Measuring Trust in China: Resolving Eastern and Western Differences in Concepts of Trust

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Abstract

Trust has implicit meaning for every person and has different meanings in different cultures, making it difficult to measure across cultures. From an International Psychology perspective, contrary to those who suggest creating "different psychologies" for different nations, this paper builds on scientific knowledge by using tested principles and instruments and applying them with contextual sensitivity to other cultures. After examining the concept of trust in the literature, an operational definition of trust is offered. Then, cultural differences, such as individualism and collectivism, are discussed in relation to the way trust is perceived in China and the West. Results are presented of some early attempts to assess trust in China using a western instrument, which revealed certain research anomalies, particularly low reliabilities for the measure. When relevant cultural differences were taken into consideration, and minor adjustments were made in the approach to measuring trust, primarily in the instructions for the respondents to complete the questionnaire, the results showed a marked increase in the reliability values of the trust measure. Also, examples of the successful use of this approach are shown in research results with regressions that used the trust measure. It is concluded that western measures based on sound scientific research can be used successfully in China with relatively minor adjustments if researchers carefully consider the cultural context, supporting the idea that, instead of creating "different psychologies," International Psychology can be developed as a coherent branch of psychology by basing international research on existing scientific principles.

Background of the Problem

In terms of International Psychology, some authors suggest writing "different psychologies" for different cultures; but that approach runs counter to scientific progress, which carefully identifies "universal" principles and builds on them. To develop International Psychology requires building upon scientific knowledge by using tested principles and instruments and applying them with contextual sensitivity to other cultures. This paper describes how this can be achieved when measuring trust in China.

Measuring "Trust" has never been easy, and measuring it in China requires some additional considerations that must be addressed in order to obtain accurate and reliable assessments of the psychological construct of trust. Researchers often use existing measures that have been developed in western countries, especially the USA, and many such measures can work in eastern cultures when careful procedures are utilized to provide translations with equivalent meanings. Some variables, however, do not provide acceptable reliability values, which make them difficult to use in the Asian context. Trust is one such variable that has been difficult to measure in China. This may be due to several reasons, and this paper investigates some reasons related to cultural differences in how trust is conceived and how trust is measured.

Defining Trust

The scientific study of any concept requires that it must first be clearly defined, which validates the concept and allows it to be better understood and more reliably measured. In reviewing definitions of trust, one aspect is striking, namely, that the definitions often center on the negative aspect of trust, i.e., researchers and theorists have stressed that the "risk" of other people taking advantage of you is essential to the definition of trust (MacCrimmon and Wehrung, 1986) and that the person must be willing to be "vulnerable" to that possibility. For example, Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998) defined trust as "*the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another*" (p. 395).

Another weakness of existing definitions is that they use positive or negative consequences of the other person's behavior on the person viewing that behavior as a part of the definition. This is a weakness because it adds conditions (or contingencies) as if they were part of the definition even though those conditions are not inherent in the concept itself. For example, Robinson (1996) defined trust as "*expectations, assumptions, or beliefs about the likelihood that another's future actions will be beneficial, favorable, or at least not detrimental to one's interests*" (p. 567). This definition cannot be used as it imposes conditions of self-interest.

As the previous definitions are unscientific since they impose negative concepts (e.g., risk or self-interest) that are not *essential* to trust, a more positive view is taken here by defining trust as "***a conviction that another person will perform certain actions, or behave as promised***." Since this is a more scientific definition that focuses on the central concept (without imposing any conditions), it should be universal, i.e., it should to apply to any culture. This definition also reflects a social psychological approach, i.e., that trust is important to one's interpersonal interactions. Thus, a discussion of cross-cultural differences in the concept can now be made.

Cultural Differences in the Concepts of Trust

Culture is defined as the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of

people (Triandis, 1996), and groups can be of any size and as large as whole societies. There appear to be east-west cultural differences in all the aspects of culture (e.g., values) regarding trust. Fukuyama (1995) argued that Chinese society can be characterized as being low on trust because they only trust members of their own in-group, while distrusting anyone else since all people who are not in one's family are members of the out-group. Based on the World Value Survey (Inglehart, Basanez, and Moreno, 1998), people in eastern countries have less trust than people in western countries, with the Chinese showing less trust than Americans. The Japanese, likewise, have a lower level of trust than do Americans (Yamagishi, 2011).

