

# An Investigation into the Changing Self-Concepts of Chinese College Students

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**Abstract**—The in-depth interview of 10 Chinese college students found out four themes related to Chinese students' self-concept formation in the world emerging economic power. These themes are: First, college students are viewing themselves more Western-self than Eastern-self. Second, half of the interviewees are still conforming to the traditional interdependent self-construal. Third, college students tend to have high self-esteem. Fourth, compared with female students, male students are viewing themselves more Western and have higher self-esteem. The paper aims at providing a deeper understanding of the mentality change in terms of self-concept and self-esteem of today's college students for educators.

**Keywords**—Chinese college students; self-concept; self-esteem

## I. INTRODUCTION

Self-concepts are the mental representations of those personal qualities used by individuals for the purpose of defining themselves and regulating their behavior (Niedenthal & Beike, 1997). Therefore, self-concepts are reflections of one's attitudes and beliefs about themselves, which may further affect people's motivations, behaviors and success. In cross-cultural studies, China has always been taken as a typical collectivist culture, which is in contrast with the Western individualist culture. Nisbett (2003) exemplified how Westerners and Easterners view themselves differently in his book, which is mainly addressing self-concepts from two dimensional constructs: individualism vs. collectivism, or independent vs. interdependent self-construal. Nisbett further distinguished the Eastern-self and Western-self by listing the traits of each. He claimed that Western-self is more independent and prefers to uphold equality and make choices, while Eastern-self is more

interdependent, group-oriented and tend to have dislike chaos.

However, in the past few decades, China has witnessed dramatic changes in every aspect, from economic development to people's mentality, which has been greatly influenced by Western thinking through mass media and internet communication. Young college students, who are among one of the major audiences of mass media and online communication users, have been encountering Western culture in a holistic way.

The current study is to investigate the following questions: What are the self-concepts of today's college students in China? Are they still conforming to the stereotyped Eastern self-images perceived through Westerners' lens in cross-cultural studies? If not, how have they changed in their self-concepts?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Markus (1980) defined self-concept as "a cognitive schemata that organizes memories about the self and controls the processing of self-relevant information." Self-concept research used to be conducted through a social psychological perspective, which was likely to minimize the contributions of culture to the development and maintenance of self-concept. Since 1990s, there has been a growing literature concerning cultural differences and self-concepts. Among which, there are a lot of studies are investigating self-concepts from the two dimensional perspectives: individualism vs. collectivism; independent vs. interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, 2003).

According to Nisbett, Eastern-self and Western-self can be summarized as following "Table I":

TABLE I. EASTERN-SELF VS. WESTERN-SELF

	Eastern-self	Western-self
1	In many cases, do not want to be the "peg" standing-out.	Wanting to be distinctive.
2	Choice is not a high priority.	Preferring to be in control of their own behaviors and like choices
3	Less concerned with personal goals and preferring to concern group goals and coordinated actions.	Preferring to have personal goals of success and achievement
4	Feeling good is likely to be tied to the sense that they are in harmony with group wishes.	Striving to feel good about themselves
5	Equality of treatment is not assumed nor is it necessarily regarded as desired.	Preferring equality in personal relationships and a superior position in a hierarchical relationship.
6	Focusing more on harmonious relationships and trying to use "guanxi" - relationship	Believing the same rules should apply to everyone and justice should be blind.

As a college teacher, it will be necessary to encounter with my students frequently and get to know a lot about their thinking, learning and life. The frequent social interactions with my students together with the young people's images broadcast and promoted in mass media convinced the author that today's young people in China have changed dramatically compared with the older generation and the traditional stereotyped images described above in a Westerner's research.

Nowadays, many social media in China, WeChat, Tik Tok, Vlog etc. are so popular among young people and are exerting huge influence on young people's minds, boosting their self-esteem and self-efficacy and changing their self-concepts. Young people admire those show competitors' huge success of rising from the unknown to the superstardom, and they also want to be uniquely different and distinctive from others and cherish a dream that will finally bring them similar success. Today's young people in China want to be unique and distinctive; cherishing very clear personal goals; striving to feel good about themselves; preferring equality and justice. They are dramatically different from the stereotypes of Chinese from the Westerners' perspective. Therefore, the study is aiming at investigating and testifying the assumption.

### III. METHOD

The author posted a personal interview invitation message on the discussion forums of the online learning system of a university in Shanghai. The author came up with about 34 volunteering participants. Invitations were sent to 5 female and 5 male who are randomly selected. With 5 female numbered as A1, A2, A3, A4 and A5, while 5 male numbered as B1, B2, B3, B4 and B5. The age of the ten interviewees is ranging from 20 to 23. After the interview, the interview notes were numbered, typed and decoded by the author. The research is conducted by having a 30-40 minutes' interview with each of the ten participants respectively. Ten questions related to self-concept were developed, among which six questions were based on Nisbett's summary of Eastern-self and Western-self, and the other four questions are related to self-esteem (7-10).

