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## INTRODUCTION



# A Brief Background to the Chinese Way of Life

## GROUP COHESIVENESS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

China is the only country with a civilization stretching back continuously some five thousand years. Chinese civilization was built on agriculture; generations of peasants were tied to the land on which they lived and worked. Except in times of war and famine, there was very little mobility, either socially or geographically.

The agrarian nature of ancient Chinese society accounts for the cultural traits and values that came to characterize that society and that still characterize it today. Peasant families were cohesive units in which all members joined in the work of planting, raising, and harvesting. Often the entire population of a village was a clan or family group. Thus, family and clan membership was a key element in each peasant's identity. The collective (group-oriented) nature of Chinese values is largely the product of thousands of years of living and working together on the land.

The principal cohesive groups (primary groups) within Chinese society today are family, school, work unit, and local community. The daily

life of virtually every Chinese is deeply embedded in his or her relationships with other people in these groups. Very few significant relationships occur beyond the boundaries of these primary groups.

At first glance the relationships within a Chinese family may seem similar to those within a Western family. But closer observation reveals important differences. Chinese parents are highly protective of their children. Chinese children, even as adolescents, do not expect to earn their own money by means of part-time jobs, and they make no important decisions about their own daily comings and goings. For example, parents often decide what kind of interest groups their children should join. Even grown children depend on their parents' financial support until they find employment; they live in their parents' household until they are married, if not longer. Filial piety is one of the principal virtues counseled by Confucius; this virtue is not an abstraction but one that continues to be played out on a daily basis as children—including adult sons and daughters—demonstrate again and again that they are obedient to their parents and solicitous of their welfare.

Extended families in China are remarkably cohesive. Households that include three generations, though rapidly disappearing (especially in urban areas), are still far more common in China than in the West. Family-centered values and physical closeness combine to ensure that most Chinese have relationships with the members of their extended families that are durable and that involve frequent instances of aid and support being given and received.

In school at any level, Chinese students are enmeshed in another important network—that of peers. It is true that in Western countries peer relationships among young people are intense too, but there is an important difference. In China, school children remain members of the same small group of students not only during each school day and year but also during all the years they attend a particular school. Called the "class collective" and numbering anywhere from fifteen to fifty students, this group constitutes a strong force for stability and conformity. The class monitor, who is the leader of the class collective, bears responsibilities much broader than those of a class president in the United States. Sometimes the class monitor acts as a kind of mediator or intermediary between the teacher and the students. He or she collects comments and

suggestions from the students and reports them to the teacher. The class collective attends classes together, organizes other study activities, and participates as a unit in extracurricular activities such as intramural sports.

Every Chinese student belongs to a class collective. Joining is not a matter of personal choice, and students are assigned to collectives by school administrators on the basis of similarity of academic programs. A student who remains apart from the activities of his or her collective is looked upon by peers as antisocial and quite odd. Members of the class are expected to take care of each other when misfortune strikes as well as to help each other in more ordinary ways. In spirit, a Chinese class collective is similar to an American sorority or fraternity. Relationships among Chinese classmates (especially those of the same sex) usually last indefinitely, becoming incorporated into each student's lifelong network of trusted friends.

Regardless of occupation or profession, most urban Chinese belong to a work unit, or *danwei*. (For guidance in pronouncing Chinese words, please see appendix A.) Strictly speaking, a *danwei* refers to a government office or an institution. But its use includes state-owned companies, factories and shops, hospitals, and universities and schools. Thus, independent entrepreneurs as well as Chinese who work in foreign-owned or joint-venture companies are generally not classified as belonging to a *danwei*. A Chinese *danwei* is quite different from employment organizations in the West. A work unit in China assigns productive tasks and pays wages, but it also administers all government regulations and policies that relate to its workers and their families, and has responsibility for a variety of other aspects of the lives of its members. For instance, the work unit provides extra support for workers whose families have financial problems. Low-income families receive a yearly allowance from their work unit on the occasion of the Spring Festival to buy food and other necessities for the Chinese New Year. Larger work units typically own and operate a medical clinic as well as a day-care center and a kindergarten; the largest ones also include primary and secondary schools.

Picnics, weekend outings, and other forms of recreation are typically organized by work unit administrators for workers and their family members. Large work units may arrange for their employees to vacation

at a summer resort. Some financially secure work units even own and operate hostels at famous resorts such as Beidaihe. When an employee or a member of his or her family is ill or injured, the work unit makes sure that medical care is provided. When employees retire, the work unit gives them gifts during the Spring Festival. Finally, when a worker dies, the work unit helps with funeral arrangements and organizes memorial services. With the possible exception of a few successful company towns, there is no counterpart in the United States or any other Western country to the Chinese work unit.

