We present our recent research on children’s learning goals and personal agency in the domain of learning in order to show the complexity of selves in Chinese culture. Our research poses challenges to the widely claimed collectivist self-concept in Chinese children and calls for reexamination of selves in specific domains across cultures.

Self in Learning Among Chinese Children

Jin Li, Xiaodong Yue

One’s self-orientation is an important outcome of growing up in one’s culture. Individualist versus collectivist (I-C) selves have been argued and observed to exist as the two basic types of selves in the world that correspond to the two cultural orientations of I-C (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). Individualist selves are said to be bounded, autonomous, distinct from others, and emphasizing one’s own goals and agency rather than those of others. By contrast, collectivist selves are connected and interdependent, stressing roles and relationships more than individual uniqueness; they are principally motivated to pursue group goals rather than their own. Therefore their sense of agency is also socially defined.

The Collectivist Chinese Self

This research tradition characterizes Chinese culture as typically collectivist (Hostede, 1980). Chinese selves, accordingly, are also collectivist (Bond and Forgas, 1984; Leung and Bond, 1984; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui, 1990). Two sources of support are compelling. First, researchers in this area typically evoke Confucianism, the dominant social thought that has been influencing Chinese lives throughout history. Maintaining social harmony as expressed in one’s social position (role) is indeed one of the essential life tasks espoused by Confucianism (Hsu, 1981; K. S. Yang, 1997). Important social practices such as filial piety, friendship, and superior-subordinate relationships all center around social harmony. Compared to this well-established sociocentric system, the notion of the individual does appear to be downplayed (Ho, 1986).
In addition to Confucianism, empirical research has produced consistent findings that Chinese selves are primarily socially oriented. For example, Leung and Bond (1984) found that Chinese showed a higher concern for in-group harmony in their reward allocation than their American counterparts. Similarly, Chinese scored higher on their belief in groups and feelings of interpersonal concerns than Americans (Hui and Triandis, 1986). They also gave more social responses when defining the self and perceived themselves much closer to their in-groups than to out-groups (Triandis, McCusker, and Hui, 1990). Recent research on Chinese autobiographical memory also documents the Chinese self as more connected to social activities (Wang, 2001). Finally, Chinese were found to attribute more group than individual agency to causality than did Westerners (Menon, Morris, Chiu, and Hong, 1999).

**Countering Claims**

It is clear that the Chinese self as a whole is more socially than individually delineated and developed. However, inquiry into the Chinese culture and self does not lack differing views and empirical findings. By analyzing the Confucian *Analects*, the central text that records Confucius’ teaching, scholars found well-preserved space for the individual, particularly with regard to the person’s moral self-cultivation (Chang, 1997; King, 1985; C. F. Yang, 1993). In examining children’s lives during the early twentieth century, Saari (1990) observed that Chinese children developed an “inner self” in order to retain a private space of their own. These scholars conclude that claiming that Confucian cultures only emphasize and impose social roles and hierarchy on people may be simplistic and one-sided.

Some empirical research also echoes these counterclaims. For example, Bond and Cheung (1983) documented that Chinese made the most references on several of their key individual dimensions while using the fewest social descriptors (compared to both Japanese and Americans). Furthermore, Lau (1992) also found that Chinese endorsed no fewer “individualistic” values than Americans, with Chinese scoring higher on some autonomous values such as “freedom” but lower on some typically collectivist values such as “family security.” Even Harry Triandis’s own research (Triandis, McCusker, and Hui, 1990) failed to support some of the key assumptions about the collectivist self; for example, Chinese displayed more self-reliance but less “social connection” (for instance, sense of belonging) than Americans.

Recent research also found that, despite their overall collectivist tendency, Chinese selves emphasize self-reliance, individual responsibility (Ho and Chiu, 1994), success, ambition, personal capability (Schwartz, 1994), personal agency, and even autonomy in decision making (Helwig, Arnold, Tan, and Boyd, 2003; Wink, Gao, Jones, and Chao, 1997). Most striking is the research by Y.-Y. Yang (2001), who documents that Chinese selves look more like web builders rather than fixed web nodes in their intricate social
relations. They keep flexible interpersonal boundaries where they can bring strangers into their relation network and also be creative in pushing their so-called in-group members out if they don’t want them. By doing so, Chinese selves display a great deal more personal agency than has been acknowledged.

