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# Triandis Award: A Sense of Obligation

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I was originally attracted to cultural psychology for two reasons: I enjoy having my expectations about the world shaken by alternative perceptions of reality; and I enjoy being able to ask philosophical questions and receive a numerical answer. My dissertation research was motivated by a baffling experience I had as an English teacher in central China.

Several years later, I was able to not only use some exciting statistical techniques to demonstrate a likely explanation, but to explore the philosophical ironies behind my reaction. The dissertation even sent me back to my undergraduate philosophy books. Despite challenges on the way, it was a satisfying experience—now greatly enhanced by the honor of receiving the Henry and Pola Triandis Doctoral Thesis Award.

The reconstructed story of my dissertation begins with a cultural misunderstanding. While teaching in a high school in Hunan, China, I was quite insulted by how my students responded when I thanked them for their frequent help. “Oh, it’s just my duty,” they would reply, with a smile I’d expect to see on the face of someone saying “My pleasure!” Growing up in an independence-encouraging family in the American Midwest, I had learned to be annoyed whenever duties and expectations of others impinged on my personal freedom. If I did something out of a sense of



duty, it certainly would not be a pleasure! Did my students feel differently, or was helping me the burden that their words seemed to imply?

## From Physics to Psychology

My zig-zag journey towards answering that question can perhaps be a comfort to undergraduates who are uncertain of their future path. Originally excited about the reality-challenging research of quantum physics, my pre-university plan to become a theoretical physicist was quickly tossed out in my freshman year at Yale, when instead of the Physics major’s prerequisites I chose to take a special three-course humanities program. I loved thinking about the questions brought up in my philosophy courses, but I was frustrated with the philosophical method of figuring them out: endless logical argument, but seemingly no way to test these arguments outside of the mind.

Happily, I soon realized that psychology research methods could provide a more satis-

fying answer. That summer I had the chance to work as a research assistant in Harold Stevenson's lab, where among other tasks I entered open-ended data from the question "If you could have any three wishes, what would they be?" Despite the fact that participants could presumably come up with anything at all, answers from the USA and Japan differed in predictable ways. Participants had unintentionally shown evidence of having been shaped by culture, even at the very moment they thought they were giving their most personal, individual answers.

The realization that what I perceived to be my own thoughts could instead be a reflection of my cultural background shook me as much as the double lives of photons did. Research assistantships with Joan Miller and Hazel Markus solidified my belief that cultural psychology research could provide both big philosophical questions and the quantifiable data to answer them with. But with little international experience or deep understanding of a non-American culture, I did not feel prepared to enter graduate school right after my 1999 graduation. Wouldn't it be better to enter graduate school with some odd cultural experiences under my belt, ones which I'd be curious to explain and could help me come up with insightful research questions?

## Four Years Collecting New Realities in China

Enter a chance to spend two years teaching English at Yali Middle School, a highly respected school in the city of Changsha, capital city of the central-China province of Hunan. Though I had no previous experience with Chinese language or culture, I was eager to take on the challenge of understanding this huge and diverse country. Along with three other recent graduates, the Yale-China Association sent us to teach oral English to Yali's outstanding and creative 7th, 10th, and 11th graders.

We were initially sent to Beijing for a summer of intensive language training. Of course, I immediately found myself awash in a sea of Chinese characters. When heading out for my first meal, not only did I encounter predictable difficulties with choosing items from an indecipherable menu, but I even had difficulty distinguishing



Photo: Emma Buchtel

**Library Hour** Students lining up outside the foreigners' house after lunch waiting for English Library Hour.

what was a restaurant (with no familiar clues from building signs or building shapes, I had to peer into windows until by chance I saw others eating).

But other than the lack of the Latin alphabet, I was actually quite disappointed at how similar Beijing was to other modern cities. I spotted no chanting Young Pioneers or dragon dances, but merely jeans, traffic and construction. Was there any unique Chinese culture hidden behind the dust of this bustling modern economy?

Over the next several years, of course, I did manage to encounter many curious (and often painful) cultural differences, though at a deeper level than dragon dances. After my two years at Yali Middle School, I felt that I had enough experience to know that there were cultural differences, but not enough to be able to decipher those differences. I decided to stay another two years in China, taking a one year intensive Chi-

nese language course at the Inter-University Program in Beijing and then teaching in the Psychology department and Yanjie Su's lab at Peking University (among other odd jobs). In 2003 I was accepted to the University of British Columbia's graduate program to work with Ara Norenzayan, Steve Heine and Darrin Lehman, and as the SARS outbreak dried up my income in Beijing I headed home and then to Vancouver to begin the process of analyzing my new experiences.

### Extreme Favors

One of the most salient aspects of my life in China was the exceptional helpfulness I encountered. I could not board a train without someone helping me with my luggage; other teachers at Yali spent hours helping me buy the cheapest plane tickets, finding the right doctors at the hospital, taking me and the other foreign teachers on tours of local attractions, and much more; students who should have been at the height of teenage angst displayed an irrational enthusiasm for doing my homework assignments and tidying up my classroom. This helpfulness did not seem to be solely directed at the foolish foreigner, but also common among close colleagues and classmates, where constant favors ran the gamut from helping carry a friend's gradebooks to pulling strings to get a colleague's distant niece into a good school. I guiltily concluded that the favors that friends could ask of each other in China seemed to be larger than the ones that I would feel comfortable taking from, or giving to, my own friends at home.

