

## **The Analysis of Tendency of Transition from Collectivism to Individualism in China**

### **THE ANALYSIS OF TENDENCY OF TRANSITION FROM COLLECTIVISM TO INDIVIDUALISM IN CHINA**

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**Abstract:** This essay introduces Individualism and Collectivism dimension of a culture and the differences between the two patterns, indicating possible factors promoting the shift from collectivism to individualism, and describes as well as analyses the current changes in China in different fields and tendency of China to transfer from collectivism to individualism.

**Key words:** Collectivism; Individualism; Post-80s Generation in China

**Résumé:** Cet essai introduit la dimension de l'individualisme et du collectivisme d'une culture et les différences entre ces deux modèles en indiquant les facteurs possibles de promouvoir le passage du collectivisme à l'individualisme, décrit et analyse les changements actuels en Chine dans de différents domaines et la tendance de la transition du collectivisme à l'individualisme.

**Mots-clés :** collectivisme ; individualisme ; la génération post-80 en Chine

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Individualism and collectivism (I-C) have attracted great attention among cross-cultural scholars and intercultural business researchers, and most of them would categorize China into one of the typical countries of collectivism. Indeed, many Chinese people would like to consider themselves as collectivists and have been proud of this great tradition. However, the assumption made, and most researches done in I-C seem incompatible with the current situations in China.

This paper aims at investigating and analysing the current tendency of transition from collectivism to

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individualism in China and attempts to explain how and why the shift comes into the life of Chinese people. The argument is based on the contemporary theories of individualism and collectivism, especially Hofstede and Triandis, and supported by the evidences of changes, as there have been a great economic growth and rapid modernization process in the last 20 years, and with the development come the changes, that can be seen in almost every part of social life, as well as in the economy system, political and educational institutions. One of the changes, although arriving quite unexpectedly, is the move from collectivism to individualism, both physically and ideologically. This tendency of individualism, in return, has brought about more changes in cultural dimensions in China, especially among the young people, the so-called "Post-80s Generation", who will be exemplified for the analysis.

## **2. DEFINING THE FIELD**

### **2.1 The Features of Individualism and Collectivism**

The understandings of individualism and collectivism differ among different people in the different parts of the world. Generally speaking, as social practice, they reflect different social values, attitudes, beliefs, norms, behaviours, obligations and relationships between people in different cultures.

Hofstede (2001) identified individualism and collectivism as one of the five dimensions of Culture (the other four are Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity and Femininity, and Long- and Short-term Orientation) and elaborated the individualism and collectivism (I-C) dimension as "the relationship between the individual and the collectivity that prevails in a given society", reflecting "in the way people live together", with "many implications for values and behaviours" (2001, p209).

Triandis (1995) described individualism and collectivism as a "social syndrome" and based on the work of other researchers, summarized the four universal factors of their constructs:

- 1) The definition of self is interdependent in collectivism and independent in individualism (Triandis, 1995; Tjosvold et al, 2003);
- 2) Group goals have priority in collectivism and personal goals have priority in individualism (Triandis, 1995; Cai & Fink, 2002; Tjosvold et al, 2003; Lu, 1998).;
- 3) Social behaviours are guided by norms, obligations and duties in collectivist cultures; attitudes, personal needs, rights, and contracts are the focus of social behaviours in individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1995; Cai & Fink, 2002);
- 4) An emphasis on relationships is common in collectivist cultures, while rational analysis of that relationship is common in individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1995; Cai & Fink, 2002).

### **2.2 The Practice of Individualists and Collectivists**

#### **2.2.1 The Practise of Individualists**

Hofstede pointed out that "individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family" (Hofstede, 1991, p51). This statement was reinforced by Smith and Morris when they said that the general tendency of individualism is "more concerned with the consequences of one's behaviour for one's own needs, interests and goals" (Smith et al, 1998, p352) and the general practice of individualism is "self-orientation focusing on individual sufficiency and control to accomplish self value" (Morris et al, 1994).

The key words commonly used to describe high-individualism cultures include independence, privacy, self, autonomy, and what is the paramount is I, who makes decisions based on what is good for myself, rather than for the group (Lustig & Koester, 2006). These are some of the typical social practices in high-individualism cultures:

1) Family structure: people prefer to live in small, nuclear families consisting of parents and their children and family members are more or less equal in decision-making (Hofstede, 2001);

2) Child rearing: independence is expected and children are encouraged to think, show their own opinions and make their own decisions (ibid);

3) Attitudes towards marriage: the emotion of individualists are ego-focused, therefore, marriages tend to be less stable (ibid);

4) Education: students are supposed to be treated as individuals without regarding their backgrounds, and teachers are expected to reinforce self-esteem of students (Hofstede, 2001; Tjosvold et al, 2003).