Perhaps the most direct challenge comes from the research on Chinese children’s consistently high school achievement (Harmon and others, 1997; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992). Yu (1996) has argued that Chinese achievement motivation is socially oriented. However, research by Stevenson and associates and others (for example, Hau and Salili, 1991) has repeatedly documented that Chinese children believe strongly in personal effort, a concept that clearly denotes individual agency. Li’s recent examination of Chinese conceptions of learning (2002) also reveals a great deal of personal agency. Interestingly, researchers advocating for the collectivist Chinese self rarely acknowledge this very phenomenon and the potential discrepancy it poses for their claims.

These differing views and conflicting empirical findings cast doubt on the sharply and statically assumed distinctions between I-C selves. More and more scholars are calling this dichotomy into question. Some researchers have proposed that both types of self may coexist in any culture (Kagitçibasi, 1994; Ho and Chiu, 1994; Singelis, 1994). Others have gone further to argue that selves may be much more complex in meaning, dynamic in process, and variable from context to context (Helwig, Arnold, Tan, and Boyd, 2003; Turiel and Wainryb, 2000).

**Aim of Our Research**

We conducted two studies on Chinese adolescents’ self-concepts in terms of individual and social orientation on the basis of two perspectives. First, we adopt the theoretical stance that selves in cultures are much more complex than the two dichotomous types can accommodate. We suspected that there are culturally specific conceptions of self among Chinese children that may have been overlooked in previous research. Second, we share the view that part of the complexity in self may be due to specific contexts and domains of activity in which individuals function rather than delineating self as a decontextualized entity (Helwig, Arnold, Tan, and Boyd, 2003; Yau and Smetana, 1996). This view assumes that selves, particularly with regard to their specific meanings, are not static notions but dynamically constructed and that they vary from domain to domain. In our study, we chose learning as a particular domain in an attempt to locate Chinese selves in a specific context.

**Chinese Selves in the Domain of Learning**

We chose the domain of learning because past research has consistently documented the essential role learning assumes in Chinese lives (Chao, 1996; Li, 2002, 2003b; Watkins and Biggs, 1996). The importance of learning is
influenced by Confucian teaching of the concept ren, a lifelong striving for becoming the most genuine, sincere, and humane person one can become (Tu, 1979). This process is also called self-perfection and is believed possible for anyone who seeks it. This outline of life purposes and processes is deeply inspiring to the Chinese not only because it is for everyone but also because it is under each individual’s control. Consequently, to the Chinese learning is not a mere academic pursuit but an individual moral striving as well. Li’s study (2002) found that knowledge was more defined by college students as “a need to perfect oneself,” a notion clearly reminiscent of Confucian moral self-striving, than “understanding the world,” a more typical construal of knowledge in the West (Li, 2003b). Unfortunately, research adopting the I-C dichotomy has neglected to address this important dimension of Confucian influence on Chinese people and their self-concepts.

Modern formal learning complements the Confucian conception of self-perfection and is seen as an important part of this purpose because academic disciplines are the areas in which one needs to self-improve constantly (Li, 2002, 2003a; Ran, 2001; Watkins and Biggs, 1996). In this process, Chinese have been found to seek to develop what we term “learning virtues” of diligence, resolve, endurance of hardship, perseverance, and concentration (Hau and Salili, 1991; Li, 2001, 2002; Li and Wang, forthcoming; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992). These “learning virtues” constitute the core of Chinese personal agency in learning.

Recent research further shows that Chinese also emphasize personal competence, mastery, and achievement through learning (Li, 2002; Li and Fisher, 2004; Wink, Gao, Jones, and Chao, 1997). Moreover, learning is seen as a process that enables one to establish oneself socioeconomically (Li, 2002; Salili, Chiu, and Lai, 2001), that is, achieving self-sufficiency (Ho and Chiu, 1994). Finally, learning can bring satisfaction to one’s own life, helping one to obtain a sense of fulfillment and happiness (Li and Wang, in press).

