

The Chinese Way of Life, Version 2014

We have identified nine concepts that form the foundation of the Chinese way of life around the year 2014 (CWOL v2014). The most important thing to remember is that the Chinese way of life is evolving. Although this chapter accurately describes fundamental aspects of current Chinese society, this does not mean that the Chinese are content with the way things are. In fact, many are quite dissatisfied with some current societal norms. The desire to create a better CWOL is palpable among the entire populace, and we have no doubt that they will succeed.

Doctrine of Mean

A concept translated as “Doctrine of Mean” is fundamental to the Chinese way of life, and is based on one of the *Four Books* that form the canon of Confucianism. Confucius originally taught people to be inclusive and consider all opinions; he advocated using a decision heuristic that takes everything and everyone into consideration. In essence, he was referring to an equilibrium concept. Achieving equilibrium typically involves creating a solution that draws on everyone’s perspectives, but not necessarily equally. However, this concept is so nuanced that even members of the general Chinese public have misinterpreted its meaning as being something closer to the misleading English translation, Doctrine of Mean—that people should not go to extremes and should instead strive to be in the middle. Finding equilibrium is not the same as finding the mean, and most certainly, finding the mean should not be the objective.

While this is not the meaning conveyed in the original text, the Chinese have adopted “striving for the middle” as a guiding life principle nonetheless. Thus, we will use this (mis)interpretation of the Doctrine of Mean (DoM) to frame our discussion of CWOL v2014. The current interpretation of DoM, which is arguably much easier for an ordinary person to follow and much more practical to implement, substantially impacts both individual and collective decisions.

Based on DoM, a Chinese person typically does not want to stand out. A common Chinese saying reflects this sentiment: “A pig is afraid to be strong and a man is afraid to

be known.” Just as the strong pig will be slaughtered first, someone who is well known is an easy target. Most members of Chinese society do not like to express radical ideas or be noticed for being different. However, once someone starts something, others will readily follow.

On social issues, DoM is reflected in a collective desire to seek a middle ground solution when there is a difference of opinion on a particular issue. Organizational supervisors use this as a guiding principle when both managing their teams and dealing with their peers. It also means that radical ideas that lack consensus typically are not adopted, regardless of their inherent merits. As a result, the Chinese see everything as shades of grey, not as black and white.

Tribalism

Westerners classify the Chinese as collectivistic and Americans as individualistic. However, this Western characterization of the Chinese could not be further from the truth. We believe the most appropriate label for this dimension is tribalism. The Chinese behave very differently when they are in their “tribes” than when they are outside of them.

A tribe can be blood based or non-blood based. A blood based tribe is built around the grandparents-parents-children family unit. This is the core unit of relationship in China, and typically, a member is willing do anything for any of the other members. The perfect family in Chinese culture is one in which several generations live under the same roof; people’s lives revolve around family. Typically, Chinese parents will literally do anything for their children. Beyond raising them and paying for major expenses such as educations and weddings, many purchase homes and cars for their adult children and help raise their grandchildren. Likewise, adult children feel obligated to take care of their parents in their old age. The blood based tribe concept also extends beyond the core unit. Whenever possible, family members are expected to assume responsibility for caring for more distant relatives. At the extreme, a young person from a poor village who becomes successful may feel responsible for helping his entire village.

Non-blood based tribes are called “circles” in Chinese culture. Circles represent more than typical friendships or social connections, and can take different forms. The strongest form in traditional China was blood brothers. Many legendary stories are told about blood brothers who fought together and died for each other. The traditional oath taken by blood brothers includes the sentence: “Do not wish to be born on the same day, but to die on the same day.”

As discussed later in this book, people behave differently when they are within a circle than when they are outside a circle. Within a tribe (circle), one exhibits dedication, loyalty and sacrifice, but the opposite is likely true towards people outside the tribe. One trusts people within the same tribe, but not outsiders. Within the tribe, collectivism reigns supreme; but outside the tribe, the Chinese are quite individualistic—even more so than their American counterparts. Since one belongs to different tribes at the same time and each tribe has a different level of closeness, it is conceivable that a casual observer may misunderstand a Chinese person’s behavior.

At the core of tribalism is the “us versus them” mentality. As long as one’s own tribe can survive, another tribe’s fortune or misery is inconsequential. Taking this perspective, it is easier to understand why some Chinese can be extremely clean and organized within their tribal boundaries (e.g., inside their homes) while completely disregarding public spaces. Another ramification of this mentality is that one’s own survival becomes the most important criterion in any situation.

Tribalism also impacts how the Chinese view other countries. The guiding principle of Chinese foreign policy, non-interference, can be traced back to tribalism, where one is not supposed to interfere with other tribes’ internal affairs and vice versa. Extrapolated to the country level, tribalism in China can assume the form of nationalism.