5) Economy: market economy, competition, innovation and development are the keynotes and emphases made on utilitarianism, pursuits, self-interests and hedonism (Yan, 2005; Tjosvold et al, 2003);

6) Values: social contract, liberty, equality, freedom and self-improvement are valued, and independence and self-sufficiency are the two basic elements (Yan, 2005).

### **2.2.2 The Practices of Collectivists**

Smith (1998, p352) considered that collectivists tend to “be more concerned with the consequences of one’s own behaviour for in-group members, and to be more willing to sacrifice personal interests for the attainment of the collective interest”. Morris and his colleagues (1994) expressed the same idea that collectivists regard individuals as subordinates to the collectivity in terms of in-group sharing and harmony. Triandis (1995) proposed four social elements of collectivism:

1) emphasis on the views, needs, and goals of the in-group rather than on the self;

2) emphasis on behaviour determined by social norms and duties rather than on by pleasure or personal advantages;

3) common beliefs that are shared with the in-group;

4) willingness to cooperate with in-group members.

The key words commonly used to describe high-collectivism cultures include interdependent, socio-centric, holistic, constitutive, connected and relational, and what is the paramount is we, who make decisions based on what is good for a given in-group, rather than for the individual (Lustig & Koester, 2006). These are some of the typical social practices in high-collectivism cultures:

1) Family structure: people live closely to each other with their extended families: grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, and sometimes even their neighbours, co-villagers and grandparents (Hofstede, 2001);

2) Child rearing: parents are chiefs in the family, children need to learn bearing from others’ opinions (ibid);

3) Attitude towards marriage: emotions tend to be other-focused and therefore, marriages are more or less stable (ibid);

4) Education: teacher-centred teaching pattern dominates in education, and students are not supposed to question their teachers unless being required to do so, as it may challenge the teachers’ authority (Hofstede, 2001; Lustig & Koester, 2006);

5) Economy: economy tends to be centre-controlled and planned (Hofstede, 2001; Tjosvold et al, 2003).

6) Values: family security, social order, good social relationships, in-group harmony, and honouring parents and elders are important (Triandis, 1995) and therefore, “decisions that juxtapose the benefits to the individual and the benefits to the group are always based on what is best for the group” (Lustig & Koester, 2006, p116).

### **2.3 Shifts from Collectivism to Individualism**

It can be imagined that people would like to stay together to help and protect each other from the outside dangers in hunting and agricultural endeavors. However, as the society progresses and modes of production move into modern and industrialized patterns, the advantages of collective work and life started to fade. This is because individuals can possess more resources, they are capable of being independent economically to pursue their own goals in life (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). As a result, the society becomes more complex and diverse and individualism arises and flourishes. These are factors identified by different researchers, which contribute to the change from collectivism to individualism:

- 1) Economic development (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995; Allik and Realo, 2004),
- 2) Affluence of individuals (Yang, 1988),
- 3) Modes of production (Hofstede, 2001),
- 4) Mobility (Triandis, 1995),
- 5) Travelling and education (Triandis, 1995),
- 6) Mass media (Hsu, 1983)

Generally speaking, individualism is a consequence of wealth and economic growth. The more a country's wealth and economy grows, the more the country tends to be individualistic. This can be explained as that poverty makes people interdependent of the in-group, whereas wealth growth helps people become independent economically (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). Moreover, I found it interesting that all factors mentioned above about the change from collectivism to individualism are related to the number of choices that individuals can make. The more choices one has, the larger the I-factor becomes. The significance of choices implies that individuals may arrive at different decisions, depending on the available information through mass media, education, travelling, and mobility, with the resources and wealth under his disposal obtained from the development of the economy. As Triandis (1995, p66) pointed out that "education generally leads to greater exposure to cultural diversity and tends towards individualism" and travelling and mass media create exposures to different view points and experiences that encourage individualism. The same thing is true with modes of production, as the individual who works for himself in his own business is more likely to be independent and individualistic.

