

Adherence to Chinese Traditional Values: Correlates and Determinants

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Abstract—Adherence to traditional Chinese values was tested using a two-factor measure of traditional values with data from 309 Chinese adults to assess their personal and public observance of traditional Chinese values. Adherence was compared with several demographic variables, and a set of social and psychological measures, as possible statistical predictors of living by traditional values. Life Satisfaction (as measured by feelings of personal accomplishment) was also tested as a possible outcome of living according to traditional values. Results found significant positive correlations between adherence to both Personal and Public Traditional Values and the demographics of Age, Marital Status, Monthly Income, and Residence (but no significant correlations with Gender, Education, or Religious Conviction). Also, both types of traditional values had highly significant positive correlations with Family Emotional Support, Conscientiousness, Physiological Needs Satisfaction, Safety-Security Needs Satisfaction, Individualism, and Collectivism. For predicting adherence to Chinese traditional values, regression analyses found that several of the demographic, social, and psychological variables were able to predict 26% of the variance for Personal Traditional Values, and 29% for Public Traditional Values. An additional regression revealed that adherence to Public Traditional Values was a significant predictor of one's personal accomplishments in life.

Index Terms—Traditional values, China, personal values, public values, life satisfaction, family emotional support.

I. INTRODUCTION

Psychologists and sociologists have been interested in people's cultural values for centuries, but have invariably had difficulty reaching agreement on defining what the concepts of culture and values literally mean. They have also had difficulty trying to identify what the specific values are, and consequently had difficulties trying to measure them. They encountered additional difficulties when they tried to compare the values that they measured in different cultures, and discovered that there were so many differences that they spent decades trying to discover whether there are any values that are "universally" (i.e., internationally) shared.

First, to overcome these problems, the present study used the following definitions. For "values," the definition was "the ideas, concepts, and qualities that are considered important in life" [1, p. 1199]. For example, in China, having close relationships among family members, as well as their overall well-being, is considered to be of utmost importance [2]. Whereas values are a critical component of a society's

culture, Taormina and Shamionov [3] defined "culture" as "the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are shared by a group of people" (p. 198), and defined "traditional values," as "ideas that are considered to be of great importance in life and that are, or have been, transmitted from one generation to succeeding generations" (p. 199).

Therefore, the present study had five objectives, namely:

- 1) To use a new measure of adherence to traditional values;
- 2) To explore whether certain demographics are related to living one's life according to traditional values;
- 3) To identify and test a set of social and psychological variables for their ability to predict one's adherence to traditional values;
- 4) To examine the relationship that living by traditional values has with life satisfaction; and
- 5) To focus only on one nation, namely, China.

II. USING A NEW MEASURE OF TRADITIONAL VALUES

Previously, the standard approach to conducting research on social values had been for researchers to try to decide what the values are in any given nation, and whether any of those values were the same in different societies. But that approach faced so many problems that even the researchers who attempted to find such values remarked that it might not even be possible to find universally shared values [4]. And there have been many criticisms of that approach, e.g., whether the results they obtained are valid or reliable [5]-[9].

According to Taormina and Shamionov [3], the solution to the measurement problem was to create a measure that asked the extent to which people live by the traditional values of their society. This approach was able to avoid the problem of trying to identify a set of specific values because it was expected that all adults know the values that permeate their own society. And by not requiring anyone to state whether they lived by the values that were specified by the researcher (which might or might not be those of the cultures studied), this allows the scale to be used in any culture or society.

The measure created was a 16-item scale that asked how much each respondent agreed that he or she lived according to the rationale for having traditional values (e.g., to preserve social justice), and lived by them at different times and locations (e.g., at work, and while socializing). Their factor analysis found two factors for the Traditional Values Scale namely, Personal Traditional Values and Public Traditional Values, which passed critical validity and reliability tests. These same factors (using a .55 cutoff value) were obtained with the present Chinese sample. See Table I.

