

Virtues and Positive Mental Health

W J Duan

School of Culture and Social Development Studies,
Southwest University

Y Bai

Rocfly Academy of Education,
Institute of Education, Tsinghua University

X Q Tang

Raymond K H Chan

Department of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong

P Y Siu

Samuel M Y Ho

Abstract

The present study explored the relationship between Chinese virtues and life satisfaction among Hong Kong sample and the Mainland sample. A total of 729 undergraduate students completed the 96-item Chinese Virtues Questionnaire (CVQ) and Satisfaction with Life Scale. Among the three virtues measured by the CVQ, Interpersonal, Vitality and Cautiousness, no significant differences were found between participants from Hong Kong and the Mainland. However, the life satisfaction of Hong Kong sample was significantly higher than that of the Mainland sample. Our results also showed a significant positive relationship between virtue and life satisfaction. We concluded that the three virtues had cross-cultural consistency among Chinese subcultures. Future research direction was discussed.

Keywords: virtues, life satisfaction, cross-culture

Introduction

Life satisfaction is the cognitive component of subjective well-being (SWB), which is also a central concept of conscious appraisal of an individual's life quality and human welfare (Pavot & Diener, 1993; Reig-Ferrer, 2003). Previous studies had identified an array of factors which would influence life satisfaction, including personality (Benet-Martínez & Karakitapoglu-Aygün, 2003; Schimmack, Oishi, Furr & Funder, 2004; Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto & Ahadi, 2002), emotional intelligence (Gannon & Ranzijn, 2005; Palmer, Donaldson & Stough, 2002),

social support (Adams, King & King, 1996; Wan, Jaccard & Ramey, 1996), psychological support (Huang & Gao, 2011), self-esteem (Diener & Diener, 2009) and physical functioning (Caligiuri, Lengyel & Tate).

With more studies focusing on positive human functioning and the pursuit of happy life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), positive individual characteristics, such as interests, values, strengths and virtues began to attract the attention of psychologists. The values in action classification (VIA) created by Peterson and Seligman (2004) seemed to be the most systematic approach of studying virtues

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Professor Samuel M Y Ho, Department of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong, Tat Chee Avenue, Hong Kong.
E-mail: munyinho@cityu.edu.hk

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and strengths. The VIA includes 24 character strengths embedded in six virtues commonly found in various writings of philosophers and thinkers in major cultures around the world (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The strengths can be measured by a 240-item self-reporting English language questionnaire (with 10 items per strength) called the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS). Character strengths are defined as a family of positive traits manifested in an individual's thoughts, emotions and behaviors (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which could promote the individual's well-being and life satisfaction (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park & Seligman, 2007; Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006). Specifically, strengths such as zest, gratitude, hope and love are more robustly associated with life satisfaction than intellectual strengths such as creativity, judgment, perspective and learning (Park et al., 2004; Peterson et al., 2007); whereas the strength of modesty had the weakest association with life satisfaction (Park et al., 2004; Shimai et al., 2006).

To date, there was no study exploring the relationship between the virtues and life satisfaction among Chinese. A possible reason could be the lack of cultural invariability of the virtue system, i.e. strengths could be grouped under different virtues depending on cultures (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010; Duan et al., 2012; Macdonald, Bore & Munro, 2008; Shryack, Steger, Krueger & Kallie, 2010), making the adaptation of the VIA to measure strengths among the Chinese problematic. With the development of the Chinese Virtues Questionnaire (CVQ) recently (Duan et al., 2012), strengths among Chinese can be more correctly measured. The CVQ was developed on the basis of VIA-IS through cultural adaptation (combination of quantitative and qualitative). It has 96 items measuring three virtues of Chinese, including Interpersonal (人際), Vitality (活力) and Cautiousness (謹慎). Interpersonal virtue reflects positive behaviors of interacting with other people (e.g. teamwork, love, and gratitude); Vitality reflects positive qualities to

the world/society (e.g. curiosity, zest, and hope), and Cautiousness reflects some intrapersonal traits (e.g. prudence, self-regulation, and perseverance).

The present study is a follow-up study of our previous one (Duan et al., 2012) to examine the relationship between virtues and life satisfaction. We will compare the results between participants from Hong Kong and Mainland China to explore the cross-cultural consistency of virtues among different Chinese subcultures. Besides, we will attempt to investigate if virtue is more of a function of personality rather than moral reasoning (Cawley, Martin & Johnson, 2000) in the present study. To our best knowledge, this is the first attempt to explore the relationship between virtues and life satisfaction among population from Hong Kong and the Mainland.