Collectivism versus Individualism. Reasons for the low trust may be based in the strong collectivism of Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1980), in which people have a strong attachment to in-group members, a long-term orientation, and a desire for social harmony. For the Chinese, the family is the core in-group. As Yang (1995) explained, Chinese people have unconditional trust in their own family, but view everyone else with great distrust. In western culture, which is characterized by a strong individualism (Hofstede, 1980), every individual is thought to have a different level of trustworthiness, such that everyone has a different degree of trust of other people. This is the tenet upon which measures of trust have been based, i.e., they assess responses to statements about the trustworthiness of other people, *in general*, by asking the individual how much he or she agrees or disagrees with those statements; and such measures are assumed to reflect the extent to which that individual trusts other people.

Given these strong cultural differences, the contrast between cultures comes into play when measuring trust. That is, the curve for measures of trust among Americans, who are from an individualistic western culture, is expected to have levels that follow a "normal curve" as regards views about the trustworthiness of others; whereas Chinese people, from a collectivist culture, vary only on a pure duality, i.e., in-group members are trusted while all out-group members are not trusted. This may be depicted in the following figure (Figure 1):
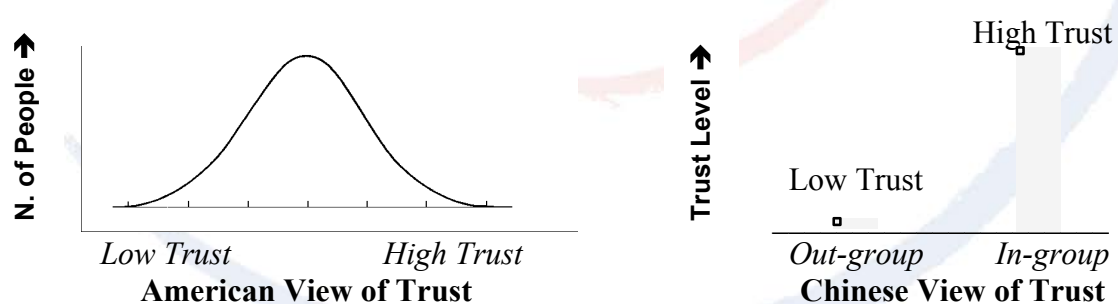
Eastern Internal and Western External Views of Trust. For the Chinese and their in-group collectivism, the family is the core group of society, with all family members deemed fully trustworthy. All other people are out-group members who must prove they can be trusted by being consistently honest, reliable, etc., over a long-term time frame. Thus, the Chinese think "trust" must be earned by other people, suggesting it is "*external*" to them. For Americans, in accord with the individualism value, every person has a different "level" of trustworthiness (including family members, i.e., even they might not be reliable)! From this perspective, since everyone is different, the objective in measuring trust is to assess it internally: How much will a given person

"generally" trust other people? This question derives from the expectation that people have individual differences in attitudes, values, and beliefs, etc., and that their answers provide a projection of their "*internal*" level of trust onto other unknown people.

Trust and the Time Perspective. Contributing to the cultural differences in the concept of trust is the sense of time. American culture uses a short-term time perspective, while Chinese culture uses a long-term perspective. For example, Americans tend to want things to happen quickly such that they enter into enterprises (e.g., making "deals") with other people using a relatively fast decision-making procedure (e.g., so they can make a "fast buck"), which also requires a fast decision on whether to trust the other person, even though they know some risk might be involved. The Chinese, on the other hand, tend to ***not*** enter into quick deals, and prefer instead to establish a personal relationship first so that the other person's reliability can be assessed over a longer period of time, which allows the Chinese to minimize the chance of risk and increase their sense of trust in the other person *before* entering into an endeavor.

