

Chinese Academic Achievement Goals and Confucian Ethics: A Response to “Do Taiwanese Adolescents Believe in the Moral Significance of Effort and School Performance?”

Bih-Jen Fwu¹, Shun-Wen Chen², Chih-Fen Wei³, and Hsiou-Huai Wang¹

The Center for Teacher Education, National Taiwan University¹

Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, National Tsing Hua University²

Department of Psychology and Counseling, University of Taipei³

Chang & Lei's (2018) article entitled, “Do Taiwanese Adolescents Believe in the Moral Significance of Effort and School Performance?” took a critical stand to the perspective held by a series of research conducted by Chen et al. (2009), Hwang (2012) and Fwu et al. (2014) that effort as positive duty has moral significance. Through empirical data collection on Taiwanese high school and college students, Chang & Lei concluded that such viewpoint was not supported by Taiwanese adolescents. As an attempt to further academic dialogue, this article first explicates the characteristics of and relevant research findings based on the Chinese academic achievement goal and the Confucian ethics. Then, this article responded to Chang & Lei's (2018) claims in the following three dimensions. First, theoretically, the social-cognitive domain theory adopted by Chang & Lei was quintessentially different from the theory constructed by the authors based on the Confucian ethics, and thus the ideas and concepts developed by the two distinct theories could not be compared and contrasted. Second, methodologically, the items used in Chang & Lei's measurement scale were not accurately developed to capture the essence of morality in the theoretical context of social-cognitive domain theory, demonstrating a fundamental problem of naïve positivist approach in methodology. Lastly, Chang & Lei failed to explain the rationales used by their participants to discern filial piety, effort and academic achievement. The authors argued that, on the contrary, their findings could be better explained by the theory constructed based on the Confucian ethics.

Keywords: *Academic achievement goal, Confucian ethics, Effort, Social-cognitive domain theory*

Extended Abstract

Chang and Lei's article *Do Taiwanese Adolescents Believe in the Moral Significance of Effort and School Performance?*, published in this journal in 2018, took a critical stance toward the argument proposed in our article (Fwu et al., 2014) that effort as an unconditional duty has moral significance. The intention of this article is to advance constructive dialogue by explicating (1) the theoretical framework and empirical results of our series of studies, (2) Chang and Lei's research findings and their critique of our studies, and (3) our rebuttal of Chang and Lei's stance, which addresses the theoretical,

methodological, and interpretive problems inherent in their article.

Series of Studies by Fwu et al.

Students in countries in the East Asian Confucian circle (including Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) have performed outstandingly well in international academic rankings such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program of International Student Assessment

(PISA) (Mullis, et al., 2016a, 2016b; Mullis, et al., 2020; OECD, 2018; Schleicher, 2019). However, many empirical studies have shown that mainstream Western psychological theories such as Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, and Dweck and Leggett's (1988) achievement goal theory, do not explain the motivations and performances of East Asian students (Hau & Ho, 2010; King & McInerney, 2016). Thus, to better explain the phenomenon, Fwu et al. (2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2021), Chen et al. (2009, 2016, 2019), Chen and Wei (2013), and Wang and Lin (2020) conducted a series of empirical studies to verify a culture-inclusive theory of achievement motivation proposed by Chen et al. (2009).

The Theoretical Framework of Chinese Achievement Goals

In a Confucian cultural context, individuals pursue socially expected goals to fulfill role obligations in a dyad relationship and thereby signal personal virtues and enhance the cultivation of inner moral development (Hwang, 2009). Chen et al. (2009) proposed a framework of Chinese achievement goals to explain the motives and forms of individuals' pursuit of such goals. Typically, when a Chinese individual constructs achievement goals, in addition to personal interest, the expectations of significant others will be taken into account. Thus, there are two types of achievement goals: personal goals and vertical goals. The former are based on personal interest, with little reference to social expectations or values, whereas the latter are related to social role obligations, the content and standards of which are of little relevance to personal choice. Mainstream Western theories of achievement motivation neither emphasize the impact of social expectations on Chinese motives and behaviors in pursuit of academic goals, nor understand the relevance of the pursuit of vertical goals and individual morality, and thus they cannot properly explain the phenomenon of Chinese students' devotion to pursuing academic goals.

