



# Reconfiguring Chinese cultural values and their tourism implications



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Identifies 40 Chinese values items from the contemporary society in China.
- Supplements modern values into the pool of Chinese cultural values.
- Draws links between Chinese values and travel behaviors/preferences.
- Confirms the trend of Chinese culture toward individualism/materialism.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the Chinese cultural values that prevail in the contemporary Chinese society and their tourism implications. Focus group discussions with residents in Beijing and Guangzhou identified 40 Chinese value items, which are classified as instrumental, terminal, and interpersonal. These value items are largely different from traditional Chinese values in the literature and provide a timely update on the current values system in China. Modern terminal values identified that demonstrate relationships with travel behaviors include *convenience, indulgence, leisure, liberation, self-interest, and ostentation*. Traditional values found to be associated with travel behaviors include the instrumental values of *courtesy and morality, honesty, respect for history, and thrift*; the terminal values of *horizon broadening/novelty, knowledge and education, and stability and security*; and the interpersonal values of *conformity and family orientation/kinship*. These Chinese value items serve as an invaluable measurement pool for future tourism research.

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural values are widely recognized by marketing theorists as one of the underlying determinants of consumer behaviors in tourism (e.g., De Mooij, 2010; Fu, Lehto, & Cai, 2012). Culture is generally defined as a cognitive system consisting of values, beliefs, norms, and other similar subjective constructs that shape human behavior and distinguish particular groups of people from others (Geertz, 2000; Goodenough, 1971; Kroeber & Parsons, 1958; Pizam, Jansen-Verbeke, & Steel, 1997). Cultural values are pivotal in influencing people's communication and thus defining cultural differences (Bond, 1996). Admittedly, every individual possesses a distinctive set of personal values that are molded by both the shared culture in the society and personal experiences. Schwartz

(1994) argued that the commonalities found in social members' values formed the basis of a culture. To better understand Chinese tourists and their behaviors, a thorough understanding of their cultural values is required.

Research on cultural values has been dominated by a Western paradigm derived from mainstream Western ideologies, philosophies, and scientific research traditions; at the same time, such research is characterized by a dichotomous, analytical, logical, and rational approach of thinking. Despite the value of such a paradigm in advancing human knowledge, this paradigm is facing increasing criticisms (Lewis, 2000). As the world steps into a new era that views Eastern cultures (and their influence on human behaviors) playing an increasing role in various aspects of human life, the current (Western) research paradigm in cultural values studies has limitations in advancing our understanding of non-Western cultures and associated behaviors (Winter, 2009). Jennings (2009), among many other scholars, called for a complete reconsideration of the lens from which tourism experiences could be interpreted

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and emphasized the need to identify and adopt alternative approaches to the Western-centric tourism research paradigm. Cross-cultural research involving Chinese nationals has also garnered the attention of tourism researchers; in this regard, theories developed in Western contexts need to be verified in Eastern cultural contexts (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990).

Currently, the literature is insufficient in providing a solid theoretical foundation for researchers to proceed in investigating the relationship between Chinese cultural values and consumer behaviors in modern business contexts. Despite the growing body of literature in Chinese language examining the relationship between Chinese values and consumer behaviors (e.g., Pan, 2009; Zhang, 2012), most studies undertaken by researchers in China focus on the traditional Chinese values and how they explain Chinese consumer behaviors. Few studies have attempted to identify modern Chinese values and their influence on Chinese consumer behaviors. In tourism, the relationship between Chinese cultural values and Chinese tourist behaviors is unclear. Given that China is undergoing unprecedented social and cultural transformation, understanding Chinese tourist behaviors on the basis of their cultural values would be further restricted by a lack of current depiction of prevailing Chinese cultural values in China. Therefore, this study primarily aimed to explore and identify currently prevailing contemporary Chinese cultural values in China. As a secondary research objective, this study examined the potential linkages between Chinese cultural values and Chinese tourist behaviors in outbound travel. The study contributes to the provision of a solid pool of Chinese values that serves as the foundation for the future development and applications of a scale for Chinese cultural values in the tourism context.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Need to identify contemporary Chinese cultural values

