What collective? Collectivism and relationalism from a Chinese perspective

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Individualism and collectivism form a paired concept frequently used in studying cross-cultural communication. Yet conflicting findings on collectivism have led researchers to question its applicability across cultures, especially concerning the meaning of "collective". By definition, "collective" refers to large groups that, through a common identity, tie the members together into a community. The scale to measure collectivism, however, has often used in-group members as examples to explore the way respondents relate to others. As these "others" were used to stand for "collectives", something that they are not, the meaning of collectivism became muddied, and its validity and reliability suffered. A re-examination of the collectivism concept from a Chinese standpoint is called for, as Confucian teachings have been considered as the philosophical basis for collectivism, and East Asian societies – especially Chinese societies – have often been seen as prototypical collectivist cultures. The purpose of this paper is, however, not to propose a Chinese version of collectivism. Rather, the goal is to clearly distinguish between "collective" and "others" in studying collectivism. Based on an in-depth analysis of Chinese and Confucian cultures and the literature on *guanxi*, it is argued that the concept of relationalism will more closely reflect the way self relates to others in these societies. Moreover, a tripartite model of individualism, relationalism, and collectivism will provide a more comprehensive framework for the study of the way self relates to others in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: relation; *guanxi*; relationalism; collectivism; individualism; intercultural communication; organizational communication; interpersonal interactions; self; other

Introduction

As a way to organize cultural differences into overarching patterns, the individualism and collectivism (I/C) model proposed by Hofstede (1980) has been one of the most widely used pairs of concepts in comparative and intercultural communication research (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Kim et al., 1996; Kim, Smith, & Gu, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 1989).

Empirical findings have pointed to distinct communication styles between collectivist and individualistic cultures (Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, & Contarello, 1986; Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Chen & Chung, 1994; Gudykunst et al., 1996; Law, Wong, Wang, & Wang, 2000; Li & Chi, 2004; Ma, 1992; Ma & Chuang, 2001; Seo, Miller, Schumidt, & Sowa, 2008; Tsui & Farh, 1997; Xin, 1997; Yum, 1988). In the former, the communication style between persons tends to be indirect, non-expressive, and high context, while that in the latter is direct, expressive, and low context. Collectivism and individualism also lead to different communication

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strategies; those in collectivist cultures prefer to encourage, give credit, or make promises while attempting to exercise influences, and in conflict situations tend to appeal to compromise and win-win solutions. Those in individualist cultures, in contrast, would more frequently resort to threats, ultimatums, and negative stimuli in pursuing desired outcomes, and utilize penalty, confrontations, and social pressures in dealing with conflict.

The above findings seem to have supported the linkage between collectivism and a certain communication style. Yet it is important to note that similar studies have also produced conflicting results. For example, in order to clarify the connection between individualism/collectivism and individual communication strategies, Kim et al. (1996) have regarded "self construal" as a mediator between culture and individual communication style. After comparing Japanese, Korean, Hawaiian, and Continental American students, they found a close connection between individualism and a direct and expressive communication style. The relationship between collectivism and indirect and other-oriented modes of communication is, however, not clear. Utilizing the I/C model to study the argumentative behavior of Chinese in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, Yeh and Chen (2004) also found that – in Chinese societies – independent individuals are more inclined to engage in argument. However, contrary to what would be expected, they are also more sensitive to the issue of face and thus able to restrain from potentially offensive argumentation.

The emergence of conflicting findings has led us to question if East Asians and Chinese are indeed collectivists and, more importantly perhaps, the meaning of collectivism. As Confucian teachings have been considered to form the philosophical basis for collectivism (Kim, 1994), and East Asian societies – especially Chinese societies – have often been seen as prototypical collectivist cultures (Yuki, 2003), it is necessary to re-examine the I/C model from a Chinese standpoint.

The purpose of this paper is not to propose a Chinese version of collectivism, as that would sink us in the quicksand of cultural essentialism. Rather, the goal is to clearly distinguish between "collective" and "others" in studying the way self relates to others. Based on an in-depth analysis of Chinese and Confucian cultures and the literature on *guanxi*, it is argued that the concept of relationalism will more closely reflect the features of these societies. In addition, a tripartite model of individualism, relationalism, and collectivism will provide a more comprehensive framework for the study of the way self relates to others in a cross-cultural context.

Following the above objective, this paper will begin with a brief review of the individualism/collectivism literature in cross-cultural research. To further clarify the substantive meaning of the terms, the historical root of the paired concept will be explored, and the evidence for Chinese collectivism, and the relation, or *guanxi*, in the Chinese interpersonal networks and cross-cultural literature will be re-examined. Finally, the paper will discuss the significance of adding relationalism to the individualism/collectivism concept in studying the way self relates to others.

Collectivism, individualism, and cross-cultural research

Despite the popularity of the I/C model, it has been criticized on both theoretical and methodological grounds in recent years. First, there is the inherent problem of individualism methodology that lies in the use of quantitative methods to study cultural or social issues, and the difficulty of transferring a set of country-level

concepts to the personal level (Bond, 1994). In addition, the paired concepts were faulted for their overly broad and diffuse definition in a "catchall" manner (Brewer & Chen, 2007, p. 134). Researchers have also challenged the feasibility of the instruments to assess individualism and collectivism (e.g., their idiosyncratic operationalizations and poor internal reliabilities) (Bond, 2002; Brett, Tinsley, Janssens, Barsness, & Lytle, 1997; Brewer & Chen, 2007; Fiske, 2002; Kitayama, 2002; Morling & Lamoureaux, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2002).

