

## CULTURAL ORIENTATION IN CHINA: DIFFERENCES ACROSS FIVE GENERATIONS OF EMPLOYEES

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Following recent shifts in economic models and family structure in China, younger generations of Chinese employees have been found to exhibit values and behaviors that are visibly different from those held and displayed by the cultural mainstream. To gain a better grasp of this phenomenon, we examined how cultural orientation (with a focus on vertical individualism and vertical collectivism) varies with age and tenure in a diverse sample of Chinese employees ( $N = 306$ ). Our results revealed a negative association of both age and tenure with vertical individualism, and follow-up analyses showed that the biggest increase in vertical individualism occurred in the post-1990s generation of employees. The post-1990s generation also showed a visible decrease in horizontal collectivism, but this cultural orientation was not significantly associated with age or tenure. Limitations and implications for theory and practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* cultural orientation, employee values, employee behaviors, intergenerational differences, individualism, collectivism, China.

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China is a primarily collectivist culture with a high degree of power distance: people view themselves as part of a group, and inequality among group members is considered a natural aspect of social order (Brockner et al., 2001; Hofstede & Minkov, 2014). However, rapid economic development and globalization have brought about a visible shift in cultural orientation, especially for the youngest generations (Sabet, 2011). Young Chinese people in the post-1980s and post-1990s generation are considered to be more individualistic (Wang, 2006), more responsive to messages that stress modernity and individualistic values (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003), and more confident and self-promoting in their professional life (Yi, Ribbens, & Morgan, 2010) compared to earlier generations. These individualistic behaviors, which are prevalent in the younger generation, are in stark contrast with the collectivistic norm that is mainstream in Chinese society (Morris et al., 2014; Yi et al., 2010).

Gaining an understanding of the unique work values and behaviors of the post-1980, and post-1990 generations of workers is of crucial relevance to businesses and the society at large. This is because differences in work ethics and beliefs between various generations of employees could lead to serious problems in the workplace: from potential misunderstandings and miscommunications, through to decreased productivity, decreased employee well-being, and reduced organizational citizenship behavior (Cogin, 2012; Georgiou, Fousiani, Michaelides, & Stavrinides, 2013). Intergenerational differences in the values of employees should, thus, be identified and properly managed in organizational settings. In particular, a better understanding is needed of how the experiences of various generations, and the processes of acculturation to the organizational mainstream, shape employees' basic cultural orientations.

## Literature Review

### Relationships Among Cultural Orientation, Generation, and Tenure

The term *cultural orientation* originates from the pioneering work of Hofstede and Hofstede (1991), who proposed individualism–collectivism as the main dimension underlying cultural differences. Further developments of the theory include the notion that individualism and collectivism can be either horizontal (where equality is valued) or vertical (emphasizing power distance; Chen, Meindl, & Hunt, 1997; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995; Triandis, 1995). The crossing of these two distinctions has resulted in the creation of four types of cultural orientation: (a) *vertical individualism*, which denotes seeing the self as fully autonomous, but recognizing and accepting that inequality exists among individuals; (b) *vertical collectivism*, which denotes the perception of the self as being part of a collective, and the willingness to accept hierarchy and inequality within that collective; (c) *horizontal individualism*, signifying seeing

the self as fully autonomous, and believing that equality between individuals is the ideal state of affairs; and (d) *horizontal collectivism*, denoting seeing the self as part of a collective, but perceiving all the members of that collective as being equal (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

Because mainstream Chinese culture is characterized by not only collectivism but also high power distance (Hofstede & Minkov, 2014), vertical collectivism should be the dominant cultural orientation in China, and a decrease in this cultural orientation, alongside a shift towards vertical individualism, should characterize younger generations in this country. This is consistent with anecdotal evidence and theoretical analyses (Lian, 2014; Wang, 2006); yet, to the best of our knowledge, has not yet been tested empirically. We believe that a shift in cultural orientation alongside the individualism–collectivism dimension will be most likely to register on the vertical orientations because these are more common among, and meaningful to, Chinese participants. Accordingly, we focused our predictions specifically on shifts in vertical collectivism and vertical individualism.