The interview questions are as follows:

*Which of the following scenarios describes you better?*

- a. In many cases, I do not want to be the "peg" standing-out.
- b. In many cases, I want to be distinctive and different from others.

If neither of the above scenarios depicts you, you need to explain why.

*Which of the following scenarios describes you better?*

- a. I don't consider choice as a high priority and I prefer to have somebody arrange for me.
- b. I prefer to be in control of my own behaviors and like choices.

If neither of the above scenarios depicts you, you need to explain why.

*Which of the following scenarios describes you better?*

- a. I am less concerned with personal goals and prefer to concern group goals and coordinated actions.
- b. I prefer to have personal goals of success and achievement.

If neither of the above scenarios depicts you, you need to explain why.

*Which of the following scenarios describes you better?*

- a. I tend to feel good if I am in harmony with group wishes.
- b. I strive to feel good about myself.

If neither of the above scenarios depicts you, you need to explain why.

*Which of the following scenarios describes you better?*

- a. I don't assume equality of treatment is a must or desire to be treated
- b. I prefer equality in personal relationships and prefer a superior position in a hierarchical relationship,

If neither of the above scenarios depicts you, you need to explain why.

*Which of the following scenarios describes you better?*

- a. I focus more on harmonious relationships and trying to use "guanxi" - relationships
- b. I believe the same rules should apply to everyone and justice should be blind.

If neither of the above scenarios depicts you, you need to explain why.

*How do you evaluate your personality?*

*How do you evaluate your academic ability?*

*Are you a happy person with a steady good sense of yourself or an emotional person with a changeable mind?*

*Are you confident? Do you believe in yourself that you can do most things well or few things well?*

### IV. RESULTS

The following themes appear after the decoding of the answers from the ten interviewees.

#### *A. Theme One: College Students Are Viewing Themselves More Western-self than Eastern-self*

The answers to the first 6 questions can reflect whether today's young people view themselves more Eastern or Western. The author found that 10 interviewees' answers to Nisbett's 6 questions of Eastern-self and Western-self can be summarized as: 23 person time to option a (Eastern-self) and

27 person time to option b (Western-self) and 10 person time to rate themselves sort of in-between the Eastern-self and the

Western-self. ("Table II")

TABLE II. RESULTS OF EASTERN-SELF AND WESTERN-SELF

Questions	Female	Male	Summary	Mean Results
Q 1	2a +1b+ 2m	2a + 3b	4a+4b+2m	2
Q 2	4b + 1m	3b + 2m	7b +3m	2.8
Q 3	3a + 2b	2a + 2b +1m	5a+4b+1m	1.9
Q 4	4a +1m	2a + 3m	6a+ 4m	1.2
Q 5	3a + 2b	1a+ 4b	4a+6b	2.2
Q 6	2a +3b	2a + 3b	4a+6b	2.2
	14a +12b+4m	9a + 15b+ 6m	23a + 27b + 10m	2.07

<sup>a</sup>. a=Eastern-self=1; b=Western-self=3; m=Moderation=2

The above results indicate that today's college students are moving toward the Western-style self, although it is still too early for us to conclude that college students are abandoning the Eastern-style self-concepts and having Western-style self-concepts. Compared with their older generation, they are definitely more Western-style than Eastern style, which can be manifested through their answers to the first question related to "peg".

There is a Chinese saying goes that "*Qiang Da Chu Tou Niao*," which literally means that "The bird taking the lead will be the first shot." The saying suggests people to keep a low profile, because the outstanding "peg" usually bears the brunt of attack. When they were asked the first question concerning whether they want to be the "peg" standing-out or not. 4 out of the 10 interviewees reported that it is for sure that they want to be the "peg" and 2 of the subjects reported that they will take the lead under certain circumstances.

Therefore, based on the six questions, taken as a whole mirroring Chinese young people's self-concepts, we can conclude that nowadays college students are viewing themselves more Western-self than Eastern-self.

#### B. Theme Two: Half of the Interviewees Are Still Conforming to the Traditional Interdependent Self-construal

Although the six questions taken as a whole can reflect the Chinese college students have a tendency to view themselves as Western-self. It cannot deny the fact that there are still some considerable traditional elements among today's young people.