Whereas self-concepts encompass many dimensions, we sought to focus on two specific but core areas: goals of learning and sense of agency because they are most central to the self in the domain of learning. We focused on adolescents because it is a developmental period where one’s sense of self is heightened. Moreover, adolescents are more adept in articulating their goals and agency in learning, thereby offering a unique window for exploring important self-concepts among Chinese children. We predicted that Chinese adolescents would hold a set of goals and express various aspects of their sense of agency that are both social and individual, reflecting their cultural values as well as their own thoughts of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986). However, on the basis of the foregoing literature review, we anticipated more individual than social goals and agency in this domain, countering the collectivist claims. In addition, we also anticipated some within-culture differences between grades and boys and girls.
Method and Data: Study One

To tap Chinese adolescents’ goals of learning and sense of agency, we first used an open-ended method, followed by close-ended methods based on the findings culled from our first study.

In the first study, we collected data from a total of 187 twelve-to-fifteen-year-olds attending seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, with 84 in seventh, 80 in eighth, and 23 in ninth grade; there were 78 boys and 109 girls from five regions of China. All participants were from city schools and middle-income families, reflecting the majority of Chinese city population (NCEDR, 2001).

We developed a questionnaire that probed, in writing, participants’ goals of learning and sense of agency in learning. Four questions were used to elicit goals of learning:

1. What does knowledge mean to you?
2. Do you need to learn? Rate yourself on a 5-point scale from “not at all” to “very much.” (If participants rated higher than 2, they were asked to respond to the next question, “Why do you need to learn?” which was used as our second open-ended question.)
3. How would you be if one day you could not learn anymore?
4. Do you like learning? Rate yourself on a 5-point scale from “not at all” to “very much.”

Regardless of their responses, participants were asked to respond to “Why did you give yourself this rating?” with only that as our final question.

For agency in learning, we used five open-ended questions:

1. How do you learn when you are faced with difficulties in learning (e.g., you don’t understand the teacher or your homework)?
2. How do you learn when you fail?
3. How do you learn when, after you’ve tried hard, you still can’t seem to learn?
4. How do you learn when you achieve well (e.g., high score on a test or teacher praise)?
5. Sometimes, you may not have an interest in some things. How do you learn then?

We took two steps to code our data: establishing coding schemes, and actual coding. For the former, we adopted techniques of content analysis (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O’Connor, 1987) and systematically identified goals of learning and expressions of personal agency. Accordingly, three coders, blind to our hypotheses, read independently a random sample of 20 percent of the raw data. First, they each recorded “distinct” goals and types of agency. The distinctness of a goal or type of agency was defined as being
not interchangeable with another (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O’Connor, 1987). For example, “my goal of learning is to know a lot about the world” and “my goal is to help my parents” were seen by the coders as two distinct goals. Likewise, “I persist in the face of difficulty” and “I work on a school problem independently first” were also seen as two types of agency with the first focusing on persistence and the second on independence.

When at least two of the three coders noted the same goal or type of agency from the same adolescent, that item was entered on the item list. For items lacking agreement, the coders discussed and excluded them if disagreement remained. Next, the coders independently examined the entries on the list and grouped them into conceptually similar categories. At the end, the three coders grouped individual versus social categories, for goals and agency respectively.

This cyclical, multileveled procedure led to establishment of nine categories of goals, six of which were deemed individual and three social. Whereas some of these categories had subcategories, others did not. Similarly, this procedure produced six categories of agency, four of which were deemed individual and two social. Most categories of agency also contained subcategories. Any adolescent could have expressed any number of these goals and any type of agency. Table 2.1 shows these goals and types of agency, which we describe next.