What explained this cheerful outpouring of assistance? As an initial step in explaining this apparent cultural difference, I conducted a couple of brief questionnaire studies aimed at documenting Asian helpfulness and Western unhelpfulness—after finding a mean difference, I reasoned, I would find the cultural correlates to explain it. To my surprise, the results were precisely opposite to my hypothesis. I eventually decided that as a student of Steve Heine I should have known better than to try to find out the answer to a question by comparing mean scores across cultural groups!

It was possible that my East Asian participants were using a different definition of “helping” or were comparing themselves to a higher standard; or, it was possible that my experience had been unusual, and East Asians in fact help friends and family less often on average than do European Canadians. Unfortunately, my questionnaire studies could not help me tell the difference.

Luckily I had asked several other questions about participants' motivations and emotional experiences when helping. Because comparisons of within-culture correlations do not have the same interpretation problems as do comparisons of scale means, I decided to see if my data could



Photo: Emma Buchtel

**Feasting favors** Dr. Liu, a Yali alum, chopping vegetables for one of his delicious, gigantic dinners that he insisted on serving to us every month—in return we tutored two of his distant relatives.

give me some insight into other questions I had about my students' helping behavior: for example, their feelings about doing something because it was their obligation to do so. Were there cultural differences in the emotional associations people had with dutiful motivations?

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**Singing favors** I somehow became obliged to represent the school at celebrations of the Communist Party in 2001, singing Hunanese traditional opera with a history teacher.

## A Duty-Loving Dissertation

Going back to my pilot study data again, I took a look at within-cultural-group emotional associations with having a “sense of duty.” To my relief and pleasure, I did find that being motivated by duty was more likely to be associated with positive emotions among East-Asian-Canadian students than European-Canadian students. This pilot study led to my dissertation research in Canada, Mainland China, and eventually Hong Kong, where I extended the research in a post-doc position with Michael H. Bond and Sylvia X. Chen. I focused on describing the subjective experience of doing what was expected of you: Was it pleasant? Unpleasant? Did it mean that you did, or did not, personally want to carry out the action—did you feel like you personally endorsed your own behavior?

This research suggested that far from viewing their duties as a burden, my Chinese students had welcomed my expectations as a way to express their most deeply held values. Among participants who had been more influenced by East Asian cultures, dutiful motivations to help others were more likely to be associated with intrinsic motivations (such as wanting and enjoying). The relationship weakened with greater distance from East Asian cultural influence, with

European-Canadians having the least positive associations with feeling a sense of duty.

With the help of multi-level modeling, I was also able to show that individuals’ endorsement of filial-type values mediated the cultural group differences. The more that participants had been influenced by East Asian cultures—as measured by cultural heritage, where they had been born and, among Canadian participants, what language they spoke with friends—the more likely they were to personally value doing their duty. And the more that you personally valued doing your duty, the more likely you were to feel that doing something because it was your duty

was the same thing as wanting to do it.

These findings could be seen as a criticism of methods used in Self-Determination Theory (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci’s famous and intuitively appealing theory suggests that having more intrinsic, and less extrinsic, motivations is cross-culturally beneficial, because this appeals to a universal need to personally endorse and control one’s behavior. However, the measurement of “extrinsic” motivations usually includes a statement or two about others’ expectations, such as “I’m doing this because it’s what I’m supposed to do” or “because I want the teacher to think I’m a good student.” For individuals for whom fulfilling one’s duties to others is a valued feature of an ideal self, those kinds of extrinsic motivations are not good measures of feeling a lack of personal endorsement of one’s behavior. These studies join similar findings by researchers such as Miller (2003), Iyengar and Lepper (1999) and others showing that Self-Determination Theory may not accurately reflect the needs of people from collectivistic cultures. Instead of “self-determination” and “autonomy,” a sense of agency may be universally satisfying, while the negativity of coexisting extrinsic motivators may vary with cultural views.

## Conclusion(s)

Happily, my dissertation suggested that my friends and students who so eagerly helped me during my time in China were likely to have been doing it both because they felt that they ought to, and also with a sense of desiring, personally choosing, and feeling glad to help me. Moreover, it seems probable that my misinterpretation of my students' motives for helping me (as implying that they felt forced to help me) might be a common misunderstanding, one that may negatively affect

can lead to a sense of volition, I also found that duties are experienced surprisingly positively in the West as well. The benefits of being simultaneously motivated by internal and external expectations have not been deeply explored by our independence-loving Western researchers. Perhaps it is true that by looking at cultural others, we can better understand ourselves—because sometimes we are actually more similar than our idealized cultural scripts might imply.



Photo: Emma Buchtel

**Oral English Class** Emma calling on a student in one of our unheated classrooms.

cross-cultural interactions between other people from Western and East Asian cultures.

But one last statement is needed. Though the cross-cultural differences are important (and to me, with my love of encountering alternate realities, most interesting), one more finding emerged from my studies: that the associations between wanting and feeling expected to help others were unexpectedly high in all cultural groups. It may be that Western psychology research has neglected to emphasize the joyous aspects of doing what one ought to do due to our own “cultural blinders” about what is important for healthy functioning (Markus & Kitayama, 1993). In looking for evidence that in East Asia, duties

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