## **3. ANALYSIS OF THE TENDENCY OF THE TRANSITION FROM COLLECTIVISM TO INDIVIDUALISM IN CHINA**

It is still generally true that many Chinese people would like to claim themselves as collectivistic, as individualism carries a negative connotation of selfishness in Chinese. However, if we exam the whole scenario of changes in the last 20 years in China, we would probably find out that, to some extent, the words and actions may not match, which may explain why it is difficult for many outside researchers to get the real picture of the essence. However, some researchers, such as Pye (1991), Garrot (1995), Barber (2001), Allik and Realo (2004), Stanat (2005) and Doctoroff (2005) found that there was a tendency of a gradual individualistic process in China. The following part of the paper attempts to analyse this tendency from my experience and observation, as well as the research done in the area. The analysis starts from macro-scope by describing the changes of the nation, and then moves to micro level to look at how the changes have nurtured individualism in the young generation born after the Opening-up in 1979.

### **3.1 Macro-Scope: Changes across the Nation**

#### **3.1.1 The Historical Background**

Pye (1991, p460) pointed out that "the combination of the shocks and disillusionments of the Cultural

Revolution and the fresh air that came with the decade of 'opening' to the outside and liberalizing reforms may have done more to inspire a spirit of individualism among modernizing Chinese than any development in China's history...". Indeed, the extreme collectivism and widespread material shortages in 1960s and 1970s haunted and perplexed the Chinese people and there was a great hope for changes among many people at that time, making it huge latent force for the development.

### **3.1.2 The Economic Leap**

The great potential was released after the Opening-up in 1979. As has been mentioned before, China's economy has undergone a tremendous development. According to the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, China's "GDP has risen from Rmb 362.4 billion in 1978, at the start of the reform period, to Rmb 13.7 trillion in 2004 (both figures at current prices). Individuals have also become richer, as the annual GDP per head has risen during that time (1978-2004) from 379 to 10502 RMB" (Chinability Web, 2006).

### **3.1.3 The Reform and Opening-up**

Although Chinese people welcome the reform, before long, many people found that the reform might not bring good fortune for them, as the changes started to invade their benefits from the collective system. Planned economics system was transformed to a market-oriented one; state-owned enterprises were privatized (Sha, 2004; Wang et al, 2004); foreign invested companies introduced new and tight management systems; collectivist farming structure was replaced by a private contrast approach; and what is more threatening is that the collective "iron rice bowl" was removed, forcing employees work more competitively, or they might be laid off. To a great extent, the reform was not only physical but also psychological, as many people experienced shock, disappointment and adjustment (Doder, 1998).

### **3.1.4 The Influence of Education**

To meet the needs of rapid economic development and industrialization for qualified workers, the Chinese government decided to expand education by redefining the policy of the elite education to accommodate average students for college learning. As a result, the recruitment of college students has been increasing by about 10 percent every year for the last 10 years, which shows that more and more people have the opportunities to receive higher education and, therefore, will possibly choose more a diversified and individualistic life in the future.

Furthermore, influenced by a Western teaching style, education in China has now entered a new era. Individual-oriented learning that considers different personal needs of development is greatly promoted. Take English teaching for example. The newly revised Chinese College English Curriculum Requirements (Zhang and Kong, 2004) mentioned the importance of "the development of individualized study methods and the autonomous learning ability on the part of students. The new model should enable students to select materials suited to their individual needs" (Zhang and Kong, 2004, p23).

### **3.1.5 The Influence of Mass Media**

Accompanying the profound changes, there has been rapid progress in almost all parts of life, especially in mass media. As the international contacts increase and people are more affluent, they demand for better communication with the outside world and entertainment from different resources. The Internet meets this need and expands in multiple speeds and encourages more intercultural communication (Macfadyen et al, 2004). TV programs, especially Western movies and entertaining series, have become the evening routine in many families. As a result of the gaining more access to the great amount of information through internet, TV, newspapers and the media, Chinese people have become much better informed, which provides them with more alternatives and choices in life.

### 3.1.6 Transformation of Social Pattern

With the development of the economy, reform, education and mass media, Chinese society has become more diversified and changes started to inroad into ordinary Chinese life, all moving towards a more individualistic side of the continuum. I list the following as typical examples:

1) Family structure: the traditional extended families have been replaced by nuclear units with parents and their only child, even in the rural areas, most couples found it more convenient to live separately from their parents.

2) Divorce rate: according to the statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, "1.613 million couples got divorced in 2004 in China, ..., an increase rate of 21.2 percent, compared with the figure in 2003" (China Daily Web, 2005), which showed that many couples would choose to separate rather than to stay together unhappily.