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TABLE I: FACTOR ANALYSIS OF THE 16 TRADITIONAL VALUES ITEMS

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. I live by traditional values to preserve society	.71	.17
2. I live by traditional values to uphold social justice	.77	.11
3. I live by traditional values for the integrity of my family	.74	.22
4. I live by traditional values to preserve morality	.80	.20
5. I live by traditional values because they are important	.73	.35
6. I live by traditional values because it is the right thing to do	.66	.41
7. I live by traditional values because I respect society	.62	.43
8. I live by traditional values because it is ethically correct	.63	.47
9. I live by traditional values because it benefits the community	.56	.52
10. I live by traditional values at home	.55	.52
11. I live by traditional values at work	.39	.71
12. I live by traditional values when playing sports or games	.15	.87
13. I live by traditional values when I am relaxing	.19	.86
14. I live by traditional values when I am on vacation	.22	.80
15. I live by traditional values when I am socializing	.37	.71
16. I live my life according to traditional values at all times	.33	.70
Variance explained (Total = 60.08%)	32.31%	31.77%

III. DEMOGRAPHICS AND TRADITIONAL VALUES

Whereas there is not a great deal that is known about personal differences in living according to traditional values, this study asked the respondents for an exploratory set of demographic variables. These were their gender, age, marital status, education completed, monthly income, religious conviction, and place of residence.

IV. SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS IN TRADITIONAL VALUES

This study tested the correlations that adherence to Traditional Values had with certain social and psychological variables, namely, these were Family Emotional Support, Conscientiousness, Physiological Needs Satisfaction, Safety-Security Needs Satisfaction, Individualism, and Collectivism. The model also tested Life Satisfaction as a possible “outcome.”

A. Family Emotional Support

This refers to the care and concern family members give to each other. In theory [10], the emotional assurance that is given by parents tends to make their children more socially competent. For example, when a child encounters a problem, parents might tell them about some difficulties they had and how their values helped them deal with those difficulties. And research supports this idea [11]. Therefore, H(1) More Family Emotional Support should lead to greater adherence to traditional values.

Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness is a “Big-Five” personality measure [12], which refers to being self-controlled, organized, careful, and devoted. Some research has indicated that conscientiousness may be related to “traditionalism” [13]. Historically, conscientiousness may be related to traditional values because many religions oblige their believers to carefully follow their moral beliefs, and to live according to specific behaviors to maintain ideas that their culture values. Therefore, H(2) Higher levels of Conscientiousness will incline people to live more by traditional values.

B. Physiological Needs Satisfaction

Maslow [14] theorized that physiological needs (e.g., for food and water) are so basic that people cannot survive

without them, and will forfeit other needs until these needs are sufficiently satisfied. For example, starving people will eat tainted food without worrying about what other people think.

Traditional values, however, are often about honor and morality, but these may be disregarded by people who do not have their basic needs satisfied. In other words, people whose basic needs are being satisfied may pay more attention to ideas about traditional values and live by them. On the other hand, as Maslow theorized, people whose basic needs are not being satisfied would have to focus on ways to satisfy them rather than worry about what traditional values teach. Hence, H(3): The more satisfied people’s Physiological Needs are, the more they will live by Traditional Values

C. Safety-Security Needs Satisfaction

Maslow [14] also saw safety and security as a basic need. That is, when people do not have safety and security in their lives, they will need to spend time seeking these things rather than worry about traditional values. For example, people who do not have a home or enough money to live on may be too busy working overtime or doing extra jobs to be concerned about seeking esteem or respect.

With regard to how this is related to living by traditional values, the answer is similar to that for the other basic need. If a person is preoccupied with making a living in order to have shelter, he or she would be less concerned with living by a high code of morality and ethics as mandated by traditional values. But when people have a better life because their basic needs are being met, they may spend more time trying to live their lives according to traditional values and behaviors. Thus, H(4): The more people’s Safety and Security Needs are satisfied, the more they will live by Traditional Values.

