b}	0.42	3.32 ^a	0.48
	Female	3.15 ^b	0.51	3.08 ^b	0.51	3.34 ^c	0.38	3.26 ^{a,b,c}	0.52
	Total	3.13	0.51	3.11	0.49	3.28	0.40	3.29	0.50

Note: Means with different superscripts differ significantly in rows for harmony and hierarchy. Means with different superscripts differ significantly in rows and columns for conservatism.

Traditional Conservatism

Simple main effects of gender were examined within cultural group. There were no significant gender effects among Chinese, ($F(1, 416) = 1.69, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.00$), Taiwanese ($F(1, 403) = 1.76, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.00$), and Korean participants ($F(1, 399) = 3.03, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$). The only significant gender effect appeared in the Japanese participants' scores ($F(1, 364) = 9.16, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.03$) with females endorsed traditional conservatism more than males.

Simple main effects of cultural group membership were also examined within gender. Analyses indicated that both male participants and female participants in the four cultural groups perceived traditional conservatism significantly differently (males: $F(3, 671) = 8.91, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.04$; females: $F(3, 909) = 29.00, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.09$). Pairwise comparisons indicated that Korean male participants rated traditional conservatism as significantly more important than did males in China and Taiwan (did not differ from each other). Results also indicated that Japanese females provided significantly higher rating for traditional conservatism than Chinese and Taiwanese females did. There were no other significant comparisons (see Table 1).

Discussion

Summary of Results

Participants' endorsement of the importance of the Confucian values both supported and challenged our predictions. *H1*, which stated that the key Confucian values would still be upheld at varying degrees, was supported. Specifically, the interpersonal harmony values were endorsed the most, followed by relational hierarchy, with the traditional conservatism as the least important value. *H2* was partially supported in that Chinese participants provided the highest ratings for the interpersonal harmony and relational hierarchy values, but not conservatism. We also found some support

for *H3* in that Japanese female participants were more conservative than Japanese male participants and Chinese and Taiwanese female participants. Together, these results reveal similarities and differences among young people in these East Asian culture and provide insights into research and theorizing on globalization, culture, and communication.

Influences of Globalization on Confucian Values in the East

The essence of globalization is the “conjunction of different forms of life” (Robertson, 1992, p. 27). Western scholars tend to conclude that globalization may have fostered a global materialistic fever and jeopardized traditional values (Pollay, Tse, & Wang, 1990). Previous studies (e.g., Yang & Cheng, 1987; Zhang & Harwood, 2004) already suggested that some core and deep-rooted Confucian values, such as interpersonal harmony, are more indigenous and may coexist with modernity whereas others (e.g., thrift) are losing their flavor. The results of this study seem to echo a similar tone in which conservatism was not endorsed as much. Three of the four mini-economic dragons, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, have achieved significant economic advancement (Tu, 1996). Joining the global economy at a much later date, China is the fastest growing and largest potential market in the world (Chan & Cheng, 2002). Some of the fundamental principles of traditional conservatism (e.g., being contented in one’s life, thrifty, non-competitiveness, having few desires) are in contrast with modernity and consumerism. Hence, conservatism was the least endorsed value.

This study also has demonstrated both similarities and heterogeneity of the fundamental East Asian cultural values, reflecting different cultural dynamics in modern Asian societies. For most, findings in this study provided empirical evidence demonstrating that East Asian divisions should not be treated as a single cultural entity; rather, each developed its own unique Confucian characteristics. China is still the most traditional Confucian society regarding harmony and social hierarchy. The other three societies that opened to international business earlier than China all scored lower on the two major Confucian values. In combination of the low ratings on traditional conservatism across the four societies, results in this study offered evidence of cultural change in an age of modernization and globalization.

This study reconfirms our understanding of Japanese women as the most conservative. Our preferred explanation for the gender effect on conservatism in Japan is consistent with our previous contention that Japanese females have accustomed to the societal expectations for them to be “good wives”, which involves suppression of certain ambitions and desires that are the characteristics of males (Hofstede, 1980).

Conclusions

Western accounts of East Asian communication tended to paint all Asian cultures with the same broad brush (i.e., collectivism), thus neglecting subtlety, especially

within younger, more educated, and urban segments of Asian societies. This study challenged that assumption that young people in modern East Asian societies viewed Confucian values similarly. As modern values are gaining their places in these areas (Zhang & Harwood, 2004), our findings pose legitimate questions as to ways in which modern life styles and individualism compete and coexist with the Confucian values in these societies. Future research should examine the direct link between endorsement of values (both traditional and modern values) and specific communicative practices, thus reflecting dynamics of cultural exchange and communication in East Asian societies. In doing so, scholars and practitioners should resist the temptation of generalization and be sensitive to the “localized” Confucianism and its spheres of influence.

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