### **Relationship Between Age and Cultural Orientation**

Our primary area of interest was the relationship between employees' age and cultural orientation. Culture need not be limited to a national or ethnic group (Cohen, 2009); it can also describe a collective that shares the same experience and narrative bound to a particular time and place. In other words, a generation can be characterized by a particular cultural orientation and shaped by unprecedented historical circumstances (Egri & Ralston, 2004). For example, Vargas and Kemmelmeier (2013) recently showed that with mainstream culture having produced greater convergence in the values and orientations of a society's members, the particular cultural context associated with generations has yielded meaningful differences in cultural outlooks.

At present, the Chinese community is experiencing dynamic transformation, and extensive changes in economic, political, cultural, and social values and ideas (Brandt, Ma, & Rawski, 2012; Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008). Following exposure to foreign cultures, China's norms have begun to change, leading to the erosion of traditionally dominant values, and the embracing of Western and individualistic ideas, especially by younger generations of Chinese citizens (Yi et al., 2010; Zhang & Shavitt, 2003). Accordingly, we formed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Compared to older generations, younger generations of Chinese employees will display an increased level of vertical individualism.

**Hypothesis 2:** Compared to older generations, younger generations of Chinese employees will display a decreased level of vertical collectivism.

Our second area of interest pertained to the relationship between organizational socialization and employees' cultural orientation. Newcomers to the world of work—the post-1990s generation—face a process of organizational socialization in which they acquire the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge necessary to participate successfully in the workforce (Fang, Duffy, & Shaw, 2011). Adaptation to a company's cultural mainstream gives an employee a functional advantage, and could reduce his/her anxieties about fitting in and performing well at work (Carr, Pearson, Vest, & Boyar, 2006; Fang et al., 2011); however, for the youngest generation of workers, who have had the fewest opportunities to socialize in the workforce, the process of cultural adaptation will have had the least effect. These observations formed the basis of the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3:** Compared to more experienced employees, employees with shorter tenure will display an increased level of vertical individualism.

**Hypothesis 4:** Compared to more experienced employees, employees with shorter tenure will display a decreased level of vertical collectivism.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

We collected questionnaires from 367 employees at nine high-technology companies in China. Of these, 61 provided incomplete responses, and their questionnaires were, hence, disregarded. Our data analyses were based on the remaining valid responses ( $N = 306$ ).

The nine high-tech enterprises selected for our survey have a long-term cooperative relationship with our research group. We reached an agreement with the enterprises that we would inform them of our results in order to help improve intergenerational management in their company. We took advantage of internal training at the enterprises to distribute and collect questionnaires. A total of 500 questionnaires were sent out in Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Sichuan provinces and 367 were returned. We dealt with lost data using Listwise and received 306 valid responses (61.2%). The selection of the survey object generally followed the distribution of employees within the enterprise, and employees were selected randomly according to the proportion.

### Measures

Cultural orientation was assessed using the Singelis et al. (1995) scale of vertical and horizontal individualism and collectivism. This 32-item scale (eight items in each of the four subscales) assesses the degree of participants' vertical individualism (e.g., "It annoys me when other people perform better than I do." Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ), vertical collectivism (e.g., "I would sacrifice an activity that I enjoy very much if my family did not approve of it." Cronbach's

$\alpha = .72$ ), horizontal individualism (e.g., “I am a unique individual.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .80$ ), and horizontal collectivism (e.g., “The well-being of my coworkers is important to me.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .77$ ). Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *to a large extent*). To test our hypotheses, we computed participants’ mean vertical individualism and vertical collectivism scores. For exploratory purposes, we also computed the mean scores for HI and HC, and created an additional variable, termed *chief cultural orientation*, to code the cultural orientation for which each participant received the highest score.

Job tenure in the current workplace was measured by asking participants to indicate which out of eight tenure categories described them best: less than 1 year (11%), 1–3 years (21%), 3–7 years (26%), 7–10 years (15%), 10–15 years (10%), 15–20 years (9%), 20–25 years (1%), more than 25 years (8%). Age was measured with five categories, corresponding to birth decade: 1990s (11%), 1980s (23%), 1970s (39%), 1960s (20%), and 1950s (8%).

