Guanxilization or categorization: psychological mechanisms contributing to the formation of the Chinese concept of "us"

Yang Yiyin

Research Center for Social Psychology of the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

　　中国社会心理学在面对急速的社会变迁中，需要以变迁与文化的视角来选择研究问题，而中国社会文化中群己关系的社会心理机制，即"我们"概念的形成机制及其转换的可能与条件，正是一个体现着双重视角的基本问题。对这一问题的探讨不仅有助于解释社会凝聚力、群体行动的逻辑，讨论国家与个人、社会与个人、类别与个人的关系；也有助于培植社会转型时期的社会心理资源和社会支持系统，从而促进社会合作。与以往单一机制的分析框架不同，通过对两个个案的讨论，研究提出了一个新的分析框架，即：中国人"我们"概念是在社会情境的启动和价值取向等因素影响之下，经由相互交织的"关系化"与"类别化"双重过程形成的。

关键词： "我们"概念　群己关系　关系　关系化　类别化

　　Faced with rapid social transformation, the discipline of social psychology in China needs to choose its research topics from the perspective of both change and culture. A basic issue reflecting precisely these two perspectives is that of the formation of the social psychology mechanism of individual-group relations, namely the formation of the concept of "us" in Chinese society and culture, as well as the possibility and conditions for the transformation of this mechanism. Exploring this issue will not only help us to understand social cohesion and the logic of group behavior and to discuss the relationship between the state and the individual, society and the individual, and the category and the individual; it will also help cultivate social psychology resources and support systems at a time of social transition, and thus promote social cooperation.. Unlike previous analytical studies that focused on a unitary mechanism, this study uses the discussion of two cases to put forward a new framework for analysis: that is, the Chinese concept of "us" comes into being through the mingling of "guanxilization" and "categorization" under the influence of social context priming, value orientation and other factors.

Over the past thirty years of China's reform and opening up, along with profound changes in how people think about "society" and "community," something new has emerged in the psychological mechanisms governing the relationships between the individual and the community and between the individual and society. Research into the characteristics of these relationships and their mechanisms as well as the possible changes they may undergo relates to the social psychology resources and support systems involved in social change, and at the same time enriches our interpretation of the basic logic governing the social behavior of the Chinese people.

How are the "we" and the "I" to be put together? Why is it that while the Chinese criticize themselves for lacking public spirit and the idea of the collective, with each caring only for his own affairs and having as much cohesion as a heap of loose sand,[1] Western social and cross-cultural psychologists keep describing the behavior orientation of East Asians (primarily the Chinese), as "collectivist," and believe that the Chinese are used to stressing the "we" at the expense of the "I"?[2] We will seek an answer in terms of social psychology from the perspective of the group-self relationship, with a view to seeing whether this "heap of loose sand" and "collectivism" do indeed contradict one another.

If we order the various attempts at researching the group-self relationship in terms of social psychology, two interrelated paths may be identified. One focuses on cultural, communal and individual value orientations, the other on social psychology mechanisms. Value orientation has been researchers' favored approach since the 1980s. In particular, with the advent of cross-cultural psychology, cultural psychology and indigenous psychology, a number of researchers have demonstrated from the perspective of value concepts the way people in different social / historical / cultural settings deal with the group-self relationship. Among these studies, the one that has drawn most attention is the "individualism-collectivism" theoretical framework[3] proposed in Hofstede's study of work values and the related measurement tools subsequently developed.[4] In recent years there has been significant progress in this regard, with the use of meta-analysis techniques based on extensive investigation and research to conduct a comprehensive re-examination and discussion of the merits and demerits of this framework and put forward

---

1   Ambrose Yeo-Chi King, "Individual and community in Confucian doctrine: an interpretation from the perspective of *guanxi*."
2   Yang Yiyin, "The self and its boundaries: a contribution to research from the perspective of cultural value orientation."
3   G. Hofstede, *Culture's consequences: international differences in work-related values*.
4   H. C. Triandis, "Theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of collectivism and individualism," pp. 41-65.

a new framework.[5]

In terms of social psychology mechanisms, the group-self relationship is a question of what kind of psychological ties individuals establish with the group through what mechanisms and what concept and sense of "us" that they end up with. As one of the basic issues of social psychology, this question involves, at the level of theory, the cultural social psychology underlying Chinese social behavior, as well as the psychological process and mechanisms governing intergroup relationships, social identity, communal behavior and social movements (including social cooperation).

Cultural misreadings in research into the group-self relationship in Chinese culture derive from the research paradigm of methodological individualism. We therefore begin our study with an analysis of three social psychology research paradigms and discuss the theoretical premises of Western social psychology that they reflect. We then analyze the empirical data obtained from two qualitative studies to sum up the characteristic features of the Chinese concept of "group" and "self" and reveal the psychological mechanisms governing the group-self relationship. On this basis, we put forward our theoretical model of the formative mechanisms in the concept of "us."

Three social psychology research paradigms in the study of social behavior

Behind every approach in academic research lies a meta-theory. In the case of social psychology, this meta-theory, also known as "meta-social psychology," is founded on the question of the subject of social psychology research. Therefore, rather than social psychology *per se*, what we have here is the groundwork for its theoretical construction.

In terms of research subject, social psychology is made up of the following four concepts together with their psychological interrelationships, namely, (1) "me" (2) "him" (or "you"); (3) "us," and (4) "them" together with the following relationships: (1) person to person (2) group and self (3) group and group (4) "him" and group (5) "me" and "them," and (6) "him" and "us." Different meta-theories lead to differences in research perspectives on these psychological relationships and in the amount of attention they are given. In current research, we can identify the following three approaches.

