

Cultural Foundations of Moral Judgment: A Cross-Cultural Study of Young Adults from Collectivistic (East Asian) and Individualistic (Western) Societies

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Abstract. Under globalization, clarifying how culture shapes individuals' moral judgments has become one of the core issues in psychological research. According to moral foundations theory, collectivist cultures (e.g., East Asian cultures) and individualist cultures (e.g., Western cultures) put more emphasis on different core moral values. This study employs cross-cultural comparisons to investigate differences between Chinese and Western youth in moral values, moral dilemma judgments, and cognitive thinking styles, as well as their underlying mechanisms. An online survey was conducted to collect data from 66 young adults aged 18–30 years, including a Chinese group (n=36) and a Western group (n=30). The results of MFQ revealed that compared to the Western group, the Chinese group scored significantly higher on the dimensions of loyalty, authority, and sanctity, and no difference appeared on caring and fairness. When it comes to situation choices, it appeared that two groups differed significantly in distributing their choices among the three types of dilemmas. Results of CRT show that the Western group is oriented towards analytical processing of information, whereas the Chinese group is oriented towards intuitive processing of information. Analysis of mediators reveals that cultural background has direct effects on judgments as well as indirect effects acting through moral values and cognitive styles. This work justifies the differential effect of cultural background on moral judgments and reveals the cultural background's mediational role of values and cognitive styles as well. This work provides empirical evidence supporting an understanding of cultural moral cognition underlying mechanisms.

Keywords: moral judgment, cultural psychology, individualism–collectivism, Moral Foundations Theory, cognitive style

1. Introduction

In recent years, cultural psychology has placed increasing emphasis on the role of the sociocultural context in shaping individual cognition, values, and judgment mechanisms. The collectivism-individualism dichotomy is widely regarded as a fundamental framework for understanding the differences between Eastern and Western cultures [1]. Recent empirical research suggests that young people in East Asian contexts tend to prioritize group harmony and role obligations, whereas

Western youth prioritize autonomy and individual principles. These differences are particularly evident in moral reasoning and value prioritization [2]. Moral Foundations Theory represents a prominent pluralistic approach to morality, which contrasts with monistic views [3].

However, the majority of existing studies rely on macro-level country comparisons or heterogeneous samples with varied methodologies. Few studies have simultaneously compared young adults from collectivistic and individualistic backgrounds using a unified design. In particular, research rarely incorporates both abstract value orientations and concrete situational dilemmas. This limitation restricts a precise understanding of the interactive effects between individuals and countries. Therefore, this study attempts to address this shortcoming through a rigorously controlled cross-cultural design. This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a cross-cultural survey of young adults from East Asian and Western societies.

Specifically, this survey first uses a value scale to examine cultural differences in orientations across dimensions such as group loyalty, fairness, authority, purity, and care. Next, this investigation employs a situational dilemma task to analyze individuals' judgments and decision-making patterns when faced with conflicting situations.

Finally, the survey explores the role of analytic reasoning versus intuitive feelings in shaping judgments.

To address existing research gaps, this study employs a unified cross-cultural design comparing youth groups from China's collectivist context and the West's individualist context. Based on the aforementioned theoretical background and research gaps, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Chinese and Western adolescents differ in emphasis on moral foundations framed by Moral Foundations Theory. Specifically, Chinese will score higher on "constraining" bases like loyalty, authority, and sanctity whereas two groups will be equal in performance on "individualizing" bases like care and fairness.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): There would be systematic group-to-group differences in their decision-making profiles on three culturally appropriate moral dilemmas: the Chinese group would exhibit a tendency to favor options that affirm group harmony and traditional virtues, whereas the Western group would be predisposed to favor options that affirm fairness and individual autonomy.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Cultural variations of cognitive style will be found: Western groups will have higher disposition to analytical processing (as revealed on CRT and self-rating scales), whereas Chinese groups will suggest a higher disposition to intuitive forms of processing.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Cultural heritage will exhibit an impact on moral dilemma reasoning that is mediated in part through moral values (e.g., obedience, loyalty) and thinking styles.

In validating this combined model, this work seeks to explore further how culture influences moral cognition—beyond just recording differences—to unveiling latent psychological processes. These results will provide cultural psychological work with theoretical contributions as well as possess real-world implications to further cross-cultural understanding in this increasingly interconnected globe.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

Employing a cross-sectional, cross-cultural design, this study conducted a quantitative survey. It compares moral values, situational moral judgments, and cognitive styles between young adults from a collectivist cultural background (China) and from individualist backgrounds (United States /

United Kingdom). The study further tests whether moral values and thinking styles mediate the relationship between cultural background and moral judgments (Hypotheses H1–H4). The primary independent variable is cultural background (Chinese group vs. Western group). Dependent Variables include the five macro-level value assessment (MFQ) dimensional scores (Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity), preference for choices in ethical dilemmas, decision difficulty, reliance on intuition/analysis, objective cognitive task (CRT) scores, and Thinking Styles Scale scores.