D. Individualism-Collectivism

There have been different arguments regarding ideas about individualism and collectivism. Some authors [15] have argued that there is a polar relation between these characteristics, i.e., with some countries being more Individualist, where people are more concerned about themselves and their personal desires; and other countries being more collectivist, where people are more concerned about other members of their group or society. And some authors have found that China is a collectivist culture [16].

But there has also been a different approach to ideas of individualism and collectivism. In particular, Triandis [17] thought that these characteristics could be measured separately, whereby any given culture could have low or high levels on *each* dimension. Thus, in theory, Chinese people could be both individualist and collectivist. To address such an idea, Triandis created two measures for people at the same level in society, namely, “horizontal individualism” and “horizontal collectivism.”

Regarding traditional values, as some societies advocate individualism and others emphasize collectivism, it is theoretically possible for both to be positively related to traditional values! Yet, traditional values have been passed down across generations to preserve society, so, there may be a stronger relationship between collectivism and traditional values than between individualism and traditional values. Thus, it was hypothesized that H(5): Collectivism will be

more strongly correlated than Individualism with living by Traditional Values.

V. TRADITIONAL VALUES AND LIFE SATISFACTION

Personal Achievement is a measure of Life Satisfaction. In theory, social values evolved because people's historical experiences taught them what is important in life, i.e., what they should value, and that living according to those values helped them survive, and achieve success in life. In other words, living by traditional values has helped people overcome hardships, which should build one's character. Logically, then, living by traditional values should help people to achieve more in life, which, in turn, should make them more satisfied with their lives. Thus, people that live according to their society's traditional values should more easily succeed in life, which would make them more successful, and more satisfied with life. Hence, H(6): The more people live by Traditional Values, the more personal achievement and life satisfaction they will have.

VI. CHINESE ADHERENCE TO TRADITIONAL VALUES

As the Traditional Values Scale is a newly developed measure, it has not been tested in many countries. To date, it has only been used to compare adherence to traditional values in Russia and China [3]. The present study uses only those Chinese data in order to take a closer look at how the several variables mentioned in this study relate to traditional values in China.

China is a good country in which to test these measures and ideas because Chinese culture is well established for more than two millennia. And regarding its values, a major study enumerated several values, including a strong work ethic, humaneness (called "human heartedness"), and moral discipline, and identified these values as originating from Confucius [18]. Also, several authors [19]-[21] have stated that these values, and especially social harmony [2], were established by Confucius, who lived 2500 years ago.

VII. METHOD

A. Respondents

From China there were 309 (162 females, 147 males) adults, aged 25 to 92 years ($M = 47.31$, $SD = 13.52$). For Education, 3 had none, 16 primary school, 106 secondary school, 163 a bachelor degree, and 21 a master degree or higher. On Marital Status, 67 were single, 242 were married. Monthly Income (in RMB) used five categories, i.e., very low, low, average, high, very high: 98 had less than 3,000; 82 had 3,000-4,999; 61 had 5,000-6,999; 32 had 7,000-8,999; and 36 had 9,000 or more. For Area of Residence, 38 lived in rural, 56 in suburban, and 215 in urban areas.

B. Measures

The measures used are described only briefly due to the journal's space constraints. For each variable (unless otherwise noted), respondents were asked whether the items

described them. Answers were on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. (All reliabilities reported are standardized Cronbach alpha values.)

Traditional Values Scale. This was the 16-item measure created by Taormina and Shamionov [3], which had two factors, i.e., the 10-item Personal Traditional Values scale and the 6-item Public Traditional Values scale. All items began with the phrase "I live by traditional values..." and ended with a relevant statement, such as "...because they are important" for the Personal Values; or "...when I am socializing" for the Public Values. The question asked "How much do you live your life according to these traditional values?" and responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale: 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=usually, and 5=always. The reliabilities were .92 for the Personal Traditional Values scale, .91 for the Public Traditional Values scale, and .94 for the entire 16-item measure.

Family Emotional Support. This was a 10-item measure [22] that was used to assess the extent that one's family might influence one's traditional values. A sample item was "My family gives me the moral support I need." Scale reliability was .79.