This also leads to a strong desire among the Chinese to belong to tribes, as it is difficult to survive alone in a tribal society. All members must establish their positions in the tribe. Once a tribe’s internal order is established, it is important for it to establish a reputation among competing tribes. Perhaps this is why the Chinese are constantly comparing

themselves and their children to others; in tribes, and thus in Chinese society, relative position is important.

Hierarchicalism

While there is no official noble class in China, the Chinese accept and practice hierarchicalism. Some even lament that China does not have noblemen, so they invented two new higher classes, the Red Second Generation (i.e., the children of the founders of the PRC) and the Rich Second Generation (i.e., the children of the founders of successful businesses), whom they envy yet resent at the same time. This behavior probably stems from China's long history under a feudal system characterized by a strict hierarchy of authority, both outside the family (from the Emperor down) and inside the family (from father to son). According to traditional teachings, one must find his position in such a system and behave accordingly.

When hierarchicalism is the dominant ideology, people tend to defer to their superiors, whether in business, government, family or other social contexts, and expect those who are lower in the hierarchy to do the same. For instance, in the business world, it is quite typical for even a very senior person to do chores for his superior (e.g., a VP will carry a CEO's luggage when they travel together). These expectations also translate to other parts of social life. For example, the Chinese are typically not polite to servers in restaurants, and even in other contexts they like to be served by others whenever possible. Another implication of hierarchicalism is a general lack of personal responsibility or accountability, because all actions are done for someone else.

Hierarchicalism also typically results in unequal status in romantic relationships. Chinese young women often act like children with their boyfriends and husbands, as if they need attention and protection. Chinese men, of course, generally like and encourage this behavior, as it makes them feel that they are more powerful. Although many educated Chinese women are already financially independent, happiness is still largely defined as "marrying well."

Polymorphism

Polymorphism in China takes two forms: across individuals and within an individual. Polymorphism across individuals is essentially the heterogeneity that exists among the Chinese. As we describe later in the book, different geographic locations in China have very different cultures. It would be pure folly to interact with all Chinese people using the same heuristics.

Polymorphism within an individual is more complex, yet integral to the Chinese way of life. In essence, the Chinese are taught and expected to behave differently in different situations, and they do not consistently follow the same principles in all contexts. For example, they will behave differently in front of subordinates versus superiors, in public versus private, when confronting one issue versus another. The important thing to remember is that such incongruences do not reflect poorly on a Chinese person's character; this behavior is expected. The Chinese say, "Principles are dead [fixed], but people are alive [changeable]." Thus, people are supposed to find ways to circumvent principles when they are preventing a goal from being accomplished.

In extreme cases of intra-person polymorphism, people will reverse their positions and sacrifice everything they stand for just to survive. In a story that every Chinese school child is taught, around 500 BC, the defeated king of the Yue Kingdom pretended to be a loyal servant and endured daily humiliation for years from the king of the Wu Kingdom before finally gaining his trust. He then trained a strong army, returned to defeat his former master, and forced him to commit suicide. Stories like this are meant to teach the Chinese to do whatever is needed to survive while waiting for a future opportunity.

Usefulness

Our informants often described the Chinese (especially those who grew up after the 1978 reforms) as utilitarian (if the word is translated into English directly). But what they actually meant differs somewhat from the English definition of the word. Our informants were referring to a societal norm dictating that one only does something if there is a personal benefit. The usefulness in China does overlap somewhat with pragmatism and utilitarianism; however, a main difference is that usefulness focuses on personal gain,

even at the expense of breaking moral or ethical rules. To some extent, one can think of usefulness as the opposite of idealism.

Usefulness has contributed substantially to corruption and a general degradation of morals and ethics in China. It has permeated society so much that it is typically assumed that a person will not help someone else unless there is personal benefit to him or her. Another ramification is that for some Chinese, relationships now have expiration dates. If a person thinks a relationship is no longer useful, regardless of what that person may have done for him or her in the past, there is no reason to maintain the relationship. This often happens after a person retires from an important position; suddenly, many so-called “friends” disappear.

Notably, usefulness stands in direct opposition to the traditional teachings of Confucianism that people are to prioritize benevolence to others and discount personal benefit in their actions. Many cherished virtues in the traditional value system, some as simple as always keeping promises, have been thrown out the window under the dominant usefulness ideology. In the words of an informant, “Benevolence is for fools these days.”