In view of such criticisms, Schimmack, Oishi, and Diener (2005) argued that the individualism scale is valid once national differences in response styles and self-report measures are taken into consideration, following a re-analysis of vertical and horizontal I/C scale data from an international survey. The same, however, did not hold true in the study for measures on collectivism; responses were found to have correlated highly with endorsement scores/response bias (Brewer & Chen, 2007).

Some of the findings contradicting I/C hypotheses have cast doubts over the validity of the collectivism scale. Americans were not shown to be less collectivistic than Filipinos (Shulruf, Hattie, & Dixon, 2007; Triandis, 2001). While people from collectivist cultures were as self-reliant as those in individualistic cultures, they did not demonstrate greater in-group favoritism (Smith & Bond, 1999; Triandis, 1989, Yuki, 2003), or discrimination against out-groups (Gudykunst, 1988; Yuki, 2003). A meta-analysis of 50 studies by Oyserman et al. (2002) showed European Americans to be no less collectivistic than East Asians (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2002). Reviews by Heine (2002), Matsumoto (1999), and Takano and Osaka (1999) have essentially reached the same conclusion (Morling & Lamoureaux, 2008, p. 202), challenging the "established view" that European Americans are more individualistic and independent, and less collectivistic and interdependent compared with East Asians.

The conflicting results indicated at least two possibilities: (a) Americans and East Asians did not differ according to the way the construct was defined, meaning that the construct does not have the discriminatory power it was expected to have,[1] or (b) the measures were not tapping the construct in the way it was defined, meaning they had poor validity. In either case, a thorough review at both the conceptual and the measurement levels was urgently called for. "Cross-cultural psychologists may have to rethink the concept of collectivism", Schimmack et al. (2005, p. 27) warned. To determine the reason for its purported failure, the first task would be to clarify the meaning of collectivism.

According to Ho and Chiu (1994) and Triandis (1995), collectivism has appeared in tribal societies, ancient empires, the communism of early Christians, and in communes, kibbutzim, and experiments in communal living. Such a wide variety of forms of collectivism is indicative of the nature of the concept. As Oyserman et al. (2002, p. 5) noted, "...[C]ollectivism is a diverse construct, joining together culturally disparate foci on different kinds and levels of referent groups". The concept of collectivism refers to a range of values, attitudes, and behaviors much broader than individualism (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Hui, 1988; Triandis, 1995).

The historical roots of the constructs and their measurements

As emphasized by Kim (1994) and Triandis (1995), people and societies are typically both individualistic and collectivistic. As extremes in a continuum, the paired concept, however, showed distinct features of an underlying dualistic mode: mutually

exclusive opposing dichotomies existing in tension, with one tending to overtake the other (Chi, 2003). These characteristics become clearer when the historical background of collectivism is considered.

Collectivism has not had a good name in modern history. Although the collective theme could be traced back to Plato's *Republic* and to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social* (1772/1954, as cited in Brewer & Chen, 2007, p. 133), unlike individualism, it received no credit for inspiring, nor bringing European civilization to modernity. To the contrary, it was a symbol of "the enslaving 'belongingness' to the feudal master or guild during the Middle Ages", as Rotenberg (1977, p. 6) pointed out. It was associated with everything that was left behind in the Dark Age: authoritarianism, traditionalism, mechanical solidarity, and lack of human rights (Durkheim, 1893/1964; Triandis, 1995).

Individualism, in contrast, was set against the background of Enlightenment, when the expansion of trade made it necessary to protect individual interests by way of forming contract-like relationships. These relationships provided protection for private property and allowed individual autonomy to grow. The concept of the individual and the subjectivity therein implied and the contractual relations derived from new concepts of private ownership are therefore intertwined. Durkheim (1893/1964) suggests that private property and the stipulation of contracts demarcates the boundaries between traditional and modern society. Therefore, the starting point for the enlightenment is not the conviction in and value of collectivism, nor is it the mechanical solidarity that Durkheim mentioned. Rather, individual self has become the starting point for all thought processes (Habermas, 1989; Macpherson, 1962).

Since the enlightenment, the individualist mode of thinking, new religious teachings, individual freedoms, and a social and civic structure of self-realization have formed the foundation for an individualistic culture that has enabled the development of modernity and supplied rich philosophical resources for the construct of individualism. In contrast, collectivist culture has not experienced modernity; it is not related to rationality, individual subjectivity, or contractual relations, but rather with "emotion" and "interdependence".

Collectivism, therefore, has been regarded as the opposition to individualism – something to be discarded if modernity is to be embraced as the better, more advanced, and more desirable option. As the process of evolution purportedly followed a generally linear, unidirectional path from tradition to modernity or post modernity, those that have failed to come out of collectivism therefore lag the individualistic in terms of development and are flawed in their attempt to modernize. Researchers have assumed that Protestantism and civic emancipation in Western societies resulted in social and civic structures that highlighted the importance of individual choice, personal freedom, and self-actualization (Inglehart, 1997; Sampson, 2001). As these processes have led to an emphasis on individualism in Western societies, European Americans have been portrayed as the most individualistic group in current theorizing in cultural psychology, in contrast to the more traditional societies in developing countries (Oyserman et al., 2002).

The I/C model, therefore, was developed within the individualistic cultural framework, but deemed to be a universal construct applicable across cultures (Kim et al., 1994; Li & Chi, 2004; Oyserman et al., 2002). Today, few would deny that Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan are part of the modern world, and that China

is rapidly catching up. If individualism is an important factor of modernity, then the greatest challenge to researchers – especially those from the so-called collectivist societies (Bond, 1994) – is to determine whether collectivism, as defined in the literature, can still meaningfully distinguish one group of people from another.

