



Individualism – Collectivism Revisited: *A viewpoint of the principles in East-Asian society*

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Abstract

Individualism – collectivism' dimension remains the central viewpoints in cross cultural comparison. However, they could produce difficulty in the context of psychological approach which is overwhelming and looks absolute. It is the difficulty in terms of validity in cross cultural comparison. The main reason for this difficulty could reside in 'individualism – collectivism' dimension itself. It is abstraction itself and the product of Western thought and background. Based on this perspective the paper focuses on collectivism and explores its background in terms of history, sociology and linguistics. In line with doing so, the paper explores the principles of East Asian society, Japan, Korea, Thailand and Indonesia. To redress the balance and to have a whole picture of the universal context, the paper proposes the concept 'communitism' as the additional to 'individualism – collectivism' dimension.

Key words

Individualism – collectivism', 'communitism', history, sociology, linguistic relativity

Introduction

Individualism – collectivism' *dimension* (Hofstede, 1980), *constructs* (Lukes, 1973), *cultural syndrome* (Triandis, 1996) and *cultural variations* (Kitayama, 2002) provide a variety of aspects to explain cultural comparison and difference. It seems evident that the central importance of understanding cultural differences resides in these two concepts 'individualism – collectivism'. They are generally used as an axiom of contrasting different cultures. According to a study (Tung & Verbeke, 2010), as of June 2010 there were over 54,000 citations to Hofstede's work. In this context, psychological approach to these concepts is overwhelming. However, this aspect could produce difficulty in terms of validity in cross cultural comparison. Kitayama (2002: 90) pointed out: The difficulty stems from the fact that many factors that differentially influence different cultures (e.g., ecology, language, history, customs, lay theories, and common sense) are much less variable for people in any single cultural group. Such perspective could be derived from psychic distance, which is not the same as cultural distance (Tung & Verbeke, 2010). Further, more importantly, 'collectivism (hereafter COL) – individualism (hereafter IND)' dimension itself could be problematic to apply for the universal context, when the principles of East Asian society, Korea, Japan, Thailand and Indonesia are taken into consideration. This is the main argument in this paper. It seems crucial to recognize that the original nature of COL and IND remains to be clarified. In fact, contrasting individual and collective focus is a long Western tradition (Oyserman, Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2002). For example in Japan, they are originally foreign concepts which came from Western culture in the modern era. The paper will firstly explore their original nature. Then the cultural values as the principles in East Asian societies are explored. Methodologically, an interdisciplinary approach, historical, socio-cultural and economic and linguistic, are employed for this examination.

The paper is structured in the following way.



- (1) Literature review
- (2) Origin: collectivism and individualism
- (3) Principles in East Asian societies
- (4) Concluding remarks

Literature review

In Hofstede (1980, 2001), IND and COL dimension is used to contrast and explain the distinction of national cultures in the world. It is interesting to learn that Hofstede (1980) dealt COL with IND in terms of structure in his book: (1) IND is the foundation in 'IND and COL' dimension. (2) There is one independent chapter of IND (Chapter 5), in which COL is referred to as the title of first section 'THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVITY' (p.114) and that is all so far as COL is concerned. (3) COL is subsumed under IND. This viewpoint may show that COL remains basically abstraction while IND is concrete. This perspective is essentially shared with most COL and IND related studies including psychic and cultural approaches (Triandis, 1996; Kitayama, 2002; Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Brewer & Chen, 2007, et al.).

There is a criticism of existing concept of collectivism. They raised a question that where (who) collectives are in collectivism, and propose a new model of individualism and collectivism, which components of world views are with the distinctions among individualism, relational collectivism and group collectivism (Brewer & Chen, 2007).

All in all, these perspectives without or with being aware of it show that COL is subsumed essentially under IND, the same as Hofstede's work. It suggests that cultural distinction is related eventually to COL and IND.

The concept of COL and IND are derived from a long Western tradition (Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002). This suggests the use of the linguistic relativity approach in order to examine the original nature of COL and IND. The principle of linguistic relativity is that the characteristics of one's language can affect other aspect of life and must be taken into account (Leavitt, 2006). There exist the six to ten thousand languages known and each of them is distinct at every level: in sound, lexicon, word order, grammatical categories, discourse patterns and the culture of language. This implies human creation and experience are fundamentally plural. Language differences signal differences among lived worlds – language, culture, and thinking all express the same unique essence (Leavitt, 2006). A difference in language implies a difference in point of view that must be taken account. This will be shown in the chart of the comparison of Japanese with English language in the Principles in East Asian society in section 3. Linguistic relativity is about thought in the sense of conceptualization of the world.