Conscientiousness. This was a 10-item scale that focused on the "perfectionism" facet of this construct. But as these did not exist in one scale, several sources were consulted [3], [23]-[24], plus three additional items were added, i.e., "Dislike mistakes," "Like things to be in order," and "Am not bothered by mistakes" [reverse scored] in order to strengthen this measure. The scale reliability was .76.

Physiological Needs Satisfaction. This was a 15-item scale that was created by Taormina and Gao [25], which assessed the degree to which people feel that their basic physiological requirements of life are being satisfied. A sample item was "The quality of the water I drink every day." Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (completely unsatisfied) to 5 (completely satisfied). The reliability for this scale was .86.

Safety and Security Needs Satisfaction. This was also a 15-item scale by Taormina and Gao [25]. This measure assessed the degree to which people felt they are satisfied with basic requirements for feeling safe and secure in life, and it examines such facets as personal as well as financial security. A sample item was "The protection that the police provide for me." Responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (completely unsatisfied) to 5 (completely satisfied). The reliability for this scale was .88.

Individualism and Collectivism. Triandis' [17] measures of "horizontal individualism" and "horizontal collectivism" were used, and (as recommended by that author) these were assessed as two separate measures, each containing four items. For Individualism a sample item was "I would rather depend on myself than others." The scale reliability was .81. For Collectivism, a sample item was "If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud." The scale reliability was .74.

Personal Accomplishment (Life Satisfaction). This was a 10-item scale that was developed by Sirgy and colleagues [26]. It measures how satisfied people are with what they have accomplished in life. A sample item was "How satisfied are you compared to the accomplishments of most people in your position?" The response measure was a 5-point Likert scale,

ranging from 1 (extremely unsatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied). The scale reliability was .88.

C. Procedure

Stratified random sampling was used to obtain quotas for age groups that represent the population, and guidelines of the British Psychological Society for ethical research were followed. As children and most college students depend on parents for their needs, and people past college age are more likely to experience situations that engage their value systems, only people aged 25 years and over were included. People were approached in shopping malls, bus stations, parks, apartment buildings, and on side-walks. Those who agreed to participate were given a questionnaire, which was collected on site when they finished.

VIII. RESULTS

Results for the exploratory tests of the relationship between adherence to traditional values and the demographic variables revealed that adherence increased significantly with age and monthly income, was higher for married rather than single persons, and that adherence to Personal Traditional Values was higher for people living in more densely populated locations. (But there were no significant differences between genders, level of education completed, or extent of religious conviction.)

Hypotheses 1 to 4 predicted positive correlations between adherence to traditional values and the social and psychological variables. The results were significant and supported all the hypotheses, i.e., Family Emotional Support, Conscientiousness, Physiological Needs Satisfaction, and Safety-Security Needs Satisfaction all had positive significant correlations with both types of traditional values.

For Hypothesis 5, which compared Individualism and Collectivism, both measures had significant positive correlations with both types of traditional values. To test this hypothesis, the relative strengths of these correlations needed to be assessed. Furthermore, whereas they were dependent correlations, each of the two correlations had to be converted to a z-score (by Fisher's r-to-z transformation), and their asymptotic covariance of the estimates computed. For Personal Traditional Values, the score was $z=1.99, p < .05$; and for Public Traditional Values, the score was $z=3.47, p < .001$. Both results supported Hypothesis 5.

TABLE II: CORRELATIONS FOR TRADITIONAL VALUES SCALES (TVS) WITH ALL TESTED VARIABLES

	Mean	SD	TVS Personal Values (1-10)	TVS Public Values (11-16)
1. Family Emotional Support	3.69	0.51	.40 ****	.30****
2. Conscientiousness	3.42	0.49	.26 ****	.33****
3. Physiological Needs Satisfaction	3.42	0.56	.27 ****	.34****
4. Safety-Security Needs Satisfaction	3.50	0.54	.33 ****	.32****
9. Individualism (Triandis)	3.91	0.65	.19 ***	.21****
10. Collectivism (Triandis)	3.73	0.55	.26 ****	.33****
11. Personal Accomplishment	3.38	0.62	.34 ****	.37****
11. Gender	--	--	-.05	-.03
12. Age	47.31	13.52	.21 ****	.22****
13. Marital Status	--	--	.14 *	.27****
14. Education Completed	--	--	.10	.02
15. Monthly Income	--	--	.15 **	.15**
16. Religious Conviction	--	--	.06	.01
17. Place of Residence	--	--	.14 *	.11

