Nagesh Rao
Arvind Singhal
Li Ren
Jiarying Zhang

Is the Chinese Self-Construal in Transition?

The present article investigates the Chinese peoples' interdependent and independent self-construals, including how these self-construals are influenced by socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, and rural-urban residence. A modified version of Singelis' (1994) self construal scale was administered to 237 Chinese respondents' in an urban and a rural area of Shandong Province, China, and qualitative data (focus group and in-depth interviews) were collected to enrich the quantitative findings. Our results suggest that the Chinese self-construal varies across age, gender, and urban-rural residence, and is also influenced by the changing political, economic, and socio-cultural context in China. The theoretical and practical implications for the field of intercultural communication are outlined in the discussion section.

▐ n the past, in the Chinese socialist society, you were only a brick or a screw, and were used wherever you were needed. You had no self. You were only one part of a whole machine and couldn't be independent as a separate self... You had to put yourself in the big collectives,

and belonged to your country, your work unit, your parents, or your own family. Now it's different. You are still a brick, but you are a very independent and personal brick. Suddenly the country does not take care of you anymore, and you are on your own.

(Ms. Yang, a 39 year old woman respondent in our focus group interview).

Chinese society, comprising some 1.2 billion people, is in transition. The proverbial Great Wall, symbolizing the insularity of the Chinese people, is 'in ruins' (Chu & Ju, 1993). In present-day China, the lines between Confucianism and capitalism, and communes and corporations, are blurring. From 'being wealthy is pariah' during Mao's time, the prevailing doctrine in today's China is 'being rich is glorious'. As new political and economic ideologies impinge on old ones, new 'mind-sets' emerge and mix with old ones. New ways of relating to others and one's self are emerging (Fitzgerald, 1993). Individual perceptions of authority, hierarchy, group cohesiveness, and family responsibility, while important, are now in flux (Chu, 1985; Chen, 1995). Greater contextual clarity that existed previously about what constituted appropriate or inappropriate social behaviour is not so clear now. Whether or not to squeak loudly in order to get more grease, or whether or not to stick one's neck out, is less clear in the new political, economic, cultural, and social landscape of China. For this reason, it is important to understand how the Chinese people view themselves (i.e. construe their 'self') especially in relation to others? To what degree do they see themselves as being *separate* (independent) from others or as *connected* (interdependent) with others?

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the Chinese peoples' independent and interdependent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and to see how their self-construals are influenced by socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, and rural-urban residence in a changing society. The concepts of independent and interdependent self-construal are explained, and the key historical, religious, and socio-cultural factors that influence the Chinese peoples' self-construals are analyzed. Our quantitative and qualitative data-collection procedures are detailed, and our findings presented. Finally, we draw theoretical and practical implications of our findings for the field of intercultural communication.

■ Independent and interdependent self-construal

Several scholars view an individual's conception of their self as an integral part of their behaviour (Geertz, 1975; Triandis, 1989). Markus and Kitayama's (1991) definition of the self explored the extent to which a person's identity is seen as separate from others (independent) or connected with others (interdependent). Drawing upon Markus and Kitayama's seminal work, Singelis (1994: 581) defined *self-construal* as a 'constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning one's relationship to others, and the self as distinct from others'. Since Markus and Kitayama's article on independent and interdependent self-construals, there has been considerable interest in exploring the role of self-construal in different contexts (Cross, 1995; Cross & Madson, 1997; Gudykunst et al., 1996; Kim et al., 1996; Kim, Sharkey, & Singelis, 1994; Oetzel & Bolton-Oetzel, 1997; Park & Levine, 1999; Singelis, 1994; Singelis & Brown, 1995). The concept of self-construal gained in prominence because cultural-level variables like individualism and collectivism, while useful conceptual tools, have limited explanatory power for why individuals in certain cultures display both individualist and collectivistic traits (Singelis & Brown, 1995). Markus and Kitayama's (1991) conceptualization of the self as being independent and interdependent, thus represented an important individual-level intervening variable between cultural dimensions like individualism/collectivism and human behaviour.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) noted that most Western cultures placed a high value on an individual's *independence*. Language use in Western cultures often reflects the positive attributes of being individualistic. For example, 'pull yourself by your boot straps', 'God helps those who help themselves', or 'self-help is the best help' are cherished notions. Achieving this cultural goal of independence requires individuals to construct themselves in ways that their 'behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to their own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and action, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings and action of others' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991: 226). People with an independent self-construal value 'individualism, achievement, self-direction, competition, and hedonism' (Oetzel & Bolton-Oetzel, 1997: 294). In general, people in individualistic cultures (like the United States) tend to primarily have an independent self-construal, that is, a conception of the self 'as an autonomous, independent person' (Marcus & Kitayama, 1991: 226).

In many non-Western cultures, however, the cultural norm is to maintain *interdependence* among members of a culture. Marcus and Kitayama (1991: 226) explain that:

> on certain occasions, the *individual* in the sense of a set of significant inner attributes of the person, may cease to be the primary unit of consciousness. Instead, the sense of belongingness to a social relation may become so strong that it makes better sense to think of the *relationship* as the functional unit of conscious reflection.