1. The individual-centered approach

The methodological premise of North American social psychology may be characterized as individualist, and so is known as "methodological individualism."[6] For

---

5 D. Oyserman, *et al.*, "Rethinking individualism and collectivism: evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses," pp. 3-72; M. B. Brewer and Chen Y-R., "Where (who) are collectives in collectivism? toward conceptual clarification of individualism and collectivism," pp. 133-151.

6 Karl Popper, *The Poverty of historicism*.

instance, the well-known social psychologist G.W. Allport has defined social psychology as a discipline that attempts to "understand and explain how the thought, feeling and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of other human beings,"[7] a classic formulation recognized as the most influential and lasting definition of the field.[8] On the basis of this academic consensus reached, mainstream social psychology has structured its research by starting from the social psychology of the individual. The "other" and the group are seen not just as external to the individual, as the background and condition of individual psychological activity, but also as playing a negative role insofar as they tend to affect the individual's independent and autonomous judgment, thus leading to deviations or alterations in social behavior.

From the 1970s onward, with the advent of the cultural psychological perspective, mainstream social psychology research has encountered ever greater challenges. It is seen as an "Americanized" social psychology, unable to explain what human beings have in common.[9] It is against such a backdrop that words such as "rethink" and "rediscover" have gained currency in numerous spheres of social psychology research, and unprecedented attention has been given to cross-cultural, cultural and indigenous psychological research methods.[10] At the same time, the methods and methodology of experimental social psychology are once again being discussed.[11]

2. The inter-group relationship-centered approach

After the process of post-war rebuilding and against the backdrop of typically European theoretical traditions in social, political, cultural and Gestalt psychology terms, social psychologists in continental Europe undertook a comprehensive rethinking of mainstream social psychology from the new research perspective of "membership," "group process" and "inter-group relations." In their eyes, individual actions simultaneously displayed both an individual character and the character of group and inter-group relations. A person is an individual and at the same time a member. Once an individual becomes a member, the self and self-other relations take on new characteristics. The relations between "us" and "them" are no longer a background to the relationship between "self" and "others," but are embedded in this relationship, or even constitute its very content.[12]

Within this paradigm, the putting forward of social identity theory[13] has been the most

---

7   G. W. Allport, "The historical background of social psychology," p. 2.
8   Jin Shenghua, ed., *Social psychology*, p. 4.
9   R. M. Farr, *The roots of modern social psychology: 1872-1954*.
10   A. P. Fiske, S. Kitayama, H. R. Markus and R. E. Nisbett, "The cultural matrix of social psychology", pp. 915-981.
11   J. T. Jost and A.W. Kruglansk, "The estrangement of social constructionism and experimental social psychology: history of the rift and prospects for reconciliation," pp. 168-187.
12   D. Abrams and M. Hogg, "Metatheory: lessons from social identity research," pp. 98-106.
13   H. Taifel and J. C. Turner, "The social identity of inter-group behavior," 1986, pp. 7-24.

significant research achievement. Together with the self categorization theory,[14] it reveals the process by which the individual moves from being an independent individual to being a group member, that is, the way he completes "de-personalization" and comes to belong to a group and establish his status as a group member through a process of categorization.[15] In this way, "society" is reincorporated into the visual field of social psychology.

3. The Confucian guanxi-centered approach

The development of social psychology in China was severely affected by political and historical factors. Among Chinese, social psychologists in Hong Kong and Taiwan have promoted a movement embracing indigenous psychology since the 1970s[16] after a period spent following the mainstream research paradigm. Their rethinking of this paradigm subsequently influenced the mainland social psychology community,[17] sparking interest in Chinese social psychology and cultural characteristics. Two approaches were adopted in most of this research: cultural psychology (including indigenous psychology) and cross-cultural psychology.

In research from the standpoint of cultural psychology, nearly three decades of exploration have resulted in the emergence of the typical Chinese concept of *guanxi* (to be distinguished from its apparent English synonym, "relationship") as a sensitizing concept that has gradually revealed its methodological significance and been accepted by the international social sciences community. Researchers have found that the *ren* (人) or person in Chinese cultural constructs is not the independent individual, but involves a reciprocal relationship of linkage with another. The Confucian classics define *ren* (人) meaning "person" as *ren* (仁) meaning "human-hearted," or somebody who "loves others."[18] Thus "human-heartedness" refers to the communication of sentiment between people; to be alienated from interaction and mutual communication with others is to cease to be a person. This cultural construct defines the person in terms of the interrelationship between two persons. Without this interrelationship, the Chinese seem to be minding their own business and to have no more cohesion than a heap of loose sand. But with it, they are knitted together and are ready to go through thick and thin together. D. Y. F. Ho and other social psychologists from Hong Kong were the first to come up with the concept of "methodological relationalism,"[19] in an attempt to build a comprehensive theory analyzing

---

14   J. C. Turner, M. A. Hogg, P. J. Oakes, S. D. Reicher, and S. M. Wetherell, *Rediscovering the social group: a self categorization theory*, pp. 42-67.

15   "De-personalize" does not equate to "de-individualize." The latter denotes the anonymous abrogation of responsibility, while the former means the fading away of personal characteristics.

16   Yang Guoshu, "Why we are building an indigenous psychology of the Chinese," pp. 321-434; Ye Qizheng, *Essays on sociological theory and its indigenization*.

17   Li Qingshan, ed., *Collection of papers on social psychology of the Chinese*.

18   Hsu F. L. K., "Psychological homeostasis and jen: conceptual tools for advancing psychological anthropology," pp. 23-44.