Method

Participants and procedure

The Hong Kong sample consisted of 116 undergraduate students (34 male and 82 female) from the University of Hong Kong (mean age = 19.52 years, $SD = 2.62$ years) and another 613 undergraduate students (229 male and 384 female; mean age = 23.64; $SD = 6.74$) from Southwest University in Chongqing, China. Once participants had completed a package of pencil-and-paper questionnaires measuring life satisfaction and Chinese virtues, they were given credits for their basic psychology course. Ethics approval was obtained both from the University of Hong Kong and the School of Culture and Social Development in Southwest University of China.

Instruments

The *Chinese Virtues Questionnaire* (CVQ-96) (Duan et al., 2012) was a simplified Chinese scale assessing 3 virtues: Interpersonal (32 items), Vitality (40 items), and Cautiousness (24 items). Respondents were asked to rate to what extent each item could describe them on a 5-point Likert scale

ranging from “1 (very much unlike me)” to “5 (very much like me)” (Duan, et al., 2012). The total scores of the three virtue scores would be obtained by summing the corresponding items of each subscale. The higher the score, the more a respondent possesses that virtue.

The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item self-report scale which measures a person’s global life satisfaction. Participants were required to respond to each item (e.g. “I am satisfied with my life.”) using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “1 (Strongly Disagree)” to “7 (Strongly Agree)”. Higher score reflects higher life satisfaction. Coefficient alpha was .87 reported by (Diener, et al., 1985), and test-retest correlation coefficient was .82 (Diener, et al., 1985); reliability for this scale was .92 (Shevlin, Brunsten, & Miles, 1998), and convergent validity ranged from .39 to .88 (Pavot, Diener, Colvin & Sandvik, 1991). Overall, SWLS has been shown to be a reliable measure by numerous studies.

Results

Descriptive statistics, reliability, city and gender difference

Descriptive statistics and reliabilities are reported in Table 1. Among the three virtues, participants scored the highest in the Interpersonal subscale (M = 3.94 - 4.00) and scored lowest in the Cautiousness subscale (M = 3.34 - 3.46). The three subscales had good psychometric characteristics with the α ranged from .76 to .93. There were no significant differences among the three virtues between Hong Kong and the Mainland samples but the life satisfaction scores of Hong Kong sample was significantly higher than that of the Mainland sample. Gender differences were found in the Vitality and Cautiousness subscales, with male respondents scoring higher than female respondents. Consistent with previous findings (Pavot & Diener 1993; Pavot et al., 1991), life satisfaction of female respondents was significantly higher than male respondents.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, City and Gender Difference on the Three Virtues and Life Satisfaction

	Total Sample			Hong Kong Sample			Mainland Sample			City Difference
	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	t-test
Interpersonal	3.98	.39	.90	3.94	.33	.88	3.99	0.41	.92	-1.26
Vitality	3.40	.47	.91	3.39	.41	.89	3.40	0.48	.93	-0.23
Cautiousness	3.38	.45	.81	3.34	.38	.76	3.39	0.46	.85	-1.25
Life Satisfaction	3.90	1.15	.83	4.34	1.16	.85	3.81	1.13	.82	4.56***
				Male Sample			Female Sample			Gender Difference
				Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	t-test
Interpersonal				3.96	0.41	.88	4.00	0.38	.91	-1.23
Vitality				3.46	0.48	.90	3.36	0.47	.92	2.82**
Cautiousness				3.46	0.46	.78	3.34	0.43	.84	3.69***
Life Satisfaction				3.71	1.14	.84	4.00	1.14	.88	-3.29***

Notes. $N_{(Total Sample)}=729$; $N_{(Hong Kong Sample)}=116$; $N_{(Mainland Sample)}=613$; $N_{(Male Sample)}=263$; $N_{(Female Sample)}=466$.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Relationship between virtues and life satisfaction

The three virtues – Interpersonal, Vitality and Cautiousness – were significantly and positively correlated to life satisfaction in all sub-samples, irrespective

to their culture or gender (Table 2). Subsequent regression analysis showed that the Vitality was the only individual predictor of an individual’s life satisfaction and this applied to both Hong Kong and Mainland samples (Standardized Coefficients β ranged from .27 to .35)(Table 3).