Thus one's actions, thoughts and feelings are influenced significantly by the specific context/situation and the key members involved in the situation. For example, to decide whether or not to come to the United States to pursue higher education, one of the present authors (who belongs to a non-Western culture) held several discussions with parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and friends before his parents suggested that it was a good idea to go to the US. Those with an interdependent self-construal learn to control their own feelings and reactions to be seen as a mature member of society (Marcus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). This interdependent construal of the self 'has been variously referred to, with somewhat different connotations as, sociocentric, holistic, collective, connected, and relational' (Marcus & Kitayama, 1991: 227).

There is a growing body of literature on how independent and interdependent self-construals impact human communication behaviour (Oetzel, 1998; Yamada & Singelis, 1999). For instance, Oetzel and Bolton-Oetzel (1997) investigated the relationship between self-construal and group effectiveness and found that while task effectiveness was positively correlated with independent self-construal, relational effectiveness was strongly and positively related to interdependent self-construal. They concluded that a person with a strong interdependent self-construal will see building and maintaining relationships as key to task accomplishment, while those with an independent self-construal will view task outcomes as the means to build good relationships. Cross (1995) studied how the self-construal of East Asian and American students influenced their coping behaviours related to stress during cross-cultural adaptation. East Asian students with higher scores on the interdependent self-construal reported higher levels of stress and difficulty in adapting to the more individualistic US culture. However, East Asian students who scored higher on their independent self-construal used more direct coping strategies, and in-

dicated lower levels of stress. In a study on conversational strategy, Kim, Sharkey and Singelis (1994) found that participants scoring higher on independent self-construals were more likely to focus on conversational clarity (straight talk, linear patterns of communication, etc.), and participants with higher scores on interdependent self-construals were more likely to focus on face-related issues and used a more indirect style of communication. Results of a follow-up study by Kim et al. (1996) were consistent. Cultural individualism greatly influenced the independent self-construal, while cultural collectivism greatly influenced the interdependent self-construal. Other recent studies have reinforced the importance of self-construal as an important mediating individual-level variable in explaining cultural effects on people's communication behaviours. For instance, Gudykunst et al. (1996) hypothesized that while individualism-collectivism had direct effects on high-context and low-context communication styles, self-construals had an indirect impact on communication styles. Results indicated that the impact of individualism-collectivism on low-context communication was mediated by independent self-construal. Similarly, the impact of individualism-collectivism on high-context communication was mediated by interdependent self-construal. Singelis and Brown (1995) argued that culture influences individual-level variables like self-construal, which, in turn, influences a person's communicative behaviour. Results indicated that culture, self-construal, and people's communication behaviours were theoretically and empirically linked in a way such that collectivism correlated positively with interdependent self-construal, and negatively with independent self-construal. In all, research suggests that individual-level factors are better predictors of behaviours than cultural-level variables.

Self-construal in China

Most past research suggests that the interdependent self-construal is stronger and more dominant than the independent self-construal in China (Yang, 1981; Hsu, 1981). In his classic work, Hofstede (1984: 151) offered a historical/political perspective to explain the collective or interdependent nature of the Chinese: 'For Mao Tse-tung, individualism is evil. Individualism and liberalism, for Mao, are manifest in the selfishness and aversion to discipline and characteristic of the petty bourgeoisie'. In contrast, Bond, Leung and Wan

(1982) found that individualistic Americans focused more on task accomplishment, whereas the collectivistic Chinese focused more on relational maintenance (interdependence) issues. McCrae and John (1992) (cited in Bond, 1994) also found that the Chinese community (in Hong Kong) were much more likely to focus on agreeableness and conscientiousness (collectivistic relational issues) than Australians, for instance. Schwartz's (1994: 111) study was instrumental in pointing out that Chinese people can show individualistic traits within a collectivistic context: China 'is not a prototypical collectivistic society, if collectivism refers to a conception of the person as deeply embedded in the collectivity without legitimate autonomous interests'. The Chinese respects hierarchical differences, and private entrepreneurship is undertaken within tightly integrated relationships.

Several historical, political, economic, social, and cultural factors influence the self-construal of the Chinese people. Here we detail some of the key influences, including the Confucius ideal that individuals should be first concerned with their place in the scheme of human relations (Stipek, 1998). The dominant tenets of Confucianism include an attention to harmony, hierarchy (social position), face (self-image), shame, Baoying (reciprocation), and Guanxi (relationship maintenance) (Liu, 1997). Confucianism views family relations as the basis of society in which wives are generally subordinate to their husbands, children are subordinate to their parents, subjects are loyal to the king, the young respect the elders, and friends help each other sincerely (Chang & Holt, 1991).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, political ideology became a key influence on the Chinese people's self-identity. The Chinese identity was shaped by several political and cultural upheavals. First, Maoism was antithetical to the hierarchical principles of Confucianism, which insisted on equality for everyone. As a part of a collective enterprise, the Chinese people were ordained to obey the decision of the collective at all times. The 'self' in this context was subordinated to others (Chen, 1995). During the turbulent Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), everything reminiscent of the old was rejected as 'feudal'. Temples were destroyed; children were urged to scream at their parents; students actively condemned their teachers; and officials and scholars were publicly humiliated. In 1978, the responsibility system, in which farmland was distributed to every household, was carried out in rural areas (Bernstein, 1981). The responsibility

system linked income with the quantity and quality of work, so farmers were intrinsically motivated to boost their productivity, improving their self-confidence (Bernstein, 1981). Later, in Deng Xiaoping's era (post-1978) economic reform led to the opening of China to the outside world. A strong wave of self-awareness emerged among the Chinese people during this time. 'Following your own path' has become a more and more popular motto among Chinese people. On one hand, with the opening of the society and the decline of the political movements, there is less social and political pressures on people's pursuit of personal happiness. The Chinese people, it seems, have learned to mind their own business, and not to press others for certain kinds of social rules. On the other hand, Chinese people have realized that they themselves deserve a better life, and they are very determined to reach their changed goals in life.