**Goals of Learning.** With respect to individual goals of learning, the first category, “cognitive goals,” had three component goals. The first, “to develop one’s ability/competence/skills,” emphasized developing the self’s own ability (for example, “I want to have skills to solve many problems in life”). The second subgoal involved “expanding one’s horizons and worldview.” This goal stressed the need to increase the self’s knowledge in ever-expanding quantity and ever-varying spheres of life (for example, “I want to expand my view beyond where I came from all the way into the world”). The third subgoal was to “master knowledge” so that the self could possess it to serve the self’s needs in life (for example, “I need to master knowledge so that it’s in my own head at my beck and call”).

The second category of goals, also with three subgoals, was organized around the notion of “aspirations.” The first subgoal, “to keep the self’s ideal, aspiration, and ambition,” referred to long-range goals (for example, “My goal of learning is to be famous”). The second subgoal consisted of the desire to “have accomplishments in life for the self” (for example, “I want to achieve excellence in life”). The third subgoal involved the desire to “self-strengthen continuously without ever stopping”; this goal reflects the pursuit of learning as a lifelong process (as in “I will learn as long as I live”).

The third category was organized around the goal of achieving “moral/spiritual/wisdom,” also with three subgoals. The first involved the intention to “forge the self’s moral character,” which consists of improving the self in the moral domain (for example, “I learn so that I can distinguish right from wrong”). The second subgoal, “enriching the self’s life,” was aimed at
Table 2.1. Self’s Individual and Social Goals and Agency in Learning Expressed by Chinese Adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals of Learning</th>
<th>Agency in Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive goals</td>
<td>General effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop self’s ability/competence/skills</td>
<td>Be diligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand self’s horizons/worldview</td>
<td>Have resolve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master knowledge for self</td>
<td>Endure hardship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep self’s ideal/ambition</td>
<td>Persevere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have accomplishments in life for self</td>
<td>Concentrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-strengthen without ever stopping</td>
<td>Remain humble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral/spiritual/wisdom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forge self’s moral character</td>
<td>Self-generate/regulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrich self’s life</td>
<td>learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain wisdom for self</td>
<td>Set goals for self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience love/happiness/enjoyment for self</td>
<td>Use strategies to achieve goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevate self’s SES</td>
<td>Regulate self’s emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is good for self in general</td>
<td>Compete with others (to be better oneself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit others</td>
<td>Seek help from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to society</td>
<td>Interact with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor parents and teachers</td>
<td>Study/discuss with/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not become a burden to society</td>
<td>emulate others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streamline self with social world</td>
<td>Participate in social activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep up with societal development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catch up with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive social acceptance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop interpersonal relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

finding meaning in life or seeking spirituality (for example, “If I don’t learn, I feel empty, and I feel my life is being wasted”). The third subgoal, “obtaining wisdom,” involved seeking deeper understanding of the human world.

The fourth category consisted of “experiencing love/happiness/enjoyment” with learning (for example, “I am very happy when I learn”). The fifth category was organized around attempts to “elevate one’s SES” (for example, “I want to make a lot of money”). Finally, the sixth category involved a general notion that learning is “good for oneself” in all aspects.

With regard to social goals, the first category involved “benefiting others.” Participants indicated three subgoal types. The first involved the desire to “contribute to society,” including the self’s own community, country, and the world at large (for example, “I want to help educate our country’s poor children”). The second subgoal was to “honor the self’s parents and teachers,” who nurtured the self in his or her development, such as “my parents sacrificed for my education; I want to bring honor to and take care of them.” The third subgoal was organized around not becoming a “burden to society.” (This goal was coded as a type of social goal because the self adopted a societal perspective.)
The second category of social goals involved “streamlining the self with the social world.” Again, this category was embodied by three subgoals. The first was to “keep up with societal development” so that the self would be part of the development (for example, “computer science is developing fast now, but I need to learn that so that I won’t be left behind”). The second reflected a desire to “catch up with others” in order to compete and surpass others in learning. (This goal is defined in terms of how the self is compared with others). The third subgoal was embodied by a need to “receive social acceptance” such as respect, honor, and recognition. Finally, the third category consisted of “developing interpersonal relationships” (for example “I will know how to make more friends”).