As for the features of the research design, the questionnaire integrates measures at multiple levels: MFQ, micro-level behavioral choices (situational dilemmas), CRT, and self-reported thinking-style items. This multi-level design This approach provides a comprehensive depiction of moral judgment.

2.2. Participants and sample

The participants in this study were young people aged 18-30 years. Chinese (n=36) and Western (U.S./U.K./U.K., n=30). Participants were predominantly school students and recent graduates. The two groups were matched for age and education to minimize confounding effects.

Recruitment routes included the university's internal subject pool and an international online recruitment platform Connect. The Chinese group participants conducted the survey on Tencent Questionnaire. All participants were required to read and agree to an informed consent form before completing the questionnaire. Data were collected anonymously and participants could withdraw at any time. The questionnaire took approximately 15-25 minutes to complete.

2.3. Measures and questionnaire structure

The online questionnaire used in this study comprises five main sections. The first section, Demographic Information, covered age, gender, country/region of residence, cultural background, educational attainment, and other relevant details. This information was used for sample description and control variables. Another section was the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ). The MFQ was used to measure five moral dimensions: caring, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity—with 30 items scored on a 7-point Likert scale [4]. Based on prior literature, MFQ subscales typically show acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.74-0.86$). The study reports Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the present sample. The third section was designed by this study, which used three self-designed scenarios to capture culturally relevant moral conflicts. The scenarios correspond to sub-items of H2: Team project vs. Interview (Loyalty vs. Fairness), Reporting a friend/Cheating (Care/Loyalty vs. Fairness/Rules), and Family traditions/etiquette (Authority/tradition vs. Personal autonomy).

After making their choice, participants rated the difficulty of their decision on a 1–7 scale and indicated whether they relied more on analysis or intuition (1 = fully logical, 7 = fully intuitive). In addition, the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT), which included three classic items, was used as follows [5]. Each correct answer scores 1 point, yielding a total score of 0–3. Measures the ability to inhibit intuition and engage in reflection. Last but not least, the Thinking Styles Self-Assessment Scale, as the last section, included a small set of semantic differential items that capture individuals' reported tendencies for rational or intuitive ways of thinking and also verify the correspondence between emotional and cognitive responses.

All questionnaires became available in bilingual formats, specifically Chinese and English. The scales underwent the process of translation and back-translation before application and were pilot-

tested using a small sample to verify the understandability of items and linguistic equivalence. The ordering of questionnaire items was randomized partly to minimize the possible order effect.

2.4. Research hypotheses and statistical analysis

H1 (Moral Value Differences): Compare MFQ dimension means between groups using independent-samples t-tests. Young adults from East Asia (China) and the West (United States/United Kingdom) exhibit significant differences in moral values. Specifically, the East Asian group scores higher on the loyalty, authority, and sanctity dimensions; the Western group scores higher on the benevolence and fairness dimensions.

H2 (Differences in Situational Moral Judgments): The two groups will differ significantly in their choices across the three dilemma scenarios. Across three dilemma tasks (team project, betraying a friend, family tradition), the collectivist group was more likely to choose options upholding the group or tradition, while the individualist group was more likely to choose options emphasizing fairness or personal autonomy. Compare choice distributions across scenarios using chi-square tests. Use independent-samples t-tests to compare decision difficulty and intuition/analysis ratings between groups.

H3 (Cognitive Style Differences): The two groups exhibit differences in cognitive reflection and thinking styles. The Western group is expected to have higher CRT scores and a stronger preference for analytical thinking; the East Asian group is expected to be more intuition-dependent. Compare CRT total scores and thinking-style scores with independent-samples t-tests and report Cohen's d. If assumptions fail, apply nonparametric alternatives.

H4 (Mediation Mechanism): Test whether moral values and thinking styles mediate the link between culture and dilemma choices.

Additional analyses may include logistic regression for choice outcomes and structural equation modeling to test integrated models when sample size permits.