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .005$; **** $p < .001$

positive correlations with both Personal Traditional Values and Public Traditional Values, which lent support to this hypothesis. All the above correlations are shown in Table II.

To test if any of the variables could predict adherence to traditional values, two stepwise multiple regressions were run. For Personal Traditional Values, five variables explained 26% of the variance, $F(5,303)=19.00, p < .001$. Family Emotional Support explained 16%, Safety-Security Need Satisfaction explained 4%, Age explained 3%, Education Completed explained 2%, and Physiological Needs Satisfaction explained 1%. The results for this regression are shown in Table III.

TABLE III: REGRESSION FOR PERSONAL TRADITIONAL VALUES

Predictors	Beta	t-value	ΔR^2
Family Emotional Support	.30	5.82 ****	.16
Safety-Security Needs Satisfaction	.14	2.48 *	.04
Age	.22	4.21 ****	.03
Education Completed	.15	2.84 ***	.02
Physiological Needs Satisfaction	.13	2.25 *	.01
Total R ²			.26
Final F(5,303)			19.00 ****

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .005$; **** $p < .001$

For Public Traditional Values, six variables entered the regression equation to explain 29% of the variance, $F(6,302)=21.97, p < .001$. Physiological Needs Satisfaction explained 11% of the variance, Marital Status explained 6%, Conscientiousness explained 6%, Collectivism explained 3%, Family Emotional Support explained 2%, and Monthly Income explained 1%. The results are shown in Table IV.

TABLE IV: REGRESSION FOR PUBLIC TRADITIONAL VALUES

Predictors	Beta	t-value	ΔR^2
Physiological Needs Satisfaction	.18	3.58 ****	.11
Marital Status	.23	4.54 ****	.06
Conscientiousness	.19	3.59 ****	.06
Collectivism	.18	3.43 ****	.03
Family Emotional Support	.13	2.45 *	.02
Monthly Income	.11	2.17 *	.01
Total R ²			.29
Final F(6,302)			21.97 ****

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .005$; **** $p < .001$

In addition, a final regression was run on Personal Accomplishment to test if living by traditional values helps people achieve more in life (have more life satisfaction). Four variables entered this regression to explain 31% of the variance, $F(5,303)=28.12, p < .001$. Family Emotional Support explained 15%, Monthly Income 8%, Public Traditional Values 5%, Collectivism 2%, and Marital Status explained 1%. These results are shown in Table V.

TABLE V: REGRESSION FOR PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT

Predictors	Beta	t-value	ΔR^2
Family Emotional Support	.26	5.21 ****	.15
Monthly Income	.26	5.26 ****	.08
TVS Public Values (11-16)	.16	2.96 ***	.05
Collectivism	.15	2.90 ***	.02
Marital Status	.11	2.18 *	.01
Total R ²			.31
Final F(5,303)			28.12 ****

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .005$; **** $p < .001$

IX. DISCUSSION

Chinese values have been a topic of discussion among

For Hypothesis 6, Personal Accomplishment had strong

sociologists, psychologists, educators, and historians for many decades, partly because they have existed for more than 2,000 years, are central to Chinese culture, and more than one billion people practice them. They continue to be a concern today, with hundreds of “Confucius Institutes” established around the world since 2004 [27]. But very few empirical tests of the values have been conducted to examine correlates and possible predictors of living by those values.