In the past several decades, several key changes seem to have occurred in the attitude of the Chinese people toward long-held Confucian principles, which are also integral to understanding their evolving self-construal (Chu, 1985; Chu & Ju, 1993). First, it seems that there has been an erosion of the importance of 'age' and 'authority' in China. Distinctions between superiors and subordinates are weakening. While family relationships are still valued, disagreeing with parents or elder siblings is not uncommon. In most situations, people do not hesitate to express their opinions. Relative to the past, children are more independent of their parents' control, and exercise more freedom of choice, such as in the selection of marriage partners. In the work place, managers, increasingly, tend to consult subordinates for ideas and opinions when making a decision (Chu & Ju, 1993). Second, the Chinese women have experienced a sea-change in their personal, professional, and familial lives. The most remarkable achievement during Mao's era was that it liberated Chinese women from Confucian tenets. Women worked together with men. Female iron-ore workers, train drivers, and pilots appeared (Chen, 1995). Increasingly, women select their husbands by themselves. Remarkably, in present day China, some 70 per cent of divorces are initiated by women (Bullough & Ruan, 1994). Third, while family ties remain stable, social relations are becoming increasingly superficial. The kinship structure of the traditional Chinese family, especially in urban areas, has either been disbanded or destroyed. However, blood and clan relationships are still important, and Chinese people still care a great deal about siblings and relatives. Relatively, fam-

ily relationships are more stable than other social relationships (Chu, 1985; Chu & Ju, 1993). People with a higher level of education, or under Western cultural influences develop more social relations outside the kinship structure, but these human ties are more superficial than family relations Moreover, the purpose of extending social relationship networks is for personal success and interest, not just for friendship (Chang & Holt, 1991). In rural areas, on the other hand, the kinship-based network still remains a fairly strong influence, perpetuating traditional interdependent relations toward significant others, especially to ensure enduring social support (Chu, 1985).

Our above analysis suggests that the Chinese self-construal is in flux. Various political, economic, and socio-cultural events, especially of the past few decades, seems to have exerted an influence on how the Chinese people view themselves as being separate from others (independence) and in relation to others (interdependence). There is also reason to believe that socio-demographic actors such as age and authority, gender, and rural-urban residence exert an influence on the Chinese peoples' self-construal. We thus pose the following two research questions:

Research Question #1: To what extent is the Chinese peoples' self-construal independent and interdependent? That is, do the Chinese people see themselves as being separate from others or as connected with others?

Research Question #2: How is the Chinese people's self-construal influenced by age, gender, and urban/rural residence?

■ Methodology and data-collection

We collected both quantitative and qualitative data to help answer our research questions. The quantitative survey data were collected in China in mid-1998, and the qualitative focus-group and in-depth interview data were gathered from US-based Chinese respondents in late-1998 and early-1999. The primary purpose of the qualitative data-gathering was to shed further light on the quantitative findings.

The quantitative data-gathering centred on the adaptation and administration of the 24-item Singelis (1994) scale to measure a Chinese individual's independent and interdependent self-construal. These two distinct dimensions of the scale were sup-

ported in confirmatory factor analyses of two multiethnic samples of college students in the US, and the scale was found to have high reliability and validity (Singelis, 1994). However, since the scale was designed in the United States, we took several steps to ensure that the scale was comparable in meaning in China. The scale, comprising of 12 questions that measured an individual's 'independent' self-construal and another 12 questions measuring the individual's 'interdependent' self-construal, was first translated into Mandarin under the close supervision of two of the present paper's four authors, both of whom are Chinese nationals. The translated questionnaire was discussed in-depth with a team of about one-dozen survey interviewers and supervisors, graduate students and professors from a major Chinese university, and then pre-tested in a field-setting with several rural respondents in Yanqing County, 80 kilometers outside of Beijing.

Based on the pre-test results, and the ensuing debriefing of the survey interviewers, the questionnaire was modified for use in the Chinese context. Four items out of the original 24-item Singelis (1994) scale were dropped because they were strongly perceived by both the respondents and the survey interviewers as being 'redundant'. Additionally, rural respondents found it difficult to comprehend these four items. Further, two items of the remaining 20 items were translated into Chinese in a somewhat non-literal manner to preserve the original contextual meaning of the statement. For instance, the item on 'I should have the hope of living long enough to see my grandchildren grow up' was translated as 'I hope I could live under the same roof with my grand children', which is a common Chinese colloquial expression to signify the same meaning. Further, the number of response categories for gauging the respondents' agreement with each question was reduced to a 3-point Likert-type format (1 = Agree; 2 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 3 = Disagree), from a 5-point response format. While a 5-point response format can tap a broader spectrum of variance in responses, our pre-test experience, and the ensuing in-depth debriefing with survey interviewers strongly suggested that in the rural Chinese field context, respondents find it easier to respond in a 3-point response format.