19   Ho D. Y. F., "Relational orientation and methodological relationalism," pp. 81-95.

Chinese social psychology through employment of *guanxi* as a research paradigm.

The *guanxi* concept has the four following characteristics. (1) It is ethically related to role norms. The use of social identity (especially kinship identity) to define norms for interaction with others implies role norms. (2) In particular, *guanxi* establishes requirements for degrees of closeness, trust and responsibility. The closer the kinship between two parties, the greater their familiarity and intimacy and their mutual trust and responsibility. Thus closeness, trust and mutual responsibility arise only in kinship or quasi-kinship relationships.[20] Requirements based on kinship institutionalize emotions, trust and duties and determine the appropriate psychological distance between one person and another, in what appears to be a pre-established formula. (3) *Guanxi* can be established or broken through interchange, in what is called "pulling strings" or "breaking off relations." By performing duties normally performed only by someone closer to the person in question and thus showing feelings normally shown by someone more intimate, one can turn from a outsider (with no *guanxi*) into an "acquaintance" (with *guanxi* newly established) and thence forge a "solid and ironclad relationship" (with *guanxi* firmly established). (4) With the "self" at the center, a web-like structure can be built with others spread across it. The determinate nature of these role duties and the structural character of their interwoven exchanges allow *guanxi* to work as a melting pot that fuses ethics and morals, power structures, resource allocation, motives for interchange and social networks. In such circumstances, hardly anyone living in Chinese society can stay clear of *guanxi*, and *guanxi* influences everybody's concept of "me" and "us."

4. How the three paradigms have inspired our research

The three paradigms proceed from three points of departure, respectively the individual, the group member and *guanxi*. For this reason they have different applications to the explanation of cultural psychology phenomena. The first two differ on whether a person is an individual or a member, a question that comes down to "the individual in the group" or "the group in the individual." These two different perspectives or orientations also provide different explanations for social behavior. They are however linked in that whether individual or member, the person has the same theoretically ordained boundaries. The *guanxi*-based and the inter-group-based paradigms are the same to the extent that they both stress group-self linkage, but they differ as to how this linkage comes into being. While the inter-group-based paradigm espouses categorization or role identity as the underlying psychological mechanism at work, the *guanxi* paradigm, by contrast, views the individual, the group and *guanxi* as being mutually constructed with mutual subject agency in "the

---

20   Yang Guoshu, "Social orientation of the Chinese: a social interaction viewpoint," pp. 87-142; Yan Yunxiang, "The culture of *guanxi* in a North China village," pp. 1-25.

individual and the group in *guanxi*" and "*guanxi* in the individual and the group."

When it comes to research into the Chinese concept of "us," the inter-group-centered approach provides inspiration in the sense that it owes its birth to a background of inter-group processes, with the acquisition of membership standing at the heart of its psychological mechanism. When the individual identifies with the group and becomes psychologically a member of it, a psychological linkage is set up between the self and the group, giving rise to a feeling of "us." The *guanxi*-centered approach, on the other hand, provides us with a cultural psychology perspective in that it reminds us to pay due attention to *guanxi* as a distinctive cultural psychological mechanism when discussing the psychological linkage between the self and the group against the backdrop of Chinese culture. In other words, it is probably not through the "categorization" mechanism but rather through the mechanism of "determination of roles and duties" coupled with "establishment of *guanxi*" that a psychological relationship is established between the individual and others. Then is "categorization" or "guanxilization" the social psychology mechanism that gives the Chinese the concept of "us"?

We feel that by analyzing the three social psychology research paradigms currently in use, our research into the social psychology mechanisms underlying the Chinese concept of "us" can be conducted along the lines of the following two approaches: (1) Proceeding from the *guanxi* paradigm, we explore the question of whether the *guanxi* linkage (that is, guanxilization) leads to the concept of "us" that links the individual and others or the individual and the group, and then explain the cultural features of this concept. (2) Proceeding from the group approach, we explore the question of whether group background can water down the guanxilized "self" concept and further to affect the mechanisms of the individual's psychological linkage with the group, resulting in a switch from "guanxilization" to "categorization" and the emergence of a different concept of "us." What follows is a discussion of this issue based on the findings of two empirical studies.

The guanxilized concept of "us"

What kind of a concept of "us" emerges if an individual's psychological linkage with other people is established through *guanxi*? We may describe the influence of *guanxi* on the concept of "us" by borrowing from the concept of the "differential mode of association," used by social anthropologist Fei Xiaotong in his description of China's earthbound society. This is because the sequential structure based on the "differential mode of association" not only embodies the Confucian ethical principle of "generational seniority and kinship hierarchy," but also serves as the script for identifying *guanxi* and making it work. What is meant by "differential mode of association" is vividly illustrated

by Fei in his *From the soil: The foundations of Chinese society.*

> What we see before our eyes is not like clearly separate bundles of firewood, but ripples extending outward in concentric circles after the splash of a stone in the quiet water. Each person stands at the center of these circles, which create personal linkages wherever they arrive. Not everybody makes use of the same circle at every moment and every place.[21]

In a social structure based on the differential mode of association, interpersonal relations can never be equal, for everybody has his own personal status and therefore stands at a different psychological distance from other people. All interpersonal feelings, duties and responsibilities come from this.