Both etic and emic perspectives can be found in prior research on cultural values. Adopting an etic perspective, Rokeach's (1973) Value Survey (RVS), Hofstede's (1980, 1991) cultural dimensions (HCD), and Schwartz's (1992) theory of human values have laid the foundation for cross-cultural studies by enabling the meaningful comparison of values in different cultural groups. Specific to Chinese cultural values, Michael Bond and colleagues (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) examined the validity of HCD and developed their Chinese Value Survey (CVS) containing 40 value items that are central to the Chinese way of life. The CVS marked an effort toward an "emic" understanding of Chinese culture; however, the intention of Bond's team was not to analyze the fundamental characteristics of Chinese culture but to seek the culture-free dimensions of values and develop a universal values instrument. Consequently, the 40 Chinese value items were neither extensively discussed nor adequately validated within the Chinese communities. Furthermore, most of the CVS items are more pertinent to traditional than modern China. Even at the time of the original study (1987), some of the items, such as non-competitiveness, may have already lost relevance in the Chinese society.

Culture is dynamic and evolutionary in nature (Fang, 2012; Hofstede, 1991; Rokeach, 1973). The theory of cultural crossvergence (Ralston, 2008; Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, & Terpstra, 1993; Ralston, Holt, Terpstra, & Yu, 1997) provides a theoretical foundation for examining the evolution of Chinese cultural values under the influence of globalization and China's economic and social transition. Crossvergence theory posits that cultures evolve in two broad directions: convergence, which sees some national cultural values become more similar to one another across different countries, and divergence, which perceives other national cultural

values to be increasingly distinct and different across national borders. In most cases, researchers observe that people simultaneously adopt both traditional and modern cultural values, even though traditional values may be contradictory to modern values (e.g., Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005). The crossvergence view of cultural evolution implies that the evolution of cultural change is more complicated and paradoxical and calls for alternative perspectives in values research (Fang, 2012; Faure & Fang, 2008).

Recognizing the evolution of cultural values, Fan (2000) proposed 31 Chinese cultural values in addition to the 40 Chinese value items listed in CVS. These 71 Chinese values items were further classified into eight categories, namely, national traits, interpersonal relationship, family (social) orientation, work attitude, business philosophy, personal traits, time orientation, and relationship with nature. Although the 71-item pool identified by Fan (2000) appears to be more inclusive and comprehensive than the CVS, the approach for Fan to identify the value items is chiefly based on critical literature review. Hence, the extent to which these value items can be applicable to the contemporary society in China is questionable. Fan's (2000) study included the 40 CVS items in an undifferentiated manner, despite the criticisms on CVS that some of its items (e.g., chastity) are already irrelevant to the modern Chinese society. Therefore, Fan's Chinese cultural value items need to be further verified and cannot be readily used to reflect the current state of values in China.

In the context of cross-cultural management studies, researchers have also attended to alternative paradigms in analyzing culture. Fang (2012) resorted to the indigenous Chinese philosophy of Yin Yang and proposed a new alternative perspective of culture. According to Fang (2012), potential paradoxical values coexist, reinforce, and complement one another in a culture, and culture is holistic, dynamic, and dialectical in nature. Each culture is "a unique dynamic portfolio of self-selected globally available value orientations as a consequence of that culture's all-dimensional learning over time" (Fang, 2012, p. 25). Although Fang's conceptualization of culture and cultural values represents the much needed paradigm shift in cultural studies, which, more or less, is also reflected in crossvergence theory (Ralston, 2008; Ralston et al., 1993, 1997), the Yin Yang perspective of Chinese cultural values studies remains mostly conceptual and requires empirical corroborations. Based on a paradigm shift advocated by Fang (2012) and adopting the lens of crossvergence theory, the current study addresses the limitations of both CVS and Fan's (2000) study to identify an array of relevant cultural values in the society of mainland China.

### 2.2. Traditional and modern value items

In general, cultural values that exist in contemporary China can be grouped into two types, namely, traditional and modern values. Although this classification might seem over-simplistic and arbitrary, Leung (2008) believed that the investigation of traditional (old) and modern (new) values and the interplay between them would serve as a valuable starting point for insights into Chinese idiosyncrasies. The cultural roots of Chinese traditions and values can be traced to several schools of thought, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, with Confucianism being the most influential and widespread among them (Pun, Chin, & Lau, 2000). The major teachings of Confucius include a set of principles that guide behaviors in human relations and are essential in maintaining social order. Individual and family are heavily emphasized, as the former is considered a basic element of the society and the latter is the first institution where an individual learns to be a gentleman (*junzi* 君子). Nevertheless, the value of a group is well above that of an individual; therefore, any true gentleman should dedicate

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