In Chinese society, academic goals, which are often ascribed high social value and based on social expectations, are considered to be students' role

obligations. In other words, academic goals are "vertical" goals that are highly valued by society and effort in pursuit of such goals is always regarded as of paramount importance. As a result, students who fail academically can only attribute their failure to inadequate effort, and thus failure may prompt them to make greater effort to fulfill role obligations (Chen et al., 2009; Chen & Wei, 2013; Hwang, 2004, 2009; Tao & Hong, 2014).

Empirical Research Outcomes

Based on the Confucian concept of role obligations and the theoretical framework of Chinese achievement goals (Chen et al., 2009), Fwu et al. (2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2021), Chen et al. (2009, 2016, 2019), Chen and Wei (2013), and Wang and Lin (2020) conducted a series of empirical studies and reported the following major findings in support of the framework.

- (1) In the pursuit of a vertical goal such as academic achievement, the more effort students made, irrespective of success or failure, the more parents and teachers credited them with a strong moral image and learning virtues. However, there were fewer discrepancies between the perceived moral image and learning virtues of those who made effort in pursuit of personal goals and those who did not. Moreover, teachers who considered effort to be an obligation preferred students who worked hard but whose performance was average (i.e., those with learning virtues) to students who did not work hard but performed outstandingly well. These results correspond with Li's (2002, 2005, 2012) findings that learning is virtue-oriented in East Asian societies.
- (2) Hard-working students who were successful in pursuit of a vertical goal tended to win more credit from parents and teachers due to their better moral image, whereas in cases of failure, those who did not work hard tended to receive more punishment from parents and teachers because their failure to fulfill their role obligations resulted in a worse moral image. However, in the pursuit of personal goals, the gap in the moral images of hard-working and lazy students was smaller, indicating that Chinese parents and teachers

considered both “process” and “outcome” when assigning credit or blame when their children pursued vertical goals such as academic achievement.

- (3) College students tended to adopt an “effort” model when discussing their academic success or failure. Attributing academic failure to a lack of effort may motivate students to study harder to fulfill their role obligations by achieving academic success. Such outcomes correspond to the results from a variety of cross-cultural studies that showed that Chinese parents and students tended to attribute outcomes to effort made in the process of learning (Li, 2002, 2012; Stevenson et al., 1990; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).
- (4) Students who regarded the pursuit of vertical goals as fulfilling role obligations felt indebted toward their parents and themselves after reflecting upon their academic failure. To escape from such feelings of indebtedness, they tended to motivate themselves to work harder to achieve academic success. This finding echoes previous findings that East Asian students tended to persevere after academic failure (Heine et al., 2001; Zhang & Cross, 2011).

Chang and Lei’s Research Outcomes and Their Critique of Fwu et al.’s Studies

Chang and Lei (2018) presented three critiques of the conclusion of Fwu et al. that effort, as an unconditional positive duty, has moral value.

Theoretically, they pointed out that Fwu et al., drawing on a moral perspective predicated upon Confucian role ethics, regarded effort and academic achievement as moral obligations. They argued that from a social-cognitive domain perspective, fulfilling one’s obligations can only be viewed as a social convention, not a moral issue (p. 51). Second, they maintained that according to Helwig and Turiel (2011), the only valid criterion for judging a certain behavior as moral conduct or a social convention is whether “such behavior would affect others” (p. 155).

Methodologically, Chang and Lei asked Taiwanese high school and college students to rate on a 6-point Likert scale if a person is “immoral” (moral issue) or

“not right/should not do this” (social convention issue) if he/she “is not filial,” “did not work hard” or “had low academic performance.” They defined an average score above 3.50 as an indication of behavior deviating from moral rules or social conventions (p. 158).

Chang and Lei concluded that effort was regarded as a social convention, not a moral conduct or an unconditional positive duty (p. 161). Moreover, they found that when comparing the three domains of “effort,” “filial piety,” and “academic achievement,” filial piety had higher salience as a moral issue or social convention than either effort or academic achievement (Table 1 on p. 159).

In sum, Chang and Lei concluded that Taiwanese adolescents regarded effort as a social convention (p. 161), and that there was no consensus among these young people on the moral significance of effort (p. 151).