With slight differences in their definitions of collectivism, Hofstede (n.d.), Oyserman et al. (2002), and Triandis (1995) shared the same emphasis on the significance of collectives to individuals in defining collectivism. As Oyserman et al. (2002, p. 5) pointed out, the core element of collectivism is the assumption that "groups bind and mutually obligate individuals". In a collectivistic society, individuals see themselves as parts of collectives; they are motivated by the ascribed obligations and the norms of the collective. Members of the collective place the interest and objective of the group over those of the individual. Their connectedness to members of in-groups also significantly differs from relationships with those from out-groups (Triandis, 1995).

Despite the centrality of the social group to the concept of collectivism, it has received little attention in the literature (Brewer & Chen, 2007), and problems with the ways in operationalizing collectives and the domains of individual-group relationships (e.g., identity or priority of interests) were largely left unresolved (Brewer & Chen, 2007). According to Brewer and Chen (2007), Brewer and Gardner (1996), and Ezioni (1968), the members of collectives do not necessarily have close personal relations. Yet in most collectivism research, the majority of groups under study were in-groups – rarely the type of large social groups indicated by the term "collective". Respondents were described as "collectivistic" if they were found to be interdependent, thus failing to exhibit the Western view of an independent self (Dunning & Kim, 2007; Yeung & Tung, 1996).

Based on the above "anomalies", Brewer and Chen (2007, p. 137) declared collectivism a "misnomer" – it is people's orientations to relational others that dominate conceptual discussions and empirical measures of collectivism, rather than collectives or large social groups as the term indicates. Whether the "collective" under investigation features social connections that are personalized bonds of attachment or impersonal membership derives from common identification with a certain social group, therefore, matters. In other words, the purported characteristics of collectivism found in many empirical studies are in fact characteristics of a relational orientation.

Given the large variety of cultures labeled as "collectivistic" as compared to those labeled as "individualistic", can there be different patterns of individual-group relationships involved with different groups, and in different cultures? Have we defined and cut out groups in the right way to capture crucial distinctions? If yes, why did Fei Xiao-tong (1993), a Chinese sociologist widely respected for his works on Chinese society in the early 1900s, describe Chinese culture as selfism,[2] yet describe the West as collectivist? What features are to be expected of modern "collectivist" societies? In the next paragraphs, we will try to clarify the above issues by re-examining the features of Chinese culture.

Collectivism in Chinese culture

In the literature, Chinese culture has generally been considered collectivist because it emphasizes obligations and collective interests over those of individuals (Hui, 1988; Yang, 1991). Ho and Chiu (1994) pointed out that in China, individualism means

selfishness, thoughtlessness of others, and resistance to group discipline. To the contrary, collectivism has positive connotations (e.g., enhancing group solidarity). Sun (1990) suggests that the self in Chinese culture is suppressed and underdeveloped. The manifestation of this weak self-consciousness is reluctance to fight for one's rights and a tendency to package desires, preferences, and disagreements with courtesy and politeness. In appearance, it is all for harmony.

Confucianism has been seen as the philosophical foundation for collectivism because the features of collectivism are compatible with Confucian values. Kim (1994, p. 26), for example, suggests that liberalism extols the virtues of individualism, while Confucianism glorifies collectivism:

> In east Asia, Confucianism became the dominant moral-political philosophy. Confucianism promotes the collective welfare and harmony as its ultimate goal. … Individuals are encouraged to put other people's and the group's interests before their own. … Confession and compromise are essential ingredients in promoting a role- and virtue-based conception of justice.

In addition, researchers found evidence of collectivism in Chinese tradition (e.g., proscriptions that had placed individuals under sets of tedious taboos) (Triandis, 1995). Although these observations are not completely groundless, they suffer from a lack of in-depth understanding of Confucianism and the social context within which Chinese tradition needs to be examined. First, by citing proscriptions as evidence for collectivism, Triandis seems to have taken taboos as something similar to what Durkheim described as social fact: it is outside of the individual, yet it holds a degree of authority even if an individual does not recognize its existence. If this is the case, then the fact that taboos exist in both collectivist and individualist societies means that citing cultural taboos as evidence of collectivism confuses cultural phenomena with the concept.

Secondly, there is a need to clarify the features of collectivism that Kim et al. have pointed out exist within Confucian teaching, the concept of self being an important one. The Chinese self-concept has often been described as de-emphasized, suppressed, and restrained, as Confucianism discourages hedonistic and selfish desires in order to achieve moral self-discipline (Kim, 1994). However, according to Yang (1991), in Confucianism, the self is actually the driving force of individual action; it is the key to an ideal society and has never been de-emphasized.

The major difference between Confucianism and Western liberalism is the way self was emphasized and expected to develop. Rather than accentuating self-actualization and external inclination of the individual (Yu, 1987), Confucianism focuses on the internal discipline or cultivation of the self – a long-term process that leads to individual development by internalizing ethical values such as humanity, justice, trust, diligence, and persistence.

Confucianism's emphasis on individual self-cultivation has implications to our discussion of collectivism on at least two levels. First, as the ultimate goal of this internal self-cultivation is the unity of man and nature, self-cultivation is also the key to maintaining social order and harmony (Tu, 1985; Yang, 1991). In other words, there is no need to distinguish between individual goals and social objectives, as they are ultimately the same. Second, the success or failure of individual self-cultivation and ultimately the kind of person one may become is entirely the responsibility of the individual. Therefore, persistence, self-reliance, and individual will are heavily emphasized. Individuals in Chinese societies are therefore mutually supportive and

interdependent through ascribed roles in dyadic relationships (Barnes, 1998; Tu, 1985; Yang, 1991). However, these characteristics do not necessarily result in the lack of personal initiative indicated as emblematic of the collectivism of Hofstede's individualism/collectivism concept (Kim, 1994; Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007).