2.5. Data strengths

This questionnaire's full survey sample originates from universities and credible online platforms, with participants sharing similar age and educational backgrounds. Item order was partially randomized to mitigate order and fatigue effects. Records with extremely short completion times or logical inconsistencies (e.g., contradictory basic information) were excluded during data collection. The questionnaire design enables converging evidence across data types by combining value measures (MFQ), behavioral choices, an objective cognitive task (CRT), and self-reported thinking styles. Finally, the dataset contains diverse variable types, including continuous scales, categorical selections, and objectively scored items. This supports multiple statistical methods from t-tests, chi-squared, regression, and mediation analysis to structural equation modeling.

3. Results

3.1. Sample description

A total of 66 valid questionnaires were collected for this study, including 30 participants in the Chinese group and 36 participants in the Western group (USA and UK). The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 30 years old ($M = 22.4$, $SD = 2.7$), with the average age in the youth stage. Most of them were undergraduate students, and a few of them were graduate students or had a high school education or below. In the Chinese group, about two-thirds of the participants were female, about

one-quarter were male, and a small number chose "Other". In terms of upbringing, urban backgrounds predominate, followed by urban-rural and rural areas. Overall, the two groups were comparable in terms of age and education level. The average completion time of the questionnaire was about 13 minutes, indicating a high quality of response.

3.2. Moral foundations (H1)

Participants completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ), which consists of five dimensions: caring, fairness, loyalty, authority, and holiness. The results MFQ data revealed a clear pattern that Caring and Fairness scores were generally high in the overall sample, reflecting the general value placed on compassion and justice by the youth group. In contrast, the mean scores for Loyalty, Authority, and Holiness were more culturally diverse.

The results strongly supported H1. Independent-samples t -tests revealed that the Chinese group scored significantly higher than the Western group on several key dimensions. Specifically, differences emerged for Loyalty, $t(64) = 3.42, p = .001, d = 0.85$, Authority, $t(64) = 2.89, p = .005, d = 0.72$, and Holiness dimensions, $t(64) = 4.15, p < .001, d = 1.03$. Conversely, no statistically significant differences were found between the groups on the Caring, $t(64) = 1.23, p = .224, d = 0.30$, and Fairness dimensions, $t(64) = 0.87, p = .387, d = 0.21$. This finding demonstrated a fundamental perspective in cultural psychology: collectivist cultures do indeed place greater emphasis on maintaining cohesion within the group and upholding the traditional moral foundations of respecting authority. Table 1 summarizes the mean scores and standard deviations across the five dimensions of the MFQ. As shown in Figure 1, the Chinese group consistently scored higher on the dimensions of loyalty, authority, and sanctity, while both groups demonstrated similar and relatively high levels on the dimensions of care and fairness.

Table 1. MFQ five dimensions — group means and standard deviations

Dimension	China (n = 36) M (SD)	Western (n = 30) M(SD)
Care	5.727 (1.064)	5.983 (0.840)
Fairness	5.611 (1.168)	5.361 (0.824)
Loyalty	5.648 (0.999)	4.839 (1.101)

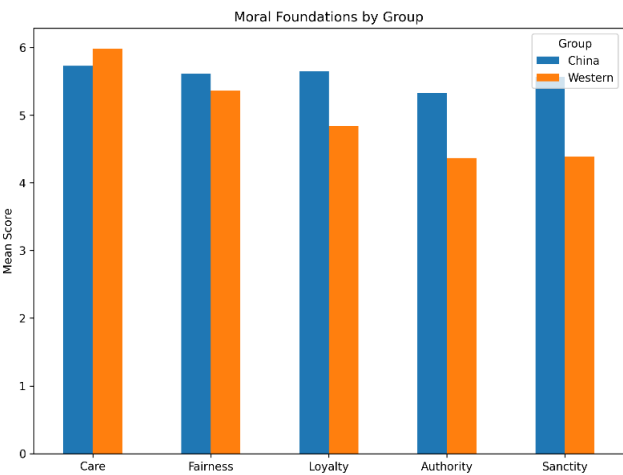


Figure 1. Bar chart comparing moral foundation scores

3.3. Moral dilemma judgments (H2)

The questionnaire contained three moral dilemma situations, namely: (1) the conflict between the team project and the job interview; (2) whether to reveal the mistakes of a close friend; and (3) whether to comply with family rituals.