**Agency in Learning.** As shown in Table 2.1, the first of the four individual categories of agency was the general notion of effort, which referred to individual striving and working hard toward the self’s goal. There were five components specifying particular dimensions of effort. “Be diligent” (**qin**) was the first, which stressed the need for frequent studying (for example, “I always study no matter what happens”). The second consisted of “having resolve” (**fen**). **Fen** refers to one’s commitment to a course of learning and reflects a certain “stubbornness” in serious, intense, but optimistic pursuit of the self’s goals (for example, “I have the resolve to realize my dream of becoming a lawyer”). The third component consists of “enduring hardship” (**keku**); it addressed the self’s staunch attitude and behavioral tendency toward overcoming difficulties that were the opposite of fun, pleasure, or luxury. These difficulties ranged from poverty and difficult knowledge to the self’s perceived lack of intelligence (for example, “My family is poor, but I save money from food to buy books. I must endure this hardship”). The fourth component involves the desire to “persevere” (**hengxin**). **Hengxin** corresponds to what the self does to continue learning when faced with failures, as in “I failed the exam. But I will never give up; I will continue to study hard again.” The final component was “concentration” (**zhuanxin**), where the self tried to pay undivided attention to his or her learning. For example, “Whenever I study, I put my whole heart and mind to the work.”

The second large category of agency was organized around the ideal “remaining humble.” Humility consists of the need and readiness to learn from any source or from any person, which functions to prevent the self from becoming arrogant or conceited (for example, “It’s important to remain humble so I won’t be full of myself”). We classified humility as an agentic subcategory in light of its capacity to sustain adolescents’ attempts toward self-improvement.

The third category of agency consists of “self-generated/self-regulated learning.” This category pertains to specific types of activities the self generates or controls, and not to those that were merely intended to meet contextual demands (such as going to school or doing homework). There were also three activity types in this category. First involves “setting learning
goals for the self” (for example, “I set my own goal for memorizing five English words a day”). The second type consisted of “using strategies to achieve the self’s goals,” such as reviewing course material before and after class and using flashcards. The third type included “regulating the self’s emotions,” in which participants referred to strategies for handling the self’s emotional reactions to failure or setbacks. Examples of such regulation included actively encouraging the self to increase confidence, and trying to think positively.

The fourth and final category of agency involved the need to “compete with others” in order to achieve the self’s best. For example, one participant indicated that “competition makes me want to do my best. Even if I don’t make it to the top, I feel I would win in the end.”

With regard to social agency, there were two categories. The first was “seeking help from others,” which indicated that one’s learning benefits from seeking and receiving support from others. For example, “I ask for help if I can’t figure out something by myself.” The second category consisted of social interaction, of which there were two components. The first involved the proclivity to “study and discuss with others as well as emulate others’ examples” (for example, “I like to discuss and debate with my peers”). The second was “participating in social activities.” Usually adolescents referred to activities in which they were engaged outside of school (such as community service or activities at the workplace where the self’s book knowledge can be used and verified).

We used these categories and components to code the data. First we achieved reliability by having two coders, who had no knowledge of our predictions, code a random sample of the data. Real coding began upon reaching high reliability scores for goals and agency (Cohen’s kappa = .83 and .89 respectively).

Findings and Discussion. From Table 2.1, it is clear that regarding goals and agency there were individual and social references. This lent support for the argument that both types of orientations coexist. However, in goals and agency alike, there were more, not fewer, types of individual categories than social categories (for goals, mean = 5.92 compared to 1.40; for agency, mean = 6.98 compared to 1.56, respectively). To test for group differences between boys and girls and across the three grades in the outcome variables (the categories), we performed analyses of variance (ANOVAs). We found again that as a whole (all individual and social goals aggregated respectively) these adolescents expressed more individual goals than social goals and sense of agency. Gender and grades did not differ.