The Chinese sometimes complain about their work units. Someone from the West might speculate that the complaints arise because work units tend to interfere too much in people's daily lives. On the contrary, the complaints most often arise because a work unit has not taken sufficient care of someone (for instance, has not provided that person with adequate housing) or has been unfair (for example, has seemed biased in its selection of members to go abroad). Most Chinese workers appreciate the close, nurturing atmosphere of the work unit as much as they value the caring and loving atmosphere of their families. It should be pointed out, however, that the importance of *danwei* has been declining in the past two decades. For instance, with the housing reform in operation, nowadays government departments, factories or universities no longer provide housing for new recruits.

The neighborhood is another relatively close social unit. (In some cases it is difficult to differentiate clearly between the work unit and the neighborhood, since workers often live in apartments located on the grounds of their work unit.) Since the housing reform in the late 1990s, a large number of Chinese have bought apartments of their own. (Prior to this, urban housing was mostly owned by the government, state enterprises or institutions.) As many have become home-owners, naturally their living conditions have improved. However, there are some people who still live in crowded conditions and interact frequently with neighbors. They are likely to share the same courtyard and hallway, and in older buildings they may share a common bathroom and kitchen. Even when housing is less crowded, as in rural areas, the relationship between neighbors remains close. If a family dispute erupts, neighbors are likely to come in to mediate. In cities, some neighborhood committees

provide recreational rooms with facilities where senior residents can find people to talk to or to play chess with. The type of connectedness found in Chinese neighborhoods is characteristic of a collectivistic culture, but it would be viewed by the great majority of Westerners as encroaching upon their personal prerogatives and privacy.

Before briefly discussing Chinese values, we should note that what we are calling Chinese society is in actuality the society of the Han, the dominant ethnic group in China. About 92% of the Chinese are Han people. The rest belong to the other 55 ethnic groups in the PRC, such as Zhuangs, Mongolians, Tibetans, Uighurs, and Miaos. These ethnic minorities tend to cluster in either southwest or northwest China. For example, Yunnan, one of the southwestern provinces, has as many as 26 ethnic groups living within its boundaries.

### THREE FUNDAMENTAL VALUES OF THE CHINESE

*Collectivism* is the term used by anthropologists and sociologists to designate one of the basic orientations of Chinese culture. This term could be placed at one end of a continuum; at the other end would be one of the basic orientations of U.S. culture, *individualism*.<sup>1</sup>

*Individualism* is not a term that describes something unique about American culture, but a set of assumptions and values that can be applied to a greater or lesser extent to many cultures, particularly those of Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Likewise, *collectivism* is a term that more or less applies to many cultures, especially those in Asia, Africa, South America, Central America, and the Pacific Islands. Thus, while collectivism is not unique to China, it is clearly an integral part of China's culture. Here is how one group of scholars summarized the basic differences between individualism and collectivism.

Collectivism is characterized by individuals subordinating their personal goals to the goals of some collectives. Individualism is characterized by individuals subordinating the goals of collectives to their personal goals. A key belief of people in collectivist cultures is that the smallest unit of survival is the collective. A key belief of people in individualistic cultures is that the smallest unit of

survival is the individual. In many situations people in collectivist cultures have internalized the norms of their collectives so completely that there is no such thing as a distinction between in-group goals and personal goals.<sup>2</sup>

Though collectivism originated in the agrarian economy of ancient China and in the ethics of Confucius, a few of the forms taken by contemporary Chinese collectivism are attributable to China's present political system. For example, the enveloping nature of the Chinese work unit is largely a product of that system. Another example is the relationship among neighbors. Though neighbors in China have traditionally been highly interdependent, the type of neighborhood committee that is an institutionalized provider of social services and mutual aid is quite new. In these and other ways, the tradition of collectivism has been enhanced since the founding of the People's Republic of China.

On the other hand, the burgeoning business economy of China's large cities, where Western influence is especially strong, is beginning to erode the ethic of collectivism. Western businesspeople frequently complain about the job-hopping of their Chinese employees and question how this is compatible with China's ancient collectivist ethic. The answer: it isn't. Job-hopping demonstrates that individualistic values are gaining a foothold in China. Nowadays it is common for young people to change their jobs one or two years after graduation from college. They gain experience and then seek higher positions, which accounts for the high mobility in the business world. Those who work in foreign companies tend to change their jobs even more frequently, because they believe they may have better opportunities in the new companies.

*Large power distance* is another term from cross-cultural research that is useful in explaining Chinese values. Power distance indicates the extent to which the people in a society accept the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally among individuals. Large power distance characterizes a society in which people are comfortable with an unequal distribution of power and thus do not try to bring about a more equal distribution.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout their history the Chinese have shown respect for age, seniority, rank, maleness, and family background. Confucianism embodied this attitude toward power and authority by stressing the benefits of

ordered hierarchical relationships. Over the past few decades in the PRC, however, the emphasis on socialist egalitarianism has noticeably eroded this way of thinking. In Chinese families the kind of absolute power wielded by the patriarch is a thing of the past.