For example, Question 3 and 4 are asking about the relationship between self and group. Kim, Kasser & Hoonkoo (2003) examined the similarities and differences between 3 dimensions that represent people's focus on self vs. other: individualistic vs. collectivistic nations, independent vs. interdependent self-concepts, and intrinsic vs. extrinsic aspirations. They found that the South Korean and U.S. college students holding self-concepts which are in expected ways: South Korean students holding more interdependent self-concepts and U.S. college students holding more independent self-concepts. From the participants' answers to Question 3 and 4, the author also found that about half of the 10 participating students are still conforming to the expected interdependent self-concepts.

According to Markus & Kitayama (1991), people with independent self-concepts typically believe that their own rights and feelings outweigh those of the group, whereas those with interdependent self-concepts are particularly focused on the stability and harmonious functioning of the whole group. The 10 interviewees' answers to Question 3 and 4, which are related to the relationship between self and group, follow the above statement.

In sum, in terms of the dimension of independent vs. interdependent self-construal, despite the fact that there are more and more young people view themselves more Western-self. There is still half or more Chinese college students are in accordance with the traditional Eastern interdependent rather than the Western independent self-concepts. This indicates that some of the traditional cultural values are still prevalent among college students.

#### C. Theme Three: College Students Tend to Have High Self-esteem

Self-concept and self-esteem sometimes can be used interchangeably, and quite often by laypersons. The two terms actually represent different but related constructs. For educators and researchers, *self-concept* refers to a student's perceptions of competence or adequacy in academic and nonacademic (e.g., social, behavioral, and athletic) domains and is best represented by a profile of self-perceptions across domains. *Self-esteem* is a student's overall evaluation of him- or herself, including feelings of general happiness and satisfaction (Harter, 1999). Therefore, in the present study, some questions related to college students' self-esteem are also raised. The author aims at investigating how do college students evaluate on themselves, including their personality, academic ability, well-being and confidence.

1) *Personality*: When asked this question, on the whole all participants reported very positive evaluations about their own personality. The following words describing personality are most frequently used: integrity, friendly, lively, optimistic, extroverted, hardworking, reliable, honest, generous, independent, strong, kind-hearted, enterprising, persistent, earnestness, perseverance, ambitious, sense of responsibility, a person of principle, a person with value etc. While only a few words related to their demerits are employed, which is also elicited by my further question: "What is the biggest merit and demerit in your personality?" after their self-report of personalities. The negative

personality descriptive words employed by the participants are as follows: shy, not confident enough, lacking in perseverance, hesitation, stubborn.

2) *Academic ability*: Self-concept is frequently positively correlated with academic performance, but it appears to be a consequence rather than a cause of high achievement (Baumeister et al., 2003). The participants in general rated their academic ability as average or above. They are using expressions like "sharp insight", "good at study", "not bad", "not intelligent but diligent", "not very good at", "love new things" etc. They are using less negative expressions to evaluate their academic ability.

3) *Sense of well-being / feeling good about self*: According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, well-being, in its philosophical use, refers to "the notion of how well a person's life is going for that person." (Retrieved on July 18, 2019 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/>). Eight participants reported that they are "happy", "good sense of myself", "optimistic" and things like that. Only two reported that they were not very happy.

4) *Self-confidence*: Dictionary.com defines self-confidence as "realistic confidence in one's own judgment, ability, power, etc." or "excessive or inflated confidence in one's own judgment, ability, etc." Seven participants reported to the author that they are self-confident, while two reported that "not confident enough". Therefore, we may conclude that college students in general are confident. In summary, college students are confident and the majority believed that they can do most things well.

#### *D. Theme Four: Compared with Female Students, Male Students Are Viewing Themselves More Western and Have Higher Self-esteem*

Although this study is a qualitative one with only 10 participants, the gender differences in answering the ten questions are so striking that make people feel the urge to enlist it as one of the findings of the research.

For the Eastern-self and Western-self questions, from "Table I" Results of Eastern-self and Western-self, we can see that there are more male (15 person time) college students who are viewing themselves as Western-self than female (12 person time) student and much less male (9 person time) view themselves as Eastern-self than female (14 person time). This indicates that male college students are in general more Western than female college students.

As to self-esteem questions, male's answers are more assertive, concise and straightforward. Gender differences vary related to different questions concerning self-esteem. The answers to Question 9 and 10 are the most notable in gender differences. Although the number is not significant due to the small number of participants, the degree of confidence reported by male students is much stronger and higher than female students through their composed and assertive facial expressions, their tone and intonation and their gestures etc.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the interview results, it is found that self-concepts of today's young people are closer to Western-style than Eastern-style. Additionally, the results of the study also suggest that college students tend to have high self-esteem and male college students have even higher self-esteem than their female peers. The current study was conducted through a qualitative method and the subjects were selected from the author's own university, the participants may not represent all the young people in China. The findings about college students' self-concept and self-esteem may need further test and verification through quantitative studies.

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