Generally speaking, the Chinese are accustomed to classifying *guanxi* into "family members," "acquaintances" and "outsiders." "Acquaintances" and "outsiders" are distinguished on the basis of frequency of contact. Provided the individual has the right to enter into or break off relations with somebody else, high contact frequency generally means that *guanxi* is affirmed affectively or instrumentally and that the person concerned is nearer the center than a outsider and thus obtains a greater allocation of affective or instrumental resources. Family members are distinguished in terms of kinship relations. In an earthbound society with very little mobility, mutual interdependence is high, and family members are located at the core of the differential mode of association. Not only can these two classifications be differentiated into kinship and non-kinship, but at a deeper level of meaning, they hold the possibility of turning one into another, insofar as the concept of "family member" may sometimes include acquaintances and even outsiders, while it may also happen that family members treat each other as outsiders.

The feeling of "our own family" or "one of us" accompanies the sense of "us" as a synonym for the concept of "us." Therefore, in discussing the characteristics of this concept in terms of *guanxi,* our best approach is to see what relationships are included as "one of us" and what criterion separates such people from "outsiders."

I conducted home interviews with people in 106 households in five villages in Northern China from July 1996 to August 1998, with one of these households selected for participatory observation and in-depth interviews over 70 days (in six sessions). In this case study of the classification of Chinese interpersonal relationships, I found that, in terms of gradations of psychological distance, a psychological "us" pattern formed by a "self" at the center surrounded by affective and instrumental elements at varying distances could be identified[22] (see Table 1).

---

21 Fei Xiaotong, *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society,* p. 28.
22 Yang Yiyin, "One of us: a case study of the classification of relationships among the Chinese," pp. 277-316.

Table 1 Analysis of results of interviewees' classifications

Degree / character	Ascribed relationship	Interactive relationship
First degree	Family member	Very close friend
Second degree	Close relative	Good friend
Third degree	Clan relative	Close acquaintance (frequent contact)
Fourth degree	Distant relative	Acquaintance (some contact)
Fifth degree	Scarcely a relative(more distant relative)	Nodding acquaintance (little contact)

Such a relationship hierarchy is not based on kinship alone and therefore is not determined solely by kinship or non-kinship or by contact frequency and closeness. Rather, there are two coexisting systems of hierarchy that together form a unique two-dimensional system that is taken for granted in the daily life of the Chinese, namely, the classification "our own people vs. outsiders."

The interviewee in the case surveyed explained the criterion by which he classified different people:

> The two of *us* (the subject and his wife, henceforth Y and X) are definitely *our own people*. As to A and B (his children) and C (his daughter-in-law), if I *draw a smaller circle*, even the two (three) of them cannot be *included*, but they can if the *circle* is *larger*. With an even larger *circle*, my father will be inside. *Enlarging the circle*, I will *include* her (X's) father, and then my own brothers, as well as her (X's) brothers. However, even inside the same *circle* things are not always the same. For instance, my three brothers and myself, we aren't exactly the same. Everything depends on the issue we're dealing with. Each person has a different *personality* and behavior. Two of the brothers might stay *close* to each other and be a little *distant* from the others. (Y, male, May 1997)

In what he said about "our own people," we found the following key words: *we*, *me*, *he/she*, *they*, *our own people*, *circle*, *draw*, *larger*, *smaller*, *include*, *personality*, *close*, and *distant*. "Our own people" are classified with the "self" at the center, surrounded by a set of concentric circles representing different degrees of relationship, ascribed or interactive, with the area between one circle and another varying in size according to the people involved. Within each category, internally and externally oriented relationships can be identified, as the interviewee explained:

> With "outsiders" and "insiders," the difference depends on the *circumstances*. Take X and me. With respect to you (the interviewer), X and I are *insiders* and you are an *outsider*. However, if somebody else comes, even a fellow villager I don't

have much *contact* with, I would regard us three as *insiders* and the other as an *outsider*. (Y, male, May 1997)

By means of in-depth interviews, we found that there are two major ways for an outsider to turn into an insider. The first is to gain the ascribed status of "one of us" as a virtual blood relative through marriage, adoption or pseudo-kinship (sworn brotherhood, for example). The second is through personal contact. Conversely, there are two ways for an insider to turn into an outsider. For example, people can dissolve their kinship relations or break off contact. An interviewee explained how a neighbor became someone in the third category:

Our relations seem to be closer than those between *neighbors* or *friends*. Even some friends are not as close to each other as the two of us are…But unlike *brothers*…the two of us just understand each other and nothing more… Absolutely nothing like close *companionship* as it is usually understood. Eating and drinking together and helping each other. (Y, September 1997)

The kinship network, based as it is on biological features, is ascriptive and innate. The structure of "our people" has an ascribed character, but at its core is the psychological driving force at the boundaries of the structure. Latent in the circle of "our own people" is an independent "self," controlling people's adaptation to and creation of their environment and joining together the two fields of "me" and "us." In the case studies above, we found the pattern by which the Chinese tell someone who is "one of us" from an "outsider"[23] (see Table 2).

Table 2 Classification of "one of us" and "outsider" and their interaction

		Contact-based relationship Genuine feeling, voluntary mutual help	
		High	Low
Ascribed relationship (including pseudo-kinship)	High	One of us (family member, crony, someone in the inner circle)	One of us by kinship (relative, mother- or daughter-in-law, adopted son)
Obligatory affection, relationship-based responsibility	Low	One of us by contact (close friend; traditional role of married daughter vis-à-vis Parents)	Outsiders (outsider, native of another place, someone outside the circle)

From Table 2 it can be seen that two dimensions need to be taken into account when an interpersonal relationship is to be defined. One is the ascribed dimension, based on

---

23   Quoted from Yang Yiyin, "One of us: a case study of the classification of relationships among the Chinese," pp. 277-316.

kinship, and the other the interactive dimension, consisting of feelings, trust and duties derived from interaction between individuals.