The Trust Measure

A discussion of problems with measuring trust in China would not be complete without an example of a trust measure and the difficulties associated with using it. A popular measure of trust has been Rotter's (1967) 25-item Interpersonal Trust Scale (see Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman, 1991, for the items) which has been used in the USA for 46 years. Below are 12 of the original items [R = Reverse-worded item]:

1. Hypocrisy is on the increase in society [R]
2. Fear of punishment rather than conscience prevents most people from breaking the law [R]
3. Most salesmen are honest in describing their products
4. Most people would be horrified if they knew how much news is distorted [R]
5. In spite of what people say, most people are only interested in their own welfare [R]
6. Parents usually can be relied on to keep their promises
7. Most experts can be relied upon to tell the truth about the limits of their knowledge
8. Most people can be counted on to do what they say they will do
9. Most people answer public opinion polls honestly
10. Despite reports in the news media, it is hard to get objective accounts of public events [R]
11. These days one has to be alert or someone is likely to take advantage of you [R]
12. Most idealists are sincere and usually practice what they preach

Unfortunately, problems arose when scales composed of these items were used to measure trust in China. (The problems are described in the subsequent section of this paper).

In an attempt to make the items simpler to understand and easier to translate, a shorter 10-item Trust Scale was developed. Four items were selected (with minor edits) from Rotter's (1967) scale that were relatively easy to understand, while dropping others that seemed unsuited to Chinese culture (e.g., about idealists). One item from Costa and McCrae's (1992) Trust Scale and five newly created items were added. This gave a set of 10 easy-to-understand items with low ambiguity, which was expected to increase reliability:

# Item	Source
1. Hypocrisy is on the increase among them [R]	Rotter (1967)
2. They are primarily interested in their own welfare [R]	Rotter (1967)
3. I believe they can be trusted.	Newly created
4. I have to be alert or they are likely to take advantage of me [R]	Rotter (1967)
5. Their behavior reveals what they think	Newly created
6. I think they are basically not honest [R]	Rotter (1967)
7. If I ask them to keep a secret, they will do so	Newly created
8. They can be relied upon to tell the truth	Newly created
9. I believe they have very good intentions	Costa and McCrae (1992)
10. Most of them are sincere	Newly created

Research Anomalies Encountered in Measuring Trust in China

The main problems in measuring trust in China are based in the cultural differences, which, as discussed earlier, relate to how persons in the different cultures view other people in the society, i.e., they (a) have individual differences in trustworthiness, versus (b) are a trustable in-group member or an untrustworthy out-group member. In addition to the difference in cultural perspectives, other problems have arisen that are associated with the *techniques* used to measure Trust. [At this point, it should be noted that there could be a variety of reasons responsible for measurement difficulties, such as problems with translation, but this paper assumes that appropriate methods, e.g., having skilled translators and using back-translation, can be used to assure accuracy in the translations.]

Therefore, this section addresses some problems with measuring trust in China in addition to the cultural issues. In particular, there were statistical problems that needed to be corrected, such as those related to: (a) the reliability of items, (b) results from reverse-worded items, and (c) the use of Likert scales.

(a) *Reliability of the Rotter (1967) Trust Scale*. When the Rotter (1967) scale was used in China, despite the scale's success in the West, the Cronbach alpha reliabilities had been consistently low (even after careful back-translation of each of the items); ranging only from about .49 to .55, which falls considerably short of the .70 value that is usually recommended as a good minimum value for scale reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

To determine the cause of the low reliabilities, in pilot studies, debriefings were conducted with respondents, who said they did not know to whom the questions referred. The Chinese respondents, when asked to give a score on the trust measure, expected the researchers to refer to some specific person. For example, regarding the item that says "*Most people can be counted on to do what they say they will do,*" respondents wanted to know who "*most people*" are. But in the West, the implicit assumption is that the scale will determine how trusting a person is according to their responses to questions about the trustworthiness of other people *in general*. The Chinese take the questions literally, and expect the researcher to identify some specific target person for the respondents to evaluate! This, in the minds of Chinese respondents, creates ambiguity, which may partly explain the low reliabilities.