Within the categories of goals and agency, we also tested for group differences by gender and grade and found some. On the other hand, seventh graders referred to more individual cognitive goals, but eighth graders harbored more goals for elevating their SES, and ninth graders expressed more individual aspirations. On the other hand, girls articulated more individual moral/spiritual goals than boys. However, ninth grade boys mentioned more
love, happiness, and enjoyment for learning than girls, whereas the other
two grades did not differ. Interestingly, none of the social goals showed any
differences. Concerning agency, girls in the ninth grade showed a higher
level of personal effort than boys, but there were no gender differences in
the other grades. No differences were found for humility, self-generated/
regulated learning, or seeking help.

It appeared that there was more variability within the individual ori-
entation for both goals and agency than within the social orientation. These
findings supported our general argument that selves in any culture are more
complex than has been acknowledged by researchers of the I-C persuasion.

**Methods and Data: Study Two**

The purpose of study two was to further verify what we found in our first
study. Even though we detected clear patterns of Chinese adolescents’
strong individual orientation in study one, the open-ended method may
not have provided participants equal opportunity to consider both indi-
vidual and social aspects of their own learning. We sought to collect more
direct and focused data on their references to self in this domain.

Therefore, on the basis of the content of participants’ responses in study
one, we developed twenty-two statements about the self’s attitudes toward
and behavioral tendencies in learning. Half of the twenty-two statements
showed individual orientation and half showed social orientation within
an identical aspect of learning. Examples are “My learning is my own busi-
ness; it has nothing to do with others” (tapping individual orientation)
versus “My learning has a lot to do with others; it’s not just my own busi-
ness” (tapping social orientation), or “I like to study alone” (individual)
versus “I like to study with other people” (social). These statements were
randomly ordered. The statements as a whole cohered (internal consis-
tency) moderately well (XX = .65 for the individual items and .60 for the
social items).

A second group of adolescents (52 seventh graders and 114 eighth
graders, 78 boys and 88 girls, for a total of 166) from similar demographic
backgrounds were asked to rate themselves on a 5-point scale. Their ratings
ranged from “completely agree” to “do not agree at all” for statements that
focused on adolescents’ attitudes toward learning, and “always describes
me” to “never describes me” for statements that focused on their behavioral
tendencies. To reduce social desirability, participants responded to our
scales anonymously.

In terms of findings, the mean rating for individual orientation was
3.43 and for social orientation 2.24. Our analyses showed again that ado-
lescents rated individual orientation significantly higher than social orien-
tation. There were no differences between the boys and girls or the two
grades, or any interactions between these factors. These findings generally
confirmed the results of our study one.
General Discussion

Our goal in this research was to examine two particularly important areas of Chinese adolescents’ self-concepts: goals and agency in the domain of learning. We took the theoretical perspective that selves in any culture are more complex than the I-C framework has acknowledged. One way selves in cultures are complex may have to do with the content, not just the structure and process, of self-concepts that are informed by specific cultural values. Whereas structure and process (Bracken, 1996; Harter, 1998) are important in describing selves, content is equally important. Content is about meanings that individuals construct about themselves. According to cultural psychologists, meanings are indispensable in examining selves because they exert what D’Andrade (1987) called “directive force” or motivation for behavior.

Our data supported not only our prediction that there would be more individual goals and agency but also the idea that there were culturally specific meanings Chinese adolescents would express in their goals and related agency. We did not find a few individual goals, but rather six categories consisting of twelve distinguishable goals these adolescents harbored about their purposes of learning. Adding the three categories of seven specific social goals, there were nineteen goals. Even though no single adolescent expressed all nineteen, the majority of them (78 percent) expressed four or more, and 41 percent had six or more. Only 7 percent had fewer than two goals. The same picture applied to agency. Our data showed four categories of individual agency, consisting of eleven specific types. Adding the three social types of agency, there were fourteen in total. Again, no single adolescent mentioned all of these types, but 85 percent of them mentioned four or more, and 50 percent mentioned six or more. Only 4 percent mentioned fewer than two types of agency.

From a cultural perspective, we argue that these categories of goals and agency reflect well the Chinese cultural value system regarding learning, which is largely Confucian (Li, 2002; Tu, 1979; Watkins and Biggs, 1996). Accordingly, the fundamental purpose of learning is geared toward the notion of self-perfection, which stresses the role of the individual, particularly his or her decision, commitment, and day-to-day practice throughout life. Learning is believed to be the only underlying process that can lead the individual toward that ultimate goal.