Table 2

Correlations between Virtues and Life Satisfaction

	Life Satisfaction				
	Total Sample	Hong Kong Sample	Mainland Sample	Male Sample	Female Sample
Interpersonal	.22**	.30**	.23**	.28**	.19**
Vitality	.33**	.35**	.33**	.40**	.31**
Cautiousness	.15**	.12*	.17**	.23**	.13**

Notes. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Regression Analysis of Virtues Predicting Life Satisfaction

	Life Satisfaction					
	Total Sample		Hong Kong Sample		Mainland Sample	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Interpersonal	.06	1.46	.16	1.54	.06	1.23
Vitality	.34	6.95***	.27	2.54*	.35	6.35***
Cautiousness	-.08	-1.87	-.03	-.30	-.08	-1.61

Notes. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Our study showed that the three virtues (i.e. Interpersonal, Vitality and Cautiousness) are significantly and positively related to the life satisfaction, and these correlations apply to undergraduate students in both Hong Kong and Mainland China. There were no significant differences in the three virtue scores between samples from Hong Kong and Mainland.

All virtues are positive and significantly related to satisfaction with life in the correlation analysis (re Table 2). Our findings show that individuals exhibiting more of the three virtues tend to report more subjective well-being. Among the three virtues, Vitality is the most significant virtue related to one's life satisfaction. The Vitality virtue measured by the CVQ consists of the strengths of hope and zest (Park et al., 2004; Peterson et al., 2007). Thus, our present findings are consistent with previous studies conducted among Hong Kong Chinese that the strength of hope is an important factor predicting well-being and buffering against adversities (Ho, Chak, Yip & Wong, 2010; Ho, Ho, Bonanno, Chu & Chan, 2010; Ho et al., in press; Ho & Kwong, 2012; Ho et al., 2011; Rajandram et al., 2011). Existing hope-based intervention programs (e.g. Ho et al., in press) and psychoeducational materials (e.g. Ho et al., 2010) should be applied and examined further in Hong Kong and the Mainland.

Our results also supported the cross-cultural consistency of the three virtues as measured by the CVQ. There were no significant differences between the Mainland and Hong Kong sample in all three virtues despite the cultural differences between Hong Kong and the Mainland. Although the cultural difference is not as large as between the East and the West, research has shown that Hong Kong Chinese have developed a subculture that is different from the Mainland Chinese (Cheung, Conger, Hau, Lew & Lau, 1992)

owing to the approximately 150 years of British colonial administration. It is commonly agreed that Mainland Chinese represent the typical collectivist culture. Individuals tend to be more restrained and introverted in order to maintain harmony among people. In contrast, due to the colonial background of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Chinese exhibit less degree of collectivism but more individualism as inherited from the British. Accordingly, we predicted that our Mainland China sample would score higher than Hong Kong sample in the Interpersonal subscale. Nevertheless, such prediction was not supported in the current study as no significant difference was found between the Hong Kong and Mainland samples in each of the virtues. Perhaps, the three virtue subscales represent core Chinese values that are less influenced by subculture. Future studies can explore this possibility.

Finally, our results showed that overall life satisfaction of Hong Kong undergraduates was significantly higher than that of their counterparts in the Mainland. Some studies have shown that the fast development of economy in Mainland China does not lead to higher level of life satisfaction (Brockmann, Delhey, Welzel, & Yuan, 2009). Our finding seems to be in line with the notion. However, a detailed discussion on this issue is beyond the focus of this paper, and more studies need to be conducted to validate our findings as well as explore the underlying mechanisms further.

Some limitations should be mentioned. First, this is a cross-sectional study and no cause-effect relationship could be deduced from the present results. Second, only undergraduate students were included in this study; so whether and the results could be generalized to the larger populations in Hong Kong and China is not certain. Besides, only the positive outcome of satisfaction with life was included. It would be interesting to see if virtues are negatively related to psychopathology in future studies.

Nevertheless, the present study supports the use of CVQ as a measure of virtues among the Chinese in future positive mental health studies. We also hope that more studies on virtues could be conducted in future to increase the understanding of its role played in mental health and illness.

摘要

美德及正面心理健康

當前研究以香港和大陸樣本探索了中華美德和生活滿意度之間的關係。一共729名大學本科生完成了96個題項的中華美德問卷和生活滿意度量表。結果顯示，無論樣本來自香港還是大陸，三個美德（人際、活力和謹慎）都與生活滿意度顯著正相關，而且這三個美德在兩個樣本之間不存在顯著差異。然而，香港樣本的生活滿意度卻顯著高於大陸。我們的結果揭示三個美德在中國亞文化內具有跨文化一致性。同時還討論了該領域未來的研究方向。

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