CHAPTER ELEVEN

GUANXILIZATION OR CATEGORIZATION: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS BASED ON TWO CASE STUDIES

Yang Yiyin

Western social and cross-cultural psychologists keep describing the behavior orientation of East Asians (primarily the Chinese), as “collectivist” (Oyserman, et al, 2002; Brewer & Chen, 2007), on the contrary, Chinese people were believed to be selfish and distant in public affairs (Academic Commission of the China Culture Academy, 1989). We will seek an answer in terms of social psychology from the perspective of the group-self relationship, with a view to seeing whether this “heap of sand” and “collectivism” do indeed contradict one another.

In terms of social psychology mechanisms, the group-self relationship is a question of what kind of psychological ties individuals establish with the group through what mechanisms and what concept and sense of “us” that they end up with.

Cultural misreadings in research into the group-self relationship in Chinese culture derive from the research paradigm of methodological individualism. We therefore analyze the empirical data obtained from two qualitative studies to sum up the characteristic features of the Chinese concept of “group” and “self” and reveal the psychological mechanisms governing the group-self relationship. On this basis, we put forward our theoretical model of the formative mechanisms in the concept of “us”.

1. The Confucian Guanxi-Centered Approach

The development of social psychology in China was severely affected by political and historical factors. In research from the standpoint of cultural psychology, nearly three decades of exploration have resulted in the emergence of the typical Chinese concept of guanxi (to be distinguished from its apparent English synonym, “relationship”) as a sensitizing concept that has gradually revealed its methodological
significance and been accepted by the international social sciences community.

Researchers have found that the ren 仁 or person in Chinese cultural constructs is not the independent individual, but involves a reciprocal relationship of linkage with another. The Confucian classics define ren 仁 meaning “person” as ren (仁) meaning “human-hearted” or somebody who “loves others” (Hsu, 1971).

Thus “human-heartedness” refers to the communication of sentiment between people; to be alienated from interaction and mutual communication with others is to cease to be a person. This cultural construct defines the person in terms of the interrelationship between two persons. Without this interrelationship, the Chinese seem to be minding their own business and to have no more cohesion than a heap of loose sand. But with it, they are knitted together and are ready to go through thick and thin together. D.Y.F. Ho and other social psychologists were the first to come up with the concept of “methodological relationalism” (Ho, 1991), in an attempt to build a comprehensive theory analyzing Chinese social psychology through employment of guanxi as a research paradigm.

The guanxi concept has the four following characteristics.

1. It is ethically related to role norms. The use of social identity (especially kinship identity) to define norms for interaction with others implies role norms.

2. In particular, guanxi establishes requirements for degrees of closeness, trust and responsibility. The closer the kinship between two parties, the greater their familiarity and intimacy and their mutual trust and responsibility (Yang, 1993; Yan, 1996). Requirements based on kinship institutionalize emotions, trust and duties and determine the appropriate psychological distance between one person and another, in what appears to be a pre-established formula.

3. Guanxi can be established or broken through interchange, in what is called “pulling strings” or “breaking off relations.” By performing duties normally performed only by someone closer to the person in question and thus showing feelings normally shown by someone more intimate, one can turn from an outsider (with no guanxi) into an “acquaintance” (with guanxi newly established) and thence forge a “solid and ironclad relationship” (with guanxi firmly established).