Our study shows that in traditional earthbound China, there exists a concept of "us" involving being "one of us," characterized by the following features. (1) Individual autonomy, in the sense that the individual places other people within boundaries of the self because of the highly ascriptive and / or highly interactive nature of the relationship while keeping others outside and treating them as "outsiders" where the relationship has a low degree of ascription or interaction. (2) Permeability of boundaries, in the sense that both "insiders" and "outsiders" can turn into their opposites by changing their status in terms of these two dimensions. (3) Elasticity of boundaries, in the sense that individuals draw them differently in different circumstances, resulting in a varying number of people inside the boundaries of "one of us."

Therefore, as we see, the "us / them" concept arises from a dichotomy of people subjected to judgment in terms of the two dimensions. Individuals who find themselves related to others tend to include them into the boundaries of the "self" and make them "one of us" or an "insider." The Confucian tradition allows for the inclusion of more people, whose joys and sorrows are shared by the individual in question, who adheres to the concept of the "greater me." In this way, the concept acquires a moral connotation. Such inclusion is relationship-based and comes from the psychological ties established between oneself and other people or even the whole world. Therefore, however broad the circle may be, its point of departure always remains the "me" and it is always isomorphic with the "us."

How can the guanxilization process among the Chinese be at once ascribed and interactive? A possible explanation is that, on the one hand, in China's traditional social life, with its limited mobility, socio-cultural arrangements are such that everybody's affections, trust and duties are based on kinship relations, everybody has a place inside the kinship system and people see themselves as the point of departure when measuring their distance from everybody else; this guarantees the order of structural distribution and the power structure. On the other hand, face-to-face interaction among family members and acquaintances has different psychological effects on either side, so that an autonomous space is required in order to measure psychological distance; hence the dual character and rich variety of *guanxi* itself.

Once the ascribed and interactive dichotomy between "*guanxi*-fulness" and "*guanxi*-lessness" and between "one of us" and "outsiders" is established, *guanxi* remains as a role or identity that condenses the two attributes. For example, what is required from the father (paternal love) and from the son (filial piety) becomes the prototype and category. Generally speaking, categorization is a universal pattern of perception, a shortcut for cognition that enables people to transfer knowledge by analogy. Categorization derived

from *guanxi* becomes the *guanxi* base for the next instance of interpersonal relationship, with the category subject to guanxilization; on the basis of *guanxi* development, the individual opts for making the relationship with the other person closer or more distant. After each contact event, *guanxi* coheres once again in roles and personal conditions, with the importance of contact fading away. *Guanxi* then becomes a category, and *guanxi* and category become intertwined, although *guanxi* is still the main element. This process of including other people through *guanxi* and thence arriving at a concept of "us" might be summed up as a guanxilization process.

The category concept of "us"

Comparisons undertaken in research conducted jointly with Chinese social psychologists by the well-known cultural and cognitive psychologist Richard E. Nisbett show that "Contemporary Westerners would have a greater tendency to categorize objects than would Easterners…Easterners, given their convictions about the potential relevance of every fact to every other fact, would organize the world more in terms of perceived relationships and similarities than would Westerners."[24] For example, when asked to form pairs from words like "monkey," "banana" and "panda," Asian students tended to use relationships (monkeys eat bananas) rather than categories (animals vs. plants). In the experiments, Chinese students scored twice as high as American students of European descent when it came to classification by relationship, while the opposite was true of classification by category. These results are also supported by the case studies cited above. However, does this point to something universal? What do we find when we take group relationships as our research paradigm? In other words, do the Chinese have a categorized concept of "us"?

Research into group relationships based on social identity theory shows that once psychological ties are in place between the self and a particular category, identification with that category occurs, as well as positive distinctiveness with respect to people outside the category and other categories, as well as the formation of the concept of "us." The category with which an individual identifies is the "in-group," while the other categories are "out-groups." This psychological process of establishing ties between the individual and the group is called "self-categorization."

Both Fei Xiaotong[25] and Liang Shuming[26] have talked about the weakness of

---

24   Richard E. Nisbett, *The geography of thought: how Asians and Westerners think differently…and why*, pp. 87-88.
25   Fei Xiaotong, *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society*, p. 22.
26   Academic Commission of the China Culture Academy, *Complete works of Liang Shuming*, vol. III, p. 80.

Chinese group awareness. However, this may be due to the fact that in a society mainly characterized by the differential mode of association, the concept of "us" could signify little more than "one of us." But with the advent of social mobility and against the backdrop of group relationships, things may be different. On the basis of this analysis, we will explore whether the *guanxi*-type concept of "us" can become a category-type concept of "us" in the context of inter-group relationships, as well as the conditions under which such a change occurs.

Migration between countries is typical of social mobility. With the above question in mind, we formed a task force on "Cultural Identity of the Overseas Chinese" and interviewed over a hundred Chinese Malaysians from all walks of life. The text (over 620,000 Chinese characters) of the interviews was encoded and analyzed based on complete sentences, so as to provide a concept tree summing up the main factors in Chinese Malaysians' cultural identity. These were finally summarized into seven levels of concept. Of these, three first-level concepts were taken as the main analytical axis of our study. They are (1) Chineseness (2) culture (3) identity. Of the three, "Chinese" is the subject, while "identity" is the psychological mechanism connecting Chinese Malaysians to Chinese culture; they consider themselves Chinese by virtue of their identification with Chinese culture. Owing to limited space, we will only discuss here the mechanisms that lead to the formation of the concept of "us" among Chinese Malaysians.