Origin: collectivism and individualism

Both Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies lived nearly the same era marked by 'three momentous events reshaping their societies: the emergence of industrial capitalism, the rise of the nation state, and the transformation of community and popular morality'.

Hofstede (1980) referred to sociologist Tönnies (1887[1963]) who introduced the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society); 'Sociology has provided us with a variety of distinction associated with the individualism dimension, of which the best known is probably Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* (low individualism) **versus** *Gesellschaft* (high individualism) (Hofstede, 1980: 213).' Hofstede (2001) modified later the

above phrase to “Tönnies’s *distinction between Gemeinschaft* (low individualism) **and** *Gesellschaft* (high individualism)” (Hofstede, 2001: 209)’. In fact Tönnies noted in history a transition from predominantly *Gemeinschaft* to predominantly *Gesellschaft* to increasing commercialization, the rise of the capitalist state (quoted Hofstede 1980: 216).

In his historical perspective on the development and treatment of the Individualism and “collectivism” construct, Triandis (2001:37) states:

The French sociologist Durkheim (1893/1984) distinguished *mechanical solidarity* (similar to “collectivism”) from *organic solidarity* (similar to individualism). The first term referred to relationships that are based on common bonds and obligations; the latter term referred to relationships that are contractual. Similarly, the terms *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) in German sociology or relational versus individualistic value orientation in anthropology have been used for some time. There is evidence that ‘individualism’ emerged in England around the 12th century (Triandis, 1995, chap.2), although some have argued that it was already present among some of the ancient Greek philosophers (Skoyles, 1998).

Tönnies (1887[1963]) distinguishes the types of relationships that formed social wholes, between unities through family or sex and unities created through contract, i.e. ‘*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*’. The concept of ‘*Gesellschaft*’ may encompass commercial capitalism, industrial capitalism, and the concentration of economic power alternatively through monopoly and state intervention (Bond, 2011).

It would be said that the original nature of individualism and collectivism has been embedded in a long history of development in the West in terms of philosophy, sociology and socioeconomics.

Their thoughts and arguments of Hofstede, Triandis, Tönnies, Durkheim which are briefly noted above, may reveal the evidence that collectivism has no real original nature in history. Individualism is the foundation to collectivism. Collectivism remains essentially abstraction. It seems suggestive that the “collectivism” is used as supplemental to ‘individualism’ and to contrast it in Hofstede (1980). This may reveal an aspect that there exists the ‘individualism’ as an axiom at the foundation of society, from which the “collectivism” is derived. Collectivism is included in and under individualism.

Principles in Eastern society: Japan, Korea, Thailand and Indonesia

Through exploring Asian society in relation to ‘individualism’ and “collectivism”, it seems that no such an explicit contrastive set is found in reality. Here *keiretsu* in Japan, *in-group and out-group* in Korea, *watthanatham chumchon* (community culture) in Thailand, and *gotong royong* (mutual and reciprocal assistance) and *musyawarah mufakat* (consensus and unanimous) in Indonesia are explored.

• Keiretsu; trust and dependence – Japan

Keiretsu is recognized as the Japanese principal business network, and there exists a various aspect of keiretsu, from economic, sociological and anthropological point of views. A study on this issue (Oikawa, 2011) recognizes keiretsu as an organic whole and conceptualizes its concept. The point is: to identify the principles of keiretsu as social solidarity and social structure. The study (Oikawa, 2011) found the principles of keiretsu are *trust and dependence*, which are the core values of social structure in Japan. As a general trend the keiretsu relationships are expanding networking. This is recognised as ‘meshing’ for survival and development (Japan Small Business Research Institute, 2006). The issue arises: how the principles of keiretsu is possibly identified as the core values in Japanese society.

Granovetter (1992) pointed out that the contingencies of economic institutions are associated with historical background of social structure and collective actions, and their corresponding constraints. This aspect leads the issue of keiretsu principles to linguistic approach.

As a common noun 'keiretsu' in Japanese language suggests that the major aspect of the word 'keiretsu' is an organic relationship of a group of interrelated elements or an array of people. This aspect could imply that all members of a group in a keiretsu relationship as such would collapse without *trust and dependence* one upon another. Such perspective of keiretsu principles could be contrasted with 'individualism and 'collectivism'. As a historical fact the word 'individualism' is originally foreign and there is no root of this word as a concept in the Japanese culture. Based on the linguistic relativity approach, the characteristics of Japanese language are compared with the counterparts of English language below. How the self is viewed in the Japanese language will be the focus in evaluating keiretsu as the core values in terms of social solidarity.