The 20-item self-construal scale was administered through personal interview surveys in mid-1998 to a total of 237 respondents in Shandong Province of China. Using a stratified random sampling procedure (stratifying according to age, gender, and urban/rural residence), and drawing upon the support of local officials

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and local citizens' lists, some 116 respondents were selected in Dongying City, and another 121 respondents were selected from eight villages in Linqu County, Shandong Province. A profile of the respondents is provided in Table 1. The data were entered into SPSS in China by the two Chinese co-authors of this paper, checking for accuracy. The quantitative data was subsequently analyzed in the US.

Table 1
Demographic profile of the participants

Variable		Number (Percentage) N = 237
Sex:	Female	122 (51%)
	Male	115 (49%)
Location:	City	116 (49%)
	Village	121 (51%)
Age:	14 to 24 years	75 (32%)
	25 to 39 years	124 (52%)
	40 to 50 years	38 (16%)
		Average age: 29.4 years

After carrying out the quantitative data-analyses (the results of which are detailed later), it was felt that a more enriched qualitative understanding of the quantitative results was desirable. Many of our survey respondents had neither agreed nor disagreed with several questionnaire items. So we conducted two focus group discussions (including one eight-person all male group, and an eight-person all female group) and two in-depth interviews with two Chinese couples, giving us a respondent count of an additional 20 individuals. These Chinese respondents were students, spouses, and visiting scholars at our US-based Midwestern university, and ranged in age from 22 to 40 years. For this qualitative portion, we purposely selected respondents who had spent less than a year in the US, so that they were 'in tune' with current-day Chinese lifestyles. In fact, 18 of our 20 respondents had spent less than 3 months in the US. In the focus groups and in-depth interviews, they reacted to a range of questions and scenarios associated with how they construed their self, both independently and in relation

to others, in the context of family life, parenting, work, gender relations, and other realms. Each focus group interview and in-depth interview was translated and transcribed, and we will draw upon them to illuminate our quantitative findings.

Table 2
Factor loadings for Singelis' self-construal scale in China.

Self-construal items	Factor 1	Factor 2
Interdependent items:		
1. I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in.	0.55	-0.11
2. I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments.	0.69	-0.13
3. I should take into consideration my parents' advice when making education/career plans.	0.50	-0.18
4. It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group.	0.54	-0.00
5. I will stay in a group, if they need me, even when I am not happy with the group.	0.58	-0.26
6. If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible.	0.48	-0.18
7. Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument.	0.56	0.00
Independent items:		
8. I feel comfortable using someone's first name after I meet them, even though they are much older than me.	0.00	0.54
9. I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I have just met.	0.24	0.59
10. Being able to take care of myself is a primary concern for me.	0.00	0.48
11. I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respect.	-0.10	0.48

Table 3
Factor loadings for Singelis' self-construal scale in China across the three age groups.

Self-construal items	(15–24 years) F1	F2	(25–39) F1	F2	(40–50) F1	F2
Interdependent items:						
1. I have respect for authority figures with whom I interact	.00	.72	.58	.14	—	—
2. I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments	.81	.11	.00	.65	.78	.00
3. If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible	.56	.00	—	—	.74	.23
4. Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument	.46	.00	.52	.23	.65	.00
5. My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me	—	—	.77	.00	—	—
6. I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I am not happy with the group	—	—	.51	.20	—	—
7. I respect people who are modest about themselves	—	—	.00	.77	—	—
8. I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in	—	—	—	—	.76	.21
9. I should take into consideration my parents' advice when making education/career plans	—	—	—	—	.72	.00
10. It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group	—	—	—	—	.62	.34
Independent items:						
11. I'd rather say no directly, than risk being misunderstood	—	—	—	—	.74	.10
12. I feel comfortable being singled out	.00	.73	—	—	.00	—
13. I value good health above everything	—	—	—	—	.00	.81

N = 237

Results

Research Question #1 asked: *To what extent is the Chinese peoples' self-construal independent and interdependent? That is, do the Chinese people see themselves as being separate from others or as con-*

nected with others? We subjected our 20-item self-construal scale, a modified version of Singelis' 1994 scale, to a principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation. Items with a minimum factor loading of 0.40 with no cross-loadings of over 0.20 were included. Eleven of the 20 items loaded on one of two factors, specifying, respectively, an interdependent and independent self-construal dimension. In this sense, the validity of the modified Singelis' scale was reinforced in a non-Western context. The reliability for the interdependent self-construal was reasonable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.71); however, the reliability for the independent self-construal was low (Cronbach's alpha = 0.42).

The first factor, which included seven items assessing the interdependent self-construal (for example, 'I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in', 'I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments', etc.) had an eigen value of 3.1 and explained 16 per cent of the variance. The second factor, which included 4 items assessing the independent self-construal (for example, 'I feel comfortable using someone's first name after I meet them, even though they are much older than me', 'I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I have just met', etc.) had an eigen value of 1.7 and explained nine per cent of the variance. A comparison of the mean scores suggested that there was no significant difference [t(224)=-2.70; p>0.05] between independent self-construal (M=9.71; SD=2.41) and interdependent self-construal (M=9.13; SD=2.01) and inter-

Research Question #2 asked: *How is the Chinese peoples' self-construal influenced by age, gender, and urban/rural residence?* The modified version of Singelis' (1994) self-construal scale comprising 20 items was subjected to a principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation. Items with a minimum factor loading of 0.40 with no cross-loadings of over 0.20 were included. We did not restrict the number of factors allowed in our solution.

