Chapter 15

The Chinese Conception of the Self
Towards a Person-Making (做人) Perspective

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The indigenous approach I have adopted for the past fifteen years entails understanding the psychology of a people within their cultural/social/historical context (C. F. Yang, 1991a; 1993). The way I have done this is to construct, based on local materials and observations, a set of commonly shared meaning systems with which the people under investigation make sense of their lives and their experiences, and give out and derive meanings while interacting with each other (C. F. Yang, 1991b; 2000a; 2000b; 2001). This set of systems also helps indigenous researchers understand and interpret the behaviors manifested by that people.

In the case of Chinese culture, this approach originated and an indigenization movement flourished from a general dissatisfaction among psychologists and other social scientists over employment of the cross-cultural approach for understanding non-western peoples (Li, K. S. Yang, & Wen, 1985). One of the problems encountered by non-western psychologists in adopting the cross-cultural approach illustrates why I chose the path I report here for investigation of the Chinese conception of self.

The problem involves the use of a common framework for comparison. As Geertz (1984) poignantly pointed out, differences are differences because they are viewed from the same perspective and measured using the same yardstick. Genuine understanding of another culture requires not differentiating it from others, but examining it from a native’s point of view. In cross-cultural psychology, the perspective used for comparison has, almost without exception, been western. The cultures involved in the comparisons, even if both are non-western, are often juxtaposed using a western framework. The result is that the views of non-western cultures
are often distorted to fit a comparative framework (see examples in the Chinese case in C. F. Yang, 1991c, 1996).

The indigenous approach advocates that non-local investigators put aside their past training and experience and their habitual way of thinking and understanding things in order to examine local people from the native’s point of view. Local investigators need to put aside any western frameworks they adopted while receiving their social-science training in western countries, and examine their own cultures from within.

This alternative view-taking requires investigators to see and understand events and behaviors happening then and there. What is the thinking framework of the local people under study? Unfortunately, in pursuit of different thinking styles for different cultures, investigators have often returned to the cross-cultural approach. Consequently, western terminology permeates the discussions and debates even at this meta-cognitive level (see example in C. F. Yang, 2000b).

This paper has three goals: (1) to find a local thinking framework with which to develop an alternative perspective to the western one in order to discover new dimensions for future studies of the self, at least for studies of the Chinese self; (2) to explore the concept of the Chinese self at its formative stage, which was during the Pre-Qin (先秦) period in Chinese history (D. N. Zhang, 1989b; L. W. Zhang, 1989), and to use this deep-rooted conception to study the evolution of self-concept in the Chinese context and better understand the behaviors of modern Chinese people; (3) and, to suggest an alternative approach to the study of the self.

These goals are particularly worth pursuing in the case of Chinese culture for three unique reasons: (1) Scholars agree that mainstream Chinese thought about the self has not changed much since its formation in archaic times; (2) there are quite good written records preserved for such a pursuit, especially in recent years since many ancient tombs have been unearthed from which a number of books of important philosophical, social, and political thoughts have been recovered; (3) these writings mainly concern how to be a person and thus are about the self.

Before I go into the main theme, two more points need to be clarified to avoid misconceptions about the purpose of this paper. First, the purpose of this paper is not to find the ancient conception of the self and claim that modern Chinese are just copies of it. Employing a person-in-culture position, which I will elucidate shortly, I aim to find the model that modern Chinese people deal with and depart from. Understanding the archaic conception achieves only half of the goal that the indigenous approach sets. It lays out the foundation upon which the study of the modern Chinese self can begin.

The second point I would like to make clear entails answering a question often asked by readers of papers like this one. It is about whether there is only one Chinese conception of the self and whether it is too general and narrow-minded to think that there is only one model that