Pronoun uses varies markedly between East and West. This contrastive chart below demonstrates the point.

Summary of Characteristics of the Japanese language compared with English regarding self

Japanese:

1. No personal pronouns (Suzuki, 1984)
2. Other-oriented/relative (Suzuki, 1984)
3. Trust and dependence (Suzuki, 1984)
4. Multi-faceted (Suzuki, 1984)
5. Horizontal and vertical relationships/Concrete (Ohno, 1999; Inoue, 1993)
6. Ambiguity (Kato, K. & Hardy, V., 1994).
7. More psychological (Kin'daichi, 2002)
8. No concept of privacy (Kin'daichi, 2002). (Oikawa, 2011: 374)

English:

- A. Use of personal pronouns (Suzuki, 1984)
- B. Self-oriented/absolute (Suzuki, 1984)
- C. Independence/Logic (Suzuki, 1984)
- D. Centred (Suzuki, 1984)
- E. Linear/Abstract (Suzuki, 1984)
- F. Clarity (Kato, K. & Hardy, V., 1994)
- G. Less psychological (Kin'daichi, 2002)
- H. Concept of privacy

1A may show the distinction of concept of self; 2B the location of self in the world; 3C the interrelated selves and independent self; 4D multi-faceted self and self-centered self; 5E human relationship horizontal in a daily life and vertical official; 6F multi-faceted view concrete and logical abstract; 7g and 8H follow.

Further the above may show the concept of individualism in the Western world. Business practice using keiretsu is an Eastern form and does not easily travel into the West. But it is necessary that business practices everywhere recognise these important cultural divisions – language, concept and philosophy.

• Confucian society: in-groups and out-groups - Korea

In fact Korean society is more strongly Confucian than China (Shim, Kim and Martin, 2008). Confucian values are based on family unit. Under such circumstances, the basic tenets of Confucianism emphasise the right and obligations of personal relationships within an established societal hierarchy. Further Korea is a group-oriented society where there is a strong distinction between *in-groups and out-groups* in behavioural intentions of persons, exploitation of *out-groups* is common. In Korean society the family, schools, companies or businesses, regions, rank or position, wealth, scholarly pursuits, can all function as *in-groups*. What is notable in Korean culture is the rigidity of these distinctions between *in-groups and out-groups*. Family is the basic unit of *in-groups*. For example, Koreans often use the concept

of “limited good”, which assumes that “good” is limited, and thus if an *out-group* gets it, that is a threat to the *in-group*. With this view, Koreans are more competitive, even hostile, when they are dealing with outsiders.

The core values as such in Korean society based on Confucian values may have to a considerable degree had an impact on the relationships between large enterprises represented by *chaebol* and SMEs as suppliers.

A study (Lim, Haggard and Kim, 2003) highlighted a definition of *chaebol* quoting the definition of the zaibatsu: “a business group in which one parent company (holding company) owned by a family or an extended family controlled subsidiaries operating in various industries, with large subsidiaries occupying oligopolistic positions in the respective industries”. This definition refers to three distinct structural elements: a governance structure of family dominance; an organizational structure of a holding company controlling legally independent firms; and a diversified business structure encompassing a number of discrete products and services. The *chaebol* is distinctive in that they combine effective family control with a relatively low concentration of ownership.

• ***Watthanatham chumchon (community culture) – Thailand***

“*Watthanatham chumchon (community culture)* is commonplace in Thai society like a specific greeting (Chayoot Wana, a PhD candidate of University of Limerick, from Thailand)”.

In Thailand it is understood that the national culture consists of a wide variety of numerous community cultures, which vary depending on the district (tambon). This thought emerged at the beginning of the 1980s. Originally *watthanatham chumchon* is based on local agricultural groups in terms of traditional mutual cooperation and friendships. It is claimed that rural people and their mutual trusted relationships and culture are understood to be ‘community’ and should be respected. For example, there was a change to accommodate to economic problems caused by market economy in the rural area. Around the 1980s rural people had created new type of economic organisation such as ‘savings cooperative’ and ‘rice bank’. These organisations are funded and managed by the people themselves. Their success showed the capability of people which was not acknowledged before (Shigetomi, 2009). This thought, *watthanatham chumchon*, has spread wide in Thai society and had considerable impact on politics in Thailand at present (Shigetomi, 2009).