Because of the centrality learning assumes in this process, individual goals and agency are only natural results. Furthermore, learning was also historically linked to “civil service” through China’s examination system (from the seventh century to the turn of the twentieth), which was inevitably associated with status, honor, and practical benefits. Modern learning through schooling as imported from the West achieved added significance in the hearts and minds of Chinese people. The multifaceted nature of goals and types of agency found in this research reflect these complex cultural,
historical, and social influences. Therefore, they must be studied in their own right. Reducing these rich goals and types of agency to the I-C dichotomy is doing gross injustice to self-concepts of Chinese people.

A second way selves in cultures are complex may be due to the particular domains of human activity and psychological functioning. Even though people do have abstract notions of themselves, they are at any given moment of the day likely to carry out activities in specific contexts or domains. Since human activities are not random but socially organized, most often these contexts and domains recur regularly, such as going to work and coming home as a daily routine. Likewise, children spend most of their waking time learning in school. Because contexts and domains have their own purposes, processes, and demands, individuals’ self-concepts are bound to differ from one context to another (Helwig, Arnold, Tan, and Boyd, 2003; Yau and Smetana, 1996). These domain-specific, rather than global abstract, self-concepts may be more potent in influencing behavior and performance outcomes (Bracken, 1996; Harter, 1998). Domain-specific differences among individuals may constitute one dimension or level where the dynamism in the construction of self-concepts is generated.

Learning (informal and formal) is a domain for any culture but is distinct for the Chinese for reasons we have stated. At the general level across cultures, learning—especially formal learning—as a unique domain calls upon more individual participation and processes. No matter how the social context for learning is structured, the individual is the agent that must be actively engaged in the activity for learning to take place. Therefore, learning is a prime domain for investigating children’s self-concepts in a so-called collectivist culture. It is therefore reasonable to assume that this domain mostly pulls out children’s self-concepts about their mental capacity and achievement. Whereas this is generally the case in the West (Bracken, 1996; Harter, 1998), research since the 1980s, surprisingly, shows that this is not the case with Asians (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992; Hau and Salili, 1991; Li, 2002, 2003b). Asian adults and children emphasize personal effort more than their mental ability in learning. Thus, even though learning may possess some common features that distinguish it from other domains (such as family life), this domain may still show configurations and meanings that vary with cultural values and practices.

Our data supported the domain-specific argument at both the general and cultural levels. At the general level (that is, regardless of cultural differences), our findings showed more individual than social orientation in both goals and agency. This was rather startling considering the verdict that the I-C framework has cast on Chinese people’s collectivist selves. Why did both studies produce the same reversed orientations? If previous research results based on the I-C framework have validity, it may be that they either tapped the global, abstract self-concepts of the Chinese (Bond and Forgas, 1984; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui, 1990) or they tapped the social and interpersonal domains (Leung and Bond, 1984; Wheeler, Reis, and Bond,
1989). By changing the focus to a particular domain, we found very different patterns. This may well be attributable to the fact that learning is a common domain where individual goals and agency are necessary if anyone is to function. Inevitably, the domain-specific approach poses challenges to the I-C framework.

At the cultural level, these reversed findings with their specific configurations and meanings attest to the argument that learning as a domain may still differ from culture to culture despite its commonality across cultures. For example, a significant component of Chinese adolescents’ goals for learning was to cultivate oneself morally and spiritually. Many of the actual words adolescents used reflected Confucian such expressions as perfecting oneself (ziwo wanshan) and elevating the self’s moral character (tigao zijide pinde). This also applied to agency. For example, the five types of agency (diligence, resolve, endurance of hardship, perseverance, and concentration) and humility constituted a large proportion of Chinese adolescents’ sense of agency in learning. These particular forms of agency also mirrored Confucian terms of the so-called learning virtues that have been documented repeatedly (Li, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). It is not the general notion of “effort” per se but these culturally specific agentic processes the self initiates that are likely to produce behavior and outcomes. Thus, domains and contexts of human activities and psychological functioning may differ in specific ways that can influence people’s self-concepts in that domain. It is particularly important to study culturally specific ways.

