



Short Communication

Through the back door: Personality factors predict acceptance of illegal *zou hou men* among Chinese people[☆]Tulips Yiwen Wang, Allan B.I. Bernardo^{*}

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ABSTRACT

Zou hou men (ZHM) (literally, through the back door) is a prevalent practice in China that is sometimes associated with corruption. We hypothesize that acceptance of ZHM in illegal transactions negatively relates to its perceived harmfulness. Moreover, personality orientations (social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism) influence harmfulness perceptions, and thus indirectly, acceptance of illegal ZHM. Chinese university students completed personality scales and questions regarding four scenarios involving ZHM. ZHM in illegal transactions were considered less acceptable than legal ones. Path analysis indicated that group-based dominance and authoritarian submission predict perceived harmfulness of illegal ZHM, which negatively predicted acceptance of illegal ZHM. Results are discussed with reference to how personality factors relate to perceptions regarding indigenous social psychological phenomena in China.

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1. Introduction

One day, Zhao goes to see a doctor but many patients have already queued when he arrives in the hospital. But Zhao has *guanxi* in the hospital; he knows someone who works there. He asks that person to take him to the doctor's office directly without queuing. Zhao's shortcut is called *zou hou men* (henceforth, ZHM) in Chinese societies, a term typically translated into English as “through the back door” or finding a shortcut to achieve one's goals, and is prevalent in Chinese societies (Dunning & Kim, 2007). It happens in everyday situations, such as getting a job and buying a train ticket; but it can also happen in illegal transactions, such as avoiding punishment for crimes and making deals with government officials. If persons have *guanxi* in the organization concerned, they could conduct ZHM to achieve their goals more easily.

ZHM is a cultural phenomenon that arises from the Chinese *guanxi* (Dunning & Kim, 2007). *Guanxi* is “an informal particularistic personal connection between two individuals who are bounded by an implicit psychological contract to follow the norm of *guanxi*, such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty and obligation” (Chen & Chen, 2004, p. 36). ZHM could be understood as a form of using *guanxi*, wherein access to the “back door” may be part of the norms befitting some personal connections and

may not be seen as unfair or immoral (Kwan, 2016). However, some people see ZHM as relating to privilege and leading to unfairness and injustice (Kriz & Fang, 2003); others see it as a key component of illegal and corrupt practices in Chinese society (Sands, 1990). We assume that Chinese people distinguish ZHM in illegal transactions from ZHM in everyday transactions that do not involve violating laws. Legal everyday ZHM would be seen as innocuous and acceptable uses of *guanxi*, but illegal ZHM would be less acceptable. In this study, we are focus on attitudes towards ZHM in illegal transactions and explore some personality factors that might be associated with acceptance of illegal ZHM.

1.1. *Zou hou men* in illegal transactions

ZHM is considered a widespread and efficient way to get things done in China (Dunning & Kim, 2007) that involves the “establishment of informal relations making it possible to ‘settle issues’ within the frames of centralized hierarchical structures though unofficially” (Podyapolskiy, 2014, p. 351). As mentioned earlier, doing ZHM is premised on the strong relational orientation of Chinese society people who value *guanxi*. Doing ZHM to facilitate some social transaction like helping someone avoid the cue or go through a short-cut process could be seen as ordinary ways of practicing *guanxi*. Viewed in this way, ZHM could be tolerated and accepted.

However, a more critical perspective views ZHM as benefiting only the actors (Luo, 1997). ZHM particularly in illegal transactions could be seen as detrimental to those who follow laws, prescribed rules and procedures (Lin & Si, 2010). When some people benefit from conducting ZHM, it is conceivable that some disadvantage is brought to some other people; if someone jumps the queue, someone

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else is moved down the queue. We propose that acceptance of *ZHM* in illegal transactions is related to perceptions of the harm brought about by illegal *ZHM*.

People's moral judgments are partly based on recognition of harm (Li, Gao, & Chen, 2016), and we propose that *ZHM* in illegal transactions would be perceived as more harmful and less acceptable compared to transactions within the law. More importantly, acceptance of illegal *ZHM* would be negatively associated with its perceived harmfulness.

1.2. Personality factors and illegal *ZHM*

What factors might be associated with attitudes towards illegal *ZHM*? Criticisms of *ZHM* refer to how it involves groups of people who have more privilege in society by virtue of their *guanxi* (Kriz & Fang, 2003). *ZHM* is seen as benefitting mainly people in privileged social groups to the detriment of ordinary and less privileged groups. This seems to be the case in accounts of the role *ZHM* involving powerful government officials in corruption (Sands, 1990). Framing *ZHM* within hierarchical intergroups relations, we hypothesize that personality variables that endorse advantage of certain social groups would be associated with attitudes towards illegal *ZHM*. Social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) are two personality variables known to be associated with negative attitudes towards disadvantaged groups (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), and could also be associated with whether *ZHM* is perceived as harmful and acceptable. In general, individuals with personality orientations that justify the disadvantage of some social groups might be more likely to overlook how *ZHM* disadvantages some people. Individuals high in these personality orientations might accept the detriment brought by *ZHM* as simply normal, and thus, not consider *ZHM* harmful, and indirectly contribute to making *ZHM* acceptable.