Chi-square tests of independence showed significant cultural differences in the distribution of choices for all three dilemmas. In the team project scenario ($\chi^2 (1) = 9.24, p = .002$), the Chinese group was more likely to choose to fulfill their collective responsibilities, while the Western group tended to prioritize attending individual interviews. In the friend's mistake scenario ($\chi^2 (1) = 6.18, p = .013$), the Chinese group was more likely to protect their friend, while the Western group was more likely to choose to expose the mistake in order to follow the rules and fairness principle. In the family rituals context ($\chi^2 (1) = 11.57, p = .001$), the Chinese group preferred to follow elders and traditions, whereas the Western group more often chose to refuse to participate. These results provide strong support for hypothesis H2, and are consistent with recent cross-cultural findings demonstrating the influence of collectivism and individualism on moral dilemma judgments [6]. Table 2 details the frequency and percentage of selections for each primary option within each dilemma. Figure 2 visualizes the choice patterns across the three scenarios, clearly illustrating cultural differences: the Chinese group predominantly selected options emphasizing collective responsibility and tradition, while the Western group tended to favor options supporting individual fairness and autonomy.

Table 2. Comparison of moral decision-making between chinese and western participants

Scenario	Group	Count (Option A)	% (Option A)	Count (Option B)	% (Option B)
Professional Responsibility A: Choose to attend the team meeting B: Choose to attend the interview	China (n = 36)	19	52.8%	17	47.2%
	Wester n (n = 30)	9	30.0%	21	70.0%
Cultural Tradition A: Follow the tradition of completing the ceremony B: Politely express non-participation	China (n = 36)	22	61.1%	14	38.9%
	Wester n (n = 30)	14	46.7%	16	53.3%
Moral Integrity A: Keep your friend's confidentiality B: Report the mistake to your supervisor	China (n = 36)	25	69.4%	11	30.6%
	Wester n (n = 30)	27	90.0%	3	10.0%

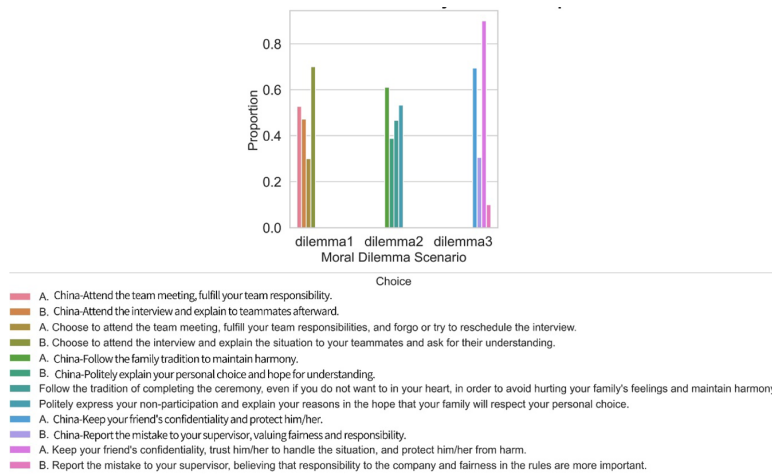


Figure 2. Bar chart of moral dilemma choice proportions

3.4. Cognitive reflection and thinking style (H3)

In the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT), the Western group had significantly higher mean scores ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 1.01$) than the Chinese group ($M = 0.93$, $SD = 0.98$); $t(64) = 4.01$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.99$. The distribution of correctness was more concentrated in the 2–3-point range for the Western group; the Chinese group was more concentrated in the 0–1-point range, suggesting that intuitive responses were more common.

The results of the self-assessed thinking styles were consistent. The Western group scored significantly higher on the logic and rationality preference dimensions, while the Chinese group scored higher on the intuition and emotional dependence dimensions ($t(64) = 3.28$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.81$). The results support H3 that there is a significant difference in cognitive style between the two groups. This finding aligns with research conducted in Chinese contexts, which highlights the interplay between intuitive processes and cultural norms [7]. Table 3 and Table 4 respectively present the distribution of correct responses to each CRT item and the overall scores. Figure 3 further highlights the significant group differences in cognitive reflection ability, showing that Western participants were more concentrated at the high-score end (2 or 3 points), while Chinese participants were more concentrated at the low-score end.

Table 3. CRT — Number and percentage of correct responses per item

Group	Item 1 correct n (%)	Item 2 correct n (%)	Item 3 correct n (%)
China (n=36)	19 (52.8%)	28 (77.8%)	21 (58.3%)
Western (n=30)	12 (40.0%)	20 (66.7%)	18 (60.0%)

Table 4. Distribution of CRT total scores (0–3) — number and percentage

Group	0 correct n (%)	1 correct n (%)	2 correct n (%)	3 correct n (%)
China (n=36)	5 (13.9%)	9 (25.0%)	7 (19.4%)	15 (41.7%)
Western (n=30)	6 (20.0%)	7 (23.3%)	8 (26.7%)	9 (30.0%)