The word "Chinese" (*huaren* 华人) is used by Chinese Malaysians in referring to themselves, as well as by "others" in referring to them. Thus the term is clearly used against a background of overseas mobility and immigrant cultural contact. The following are typical interview records:

(1) In the context of ethnic interrelations within Malaysia: "we (ethnic) Chinese" and "they, the Malays."

We Chinese call it "dragon's eyes (*longyan*)," and what do *they, the Malays,* call it? They call it "cat's eyes"! (GRD, male, middle-aged, February 2001)

(2) In the context of international relations: "Our country, Malaysia" and "China."

We will probably go to *China to represent Malaysia* before long. (CRL, male, elderly, June 2000)

(3) In the context of ties between overseas Chinese and their country of origin: "we overseas Chinese" and "our ancestral homeland."

> *China's* prosperity is a very real issue, for if *our ancestral homeland* is prosperous and powerful, its language and its whole culture will be a driving force for *us overseas…We*'re based on the *common* culture of a *common* people…*As ethnic Chinese,* we'll be part of the *world ethnic Chinese* community in future and may head towards what is called integration, or *a stronger interaction between each other.* (X1SWYH, male, middle-aged, June 2000)

> Because of ethnic or blood relationships, I feel that our economic and trade relations are bound to be *(closer) than with foreigners, real foreigners. We are seen as foreigners,* but *we still have our relationships.* (LSN, male, middle-aged, June 2000)

Viewed in terms of social psychology, concepts like "Chinese" among Chinese Malaysians have more of a category meaning. The multiracial and multicultural setting highlights commonalities among individuals within an ethnic group and differences among ethnic groups. Thus context contributes to stimulating and building up the concept of "us." Different contexts stimulate different identity consciousness. Depending on the context, certain identities fade away for the moment while others are thrown into sharp contrast with outsiders at the same time as they highlight the shared features among insiders.

The process of cultural identity of Chinese Malaysians points to three major trajectories. (1) Development from identity based on ancestral place of origin and kinship to the social, economic and political identity of the ethnic Chinese community. (2) From dialect identity, attached to identity based on ancestral place of origin and kinship, to language identity characterized by use of Mandarin and simplified written Chinese and expressed through the setting-up of Chinese-medium schools and newspapers. (3) From identity based on religion and customs to identity based on beliefs and values, expressed in the maintenance of Chinese popular customs and beliefs and adherence to and development of Chinese values.[27]

By examining the above three trajectories, we can see that the Chinese Malaysians have come a long way from traditional ascribed groupings (such as those expressed in ancestral temples and guild halls) to achieved organizational forms in the modern social, economic and political sense. This process has constructed a structure of personal identity: that is, an ethnic Chinese cultural identity predicated on identification with

---

27   Yang Yiyin, "The independence and dynamism of cultural identity: with the evolution and renovation of the cultural identification of Chinese Malaysians as a case in point."

Malaysia in the nation-state and political sense.

Research into the cultural identity of Chinese Malaysians is very useful to our understanding of the category concept of "us" for the Chinese in general, as it suggests that this concept in Chinese culture does not necessarily bear the character of *guanxi*, but can instead come from in-group commonalities and out-group differences. Individuals placed in a certain category by others will keep this group identity through the formation of cultural consensus. In spite of a certain involvement with *guanxi*, the psychological mechanism by which the individual relates to the category appears to be essentially categorical in nature, and may be summed up as "categorization."

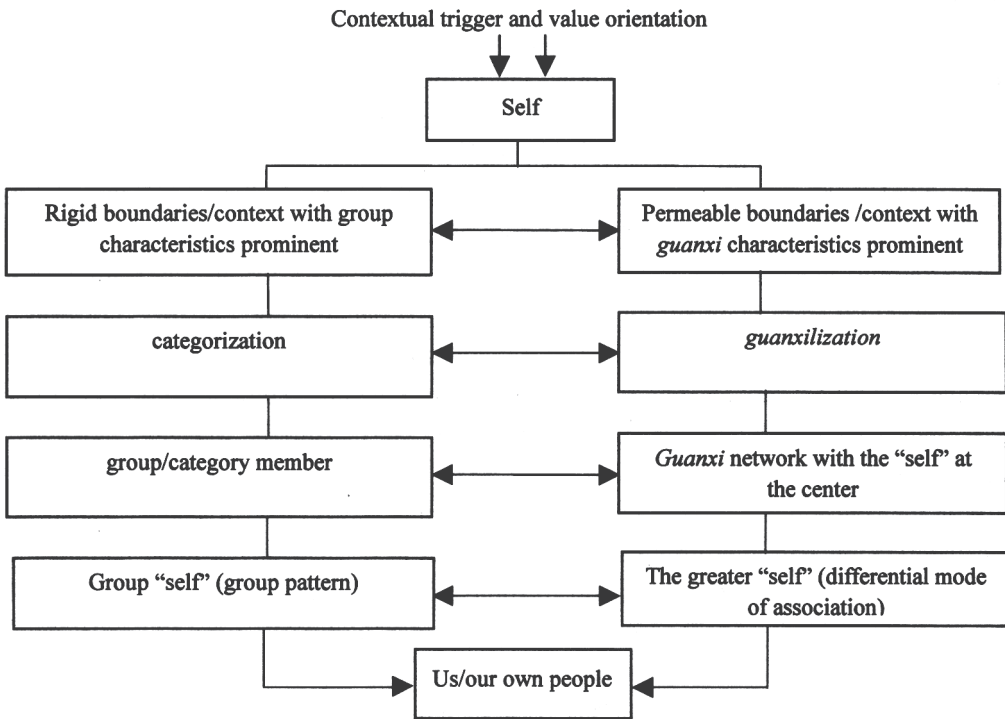**Framework for a contextual concept of "us"**