A third way selves in cultures may be complex is that there are bound to be differences within cultures. Even though there may be some large cross-cultural tendencies in self-orientation from the I-C perspective, we stand to gain much understanding from examining variations within cultures. So long as psychology’s primary anchor is the individual, within-culture variations must not be neglected at the expense of large cultural tendencies. Our research yielded some initial data on differences among Chinese adolescents. First, we found more variability within individual than social orientation; that is, adolescents’ goals and sense of agency differed by grade and gender for some individual goals and types of agency, but not for their social goals and agency. Our sample consisted of only middle-class city residents; therefore we could not analyze differences associated with SES, rural versus city residence, or developed versus underdeveloped regions (these are known factors that influence people’s lives in China; NCEDR, 2001). However, we included enough boys and girls to explore possible gender differences. Indeed, we found some. For example, girls as a whole expressed more individual moral/spiritual goals than boys. Within the ninth grade, boys mentioned more love, happiness, and enjoyment, but girls in this grade articulated more personal effort than boys. These differences may mean that girls care more about the moral/spiritual purposes of learning relative to boys and boys find positive affect more important relative to girls.
Although these results were hard to interpret accurately, within-culture variations do exist and merit more research.

Finally, the complexity in self and culture may also be due to developmental processes. At various developmental points, children in different cultures may be socialized to master certain tasks deemed important by their own cultures. In the domain of learning, for example, Chao (1996) found that whereas Euro-American mothers regarded self-esteem, social skills, and having fun to be important goals for their preschool children’s success in school, their Chinese American counterparts named hard work as the most important attitude for their children to develop. Chao’s recent research (2000) also documented that Chinese American parents expected their adolescent children to be fully self-reliant in their schoolwork, which is a key reason these parents did not think they needed to be involved in their children’s school. Therefore, developmental changes in adolescents’ self-concepts in learning are expected.

We used grade as a proxy for age because we examined the domain of learning, which we assumed centrally reflected children’s learning experiences from grade to grade rather than increased age per se. Whereas most of the categories did not differ by grade, we did find some grade-related variations, which may indicate developmental trends. For example, seventh graders referred to more individual cognitive goals, but their ninth grade peers expressed more individual aspirations. The higher frequency of cognitive goals among seventh graders was sensible considering that they were entering their first year of middle school, where the curriculum was much more demanding than in elementary school (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992). Developing one’s ability and mastering knowledge might indeed be deemed as more important by seventh graders than by their peers in higher grades of middle school. By ninth grade, adolescents faced another examination designed to select higher achievers into college-bound high school, where fierce competition was (and still is) an unavoidable social reality. Adolescents might in fact receive more concerted messages from their parents, school, and culture at large about their future. It seems also sensible for them to ponder and project future-oriented aspirations. However, we are fully aware that we found few developmental differences, which did not enable us to interpret these findings accurately. Still, developmentally related changes are likely to exist in this domain, and future research needs to investigate this area.

Selves in cultures and their development are important research topics. The research produced in the I-C paradigm ushered in the inquiry into the role culture plays in the construction of self. More recent research, however, shows that selves are more complex than the I-C dichotomy has acknowledged. The present research adopted another approach, that of a particular domain, to investigate Chinese adolescents’ goals of learning and sense of agency. We collected these adolescents’ self-descriptions as anchored in the specific domain of learning. We found differing patterns of
their self-concepts, which were also confirmed by a set of data. These findings broadened our understanding of selves in Chinese culture. Admittedly, no single approach will reveal the full intricacies and dynamic processes of selves. Nonetheless, we can move closer to them if we continue to inquire into the whole spectrum of selves and their developments from multiple perspectives.

References


---

**Jin Li** is associate professor of education and human development at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

**Xiaodong Yue** is assistant professor of psychology at the City University of Hong Kong.