■ *Influence of age*

To look at the influence of age on self-construal, we divided our sample into three groups: Respondents between (1) 14 to 24 years, (2) 25 to 39 years, (3) and 40 to 50 years. Results from our factor analyses indicated that our Chinese respondents between 14 and 24 years of age did not display a clear sense of interdepen-

dent or independent self-construal (see Table 3). Only three of the interdependent self-construal items ('I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments', 'If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible', and 'Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument') had a factor loadings of 0.40 or above with no cross-loadings more than 0.20. Also, only one of the items measuring independent self-construal loaded on factor #2 ('I feel comfortable being singled out') along with one of the interdependence self-construal items ('I have respect for authority figures'). The first factor had an eigen value of 3.18 and explained6 16 per cent of the variance; the second factor had an eigen value of 1.84 and explained 10 per cent of the variance.

Analysis of the age group 25 to 39 years indicated that none of the items measuring independent self-construal had a factor loading of 0.40 or above (Table 3), suggesting that the interdependent self-construal is stronger in China. Six of the items measuring interdependence had factor loadings of 0.40 or above with no cross loadings more than 0.20. Four of these six 'interdependence' items loaded on factor #1 (for example, 'I have respect for authority figures with whom I interact', 'Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument', and other items), and two of the items loaded on factor #2 ('I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my accomplishments', and 'I respect people who are modest about themselves'), indicating two dimensions of interdependence. The first interdependence factor had an eigen value of 2.9 and explained 15 per cent of the variance; and the second interdependence factor had an eigen value of 1.97 and explained nine per cent of the variance.

Analysis of those between 40 to 50 years of age showed the strongest indication of the role of interdependence in China. Six of the items measuring interdependence had factor loadings of 0.60 or higher (for example, 'I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my accomplishments', and 'If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible', and other items) with no cross loadings more than 0.20. The interdependent self-construal factor had an eigen value of 5.4 and explained 27 per cent of the variance. The independent self-construal factor had an eigen value of 2.1, and explained 11 per cent of the variance. Interestingly, one of the items measuring independent self-construal ('I'd rather say no directly, than risk being misunderstood') loaded strongly on the interdependence factor. Since the elders in Chinese

society have authority and respect, it is likely that they speak more directly than youngsters. Only one item ('I value good health above everything') loaded on factor #2 signifying independent self-construal. Again, this seems logical given older age respondents are more likely to be experiencing health problems.

Further, a one-way analysis of variance assessing the impact of age on interdependent self-construal (see Table 6) suggested that there was a significant difference between the three groups [$F_{(2,225)}=3.68$; $p<0.05$]. The 14 to 24 year old respondents ($M=10.32$; $SD=2.45$) demonstrated a lower level of interdependence than the 40 to 50 year-olds ($M=9.13$, $SD=2.66$), and this difference was statistically significant (Scheffe's $t=1.49$; $p<0.05$). In essence, the sense of an interdependent self-construal is stronger among the older Chinese respondents than the younger ones. A one-way analysis of variance assessing the impact of age on independent self-construal suggested that there was no significant difference between the three groups [$F_{(2,226)}=0.39$; $p>.05$].

■ *Influence of gender*

Similar analyses were conducted to assess how the Chinese self-construal varied with the respondents' gender. Results from the principal components factor analyses with varimax rotation indicated the interdependent self-construal was strong for both men and women in China (see Table 4).

For the female respondents, six items measuring interdependence loaded relatively strongly on factor #1 (for example, 'I have respect for authority figures with whom I interact', 'It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group', and other items). Interestingly, like the older age respondents in our sample, the women felt that they would prefer to say no directly than risk being misunderstood. The interdependence self-construal factor had an eigen value of 3.4 and explained 17 per cent of the variance. Three items measuring independence loaded strongly on factor #2 (for example, 'I prefer to be direct and forthright', 'I enjoy being unique, and another item). The independent self-construal factor for our female respondents had an eigen value of 1.87 and explained nine per cent of the variance.

For male respondents (see Table 4), once again, six items assessing interdependent self-construal loaded above 0.50 on the first factor, which had an eigen value of 3.3 and explained about 17 per

Table 4
Female versus male respondents on Singelis' self-construal scale in China.