(b) *Reversed Wording and the use of Factor Analysis*. Psychometric theory recommends including "reversed" (negatively worded) items, in measuring attitudes (to avoid problems of common method bias). But in Asian societies, negative wording creates bad feelings since such statements could lead to disharmony when spoken openly. This is undesirable because "social harmony" has been the principal moral precept for Chinese society since it was endorsed by Confucius 2500 years ago (Hu, 1997), and this dictum remains so important in modern Asian societies, especially in China (Tsai, 2006), that is has even been called the "ultimate good" (Yang, 1995). The Japanese, for example, rarely use the word "no," and when it is used, it is placed at end of sentence to allow the speaker to assess how the idea is being received by the listener, giving the speaker a chance to avoid using the negative if the listener seems unhappy with what is being said.

The Chinese also avoid using negatives to avoid conflict. To preserve social harmony when they are with people other than family members, the Chinese would rather say nothing than openly say anything contradictory, and therefore avoid negative statements. This means they are often not sure how to answer a negatively worded statement, particularly if a Likert-type response scale is used, which includes agree (positive) and disagree (negative) responses.

This is problematic because a Chinese respondent might want to disagree with a negative statement, which creates the problem of cognitively dealing with a double negative when even a direct negative statement is inconsistent with the Chinese culture. For example, it is easier to disagree with the positive statement "Most people can be trusted" than it is to disagree with the negative statement "Most people can *not* be trusted." Hence, negative items produce a type of cognitive dissonance for many Chinese, making them unsure of what to do, such that they responded differently to positively worded and negatively worded items.

Factor analysis of positively and negatively worded items reveals how the two types of items are perceived differently. When the items from a single scale create two different mental (cognitive) states, this could result in dissimilar responses, producing a 2-factor solution with a clear split between the items. The positively worded items load heavily on one factor, and the negatively worded items load heavily on a second factor. Interestingly, the negative items *load positively* on a separate factor, rather than negatively on the factor with the positive items. This is depicted in a factor analysis for a trust measure used in China (N=198):

#	**Items from the Trust Measure**	**Factor 1**	**Factor 2**
1	Hypocrisy is on the increase among them [R]	.11	**.81**
2	They are primarily interested in their own welfare [R]	.03	**.83**
3	I believe they can be trusted.	**.66**	.29
4	I have to be alert or they are likely to take advantage of me[R]	.13	**.76**
5	Their behavior reveals what they think	**.51**	-.23
6	I think they are basically not honest [R]	.27	**.63**
7	If I ask them to keep a secret, they will do so	**.73**	.08
8	They can be relied upon to tell the truth	**.67**	.19
9	I believe they have very good intentions	**.77**	.16
10	Most of them are sincere	**.72**	.29

(c) *The Use of Likert Scales*. Some researchers have had difficulty using Likert scales in China. Rensis Likert (1932) conducted extensive research on the number of response points in his type of scale, ranging from 2-point (disagree or agree) to 22-point scales, and reported that the "most reliable" scale was the 11-point scale. In the last 50 years, however, researchers tended to favor the 7-point scale (as an approximation of the 11-point scale) that often yields acceptable psychometrics. Unfortunately, many researchers only label the anchor points (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) but do not label the other (2~6) points, assuming the respondent will understand what they mean. In China, however, the respondents often ask the researcher what those scale points mean. Whereas they are unclear about the meaning of those numbers, the responses were inconsistent, which yielded low scale reliabilities.

Solutions to the Problems of Measuring Trust in China
Summarizing the major problems with measuring trust in China, these were: (1) differences in the way trust is envisioned due to differences in eastern and western culture, including social attitudes about in-group and out-group members and the importance of short- vs. long-term time frames in developing trust; (2) the problem of Chinese respondents having difficulty understanding the meaning of some of the points on the Likert scale; and (3) low reliability of the trust scale, including the use of items that are reverse worded (which are scientifically recommended in order to achieve psychometric accuracy when using questionnaires). These problems are addressed individually below.