Through our analysis of the two studies mentioned above, we have explored the social psychology mechanisms that may have contributed to the formation of the Chinese concept of "us." We may assume that the boundaries of the Chinese "self" have the following characteristics. (1) Autonomy: the individual, placed at the very center, can decide whether to include or reject others. (2) Permeability: the individual can include others through *guanxi*. (3) Elasticity: The circle of inclusion can vary in size depending on the number of people included through *guanxi*. (4) Morality: Social morality can guide an individual to transcend the self in sublimation into a greater self.

The "group" concept that corresponds to this "self" concept likewise becomes more complex. (1) People included on account of *guanxi* become "one of us" and form a *guanxi* network including those who are mutually accepted as "one of us." (2) When the boundaries of the "self" become rigid, independent individuals come to form a group or quasi-independent individuals to form a category. (3) The distance between "me" and "us" varies in different contexts.

With the concepts of "group" and "self" defined this way, to have a single mechanism – categorization – in inter-group relations turns out to be inadequate, for it ignores the *guanxi* characteristics of the group-self relationship. The case study above shows that if the guanxilized ("one of us") concept of "us" embodies a typically Chinese "differential mode of association" and the category concept of "us" embodies a "group pattern" universally present among people in the West, then it can be assumed that the mechanism which generates the Chinese concept of "us" is two-fold. In other words, the Chinese may reach their relationship with one another by two paths, one of which consists of making distinctions and establishing psychological relationships in accordance with ascribed definition and through face-to-face interaction, and the other of making distinctions and establishing psychological relations with abstract others in accordance with category

definition. When faced with outside groups, the "self" that includes others by virtue of *guanxi* sees them as "outsiders," whereas the "self" that does not include others in this way will see them as out-groups. Correspondingly, categorization is highlighted when out-groups appear, whereas guanxilization is highlighted when "outsiders" appear. What triggers this mechanism is whether the individual sees himself as a group member or a "self" entitled to decide whether another can be included, that is, whether the "self" is "one of many" (a group member) or "just this one" (who decides from his central position what the relationship should be). In this respect, we surmise that the context may become the trigger, that is, the concept of "us" is contextual. This concept of "us," with its dual paths triggered by *guanxilization* or categorization, may be called the formative mechanism for the concept of "us" in a two-fold context, as is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1 Formative mechanism for the contextualized concept of "us"

Contextual trigger and value orientation

Self

| Rigid boundaries/context with group characteristics prominent | ↔ | Permeable boundaries /context with *guanxi* characteristics prominent |

| categorization | ↔ | *guanxilization* |

| group/category member | ↔ | *Guanxi* network with the "self" at the center |

| Group "self" (group pattern) | ↔ | The greater "self" (differential mode of association) |

Us/our own people

Social psychologists have found that, when choosing a mechanism to link himself with the group, the individual is pushed, on the one hand, by context, and on the other hand, by a certain anchoring or preference based on social, cultural or historical factors. In other words, he has a certain tendency, formed by long years of social behavior, to adopt

either categorization or guanxilization as a means of establishing his relationship with others, a tendency which may result in path dependence leading to a strong preference for one of the two as his value orientation. The two value orientations, far from being clearly separate, are entwined with one another, and have their origin deep in cultural, social and historical structures. No culture can be orientated only towards category with no element of guanxilization, and vice versa. As sociologist Yang Liansheng has pointed out, "retribution and recompense" is a principle of social intercourse in all societies, but what is different in China is that this paradigm "has a longer history; people are strongly aware of its existence and it is widely applied in the social system, whence its deep-rooted influence."[28]

As an exploratory attempt on native soil, our study offers a framework that awaits more in-depth discussion and empirical support. Moreover, in addition to research on value orientation, relevant pathways for further research within our two-fold framework may include contextual triggers, context dependence and independence and modes of thought. This field of research could also be further stimulated by related research with significance for transformational social psychology such as the connection between the psychological mechanism of the group-self relationship and social construction, the group-self relationship and the formative mechanism of concepts of "public" and "private," and the group-self relationship and public participation.

Notes on contributor

Yang Yiyin, Ph.D. in social psychology, is Research Fellow and Director of the Research Center for Social Psychology of the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. She is also Deputy Editor-in-chief of *Social Psychology Research* (社会心理研究) and Editorial Board Director of *China Social Psychological Review* (中国社会心理学评论). Her major research interests cover cultural social psychology and transformational social psychology, including the social identity of the Chinese, their interpersonal relationships, their group-self and intergroup relationships, social mentalities, value concepts, individual modernity and tradition, etc. Her major works include: "One of Us: A Case Study of the Classification of Relationships among the Chinese"(自己人：一项有关中国人关系分类的个案研究, *Indigenous Psychological Research in Chinese Societies* [本土心理学研究], Taipei, 2001, no. 13); "The Civic Consciousness of Modern Chinese: A Preliminary Attempt at Measurement"(当代中国人公民意识的测量初探,*Sociological Studies*［社会学研究］, Beijing, 2008, no. 2). Tel.: (86-10) 85195562. E-mail: yangyy@cass.org.cn.