Consider SDO, which is “a generalized orientation towards and desire for unequal and dominant/subordinate relations among salient social groups” (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006, p. 282). It is motivated by two independent components: group-based dominance (SDO-GBD) and opposition to equality (SDO-OEQ; Jost & Thompson, 2000). SDO-GBD reflects social identity motives; people high in SDO-GBD support their own group's dominance, justified by their group's interests. SDO-OEQ reflects system justification motives instead of group interests. People high in SDO-OEQ reject universalism and efforts to reduce inequalities among social groups. But doing *ZHM* is not specific to any social group, and as such, social dominance motives might not be directly relevant to attitudes about *ZHM*. Indeed, because *ZHM* can be undertaken by anyone from any social group, it seems unlikely that SDO-OEQ would be associated with whether *ZHM* is perceived as harmful. But SDO-GBD is known to be associated with the motive to pursue self-interested goals and benefits (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), and as such, might be associated with a greater inclination to see benefits (instead of harm) in doing *ZHM*. So even if there are no explicit social groups in *ZHM*, we propose that SDO-GBD is negatively associated with perceptions of *ZHM* as harmful, and indirectly positively associated with acceptance of *ZHM*.

RWA is another personality variable associated with prejudice towards disadvantaged groups (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). It is a personality factor with covarying dimensions: (a) authoritarian submission (henceforth, RWA-AS) or the tendency to submit to legitimately established authorities in society, (b) authoritarian aggression (RWA-AA) or general aggressiveness towards people who violate social norms – aggressiveness that is viewed as endorsed by authorities, and (c) conventionalism (RWA-C) or the tendency to conform with social conventions that are also viewed as endorsed by society and the established authorities (Altemeyer, 2004). The relationship between RWA and *ZHM* is not obvious, as *ZHM* is not a social norm or practice sanctioned by authorities in society, and among the RWA dimensions, RWA-AA seems to be most irrelevant because aggressiveness seems to have no part in *ZHM*. However, some research

has defined RWA-AS and RWA-C as being rooted in conservation values (Passini, 2015) and expressions of the desire to maintain common norms and values in society (Feldman, 2003). Previous research indicated that RWA would even justify corruption and increase corrupt intentions just because people high in RWA would like to preserve traditional norms (Tan, Liu, Zheng, & Huang, 2015). Therefore, even if illegal *ZHM* is not sanctioned by authorities, the underlying values of RWA-AS and RWA-C might be associated with a tendency to justify *ZHM* and minimize its harmfulness.

1.3. The current study

Chinese people's attitudes towards illegal *ZHM* are likely to be influenced by a range of factors, but in this study, we focus on how personality factors indirectly relate to acceptance of illegal *ZHM* through their influence on perceptions of its harmfulness. We propose that specific facets of SDO and RWA predispose individuals to minimize the harmful effects of illegal *ZHM* on some people, and thus make illegal *ZHM* more acceptable.

We test this model in a sample of Chinese individuals who were first asked to answer SDO and RWA scales. They were then given various vignettes that involved either legal and illegal transactions involving *ZHM*, and asked to indicate the degree to which they perceived the *ZHM* as being harmful and acceptable. Our hypotheses were:

- illegal *ZHM* is perceived as more harmful and less acceptable than legal *ZHM*;
- perceived harmfulness is negatively associated with acceptance of illegal *ZHM*;
- SDO-GBD (but not SDO-OEQ), RWA-AS and RWA-C (but not RWA-AA) are positively associated with perceived harmfulness; and
- there will be a significant indirect effects of SDO-GBD, RWA-AS, RWA-C on acceptance of illegal *ZHM*.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 281 Chinese university students (180 females; mean age: 19.33 years, SD = 1.33) recruited from a research participants pool. All gave their informed consent to participate in the study, and received credit for their participation.

2.2. Instruments

A 16-item Social Dominance Orientation scale (Pratto et al., 2006) in Chinese (Tan et al., 2015) was used. Eight items measured SDO-OEQ ($\alpha = .87$) and eight measured SDO-GBD ($\alpha = .84$). Responses were on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

A 15-item Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (Zakrisson, 2005) in Chinese (Tan et al., 2015) was used. Four items measured RWA-AA ($\alpha = .76$). Six items measured RWA-AS but showed inadequate reliability; after removing items with low item-total correlations, the three remaining items ($\alpha = .75$) were used to measure RWA-AS. Five items measured RWA-C but showed poor reliability even after removing items, so RWA-C was not included in the analyses. Responses were on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*).

Four hypothetical scenarios were created to assess perceived harmfulness and acceptance of *ZHM* (see Supplementary materials for samples). Two scenarios involved legal interactions (harmfulness: $\alpha = .62$, acceptance: $\alpha = .71$) and two depicted illegal transactions (harmfulness: $\alpha = .70$, acceptance: $\alpha = .66$) with *ZHM*. After each story, participants were asked “Do you think [actor]’s behavior is *ZHM*?” to check that they perceived the scenario as such. They were

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