After comparing self-reliance between Americans and Chinese, Niles (1998, p. 338) concluded that collectivism and individualism do not follow an either-or model:

> Collectivism does not seem to mean less achievement striving or low self-reliance, nor does it seem to imply an unequivocal subordination of the interests of the individual to that of the collective. Respect and concern for family and a willingness to feel responsible for and serve in-groups seem to be evident, but this does not need to be in conflict with an individual striving for his or her own goals, because ultimately they can benefit the family or community as a whole.

Confucianism, therefore, does not only foster collectivist values; it also fosters individualistic values. As Triandis (1995, p. 21) noted, "When reading Confucius … one is struck by the extent to which some of his statements urged people to be individualists".

In addition to the above attributes of Confucianism, which are incompatible with the concept of collectivism, Confucianism has two more important features that act to clearly distinguish itself from collectivism. These are the way the network of relationships is formed and, most importantly, the absence of a "collective" concept.

Examining relations from a Chinese perspective

There has been little disagreement on the importance of networks for the Chinese concept of the self (Tu, 1985). However, rather than putting the family in the center of networks (Abbott, 1970; Barnes, 1998), Fei Xiao-tong placed the self at the heart of everything and all considerations – a tendency that he termed "selfism". This selfism concept is different from Western individualism, as the latter is defined in terms of the individual versus the group relationship, while the former proposes that all values lie in the self being the heart of everything (Fei, 1993, p. 27).

According to Fei, the basic unit of Chinese social structure consists of concentric circles that emanates as ripples. With "self" in the center, the significance of the circles decreases according to their distance from the center, and networks begin to form as ripples from different centers intersect and overlap. Selfism also finds its root in Confucianism, Fei argued, as Confucianism maps out a set of normative rules based on differentiations, forming a "system of differentiation", or "differential mode of association" (*chaxugeju*), in his words. Confucius said, "If one is to keep his family in harmony, he should first cultivate and discipline himself; if one is to rule his country effectively, he should first keep his family in harmony; and if one is to bring peace to the world, he should first rule his country effectively" (1959, pp. 10–12).[3] In other words, there is a predetermined order: from the self to the family, the nation, and the world. A son, therefore, will be condemned if he reports the crime of his father, because family takes priority over the laws of the nation.[4] Likewise, people are encouraged to take care of the young and the elderly unrelated to them only when their own have been taken care of first.

Yu Ying-shi (1987) has attempted to consider this issue by distinguishing between personalism and individualism. He considers the West an individualist culture because, to Westerners, the individual refers to a single entity, which is abstract and

general. However, for the Chinese, the individual refers to a concrete and particular entity. Precisely because of this difference, Westerners place greater emphasis on equality – in the legal and formal sense. However, personalism makes it difficult for the Chinese to live a disciplined and collective life.

From this concept of self, a set of differentiation rules that locates the individual at the center of a network was developed (see Figure 1). The appropriateness of the behavior of an individual therefore depends on his/her role vis-à-vis that of the "other" involved. It is through this relationship – rather than membership in a collective – that an individual can find his/her position in a network. The self, therefore, is defined through the role of a father/mother, husband/wife, or senior/junior. "Social positioning" becomes the first step to determining the proper set of rules for initiating interactions among individuals, and the way an individual is obligated to his/her parents fundamentally differs from that to children, brothers and sisters, nephew and nieces, and uncles and aunts, even if they are from the same family. As Tanaka (cited in Triandis, 1995, p. 32) pointed out, the way that the Japanese act largely depends on their location in a hierarchy, which in turn is determined based on demographic attributes.

In-groups of China and East Asia are complex networks formed through interrelated individual members (Hamaguchi, 1977; Kim & Lee, 1994; Lebra, 1976; Nakane, 1970). Their significance to those in relational cultures, however, is far from that described in the concept of collectivism. As Jacobs (1979) argued, in terms of relations-forming, all group memberships and all shared experiences, personal identities, and even existing personal ties can be "bases of *guanxi*", the literal translation of relations in Chinese. These groups and experiences include shared personal identity with family, hometown, surname, schools, places of work, and shared experiences in disasters, events, military service, or common friends, enemies, etc. In a study by Yuki, Maddux, Brewer, and Takemura (2005), it was discovered that Americans are inclined to trust strangers belonging to the same group. However, for a Japanese to trust strangers, a relationship – either direct or indirect – must be established with his/her friends or relatives. The findings seemed to have lent support to Jacobs' argument that in a culture that stresses relationships, even if group membership is important, it is important because these groups and organizations foster relationships. The establishment of a formal association is not a requisite to this sense of group identity, and the existence of a *guanxi* basis does not guarantee a close relationship (Jacobs, 1979). On the other hand, as an established
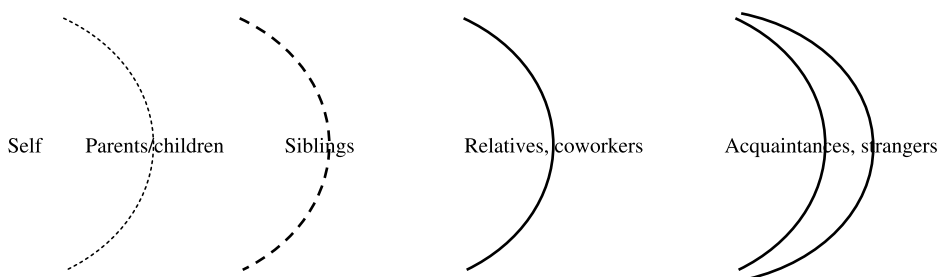

Self   Parents/children   Siblings   Relatives, coworkers   Acquaintances, strangers

Figure 1. A diagram of selfism.

guanxi can be the basis to establish other *guanxi*, one is not independent of the other, and is, in a way, "transferable", as indicated by Luo (2000).