References

Abrams, D., and M. Hogg. "Metatheory: lessons from social identity research." *Personality and Social*

---

28   Yang Liansheng, "Retribution: a basis of Chinese social relations," pp. 49-50.

Psychology Review, 2004, no. 8.

Academic Commission of the China Culture Academy. *Complete works of Liang Shuming* (梁漱溟全集), vol. III. Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House, 1989.

Allport, G. W. "The historical background of social psychology." In *The handbook of social psychology* (3ʳᵈ ed.), eds., G. Lindzey and E. Aronson. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985.

Brewer, M. B., and Chen Y-R. "Where (who) are collectives in collectivism? toward conceptual clarification of individualism and collectivism." *Psychological Review*, vol. 114, 2007, no.1.

Chiu, C-y and Hong, Y-y. *Social psychology of culture*. New York: Psychology Press, 2006.

Farr, R. M. *The roots of modern social psychology: 1872-1954*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

Fei, Xiaotong. *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society* (乡土中国). Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1985.

Fiske, A. P., S. Kitayama, H. R. Markus and R. E. Nisbett. "The cultural matrix of social psychology." In *The handbook of social psychology* (4ᵗʰ ed., vol. 2), eds. D. Gilbert, S. Fiske and G. Lindzey. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Ho, D. Y. F. "Relational orientation and methodological relationalism." *Bulletin of the Hong Kong Psychological Society*, 1991, no. 26/27.

Hofstede, G. H. *Culture's consequences: international differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980.

Hsu, F. L. K. "Psychological homeostasis and jen: conceptual tools for advancing psychological anthropology." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 73, 1971.

Jin, Shenghua, ed. *Social psychology* (社会心理学). Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2005.

Jost, J. T., and A.W. Kruglansk. "The estrangement of social constructionism and experimental social psychology: history of the rift and prospects for reconciliation." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2002, no. 6.

King, Ambrose Yeo Chi. "Individual and community in Confucian doctrine: an interpretation from the perspective of guanxi" (儒家学说中的个体和群体——一个关系角度的诠释). In *Chinese society and culture* (中国社会与文化). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Li, Qingshan, ed. *Collection of papers on the social psychology of the Chinese* (中国人社会心理论集). Hong Kong: Epoch and Culture Book Co., 1993.

Nisbett, Richard E. *The geography of thought: how Asians and Westerners think differently…and why*. Trans. Li Xiuxia. Beijing: China CITIC Press, 2006.

Oyserman, D., *et al.* "Rethinking individualism and collectivism: evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 128, 2002, no. 1.

Popper, Karl. *The poverty of historicism*. Trans. Du Ruji and Qiu Renzong. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 1987.

Taifel, H., and J. C.Turner. "The social identity of inter-group behavior." In *Psychology of intergroup relations*, eds., S. Worchehel and W. G. Austin. Chicago, IL: Nelson Hall, 1986.

Triandis, H. C. "Theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of collectivism and individualism." In *Individualism and collectivism: theory, method and applications*, eds., U. Kim, H. C. Triandis, C. Kagitcibasi, S. C. Choi and G. Yoon. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage,

1994.

Turner, J. C., M. A. Hogg, P. J. Oakes, S. D. Reicher, and S. M. Wetherell. *Rediscovering the social group: a self categorization theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987.

Yan, Yunxiang. "The culture of *guanxi* in a North China village." *The China Journal,* vol. 35, 1996.

Yang, Guoshu. "Social orientation of the Chinese: a social interaction viewpoint" (中国人的社会取向：社会互动的观点). In *Psychology and behavior of the Chinese: idea and method* (中国人的心理与行为——理念及方法篇), eds., Yang Guoshu and Yu Anbang. Taipei: Laureate Publishing Co., 1993.

Yang, Guoshu. "Why we are building an indigenous psychology of the Chinese" (我们为什么要建立中国人的本土心理学)? *Indigenous Psychological Research in Chinese Societies* (本土心理学研究)*,* 1993, no. 1.

Yang, Liansheng. "Retribution: a basis of Chinese social relations" (报——中国社会关系的一个基础). In *Meanings of "retribution," "protection" and "guarantee" in Chinese Culture* (中国文化中"报"、"保"、"包"之意义——钱宾四先生学术文化讲座). Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1987.

Yang, Yiyin. "The independence and dynamism of cultural identity: with the evolution and renovation of the cultural identity of Chinese Malaysians as a case in point" (文化认同的独立性和动力性：以马来西亚华人文化认同的演进与创新为例). In *Collection of papers about overseas ethnic Chinese* (海外华族研究论集), eds., Zhang Cunwu and Tang Xiyong, vol. III. Taipei: Overseas Chinese Association, 2002.

Yang, Yiyin. "One of us: a case study of the classification of relationships among the Chinese" (自己人：一项有关中国人关系分类的个案研究). *Indigenous Psychological Research in Chinese Societies*, 2001, no. 13.

Yang, Yiyin. "The self and its boundaries: a contribution to research from the perspective of cultural value orientation" (自我及其边界：文化价值取向角度的研究进展). *Social Sciences Abroad* (国外社会科学), 1998, no. 6.

Yang, Zhongfang. *How to study the Chinese: a collection of papers on indigenous psychological research* (如何研究中国人：心理学研究本土化论文集). Taipei: Yuan Liu Publishing Co., 2001.

Ye, Qizheng. *Essays on sociological theory and its indigenization* (社会理论的本土化建构). Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006.

—Translated by Chen Yongyi *and* Zhang Zhiping *from*
Zhongguo shehui kexue (中国社会科学), *2008, no. 4*
Revised by Sally Borthwick