To account for the heterogeneity of the sample, we also controlled for participants’ gender (0 = female [36%], 1 = male [64%]), and level of education; high school or technical school (12%), junior college (23%), bachelor’s degree (5%), master’s degree (38%), doctorate (23%).

## Results

Tenure and cultural orientation were measured on an ordinal scale, and age constituted an interval variable, so it was appropriate to use both these variables in a regression analysis (Field, 2013). We tested our hypotheses using a series of stepwise regressions with the core predictor (tenure/age) entered in Step 1, and covariates (age/tenure, gender, and level of education) entered in Step 2 of the analysis. Our first hypothesis, regarding the relationship between tenure and vertical individualism was supported: tenure was a significant predictor of vertical individualism when entered as a sole predictor in Step 1, as well as when controlling for age, gender, and level of education in Step 2 (see Table 1). Our second hypothesis, regarding the relationship between tenure and vertical collectivism, was not supported. Hypothesis 3, regarding the relationship between age and vertical individualism was supported: age was a significant predictor of vertical individualism both as a sole predictor, and when controlling for tenure, gender, and level of education. Hypothesis 4, regarding the relationship between age and vertical collectivism, was not supported. In our exploratory analyses, we also looked at the relationships of tenure and age with horizontal individualism and horizontal collectivism, and did not find any significant relationships ( $ps > .18$ ).

To gain a better understanding of the age at which the hypothesized shift in cultural orientation occurs, we constructed a contingency table (Table 2)

representing the frequencies of participants' chief cultural orientation (the orientation for which each participant scored highest), across five different generations. In line with Triandis' (1995) observation about the mainstream orientation in China, vertical collectivism was the most common orientation (51%) in the whole sample, whereas vertical individualism was the least common (12%). Concerning differences between generations, the occurrence of VI in the post-1990s generation was significantly higher (34%), compared to the other generations (8%–13%), and this was consistent with our predictions and the results of regression analyses. The occurrence of vertical collectivism in the post-1990s generation was, on the other hand, relatively low (25%), compared to the remaining age groups (45%–58%). However, because no significant relationship was observed in the regression analyses between age/tenure and vertical collectivism, this finding is best treated with caution.

Table 1. Age, Tenure, Gender, and Level of Education as Predictors of Vertical Individualism and Vertical Collectivism

		Vertical individualism				Vertical collectivism			
		$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$R^2$
Step 1	Tenure	-.18	-3.24	.001	.03	.08	1.39	.17	.01
Step 2	Tenure	-.15	-2.51	.01		.09	1.54	.12	
	Age	-.13	-2.20	.03		-.06	-0.89	.37	
	Gender	.02	0.36	.72		-.04	-0.65	.52	
	Level of education	.08	1.39	.17		.05	0.81	.42	
					.05				.01
		Vertical individualism				Vertical collectivism			
		$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$R^2$
Step 1	Age	-.16	-2.84	.01	.03	-.02	-0.35	.73	.00
Step 2	Age	-.13	-2.20	.03		-.06	-0.89	.37	
	Tenure	-.15	-2.51	.01		.09	1.54	.12	
	Gender	.02	0.36	.72		-.04	-0.65	.52	
	Level of education	.08	1.39	.17		.05	0.81	.42	
					.05				.01

We further used correspondence analysis to better understand which chief cultural orientation covaried with which generation of employees. Correspondence analysis is an exploratory nonparametric technique used to establish the associations among categorical variables, based on a contingency table (Doey & Kurta, 2011). When using this technique, rows and columns with comparable data counts will cluster together on a two-dimensional biplot (see Figure 1), whereas rows and columns with data that have different counts should not. A biplot