Solving the Cultural In-group vs. Out-group and the Time Perspective Problems. First, there was a need to resolve the East-West cultural differences in social perceptions of trust. As can be seen from Figure 1, the assumptions in measurement of the Trust concept are very different. Therefore, to make the measurement method more usable across cultures, some adjustments needed to be made in the approach. This was centered in the wording of the *question* to better fit the culture, i.e., to revise the instructions for responding to the items.

As may be inferred from this discussion, researchers can solve the problems of both the time perspective and duality in collectivist cultures by asking the Chinese about trust in a culturally appropriate way. Specifically, the question must first ask the Chinese respondent to exclude consideration of family members. Further, to make the question more meaningful, the referents (or target persons) in the question need to refer to more salient persons, i.e., people whom the respondent can readily imagine, such as people with whom the respondent interacts. Consequently, the resultant question, to be more culturally relevant, must refer to salient target-persons, i.e., "*Not including your family members, how much do you agree or disagree that the following statements describe the people with whom you interact*?"

Thus, by specifying that the question asks about the extent of trust *only of out-group members* that the respondent knows, the question becomes less ambiguous, which should produce more precise answers. That is, when considering the strong duality in Chinese culture regarding trusting family members while not trusting other people, the result yields a more accurate assessment of the extent to which there are differences in the level of trust that different Chinese people have of out-group members. (This solution is based on the assumption that everyone has certain inherent

differences regardless of whether one is from an individualistic or a collectivist culture, and that the extent of their trust is also different.) The result will be an assessment of trust that yields a scale with a higher degree of internal reliability.

Resolving Ambiguity in Using Likert Scales. One solution to the problem of the Chinese not understanding the meaning of some points on the Likert 7-point response continuum is to shorten it to a 5-point scale (as fewer points reduces ambiguity), and label all the points, thus:

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Not sure	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Solution to the Reliability Problem. Finally, correcting the low reliability of the Trust Scale can be achieved by (a) reducing the ambiguity of the directions, (b) simplifying the wording of the items for easier understanding, and (c) clarifying the points on the Likert scale. All three of these approaches, which have been described above, achieved success. Evidence of higher reliabilities based on the recommended changes can be seen in the Cronbach Alpha values obtained on the Trust measure in China before and after the changes were introduced, as revealed in the following table:

Scale	Year Tested	Reliability	Authors
Rotter (1967)	2003	.49	Taormina (pilot test)
Rotter (1967)	2004	.55	Taormina (pilot test)
Revised	2005	**.85**	Taormina (pilot test)
Revised	2009	**.80**	Taormina and Hu
Revised	2010	**.84**	Taormina and U
Revised	2012	**.82**	Taormina and Ho (in press)

Clearly, the changes greatly improved reliability of the measure, with the major change being in the instructions, which addressed the cultural difference in how Chinese and Americans view the trustworthiness of other people. Also, the negative wording problem is resolved because, although the positive and negative items still form two factors, the overall reliability of the Trust scale is high.

Sample Results of Research Using Trust in China

Here are some results of research that was conducted by the author and some colleagues that used the revised wording in the instructions, slight edits to the wording of the items, and the shorter (5-point) Likert scale to measure trust in China.

Antecedents of Interpersonal Trust in China (Taormina and U, 2010); Trust Alpha = .84. The first example is from a multiple regression analysis of a study that investigated whether interpersonal trust is affected by other variables. The predictor variables tested included some standard demographics, and independent variables such as the satisfaction of one's needs, some (Big-5) personality variables, happiness, self-confidence, and family emotional support.