Also crucial to the way networks are formed in Chinese cultures are the rules of reciprocity. These rules must be considered with the rules of differentiation; while the latter pave the ground for initial interactions, the rules of reciprocity determine the nature and the kind of relationship that is developed. Generally speaking, the more one owes to another, the greater one's obligations to that individual. Because children are deeply indebted to their parents, filial piety teachings suggest that children should place the wishes, interests, and objectives of parents over their own. This includes the most important decisions in one's life (e.g., whom to marry or what career to pursue). The same situation may rarely occur in relationships with other "significant others", let alone "insignificant others" such as fellow members of an alumni organization.

Because of this rule of reciprocity, the relations thus formed have two distinct features: they are fluid and constantly revised, but also unique or "particularistic", as Jacobs (1979) described it. For example, an elder daughter who takes care of her younger siblings when the parents are absent may foster a parent-children bond with them and adopt the role of a mother. It is also quite common for very close friends to refer to, and treat, one another as brothers or sisters – sometimes even more like members of a family. As Barnes (1998), King (1992), and Yu (1987) pointed out, the concept of family in Chinese culture has great elasticity for expansion and contraction. Horizontally, it may expand to everyone bearing the same last name, and vertically, to ancestors and offspring generations away.

As the rules of differentiation and relationship of humanity (*ren luen*) were not "compromisable" to Confucius and his followers, ideas such as universal love were unacceptable. According to Feng (1991b, pp. 92–93), Mencius, for example, severely criticized Yang Zhu and Mozi:

> Yang's principle of "each one for himself/herself" does not acknowledge the claims of the sovereign, and Mozi's principle of "loving all equally" does not acknowledge the affection due to a father. There would be no difference between human beings and beasts if neither sovereign nor father is acknowledged.

Likewise, Fan Xuanzi has sacrificed the graded order by inscribing the penal code onto a bronze cauldron, because the action implied legal equality (Yeh, 1996). From a Confucian perspective, the thoughts and actions of Mozi, Yang Zhu, and Fan Xuanzi are equally condemnable because everyone was treated alike.

As relationships are not concrete, but rather open to reciprocal assessment and reassessment – including the Chinese concept of *bao* or social reciprocity – the obligation and obedience of the self is never unilinear or unconditional. This is entirely incompatible with the kind of obligations that the individual has towards a group as specified in collectivist culture. In fact, in the eyes of Chinese sociologists and psychologists (Fei, 1993; Yang, 1991), the idea of the collective, which maintains the group through a common identity, is nearly non-existent in Confucian thought. Even family, considered as the most important, tightly knit primary group with educational, economic, political, religious, and entertainment functions (King, 1992), is by nature different from the collective as defined in collectivism.

Besides the lack of a concept for "collective", Confucian teachings have not provided an explicit set of rules to dictate the interactions between individuals and strangers, aside from humanitarian concerns for all. Values and sayings such as

compassion (*ren*), "put oneself in another's position", "do not do to others what you don't want to be done to you", and the necessary submission of the "small self" to the "big self" are all rather vague principles. As Fei pointed out (1993, p. 34), in the system of differentiations, there is a lack of moral guidelines that can reach beyond the network of private relationships. Those who are not related to the self, therefore, are mostly seen as "insignificant others" whose wellbeing does not, and should not, concern the "self". King (1992) believes that this attitude and the rules governing reciprocal relations have often become the cause of nepotism in Chinese culture.

The above-mentioned characteristics of Confucian culture have found clear evidence in empirical investigations. In studies by Schwartz (1990) and Brewer and Chen (2007), for example, "collectivists" were found to be less – not "more", as expected – concerned than were "individualists" for the welfare of strangers who might be members of an in-group. A similar kind of social apathy of East Asians is reflected in their lack of discrimination against out-groups among East Asians when there is no tangible benefit to the in-group (Jin, 1995; Yamagishi, Nobuhito, & Kiyonari, 1999; Yuki, 2003). Other study results not only have failed to support the collectivism hypothesis, but have demonstrated the importance of relationships and reciprocity. Yamagishi et al. (1999) pointed out that when the goodwill of Japanese respondents has not been adequately rewarded, they have been less likely to favor the in-group. Likewise, Benedict (1946) suggested that the loyalty of Japanese in-groups is based on reciprocal relationships.

The above analyses have highlighted several features of individuals' orientation to "self" and "others" in Chinese cultures, and to a large extent, Confucian cultures:

1. The idea of a clearly defined "collective" is vague or absent.
2. Individuals define themselves according to their relative *position* in the network, not via the group; and they are not mutually obligated members bound by a group.
3. Individuals follow the rules of differentiation and reciprocity in their interaction with others.
4. Individuals often exhibit characteristics of both individualism and collectivism.
5. Group memberships are important because they foster relationships and form a *guanxi* base; a common *guanxi* base, however, does not guarantee close association.
6. Each of the dyadic relationships an individual has with another member of the group – whether it is in-group or out-group – is unique; no two relations are entirely the same.
7. Group needs, interests, and objectives are rarely placed above that of the individual; the determining factor is his/her reciprocal relationship with the "other" involved – whether they are, or are not, members of the same group.
8. The collective norms and obligations are hardly the driving force for achievement; it is the self that seeks constant internal cultivation for its share of the contribution to a world of peace and good life.
9. There are no clear guidelines to dictate an individual's interactions with the "unrelated". In contrast to significant others, the insignificant others are, at best, unimportant to the individual.

The above features have revealed major differences between Chinese cultures and collectivist cultures as described in the literature. However, cultures change.

A look into the recent trend of development in present-day Chinese societies is therefore necessary.