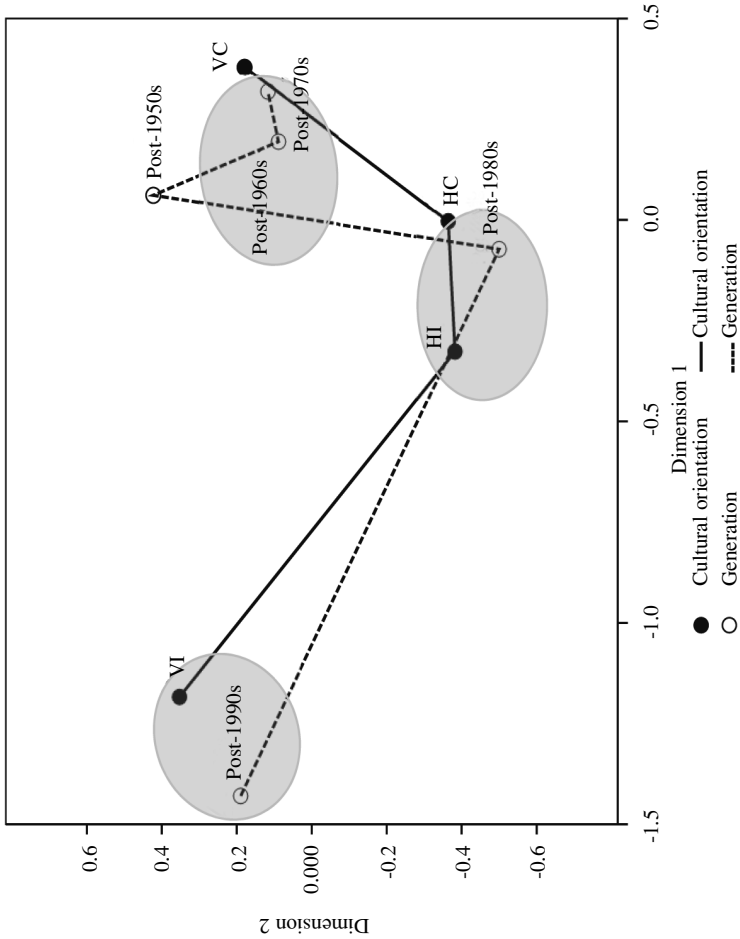


Figure 1. Biplot of covariance between chief cultural orientation and employee age.

generated for the purpose of this study suggested a close relationship between vertical collectivism and the post-1970s generation, and (to a lesser degree) between vertical collectivism and the post-1960s generation. The (youngest) post-1990s generation, on the other hand, seemed to have a strong relationship with VI, and was far removed from vertical collectivism. The biplot also revealed that the post-1980s generation was related to both horizontal collectivism and horizontal individualism, whereas members of the post-1950s generation, who, in 2016, are about to retire from the job market, showed no strong relationship with any cultural orientation.

There was a very high prevalence of vertical collectivism in the post-1980s generation and older, but not in the post-1990s generation. There was a very low prevalence of vertical individualism in the post-1980s generation and older, but not in the post-1990s generation.

Table 2. Contingency Table of Participants' Chief Cultural Orientation

		Chief cultural orientation				Total
		VI	VC	HI	HC	
Generation	Post-1990s	11 (34%)	8 (25%)	6 (19%)	7 (22%)	32 (10%)
	Post-1980s	8 (11%)	32 (45%)	12 (17%)	19 (27%)	71 (23%)
	Post-1970s	10 (8%)	69 (58%)	13 (11%)	27 (23%)	119 (39%)
	Post-1960s	6 (10%)	34 (56%)	8 (13%)	13 (21%)	61 (20%)
	Post-1950s	3 (13%)	13 (57%)	3 (13%)	4 (17%)	23 (8%)
Total		38 (12%)	156 (51%)	42 (14%)	70 (23%)	306 (100%)

*Note.* Number of participants in group are set out in the left column of the figures for each orientation type, percentage is set out in parentheses in the right column. VI = vertical individualism, VC = vertical collectivism, HI = horizontal individualism, HC = horizontal collectivism.