3) Private rights: no privacy in China has become history. Nowadays, many Chinese people would not release their income, and age, marriage, family background, business details are all considered private. There is not so much parental supervision as before, and children are allowed additional privacy concerning relationships and other personal information more than ever before. For example, many schools give academic reports directly to the students instead of putting them on the bulletin board in schools.

Moreover, the new Chinese Property Law was issued in March, 2007. "This is the first time that equal protection of state and private properties has been enshrined in Chinese law" (Zhu, 2007a). Chinese President Hu Jintao also emphasized the significance of this law and urged Chinese people for a better understanding of what gives equal protection to the state, collective and individual property rights (Zhu, 2007b)

## 3.2 Micro-Scope: The "Post-80s Generation"

Post-80s Generation refers to those who were born between 1980 and 1995, the "Chinese Generation Y". This generation is the first generation born after the One Child Policy, who enjoyed the fruits of economic development and never experienced the tough times like their parents did. Many of them were born and brought up in comparatively well off families, received good education, with computers, televisions, the Internet, CD players, and mobile phones as their companions.

Some researchers have noticed the tendency of individualization in the "Post-80s Generation" in China. Garrott (1995) made a survey of 512 college students in China in 1995 and found surprisingly the strong individualist attitude towards life. Stanat (2005) conducted a similar research and concluded that most of Post-80s Generation was open, rebellious, aggressive, pragmatic, self-oriented, strongly independent, hoping to be noticed, eager to make money and having great interest in expensive products. Moore (2005, p357) commented after the research that "many of the current changes are being driven by China's Post-80s Generation; China's equivalent of America's millennial (Generation)".

The following summarizes some general features of this generation, which can serve as indicators of their individualistic tendency in the Post-80s Generation.

### 3.2.1 Attitude towards Life

1) Their attitude towards job: unlike their parents who preferred stable jobs to avoid uncertainty, the Post-80s Generation like more challenging work and would not hesitate to change jobs, if they are not happy with them. Many of my college classmates have changed their jobs in less than a year after graduation.

2) Their attitude towards money: the Post-80s Generation spends more than they make. A new term, the "Moonlight Generation", is a good expression for them, which is a pun in Chinese, meaning no

money left every month literally. This is not because their income is not adequate, but because they enjoy luxury goods, such as iPods, Nike shoes, designer clothes and brand-name cosmetics.

3) Their attitude towards family and marriage: the Post-80s Generation tends to move out after they find work, prefer to get married later and refuse to give birth to their children as soon as they get married, as they want to enjoy more freedom and the pleasures of life.

### 3.2.2 Self-Oriented Life Style

1) The fashion maker: the Post-80s Generation has a great interest in making their own fashions, which their parents often found difficult to understand. They prefer to set different loud and unique mobile melodies, D.I.Y. their own accessories on clothes or bags, dress in different styles, have new hair styles and create their own slangs (Moore, 2005; Doctoroff, 2005);

2) The extensive traveler: many of the Post-80s Generation travels a lot. The rural Post-80s Generation travel to big cities to study and work, and the urban Post-80s Generation like to travel around China and even foreign countries for adventure. Recent years, more and more Post-80s Generation look for another long international travel——overseas study. Taking Australia as an example, according to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australian Government (Australia-China, 2006), China is the largest source of overseas students in Australia with 81,000 enrolled students in 2005.

3) The recreation indulger: the Post-80s Generation enjoy creating personal BLOGs and homepages, surfing online, playing computer games, making personal DV shows and sharing them online, and falling in love with pubs, clubs and discos (Barber, 2001);

4) The freedom seeker: the Post-80s Generation believes in freedom of speech. Barber (2001) commented that many of these young people would like to express their own opinions on politics, events and sex and are brave to point out problems, and require and protect their equal rights in families, schools and other situations. From my teaching experience in a Chinese college and after discussion with my colleagues, students now feel more free to ask various questions in class than the students did 10 years ago.

5) The unique arts expresser: the Post-80s Generation has created new literature and music forms that they believe can be used to express themselves well. Hanhan and Guo Jingming are representative of the youth writers who are leading new literature. They also immerse themselves in Post-80s Generation music that combines rock, metal and pop music, which they believe expresses their aspiration and ambitions.

## 4. CONCLUSION

It is not the purpose of the present paper to argue that individualism is better than collectivism or vice versa. There are advantages and disadvantages of both. The point is to understand what really happens in China is that young people become more individualism, so that we will be better prepared for the future, as when the tide approaches, nobody can hold or prevent it from coming.

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