As early as the 1920s, intellectuals leading the May 4th New Cultural Movement in China heralded individualism as the symbol of progress and modernity. Any constraint on liberalizing the individual – including Confucian teachings – was suspected of being a feudal curse for China to struggle with (Chow, 1995; Hu, 1921). When the issues of modernization and cultural contradictions finally settled, the concept of the self and the manner in which individuals treat others also changed. Yang (1996) pointed out that in the past 20 years, survey findings on tradition and modernity have shown that fewer Taiwanese respondents give priority to family and interpersonal relations, while the importance of self, independence, competitiveness, and equality has significantly increased. Taiwan cannot represent the other Chinese societies, let alone all East Asian cultures. There are, however, two important observations to make based on empirical findings:

1. The importance of relations in Chinese and East Asian cultures has continued to receive support in empirical findings. According to Hamaguchi (1977), his study results have pointed to an East Asian strategy of maximizing individual benefit via mutually beneficial collaborative relations with group members. Likewise, research of *guanxi* also indicated personal relations as a crucial element in organizations and business management not only in China, but also in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chow & Ng, 2004; Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998; Jacobs, 1979; Luo, 2000; Nee, 1992; Tsang, 1998; Tsui & Farh, 1997; Xin & Pearce, 1996; Yang, 1994).
2. None of the above findings has provided evidence to show that Chinese and East Asians are, or will likely become, collectivistic.

Since the I/C model was proposed, more types of self/other interactive relations have been introduced to the analytical framework to refine the distinctions between types. Rotenberg (1977), for example, utilized reciprocal individualism to describe Jewish Hasidic values. According to him, reciprocal individualism refers to the independence and self-reliance of the individual. At the same time, it also suggests mutual relations and harmonious co-existence. Although this concept has integrated the features of collectivism and individualism, conceptually relational-collectivism, reciprocal individualism, and vertical and horizontal individualism and collectivism can all be considered part of the same theoretical construct. However, if a culture that does not possess individualist features is not necessarily collectivist, it is important to recognize relational orientation as a third category of self/other relations.

Unfortunately, while the problem with operationalizing collectivism has been criticized in recent years, studies have continued to use the concepts of "others" and "collective" interchangeably in hypothesizing, testing, and describing the mode of relationships between the individual and others, and the concept-measurement issue was left unresolved. As the complexity of modern life has multiplied the number of factors in interactions between individuals in various contexts, the greatest challenge for researchers today is to construct an analytical framework to more effectively capture the nature and cross-cultural differences of the self/other relationship. What is called for is not only a proper way to operationalize collectivism, but also a way to incorporate "relation" as an important dimension in our study of the way self relates to others.

Relation, relationalism, and implications for communication research

In the social scientific literature, relations is not a new area of study; comparative studies on self-construals, *guanxi* research on Chinese organizations, and investigations on social behavior and social networks especially merit our attention.

The study of "self-construal" as proposed by Markus and Kitayama (1991) has become a useful tool for cross-cultural communication researchers, as it bridges the disjuncture between culture and individual behavior by examining the way the individual looks at the relationship between his/her "self" and "others". In Western cultures, it is believed that there is an inherent separateness of distinct persons; the conception of self is autonomous and independent, emphasizing self-actualization. In contrast, the self in many Asian cultures is part of a social relationship in that one's behavior is contingent on the thoughts and actions of "others" in the relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, pp. 226–227). The "interdependent self", therefore, cannot be described as a "bounded whole", as it changes with the nature of the social context; the focus is on the relationships between the self and its others.

To further underscore the significance of relationships in Asian cultures, Brewer and Gardner (1996) proposed the trichotomization of individual self, relational self, and collective self in distinguishing different levels of self-representation. Conceptual distinction between relational self and collective self has also been used in the discussion of group identification. In a study of group membership, Prentice, Miller, and Lightdale (1994) found that members of groups based on a common identity were more closely associated with the group than to fellow group members, whereas members of groups based on interpersonal bonds were more attached to members of the group. There was also a stronger relationship between identification with the group and evaluation of group members (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In other words, the relational self is built upon the basis of personalized bonds, and is defined in terms of associations and role relations between the self and important others. The collective self, on the other hand, is based on impersonal bonds, and is made meaningful by the prototypical properties that depersonalized members of a common in-group share. Whether these types of impersonal bonds can be established therefore depends not on social distance between group members, but also on members' identification with the group. A study by Yuki (2003, pp. 169–170) showed that the differences between "relational orientation" and "collective orientation" were clearly reflected in the extent to which Japanese respondents identified and remained loyal to their in-groups.

Research into social identity has found that East-Asian self-construals (Yuki, 2003) feature a relational-self that is starkly different from a collectivist self in several areas, including: susceptibility to influence by significant others (Abrams, Ando, & Hinkle, 1998), blurred boundaries between in-group members (Fiske, Kitayama, Makus, & Nisbett, 1998), attention, cognition, emotion, and motivation on the basis of relations and norms (Fiske et al., 1998), and emphasis on keeping harmony within the collective (Ho & Chiu, 1994; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997; Smith & Bond, 1999; Yuki, 2003). What the above studies have failed to take into full consideration is the fluid nature of relations following the rule of reciprocity. Yet studies of "relational self", just as those of "interdependent self", have highlighted distinct differences from the individual self and the collective self, whether it concerns the basis of self-evaluation or a frame of reference.

In contrast to the cultural psychological approach to studying relations via self-construals within an I/C framework, recent studies of *guanxi*, as mentioned earlier in this paper, have targeted personal relations – especially those in Chinese organizations. Defined as a dyadic or network of particularistic reciprocal ties often involving the exchange of favors,[5] *guanxi* has been seen as a resilient feature central to the Chinese culture embedded in Confucianism (Dunning & Kim, 2007).