Self-construal items	(Female)		(Male)	
	F1	F2	F1	F2
Interdependent items:				
1. I have respect for authority figures with whom I interact	.51	.31	—	—
2. I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments	.56	.00	.75	.00
3. It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group	.58	.00	.53	.00
4. I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I am not happy with the group	.56	.21	.62	.20
5. If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible	.52	.00	—	—
6. Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument	.54	.00	.58	.00
7. I will sacrifice my self—interest for the benefit of the group I am in	—	—	.62	.12
Independent items:				
9. I should take into consideration my parents' advice when making education/career plans	—	—	.55	.11
10. I'd rather say no directly, than risk being misunderstood	.45	.11	—	—
11. I feel comfortable using someone's first name soon after I meet them, even when they are much older than me	.17	.54	—	—
12. I prefer to be direct and forthright	.21	.47	—	—
13. I enjoy being unique	.00	.66	—	—
14. I am the same person at home and out with others	—	—	.14	.68
15. Being able to take care of myself is a primary concern for me	—	—	.00	.61

$N = 237$

cent of the variance (for example, 'It is important for me to respect decisions made by the group', 'I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I am not happy with the group', and other items). Only two items measuring the independent self-construal had factor loadings of 0.40 or above ('I am the same person at home and outside', and 'being able to take care of myself is my primary concern for me'). The factor had an eigen value of 1.9 and explained about 10 per cent of the variance.

An assessment of sex on independent and interdependent self-construal suggested that there was no difference between our male and female respondents on these two dimensions. A comparison of the means suggested that there was no significant difference [t(226)=0.76; p>0.05] between men's (M=9.85; SD=2.54) and women's (M=9.61; SD=2.28) interdependent self-construal. Mean score comparisons also showed no significant differences [t(227)=-1.76; p>.05] between men's (M=8.88; SD=1.87) and women's (M=9.34; SD=2.17) independent self-construal.

In essence, our findings suggest that both Chinese women and men have strong interdependent self-construals, and relatively weaker independent self-construals. Interestingly, different items comprised the women's and men's independent self-construals. While women showed a preference for being unique and using a direct and forthright communication style, men preferred to take care of themselves and be the same person both inside and outside the home.

■ *Influence of rural-urban residence*

Interestingly, for both rural and urban respondents, the items assessing independent self-construal did not load on any one factor, and were distributed randomly across several factors (see Table 5). For rural respondents, there appeared to be two dimensions of interdependent self-construal. The first factor, which had an eigen value of 3.6 and explained 19 per cent of the variance, included three items (for example, 'I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own personal accomplishments', 'I respect modest people', and another item). The second factor, which had an eigen value of 1.8 and explained nine per cent of the variance, included two items ('It is important for me to respect decisions made by the group', and 'If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible').

Table 5
Village versus city respondents on Singelis' self-construal scale in China

Self-construal items	(Rural)		(Urban)	
	F1	F2	F1	F2
Interdependent items:				
1. I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments	.71	.18	.63	.40
2. I respect modest people	.71	.00	.00	.71
3. I will sacrifice my self—interest for the benefit of the group I am in	.71	.00	—	—
4. It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group	—	.75	—	—
5. If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible	.31	.77	.25	.72
6. Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument	.00	.00	.61	.32

N=237

Two dimensions of interdependent self-construal also emerged for our urban respondents (see Table 5). The first factor, which included two items ('I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own personal accomplishments', and another item) had an eigen value of 2.8 and explained 14 per cent of the variance. The second interdependent self-construal factor also had two items ('I respect modest people' and another item); it had an eigen value of 2.0 and explained 10 per cent of the variance. None of the items measuring independent self-construals met our factor loading criterion for both rural and urban Chinese respondents. Further, while it appears that rural and urban respondents have stronger interdependent self-construals, there are multiple dimensions of interdependence.

A comparison of the mean scores suggested that there was a significant difference [t(226)=2.84; p<0.05] between the urban (M=10.19; SD=2.29) and rural respondents' (M=9.30; SD=2.45) interdependent self-construal. Also, a comparison of the means

suggested that there was no significant difference [t(227)=0.04; p>0.05] between the urban (M=9.12; SD=1.77) and rural respondents' (M=9.11; SD=2.19) independent self-construal. In essence, it appears that rural respondents have a slightly higher level of interdependence than our urban respondents.

Table 6
Impact of age on interdependent self-construal

Age	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
14 to 24 years	71	10.3286	2.4538
25 to 39 years	120	9.5667	2.2482
40 to 50 years	38	9.1316	2.6628
Total	229	9.7281	2.4125

■ Interpretation with qualitative data

In this section, we draw upon the qualitative data to shed further light on the extent to which the Chinese peoples' (1) self-construal is independent and interdependent and (2) is influenced by age, gender, and urban/rural residence.

■ *Independent and interdependent nature of self-construal*

A recurring theme in the focus group and in-depth interviews was that utilitarian, contextual, and situational factors mediate how independent and interdependent self-construals impact communication behaviours. Whether in the context of work or family relationships, respondents showed a tendency to preface their statements with a 'it depends' monotone.

For instance, in the context of professional work relationships, respondents showed a strong willingness to maintain harmonious relationships, despite considerable self-effacement. For instance, when asked if he would argue with co-workers because of a stark difference in opinion, Dong (M, 31) said he would prefer to be silent in order to maintain a harmonious work relationship, especially if his immediate interests were not in jeopardy.