## Discussion

Our goal in this paper was to explore the differences in cultural orientation across five generations of employees. Drawing on Triandis' (1995) widely accepted model for evaluating individual differences in cultural orientation, we investigated the relationships of employee tenure and age, with vertical individualism and collectivism. We predicted that age and tenure would be negatively associated with vertical individualism, and positively with vertical collectivism. In support of our hypotheses, age and tenure emerged as negative predictors of vertical individualism, and further exploration of the data revealed that horizontal individualism is more popular, relative to other generations of employees, among the post-1990s generation. We found that these effects are robust, as tenure remained a significant predictor of vertical individualism when controlling for age, gender, and level of education, and age also remained a significant predictor of vertical individualism when controlling for tenure,

gender, and level of education. Further exploration of our data revealed that, in the post-1990s generation, compared to earlier generations, there was a visible decrease in the level of vertical collectivism; however, the results of regression analyses did not provide evidence for this relationship. Although we did find strong evidence for more prevalent vertical individualism in the younger generation (vs. older generations) of Chinese employees (Hypotheses 1 and 2), the results regarding a decreased level of vertical collectivism in this age group (vs. older generations; Hypotheses 3 and 4) remain inconclusive.

In addition to illuminating intergenerational differences, our results also help to build a picture of the norms and values that are prevalent in the Chinese workforce in general. First, they confirm the commonly held belief that China, in general, is a collectivist culture. Second, they reveal that Chinese employees (across the board, regardless of intergenerational differences) vertical, rather than horizontal, collectivism is very prevalent. Thus, in addition to being highly identified with the collectivistic cultural orientation, Chinese employees accept and support a hierarchical structure within that collectivism. This idea is consistent with Hofstede and Minkov's (2014) comments about this value structure being in line with the structural properties of the Chinese job market, wherein a highly competitive performance model, with a steep incentive structure and a rising income gap constitutes the mainstream (Brandt et al., 2014). Moreover, our results underscore the notion that dominant cultural orientation is not merely a cross-national phenomenon, but can differ dynamically across generations (Cohen, 2009; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Perez & Padilla, 2000).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Our results should be interpreted in light of several potential limitations. Primarily, although we found that age and tenure are significantly associated with vertical individualism, more research is needed to establish the exact mechanisms behind these effects. For example, although our theoretical argument, at the outset, was that younger generations of Chinese people are more individualistic as a result of their exposure to foreign cultures, it is difficult to ascertain the validity of the proposed mechanism from the present data set. On the one hand, the association between age and vertical individualism could be due to a more individualistic values in the post-1990s generation, as a result of this generation's greater exposure to foreign ideas. On the other hand, the reason could lie in structural factors, such as China's one-child policy. To truly understand the reasons behind our findings, further research is needed to quantify these mechanisms where possible, for instance, by measuring the degree to which various individuals are exposed to individualistic norms through interpersonal contact or mass media. Demonstrating that such variables moderate the effect

of age on cultural orientation, would constitute a direct test of the mechanism in question.

Equally important, in our opinion, is the need for further research to ascertain the mechanism that governs the relationship between organizational tenure and cultural orientation. Quantifying the extent to which employees are willing and able to adapt to the cultural mainstream of their company would constitute strong evidence for our socialization hypothesis. Alternative mechanisms should also be accounted for, for instance, although at the outset in this paper we argued that the association between tenure and vertical individualism could be driven by the acculturation experiences of the younger generation, a similar argument could be made based on the experiences of the older generations. The post-1970s generation, in particular, is at a critical stage of career development (Schein, 1965), typically characterized by elevated levels of need for achievement (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Accordingly, these employees should have the strongest identification with their organization, and be most likely to conform to the beliefs and attitudes that are prevalent in the company (Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Zaki, Schirmer, & Mitchell, 2011). Thus, the significant association between tenure and vertical individualism could be driven by the fewer acculturation opportunities afforded the younger generation, by stronger acculturation aspirations among the post-1970s generation, or by both of these factors. It would be worthwhile for future studies to be conducted to test these mechanisms.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we found that the post-1990s generation (vs. older generations) of Chinese employees endorse and exhibit a high level of vertical individualism, in a society that is generally low in this cultural orientation. This finding has important implications for academic psychologists, business, and organizations. Significant differences exist between the cultural orientations endorsed by employees of various ages and at different levels of work experience, and this needs to be accounted for by practitioners and policy makers in order to ensure greater cooperation between teams and individuals, greater harmony, and superior results, especially in the contexts of team work and diverse organizations, where various viewpoints and perspectives on a problem need to be understood and integrated.

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