As this explosion of scholarship was set against the background of China's reopening to the world as an economic powerhouse and investors and transnational CEOs' first encounters with this prevailing social phenomena (Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002), the literature has exhibited a tendency to focus on the instrumentality of *guanxi* in Chinese business organizations, including patterns of communication and interaction (Li & Chi, 2004), leadership style, resource allocation (Cheng, 1995; Cheng, Hsieh, & Chou, 2002; Huang, 2003; Law et al., 2000; Li & Chi, 2004), strategic thinking and decision making (Chen & Easterby-Smith, 2008; Gold et al., 2002). Osigweh and Huo (1993), for example, found that the overlap of workplace and private *guanxi* tends to be more common and much larger for Chinese than it is for American employers. In a number of studies, *guanxi* has even been used to unlock the mystery behind the entrepreneurial energy of Chinese capitalism – a feature presumed to reside only in "heroic individuals" (Gold et al., 2002, pp. 11–12).

The *guanxi* literature is rich and complex, but it has also been criticized on several accounts, including its positivist methodology and neo-liberal discourse (Yang, 2002), its failure to capture the dynamic aspects of the concept (Chen & Chen, 2004; Yang, 2001a, 2001b), an over-emphasis on the classification – but not the measurement – of these types, and on its pragmatic utility.

Relations has also been an important topic of study in social behavioral research (Hwang, 2005b), including social exchange theory (Emerson, 1981), justice motive theory (Lerner, 1981), theory of intrapersonal contracts (Kayser & Schwinger, 1982), and analyses on interpersonal relations (Greenberg & Cohen, 1982). Most of these studies have attempted to analyze the association between relations and social behavior by distinguishing types of human relations. Fiske (1991) and Hwang (2005b), for example, proposed that there are four types of relations – communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing – in all human activities, works, actions, and organizations.

In recent years, social networks have become a popular research topic in information science, organization studies, communication research, and social psychology, thanks to the quick rise of the Internet (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In these studies, relations are deemed as "ties". Together with actors as "nods", they form the backbone of a network. Ties are differentiated according to their role and function in a network. For example, weak ties may be more useful in information seeking as they normally involve individuals who have less in common with an actor (Bae & Koo, 2008).

It is important to note that although all of the above studies involve some form of interpersonal relations, the way they have been conceptualized is fundamentally different from that in a Chinese society. As Hwang (2005b) pointed out, most of the studies on relations in social behavior theories have been built on the assumption that individuals are independent beings who interact with others according to their free will and the rules of social exchange. In contrast, little attention is paid to factors such as reciprocity in interpersonal interaction and culturally ascribed roles and positions.

In other words, the basis for conceptualizing relations is predominantly individualistic. In view of these shortcomings, relationalism, as proposed by Hwang, has incorporated social theories (originating in the West and culture-general by nature) with ideas of differential and reciprocal relations (originating in China and culture-specific by nature). Based on his "favor (*renqing*)/face model" (Hwang, 1987) and the concepts of communal relationship and exchange relationship (Clark & Mills, 1979), Hwang (2005a) suggests that relationalism consists of a particular dimension and a universal dimension. The former deals with "persons-in-relation", according to the Confucian rule of differentiation, while the latter deals with "person-in-relations", according to different rules of interactions. These rules, in turn, refer to three relation types: (a) emotional/affective relations based on needs for love and belonging, which refer to interactions with friends, relatives, and family members; (b) instrumental relations based on instrumental value, which refer to the market type of resource exchanges and interactions with strangers for the satisfaction of material needs; and (c) mixed relations based on favors, which refer to exchanges of both feelings and material benefits that occur among friends and acquaintances. Matters concerning instrumental relations are usually dealt with in a just and objective manner, as they concern interaction with strangers who do not have a place in a person's network, yet those in the other two relation types are more often complicated by favor and face issues.

Relationalism as defined by Hwang has successfully captured the important features of a modern relativist culture by incorporating the idea of social distance. The closer the "self" is from the "other", the more likely their interaction is influenced by the rule of reciprocity. On the other hand, the farther away an individual is from an "other", the more likely their interaction is to follow the rules of a modern, civic society. Relationalism in this sense has "modernized" the "differential mode of association" as we understand it in traditional Chinese societies, and gone beyond the limitations posed by a culture-specific approach. One of the unresolved issues with the study of *guanxi*, for example, was whether *guanxi* is uniquely Chinese with deep-seated cultural roots, or not much more than the Chinese version of social capital (Dunning & Kim, 2007; Gold et al., 2002) and network ties. The debate has in fact raised an important conceptual issue: do culture-specific concepts and culture-general concepts necessarily formulate binary extremes? One may claim that at a sufficiently high level of abstraction and generality, most, if not all, culture-specific concepts can find their parallels in culture-general concepts.

From here, it has become possible to take the issue a step further for the development of a culture-general thesis. The "differential mode of association", for example, is specifically Chinese; however, it is losing momentum in even the most traditional of Chinese communities today. On the other hand, the literature on socialization has provided us with ample evidence to show that in no society can relations be formed and interactions guided based on individual wills and interests and circumstantial factors alone. The social and cultural context within which human beings come together, the rules and principles that dictate the way individuals relate to and interact with others, and the roles and duties that they have thus acquired form the foundation in building relations, and it is on such basis that individual factors come into play. From this perspective, whether reciprocity is culture-specifically Chinese is also open to question. Social exchange theory, for example, suggests that reward often enhances the likelihood for the actor to repeat a particular action (Emerson, 1981; Homans, 1958). When applied to the strengthening and weakening

of relationships, the concepts of reward and reciprocity can bear a striking similarity in the way they function. The major cross-cultural difference, therefore, lies more in the way these rules and principles are formulated, their binding force, and the scale and scope of application, rather than their presence or absence in a society.