Table 7
Impact of age on independent self-construal

Age	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
14 to 24 years	71	9.2817	1.7170
25 to 39 years	120	9.0833	2.1947
40 to 50 years	38	8.9474	1.8592
Total	229	9.1223	1.9984

Yang (F, 39) reiterated that one should not argue for small matters as that makes 'one seen as being hard to get along with, but one should stand up for one's strong feelings'. Most respondents agreed that while self-accomplishment was very important, a harmonious working relationship represented a highly integral part of one's self accomplishment. As Li (M, 24) stated: 'Once a person has harmonious relationships with others, he can accomplish a lot. Nobody can put others behind and go on to success by himself'. In the context of family relationships, respondents alluded to the importance of situational factors in mediating how independent and interdependent self-construals impact communication behaviours. For instance, Wang (F, 31) explained how the self-construal of parents and their grown-up children may be influenced by whether or not they live together: 'It is very conditional. Many couples can't move out after marriage, because they have no houses. They have to live together with their parents. Either the parents and their children become highly dependent on each other; or they get tired of each other. The habit of every family is so different'.

■ *Influence of age, gender, and urban/rural residence on self-construal*

Intergenerational (age) differences: Our focus group interviews and in-depth interviews suggest that in spite of the social, political, and socio-cultural changes in China during the past decades, the family still remains the core unit in society, and parents and children are still to a large extent mutually dependent. Interestingly, most of our respondents talked about the influence of inter-

generational (age) differences on self-construal in the context of family life.

Most of our focus group respondents echoed the sentiment that it is the children's obligation to take care of the parents, and parents' sacrifice for their children is viewed as natural, but nevertheless highly appreciated. Yang (F, 39) said: 'I feel we have responsibility to take care of our parents. Our parents bring us up, and when we have the capabilities, we should give them a better life'. Even among the relatively younger set of parents, the notion of 'sacrificing' one's aspirations for children's development was palpable. As Li (F, 28) stated: 'I would definitely sacrifice my education and career for the good of my kids'.

The relatively strong family bond leads to a willingness among the younger people in China to still consult their parents' opinion while making personal decisions about education, career, or marriage. As one respondent said: 'Even if we do not follow what our parents may say, such consultation is a good strategy to please the parents'. Most respondents agreed that in present-day China, most parents do not force the children to do things their way: 'Because of the open-mindedness of the parents, considerable freedom is given to the children for their personal decision-making'. Several respondents noted that if, however, conflicts arose between the parents and children about career or marriage, most children would follow their own wishes.

Zhang (F, 32) explicitly noted certain reasons for differences in self-construal between her parents' generation and her own. As her parents grew up during Mao's socialist campaigns, they did not 'think about solely following their own path as that meant being anti-revolutionary'. However, our respondents noted that times have changed: 'The recent awakening of the self in China has brought a tension between parents and children'. While most young people want to live by themselves for an independent and free life, most parents like to insist on living together. As one of our male respondent's said: 'We felt obligated to live with her parents, though we had an apartment of our own. We were quite relieved when we came to the US to study and finally had a life of our own'. Li (M, 24) mentioned that 'nowadays a lot of young people would live by themselves as soon as they could afford to, and just visit their parents during the weekends'. Our respondents reported their dislike for criticism and interference from their parents. Tian (F, 25) felt strongly about the inconvenience of living with her parents because she had to report her activities to them.

Yang (F, 39) claimed that 'I feel my mother's love is so meticulous that it has become a burden for me'.

Zhao (M, 32) eloquently summarized the intergenerational (age) differences among the Chinese people in the context of the growing proclivity among young people to pursue their own personal and career goals:

> Previously one took into consideration others' opinion. If you were looking for a life partner, you considered how your parents, relatives, and friends thought about the person. If you were thinking about quitting your job and setting up your own business, you had to consider your parent's attitudes about the social status of being a private businessmen. But now such is not the case. I would marry whoever I think is suitable for me. As for my career, as long as I like it, or I can make a lot of money, I do not care what other people think about it. For me, it is all about pursuing personal happiness.

Our respondents also emphasized that in traditional Chinese society, submission to age and authority was key. However, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), people were encouraged to openly criticize authority figures. As a result, a newly found assertiveness is apparent among the younger generation Chinese. They do not submit to persons of authority simply because of their high positions in the way that their elders did in the past. Li (M, 24) claimed that his respect for the authorities did not come automatically with the high positions they held: 'Some of the authorities, I respect them, but some of them, I do not'. Deng (M, 28) also reiterated that his respect for authorities depended on the specific person and in specific situations.

In essence, our respondents remarks suggest that young people in China are looking for a subtle balance between independence of the self and interdependence with others.

Gender differences: Our focus group and in-depth interviews suggest that women's status in Chinese society and their concept of the self changed a great deal during Mao's time, when gender equality was pushed politically. Several focus group respondents commented on the changing role of women in Chinese society. As Zhang (F, 32) noted:

> In our grandparents' generation, traditional rules applied... Men were in charge of social affairs and women

of domestic affairs. Men were superior to women. Our parents grew up with the concept of men and women equal, share housework, and child-care. Today's women are very independent, and they make money to support the family too.

Wang, (F, 31) echoed a similar sentiment: 'In the past, women had no courage to speak out, but now they can speak out'. Zhang (F, 32), an editor of a women's association magazine, maintained that today's 'women had the same opportunity for promotion and same dedication for their works as men'. Such underlying sentiments may explain why our quantitative results did not demonstrate significant differences between men and women in their self-construal.

