Chapter 13

Indigenous Personality Research
The Chinese Case

Kuo-Shu Yang

After a comprehensive and systematic review of psychological studies on Chinese personality conducted before 1985, K. S. Yang (1986) characterized Chinese personality research as thoroughly Westernized, or, more precisely, Americanized, in the sense that nearly all of the studies uncritically borrowed theories, concepts, methods, and tools developed and standardized in Western historical, cultural, and social contexts specifically for use with Euro-American subjects. Under the influence of an academic movement labeled psychological research indigenization, since the mid-seventies increasing numbers of psychologists in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China have been conducting research with an indigenized approach. This approach requires that the researchers’ theories, concepts, methods, tools, and results sufficiently represent the natural structures, mechanisms, and processes of the studied psychological and behavioral phenomena as embedded in their original ecological, historical, cultural, and social contexts (C. F. Yang, 1993a, 1996; K. S. Yang, 1993b, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2000). Numerous indigenous psychological studies on Chinese behavior in various research areas of psychology have been published in domestic and international academic journals. K. S. Yang (1997a, 2000) has made selected reviews of the empirical, theoretical, and methodological accomplishments of indigenized research on Chinese psychological functioning. This chapter presents an additional review that specifically stresses the integrative analysis of indigenized studies on Chinese personality from the perspective of a particular conceptual system in terms of individual and social orientations.

1 The author is deeply grateful to Professors Lawrence A. Pervin, A. Timothy Church, and Fanny M. Cheung for their critical and useful comments on an earlier version.
Previous conceptual analyses and empirical evidence have repeatedly demonstrated that there are two cultural syndromes at the macro level (cultural collectivism and individualism), and two corresponding psychological syndromes at the micro level (psychological collectivism and individualism). These syndromes prevail in contemporary societies all over the world (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1993, 1995; K. S. Yang, 2003). At each level, collectivism and individualism represent two generic categories, or, more appropriately, prototypes, although they both have specific, concrete variants in different cultures. Judging from its major characteristics (e.g., Ho, 1998; Ho & Chiu, 1994; King, 1991; Liang, 1974; K. S. Yang, 1995), Chinese culture is unequivocally collectivistic in nature. Specifically, it is a form of vertical collectivism in Triandis’ (1995) sense. Associated with Chinese cultural collectivism is Chinese psychological collectivism, which is embodied in Chinese social orientation as systematically conceptualized by K. S. Yang (1986, 1995). As a collectivist psychological syndrome, Chinese social orientation is mainly composed of four orientations: relationship orientation, authoritarian orientation, familistic (group) orientation, and (generalized) other orientation. Yang’s conceptualization of each of the four orientations is partially based upon previous research on Chinese social psychological functioning conducted by Chinese psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists.

According to K. S. Yang (1995), Chinese relationship orientation stresses relational fatalism, relational formalism, relational interdependence, relational harmony, and relational determinism (the Chinese form of particularism). Authoritarian orientation denotes an organized set of affects, cognitions, and behaviors toward social authorities (especially the head of the family), with authority sensitization (excessive sensitivity to authority), authority worship, and authority dependence (including psychological impotence before an authority) as its main features. Familistic orientation is a complex set of family-centered thoughts, attitudes, values, and behaviors that causes Chinese people to subordinate their personal goals, interests, and welfare for the sake of their families’ existence, harmony, solidarity, glory, prosperity, and prolongation. Finally, other orientation is composed of such psychological characteristics as constant worry about non-specific or generalized (without individualized identities) others’ opinions, strong conformity with non-specific others, deep concern about social norms, and high regard for face and reputation.

These four orientations represent the most important aspects of Chinese social psychological functioning whereby Chinese people attempt to fit themselves into and form harmonious unions with their social environments. Among the four, the relationship and authoritarian orientations