Relationalism has pointed to the necessity and the possibility to conceptualize relations as another dimension of the way self relates to others in human societies. Just like individualism and collectivism, relationalism may have cultural roots, a feature that might make it particularly suitable to analyze and explain interpersonal relations in Confucian societies, yet the attributes it shares with the concepts of social capital, network ties, social relations, and relational self have demonstrated its cross-cultural nature and the possibility for universal applications.

Based on the above analyses, it is proposed that relationalism be added to the I/C binary to form a tripartite model, similar to the trichotomization of individual self, relational self, and collective self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Defined here as a term to describe any social outlook or moral and political stance that stresses the importance of reciprocal relations, relationalism exhibits major differences from individualism and collectivism in the way individuals define themselves and the way they relate to and interact with others.

The differences between relationalism and the paired concept are distinguished at four levels – the self, the collective, the others, and the primary rule for interpersonal interaction (see Table 1). At the level of self, the needs, interests, and objectives of the self vis-à-vis those of the other are the opposite, yet clearly established for both individualism and collectivism. However, for relationalism, whether those of others take priority depends primarily on the reciprocal relation of the "self" with each "other". At the level of significant others, individualism features independence, and collectivism dependence; however, relationalism emphasizes both interdependence and self-reliance. At the level of group, the concept of the collective is clearly understood by those in a collectivist culture, remotely relevant to those in an individualist culture, but largely absent to those in a relationalist culture. Consequently, the tendency to discriminate out-groups varies. In a relativist culture, for example, there is no strong attitude held either for or against out-groups.

Given the different ways of defining self versus others, the rules governing interactions also differ in individualist, relationalist, and collectivist cultures. In an individualist culture, the needs and interests of the individual take priority, yet seeking satisfaction of these needs and interests has to be placed under the framework of a civic society in which all are treated equally. In other words, interactions among individuals are primarily governed by civic rules. In a relationalist culture, civic rules are followed, but can be bent or even compromised when necessary, depending on the reciprocal relations of the individual with the "other" involved. In this case, civic rules govern foremost the interactions with strangers and acquaintances, but reciprocal rules become important when personal bonds between individuals are stronger. In a collectivist culture, on the other hand, rules of the collective govern all relations and interactions.

Relationalism therefore suggests that individuals in a relational culture define themselves according to their relative position in the interpersonal networks. The position is both culturally/socially ascribed, according to the role of the self vis-à-vis that of the others, and fluid, constantly revised by reciprocal interactions. In addition, an individual's relation with another person is more or less influenced

Table 1. Individualism, collectivism, and relationalism compared.

	Self	Others	Collective	Primary rules governing interactions
Individualism	Needs, objectives and interests of the self takes priority.	1. Independence. 2. Interpersonal interactions on the basis of free will and mutual interest.	1. A concept that used to be clearly defined but no longer regarded as important in modern societies. 2. Non-discriminatory against out-groups.	Rules of civic society
Relationalism	On the basis of reciprocal principles and relative positions in the interpersonal networks, the interests and objectives of some significant others may be placed over and above those of the individual.	1. Interdependence, but also self-reliance. 2. Interpersonal interactions on the basis of differentiated roles and reciprocity.	1. A vague concept; humanitarian rules such as righteousness and compassionate humanity dictating individuals' interactions with strangers. 2. Non-discriminatory against out-groups.	Rules of reciprocity
Collectivism	The needs, objectives and interests of the collective over and above those of the individual.	1. Interdependence. 2. No necessary linkage among individual members.	1. Group boundaries distinct and inflexible. 2. Discriminatory against out-groups.	Rules of the collective

by the relations he/she maintains with others, unlike those in an individualist or collective culture where all relationships are basically independent.

Adding relationalism as a separate dimension in studying the way "self" relates to others suggests the need to also revamp the research instrument. Currently, several different versions of individualism and collectivism measurement scales are used. Efforts have been made to cut down overlaps and redundancies in the items (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2002; Shulruf et al., 2007), and new instruments have been developed in order to improve the reliability and validity of the scales (Fischer et al., 2009). However, as pointed out earlier in this paper, if respondents in relational cultures relate to each family member, friend, schoolmate, and co-worker differently, asking them to respond globally to questions referring to all of their family members, friends, schoolmates, and co-workers invites random errors. To produce reliable results, it is necessary for question items to tap the way self relates to the collective and the way self relates to individual "others" separately and independently (Brewer & Chen, 2007, p. 138).

Similar to studies in business management and cultural psychology that employ the I/C model, the validity of communication studies using the same criteria has also suffered because of the above-mentioned problems. For concepts to claim universality, they must be empirically tested and tested in different cultural contexts. In this paper, we have shown the inadequacy of using the collectivism construct in examining the way self relates to others in Chinese societies. Ma (2004) has argued that in Chinese societies, relations are an important aspect that influences interpersonal communication and self/other relationships. To what extent the addition of relationalism to the I/C model can improve the validity and explanatory power of the paired concept is yet to be tested. But bringing a Chinese perspective to the study of collectivism has helped to see the possibility of building a more comprehensive framework of analysis for the study of the self-other relationship and the way it influences communication behavior. It is hoped that the attempt will encourage future efforts to formulate culture-general theses based on culture-specific considerations.

Notes

1. Another possible explanation is that many East Asians surveyed come from fully industrialized modern societies where individualism is considered mainstream.
2. This created term was preferred over "egocentrism", a term carrying a host of connotations that the Chinese term does not.
3. There is no indication of the gender of the subject in the original text, yet in traditional Chinese society, matters as such have never been women's business.
4. Confucius said, "The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this" (Feng, 1991a, p. 143).
5. For a brief summary of definitions, see Chow and Ng (2004, p. 1075).

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