The commonly agreed view about rural society and culture called as *watthanatham chumchon (community culture)* is threefold. First view is based on the experience of NGO workers who tried to enhance rural development: 1. Rural people has their own viewpoint and culture; 2. At the base of such culture there is the principle of mutual aid; 3. Culture and economy cannot be parted; 4. Such rural culture should be supported categorically. Second on rural community was given by the distinguished academic; Community is traditional rural socio-economic system, which provides happiness, identity, and potential to develop negotiating power for the people. The Thai villages have been independent and the villagers tied closely. Third view is that decentralisation and more trusted Community are the survival measures for Thailand. In 1990 the country wide seminar was held inviting a large gathering of wise people together after the interviews of local wise people all over the country. This showed community culture is people’s wisdom and thus officially recognised by the state.

In the context of community culture as such it is noteworthy to mention OTOP (one village one product) policy, which started in 2001 and known it has been successful. In 2004 the gross sales was equivalent to one per cent of GDP (three quarters for domestic use and the

rest for export) (Takei, 2007). This policy came originally from Japan and is spreading other Asian countries.

The community cultures in Thailand have been considerably influential to politics as well as society. Their ultimate aim is to discipline state and society for market fundamentalism and government function (Shigetomi, 2009).

• ***Gotong royong (mutual assistance) - Indonesia***

In 2001, 9th of August, the fifth president of Republic of Indonesia declared to name the first Cabinet as Kabinet Gotong Royong. The historical background of *gotong royong* in origin is opaque. However, it is since the independence day of Republic of Indonesia in 1st of June 1945 that *gotong royong* is publicly and officially declared as the embodiment of the principles of the national foundation. There are the three cultural operator in contemporary Indonesia, *koperasi* (cooperatives), *musyawarah* (consensus), and underlying all the others, *gotong royong* (mutual and reciprocal assistance, as in the traditional Javanese village (Bowen, 1986). The term *gotong royong* itself implies spontaneous and mutual aid altogether among people (Gumisawa, 2004).

The following passage is typical of the way in which *gotong royong* is discussed today.

Gotong Royong in the strict sense can be rendered as collective social activities. But the deepest meaning of *gotong royong* can be explained as a philosophy of life that takes the collective life as the most important. The philosophy of *gotong royong* is now a part of Indonesian culture because *gotong royong* is not the property of a particular ethnic group (Sinar Harapan, June 22, 1984: 6; cf. Bowen, 1986:546)

As seen *gotong royong* is declared as the embodiment of Republic of Indonesia, it could be claimed that *gotong royong* shows an aspect of social democracy and/or social nationalism advocated by the first president Sukarno. This indicates that *gotong royong* is not confined in the meaning just 'mutual assistance' (Bowen, 1986; Gumisawa, 2004). *Gotong Royong* may have been used politically to bring the unity between the people and their leaders, and between the various groups of the people, which is characterised by a pervasive spirit of *gotong royong* and family.

On the other hand, while *gotong royong* as the term was not always commonplace in Indonesia, but a wide variety of mutual, spontaneous assistance (seven different types of assistance) have been found by the survey in the middle district in 1958 and 1959 (Gumisawa, 2004).

Concluding remarks

Both concepts of individualism and collectivism are Western in origin. Through reviewing the literature about individualism and collectivism, and exploring the principles as core cultural values in East Asian societies it may be said; (1) both concepts are derived from Western civilization, (2) individualism is the foundation of Western civilization and collectivism is derived from individualism. In other words, collectivism is the collection of individualism. (3) Thus collectivism is subsumed under individualism. (4) The variety of principles as cultural core values in East Asian societies could be conceptualized as '*communitism*', which is distinguished from collectivism. (5) '*Communitism*' can be contrasted with individualism which embraces collectivism. But individualism controls collectivism. To be universal in terms of cultural variations, the paper proposed additional concept to individualism and collectivism of *communitism* based on the exploration of



Eastern society and culture. It seems that *communitism* is the principles in the East and individualism the axiom in the West.

Individualism and *communitism* could represent the Western and non-Western world respectively in terms of axiom and core cultural values respectively. These contrastive axiom of individualism and cultural core values of *communitism* could work together by employing the third core values of collectivism for sociocultural comparison. This collectivism is the abstraction, which is to be realized by the will of individualism to cooperate together for the purpose. Therefore the format and actualities of collectivism would vary depending on the approach, goals, circumstances, and so on, of the project. Above all, acknowledging the distinction between axiom and cultural core values - individualism and *communitism* – could be the starting point for cross cultural comparison.

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