Emotionalism

Emotion plays a central role in personal interactions in China. One senior Chinese academic commented to us: “A fundamental guideline in how the Chinese deal with others is ‘satisfy emotion, satisfy reason.’ Someone who understands both emotion and reason will find it easy to fit in.” The phrase “satisfy emotion, satisfy reason” essentially means that when confronting a particular issue and evaluating possible solutions, one must first examine whether a solution satisfies emotional needs of the self, all parties involved, and the general populace before examining whether a solution satisfies the standards of reason (i.e., rationality, science) and maybe even the law.

To the Chinese, emotion is not just an individual affair; it is an integral part of how society operates. A common justification used by the courts in China when determining capital sentences is, “Any sentence short of execution will not mitigate mass rage.”

Scientific research has shown emotion as a useful tool for individuals, in that it helps them make advantageous decisions in certain situations. Although emotion plays an important role in all human cultures, prioritizing emotion as such an important decision-making heuristic by the entire society is uniquely Chinese.

Emotionalism has been a fundamental part of Chinese culture for thousands of years. While we believe it will continue to play an important role in personal interactions, its equal status with rules and laws in social decisions may gradually diminish.

Wealthism

Although the Chinese desire material possessions, Chinese culture differs somewhat from a typical materialistic culture like that of the United States. Whereas a typical American may save money to buy something special, a Chinese person wants to accumulate money because wealth is the dominant (if not only) metric for success in life now. Another dimension of wealthism is the envy or even resentment many people feel towards those who are wealthy.

To some extent, many contemporary Chinese people share some characteristics with the fictitious species Ferengi in the *Star Trek* television series. Profit is paramount, and wealth accumulation is a goal in life for many. Interestingly, wealthism is a relatively recent phenomenon in China, and represents the antithesis of traditional Confucian values.

Effortlessness

Effortlessness means one should ideally get things without expending any effort. Mark Twain's quote, "Work is a necessary evil to be avoided," most appropriately describes how the Chinese view work. Historically, the kind of work that was not valued was manual labor, but now this perspective has expanded to include any kind of work that involves effort. Rewards are all that matter and effortlessness prevails. The ideal scenario for most Chinese would be to receive rewards for doing as little work as possible, or even no work. Many Chinese are generally perfectly content to do nothing; if they do not have to work, they will not.

Effortlessness has led to the pursuit of all kinds of shortcuts in life and in business. A common belief is that a one-step-at-a-time work ethic is for those who are not smart enough to skip steps. They seek opportunities that give them huge rewards with minimum investment (in capital and/or effort) in the shortest possible amount of time. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Chinese love to receive freebies if they perceive that they do not have to do any work to get them.

In general, the Chinese also like talking and debating about strategies and solutions more than actually executing them. In *The Art of War*,¹ generals are taught that the optimal strategy is to subdue enemy forces without fighting. This strategy has been applied to many aspects of Chinese society. Many of the Chinese see life as a military campaign, and most military strategies (including *The Art of War* and others) focus on how to win the most with the least amount of resources and effort; deception is not only acceptable, but encouraged.

As we describe later in this book, many role models selected by the Chinese in recent years were highly dedicated to their work. Their stories, which were “impressive” to the Chinese, would be considered normal by most Americans. Americans salute people who dare to say, “The difficult we do immediately; the impossible takes a little longer.” The Chinese, on the other hand, puzzle over why they do not go and find something easier to do instead.

Cynicism

Cynicism is not a traditional characteristic of Chinese society, but it is quite pervasive today. Many Chinese people are cynical; they do not believe what the government tells them, are suspicious of everything, and do not have an optimistic view of the future. Based on our research, it seems that the average Chinese person is more pessimistic about China than the average American.

One possible factor has contributed to this cynicism. Since the feudal system was overthrown in 1911, the Chinese have still not reached consensus on what constitutes the

new China. The changes that opened China to a market economy after 1978 further confused many Chinese citizens about the nation's future direction.

Due to this cynicism, the Chinese tend to focus more on the present and near term, for they feel uncertain about what the future will bring. They also tend to focus on the things and people in their immediate surroundings. In general, the Chinese appear to have substantial anxiety about life, especially the future. Cynicism also leads to fatalism, at least to some degree. The Chinese will try to get ahead, but if things do not work out, they attribute their failures to fate. They also believe, right or wrong, that society has constrained them from achieving many possible goals, including social mobility.

Summary

Clearly, CWOL v2014 is a complex, evolving phenomenon. Our goal in this chapter was to provide our readers with a contextual framework that will facilitate a better understanding of why the Chinese behave in certain ways and to some extent, why things are the way they are. This understanding can lead to insights that bridge the cultural gaps between us, not only as nations, but also as members of the human race. In this spirit, we encourage you to read on and learn *The Chinese Way*.

¹ Sun Tzu (1963), *The Art of War*, translated by Samuel Griffith, Oxford: Clarendon Press.