Criterion/Predictors	Beta	t-value	ΔR^2	R^2	F	df
Interpersonal Trust				.32	26.93****	5, 266
Self-Confidence	-.06	-1.01				
Happiness	.17	**2.83** **	.02			
Physiological Needs Satisfied	-.06	-1.09				
Safety Needs Satisfied	.23	**4.22** ****	.15			
Belonging Needs Satisfied	.19	**3.15** ***	.04			
Esteem Needs Satisfied	.08	1.27				
Self-Actualization Satisfied	.05	0.76				
Conscientiousness	.10	1.94				
Extraversion	.09	1.60				
Neuroticism	-.10	-1.71				
Emotional Intelligence	.15	**2.64** **	.07			
Chinese Values	.05	0.10				
Family Emotional Support	.04	0.59				
Gender	-.07	-1.32				
Age	-.01	-0.11				
Marital Status	.08	1.02				
Number of Children	-.25	**-4.95** ****	.04			
Education Level	.05	0.89				
Employment Status	-.01	-0.26				
Monthly Income	-.01	-0.27				

*$p< .05$; **$p< .01$; ***$p< .005$; ****$p< .001$. (N=272)

As can be seen from the above table, there was considerable success in the culturally sensitive approach to measuring Trust in China, particularly using instructions that fit the cultural context (i.e., asking only about out-group members); which yielded some revealing results.

The following tables, which also used the new Trust measure and new instructions, show the results of two regressions from a separate study that examined antecedents of trust among the Chinese, and to determine if trust could influence a workplace variable. The significant results suggest considerable success with the new approach to measuring trust in China.

Antecedents & Outcomes of Trust in China (Taormina and Sun, 2011). Trust Alpha = .75. This study also examined factors that might influence Trust in China, but used a somewhat different set of independent variables.

Criterion/Predictors	Beta	t-value	ΔR^2	R^2	F	df
Interpersonal Trust				.16	17.89****	3, 274
Family Emotional Support	.06	.90				
Cognitive Flexibility	.07	1.05				
Dependency	-.06	.90				
Self-assurance	-.00	-.06				
Emotional Intelligence	.09	1.56				
Openness	.12	2.04 *	.01			
Agreeableness	.28	4.52 ****	.13			
Neuroticism	-.13	-2.10 *	.02			
Self-esteem	-.10	-1.40				
Gender	.05	.85				
Age	-.08	-1.33				
Marital Status	-.02	-.43				
Number of Children	.01	.18				
Education Level	.09	1.52				
Employment Status	.08	1.38				
Monthly Income	.06	1.04				

*$p< .05$; **$p< .01$; ***$p< .005$; ****$p< .001$ (N=301).

Antecedents & Outcomes of Trust in China (Taormina and Sun, 2011). Trust Alpha = .75. This is part of that same study, but included an outcome variable, i.e., coworker support, to assess whether the level of Chinese people's interpersonal trust might have an effect on their interactions with coworkers.

Criterion/Predictors df	Beta	t-value	ΔR^2	R^2	F	df
Coworker Support				.22	20.30****	4, 267
Interpersonal Trust	.30	5.37 ****	.13			
Family Emotional Support	.12	2.15 *	.01			
Cognitive Flexibility	.09	1.56				
Dependency	.04	.64				
Self-assurance	.17	3.04 ***	.03			
Emotional Intelligence	.02	.27				
Openness	.03	.58				
Agreeableness	.02	.23				
Neuroticism	.08	1.38				
Self-esteem	.08	1.14				
Gender	.07	1.25				
Age	-.06	-1.15				
Marital Status	-.02	-.38				
Number of Children	.02	.28				
Education Level	.00	.04				
Employment Status	.08	1.38				
Monthly Income	.20	3.63 ****	.05			

*$p< .05$; **$p< .01$; ***$p< .005$; ****$p< .001$ (N=301).

Summary and Conclusions

This paper examined problems often encountered in assessing interpersonal trust in China when using a popular western measure. Apart from minor psychometric issues

related to item wording and using a Likert scale, the main concern centered on cultural differences between the ways Chinese and Americans view the trustworthiness of other people. When the cultural differences were addressed by revising the instructions for responding to the questionnaire, the reliability value of the scale increased substantially. It is concluded that western measures that are based on sound scientific research can be used successfully, with relatively minor adjustments, if researchers carefully consider the cultural context. Thus, instead of creating "separate psychologies," International Psychology can be developed as a coherent branch of psychology by basing international research on existing scientific principles.

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