Perhaps the chief determinant of relative power in China is seniority. Who is older and who is younger among siblings, for example, is of considerable importance. In Chinese, the age-neutral words *brother* and *sister* do not exist; instead, there are quite different words for older brother, younger brother, older sister, and younger sister. An elder sibling may call a younger one by his or her given name, but the younger one normally uses the more reverential age-relative title when addressing the older one—*gege* for elder brother and *jiejie* for elder sister. Similarly, age is important in local community affairs. What an older person says generally carries more weight in the meetings of the neighborhood committee than the opinions of younger people. Younger people are in general respectful to older ones, and informal social sanctions may be applied toward anyone who is disrespectful to seniors.

In spite of recent attempts within Chinese institutions to promote more informal interaction among colleagues—such as encouraging the use of rank-free titles in everyday address—the force of tradition is so powerful that many young workers (those who might benefit most from such a change) cannot bring themselves to be anything but fully deferential toward their supervisors. Promotion is much more likely to be based on seniority than on outstanding performance. Cases can be found where able young people have been promoted over less able older colleagues, especially in foreign multinational companies operating in the PRC, but this circumstance is relatively rare and encounters resistance in state-owned companies and government organizations.

Family background is not as important as relative age but can be influential in certain matters. The criterion for a good family background has changed over time. Before 1949, someone whose father was wealthy was considered to be from a good background. But after the People's Republic was founded, those whose parents were workers, peasants, or "revolutionary cadres" were said to have a good background.

*Cadre*, often pronounced "KAH-der" by English-speaking Chinese and commonly used to refer to individuals (not a group, as in French),

technically designates staff members of the Chinese government at all levels, including those in local work units. Its meaning is not unlike that of "bureaucrat." However, *cadre* is also used by the Chinese to refer to white-collar workers and people in positions of leadership in all walks of life. Service personnel are clearly not *cadres*, but different people have different ideas about the dividing line between *cadre* and *noncadre*. (The Chinese term for *cadre* is *ganbu*.)

In recent years, the Chinese have also begun to view children of professors, scientists, and senior officials as having a good family background. Whatever the criterion, those from a good family are looked upon with favor in matters such as matrimony and job allocation.

Finally, the third important fundamental value of the Chinese is *intra-group harmony* and avoidance of overt conflict in interpersonal relations. People from cultures the world over value smooth human relationships, but the importance assigned to interpersonal harmony varies from one culture to another. With respect to the Chinese, maintaining harmonious relationships with family members, close friends and colleagues, and other primary group members is a matter of supreme concern. The disapproval of overt confrontation and the high value placed on intra-group harmony are themes that will occur again and again throughout this book.



*A Brief Background to the Chinese Way of Life*

In the early 1980s, a group of social scientists from around the world conducted a survey of Chinese values.<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid biasing the research by using Western values as their starting point—as has happened frequently in cross-cultural research—they approached a number of Chinese social scientists and asked them to prepare a list of at least ten “fundamental and basic values for Chinese people.” This composite list appears in no particular order.

Filial piety	Wealth
Tolerance of others	Industry (working hard)
Humanity	Harmony with others
Observation of rites and social rituals	Loyalty to superiors
Kindness (forgiveness, compassion)	Reciprocation of greetings, favors, and gifts
Moderation, following the middle way	Knowledge (education)
Sense of what is righteous (uprightness)	Solidarity with others
Benevolent authority	Self-cultivation
Personal steadiness and stability	Ordering relationship by status and observing this order
Patriotism	Noncompetitiveness
Keeping oneself disinterested and pure	Resistance to corruption
Patience	Sincerity
Sense of cultural superiority	Thrift
Adaptability	Persistence (perseverance)
Prudence (carefulness)	Repayment of both the good or the evil that another person has caused you
Having a sense of shame	Trustworthiness
Contentedness with one's position in life	Courtesy
Close, intimate friendship	Being conservative
Having few desires	Protecting your “face”
	Chastity in women
	Respect for tradition

NOTES

1. Within the field of cross-cultural studies, the terms *collectivism* and *individualism* are most closely associated with Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede. See chapter 5 of his *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1980), 213–60.
2. Harry C. Triandis, Richard Brislin, and C. Harry Hui, "Cross-Cultural Training across the Individualism-Collectivism Divide," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 12, no. 3 (1988): 271.
3. The terms *large power distance* and *small power distance* are most closely associated with Geert Hofstede. See chapter 3 of his *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1980), 92–152.
4. The Chinese Culture Connection, "Chinese Values and the Search for Culture-Free Dimensions of Culture," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 18, no. 2 (June 1987), 143–64. (The Chinese Culture Connection is a multinational group of scholars headed by Michael Harris Bond of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.)