Response to Chang and Lei’s Critique

This article responds to Chang and Lei’s critique, considering theoretical issues, research methods, and research outcomes.

Theoretical issues

Chang and Lei attempted to make a direct link between effort and morality, i.e., to ascertain whether effort corresponds to a moral standard. Their perspective was based on social-cognitive domain theory (SCDT) (Helwig & Turiel, 2011; Turiel, 1983). However, there is a huge gap between SCDT and Confucian ethics in terms of their fundamental perspective on ethics. SCDT primarily originates from Kolberg’s theory of moral psychology and Kantian deontological theory (see review by Campbell and Christopher (1996)). Kant’s deontological ethics focuses on “duty” from the theoretical perspective of universalism, i.e., the duty to be fulfilled by each rational being. However, from the perspective of Confucian role ethics, the obligation to be fulfilled is related to specific persons in relations (e.g., a child’s filial obligations to a parent) rather than universally applied. Moreover, Confucian ethics gives higher priority to individual

character or morality (Ames, 2011; Angle & Slote, 2013; Chan, 2014; Hwang, 1999, 2012). The basic theoretical problem of Chang and Lei's article is that they did not clarify why the universalist-oriented SCDT could be used to critique research that was primarily based on the particularist-oriented Confucian ethics of role obligations.

Methodological issues

Chang and Lei's research had three methodological problems. First, its assessment methods did not correspond to their theory. Second, the wording used in their scale items was rather vague. They asked respondents to consider if a certain behavior was "immoral" without considering that there are multiple interpretations of "morality" under different ethical systems, as mentioned above. Such questions cannot yield meaningful outcomes because each respondent may interpret "morality" very differently. Third, Chang and Lei confused "first-degree interpretation" with "second-degree interpretation" (Schutz, 1962/1992) by taking participants' direct responses to the scale items as "the essence of morality." To put it more clearly, Chang and Lei adopted an approach of naïve positivism in their research, oversimplifying the relationship between social reality, theoretical frameworks, and experiential phenomena (Benton & Craib, 2010; Hwang, 2018; Godfrey-Smith, 2003).

Interpretations of research outcomes

Chang and Lei compared "effort", "filial piety", and "academic achievement" and pointed out that Taiwanese adolescents considered "filial piety" to be more strongly a moral or social convention issue than "effort" and "academic achievement." However, they did not provide appropriate explanations for why filial piety had higher moral or social convention value. In fact, such results can be better explained by the Confucian ethical perspective and the theoretical framework of Chinese achievement goals applied by Fwu et al. Because filial piety is viewed as a cardinal duty under the Confucian ethics system,

a lack of filial piety is regarded as the most "immoral" behavior. As making effort in academic work is a way to fulfill one's role obligations, lack of effort is also regarded as immoral but is not as bad as not being filial. Although academic achievement is related to one's effort, effort is only one of the factors underlying good academic performance; thus, poor performance is regarded as the least related to morality.

Conclusions

The series of studies based on the Confucian ethical perspective conducted by Fwu et al. (2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2021), Chen et al. (2009, 2016, 2019), Chen and Wei (2013), and Wang and Lin (2020) highlighted the moral value of effort as an unconditional positive duty and explored the sociocultural psychological mechanism underlying this premise. In contrast, Chang and Lei (2018) based their research on SCDT, defined morality from the Western perspective of deontological ethics, and suggested the findings of Fwu et al. were based on indirect inferences. They directly asked participants whether a "lack of academic effort is immoral" and concluded that there was no consensus among Taiwanese youths about the moral value of effort. This article rebuts Chang and Lei's critique by pointing out the following three problems inherent in their research. They applied a drastically different theoretical framework that the Confucian role ethics used in the original research and the concepts they adopted were not comparable to those used by Fwu et al. Methodologically, their scale items were vague, did not correspond to the premises of SCDT theory, and were flawed by a naïve positivism. Finally, they failed to explain their participants' different ratings for filial piety, effort, and academic achievement, which could be better explained by the Confucian ethical perspective.

We hope that the critique by Chang and Lei (2018) and the rebuttal in this article will stimulate constructive dialogue among academics holding different views, and thereby generate new insights in this field of research.