While most of our female respondents agreed 'that economic independence gave Chinese women strength to pursue their selves, some respondents believed that Chinese women are caught between the traditional family role and the newly-emerging professional one. As Zhao (M, 32) noted: 'Women still are more inclined to sacrifice their self interest for the family than men'. Some women respondents' expressed concern with the societal trend of viewing independent career women 'as unsuccessful mothers and wives'. Some others disagreed: 'If you want to be an independent person, it won't be contradictory to your role as a family member, mother, or wife'. Many respondents felt that both men and women in China were seeking a subtle balance between their personal careers and family responsibilities.

Rural-urban differences: Our focus group and in-depth interview respondents made a rural-urban distinction with respect to women's self-construals and family kinship structures. Many respondents noted that women in cities are perceived to have a much stronger independent self-concept than women in rural areas, because rural women are more dependent on the family socially and economically. Several respondents noted that in cities 'more women filed a divorce than men because women were self-reliant and can live independently without relying on men'.

Many respondents felt that in rural areas interdependent, kinship-based network structures remain relatively stronger than in urban areas. As Dong (M, 31) noted: 'In the cities, people care less about extended family members... They try not to stick to each other too often to avoid conflicts. In the countryside...people have to live together'. Shi (M, 29), whose family members live in a rural

township, noted: 'When any family member is in need, they can count on the help from other relatives'. However, the migration of people from the countryside to cities is gradually dispersing the traditional kinship network. For instance, most of our city-bred respondents said that the 'physical distance among family members is altering family traditions'. Also with the implementation of the one-child policy in China since 1978, many respondents felt, the number of nuclear families has been growing, and kinship structures are eroding.

In essence, our respondents' comments support our quantitative findings of relatively higher levels of interdependence among our rural respondents than the urban respondents.

■ Conclusions

Our investigation suggests that at the cultural level, collectivism is still predominant in Chinese society, and the traditional self-concept is still deep-rooted in the collective Chinese memory. However, a sense of self-awareness has arisen among the Chinese people since the reformist era of Deng Xiaoping (post 1978), especially among the younger generation. Chinese society, as a whole, is much more tolerant today of individualism. The individual has far more economic and social opportunities for self-accomplishment. Our findings support Chu's (1985) claim that a transient 'self' is represented in the younger generation of Chinese people, who are more assertive, less accommodating, and less submissive to authority figures than were previous generations. The 'it depends' responses (as noted previously) by our respondents, with respect to valuing the 'self' versus the 'other', can be better understood within the historical context of the changing political, economic, and social climate in China. After the formation of the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party initiated a series of political campaigns to attack traditional cultural values and beliefs, and to foster a collectivist spirit to build the new socialist state. The traditional kinship based 'self-other' relationship was replaced by a socialist collective self-concept. During the devastating Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a majority of the Chinese people lost this collectivist belief, unsure of the relationship between the self and the collective. The post-1978 open-door policy and the economic reforms have not completely filled the vacuum created by the Cultural Revolution. While the

well-defined social rules of the past do not exist anymore, the Chinese people find themselves in a mix of Confucian tradition, communist ideology, and a newly-emerging Westernized individualism: That is, in a state of flux. Therefore, most Chinese people seem to have adopted a flexible value system to adjust to the changing environment.

Compared to previous studies, our approach to studying self-construal offers several advantages. First, unlike much of the previous research on self-construal, we focused on a non-college student population in a naturalistic setting; this allowed us to draw broader generalizations. Second, we combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to study self-construal from multiple perspectives. Third, an active involvement of Chinese colleagues in the conceptualization, implementation, and writing of this project led us to interpret our findings within the contextual nuances of China's cultural, political and social history.

What implications does our present study have for the study of intercultural communication? Our study reinforces the previous findings of Markus and Kitayama (1991), Singelis (1994), and Oetzel and Bolton-Oetzel (1997) that individual-level factors (like independent and interdependent self-construals) provide a richer understanding of the depth and variability associated with a person's self-identity. Our study points to the importance of conducting further research on how a person's self-identity may not be just bipolar (i.e. independent versus interdependent self-construal), but may be more hybrid (i.e. include dimensions of both types of self-construal).

Further, our study points to how a person's self-construal influences their attitudes and behaviours in a variety of communication contexts. For example, Kim et al. (2000) found that a patient's self-construal influences her participation in a doctor-patient interaction. The more independent her self-construal, the more likely she is to actively participate while interacting with a doctor. Kim et al. (2000) discussed the implications of their findings on improving the effectiveness of doctor-patient communication.

Our future research aims to address several important areas of intercultural communication. We wish to create a self-construal scale that is 'emic' oriented and can be used in China and in other cultures. We also plan to study how self-construal influences Chinese peoples' communication styles during cross-cultural negotiations, joint venture business decision-making, or in the educational

system. We hope the present research will lead to further macro and micro-level analysis of factors that influence the independent and interdependent self-construal of the Chinese people.

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Nagesh Rao (PhD, Michigan State University) is an Associate Professor in the School of Interpersonal Communication, Ohio University. He is currently working with Professors Yong-Jin Song and Claudia Hale on a book, *The Korean Negotiator.*

Arvind Singhal (PhD, University of Southern California) is Professor in the School of Interpersonal Communication, Ohio University. He is co-author of *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change* (1999) and *India's Communication Revolution* (2001).

Li Ren is currently a doctoral student in the School of Interpersonal Communication, Ohio University.

Jianying Zhang is currently a master's student in the Department of Statistics, University of Idaho.