The present study found several significant social and psychological correlates, and some notable predictors. Specifically, for adherence to Personal Traditional Values, i.e., living by the society’s traditional values in one’s life because one has personally accepted them, the principal determinant in this regression was family emotional support, which lends empirical credibility to the idea that the family is the most important unit in Chinese society [2]. And this result also confirms the argument that the family is the means by which traditional values have been transmitted across generations [28].

It is also interesting that Age and Education were predictors of personally adhering to traditional values because, as people grow older and gain knowledge, they tend to have greater wisdom, which could incline them to live more by traditional values, which, in turn, should help with their personal survival in a difficult world. (It may also be noted that the presence of satisfaction with both basic needs supports Maslow’s [14], theory, i.e., that satisfying those basic needs allow a person to focus on higher levels of need, such as belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization.)

This study also found predictors for adherence to Public Traditional Values, i.e., behaviorally living by those values when one is among other people (in public). This time, the main predictor was satisfaction of basic physiological needs, which again supported Maslow’s [14] theory. Being married was another predictor, possibly because being married in Chinese society expands a person’s social contacts, i.e., enlarges one’s family, which increases one’s social obligations, thus requiring a person to follow social obligations more closely. This may also be why being conscientious was a predictor, that is, one is more likely to accept one’s social obligations.

Likewise, a sense of the importance of one’s group, i.e., “collective,” would also incline a person to behave according to tradition. Family emotional support was another predictor, which can easily be understood as the family is the means by which traditional values are transmitted. Monthly income was another predictor, which might mean that people with very little financial resources may have less opportunity to demonstrate their traditional behaviors at locations where more wealthy people socialize.

For Life Satisfaction, as measured by perceptions of one’s personal accomplishments, the most interesting finding was that living according to traditional values in public settings was a significant predictor of feelings of personal accomplishment in life. This suggests that traditional values continue to be important in social life in Mainland China, even though some researchers claim Chinese values might be vanishing from society. But, as Taormina and Shamionov [3] explained, the increase of adherence to traditional values as one grows older might not imply that traditional values are

being lost because they noted that “reverse trends” have also been found over several generations, that is, as young people become older and enter society, such as when they start working, they discover how important it is to abide by social prescriptions (values) in order to be accepted into society.

Other predictors include Family Emotional Support, which confirms the importance of one’s family in China as the primary unit on which one can rely for help to succeed in life. Monthly Income was another predictor, which is understandable because financial resources can help people succeed (not only in China, but worldwide). In addition, Collectivism helped to predict life satisfaction, suggesting that being concerned about other people (i.e., “*renqing*”) still plays a role in Chinese society. Another interesting result was that being married also seems to help people have a greater sense of being satisfied with their lives.

Regarding future research, while the present study found that traditional values still play a major role in present-day Chinese society, the new Traditional Values Scale offers researchers a valid and reliable empirical measure that was not previously available to learn much more about the role of traditional values in today’s modern society. This is certainly worth examining because social values in all societies have existed for many millennia, which means they have been passed down to younger people in every generation. Thus, we need to find out more detail about what inclines both younger and older people of today to adhere to their society’s values.

Because this measure is so new, only a few variables have been tested so far. But there are dozens of other variables that could still be measured, which could help shed more light on this topic. As a few examples, are there other personal characteristics that could possibly cause people to accept or reject the traditional values of their society? Are there external factors, such as the liberal media and what is viewed on the Internet that could play a role?

Additionally, are there certain “outcomes” in life, such as feelings of belongingness, social esteem, and marital happiness that result from living according to society’s traditional social values? This new measure will allow us to find out how traditional values are accepted within any given society. For example, how are traditional values accepted within Italy, Germany, the USA, Mexico, Morocco, South Africa, India, or Saudi Arabia?

Furthermore, whereas only two nations (namely, China and Russia) have been studied to date, the new Traditional Values Scale will now allow us to compare adherence to traditional values across many countries. As examples, how would the results on adherence to traditional values differ if we compared countries from Europe with countries from North America, or with South America, or Asia? Therefore, additional careful, scientific, empirical research is needed to gain a much better picture of the role that adherence to traditional values plays in modern society.

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