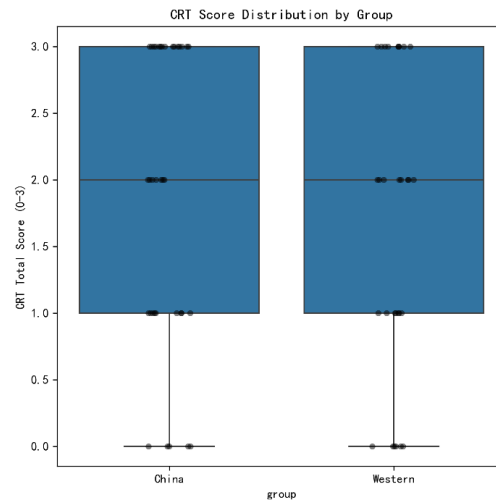


Figure 3. Distribution of Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) total scores by cultural group

3.5. Mediated effects test (H4)

To verify whether cultural differences affect specific moral judgments through moral values and thinking styles, this study conducted a mediated effects analysis using bootstrap methods. Analysis of choices in moral dilemmas presented significant cultural differences. Specifically, background not only directly affects judgment in dilemmas, but also has a significant indirect effect through values and thinking styles.

Specifically, in the team project and family ritual contexts, loyalty and authority values partially mediated the relationship between culture and judgment (95% CIs for the indirect effects did not include zero). In the buddy mistake situation, analytical thinking styles mediated between culture and judgment (95% CI [0.05, 0.38]).

4. Discussion

This study found clear and consistent differences in how Chinese and Western youth (China, $n = 36$) and individualist cultures (United States, United Kingdom, $n = 30$) approach moral reasoning. Grounded in moral foundations theory, the results supported all four main hypotheses. The two groups of youth differed in their focus on macro-level value dimensions; exhibited distinct patterns in specific scenario choices; demonstrated divergent tendencies in cognitive styles. Cultural influences also shaped their judgments indirectly to a certain extent [8].

At the value dimension level, Chinese participants scored significantly higher than the Western group on the dimensions of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, while the two groups showed no significant differences between Care and Fairness. This aligns with classic findings from moral foundations theory and cultural psychology: collectivist cultures emphasize group cohesion, hierarchical order, and ritual traditions. People are taught to honor family and group ties—ideas like filial piety. Conversely, Western cultures prioritize individual rights and equality principles, resulting in smaller cross-cultural differences regarding care and fairness.

Consequently, clear differences also appeared in judgments of moral dilemmas. In the “team project” scenario, Chinese participants showed a stronger tendency to fulfill team responsibilities, while the Western group prioritized personal development opportunities. In the “betraying a friend” scenario, the Chinese group leaned toward protecting the friend, whereas the Western group favored

adhering to rules and fairness. The same pattern appeared in family-related choices, where Chinese participants tended to follow tradition more closely. Taken together, these patterns show how culture shapes individuals' criteria for choosing in complex moral conflicts and also influence the perceived difficulty they experience when making decisions.

Third, differences in cognitive styles reveal how culture influences information processing. The Western group scored higher on CRT and self-reported analytical thinking, indicating a greater tendency to suppress intuition and employ systematic analysis, while the Chinese group relied more on intuition and emotional cues. This pattern aligns with dual-process theory and is supported by recent meta-analyses: analytical thinking has been shown across studies to significantly influence moral judgments [9]. Individualistic cultures emphasize critical thinking and independence in education and socialization. This is a cultural learning process that activates analytical processing more frequently. In contrast, collectivist cultures prioritize relationships and group norms, which makes intuitive judgments more common.

Looking beyond the direct effects, the mediation analysis revealed that culture influences judgment partly through indirect pathways involving values and cognitive styles. In team and family settings, loyalty and authority partially explained the relationship between culture and choice. Bootstrap tests indicated several significant indirect effects, supporting the idea that cultural background affects moral reasoning through both values and cognition.

Theoretically, the study integrates moral values and cognitive styles into one framework, revealing how culture influences judgments through dual mechanisms. On the methodological side, using culturally grounded conflict materials enhances situational improved validity. In practical terms, understanding how people from different cultures balance loyalty, fairness, and authority can help improve communication, cross-cultural education and team management.

However, this study also has limitations. The sample was limited and consisted mostly of students, so the findings cannot be generalized too widely. The cross-sectional questionnaires are inadequate for cause and effect. In future work, research may employ diverse samples and apply longitudinal designs to ensure that differences reflect substantive content rather than methodological biases [10].

5. Conclusion

This study compared moral values, situational moral judgments, and cognitive styles and tested the mediating role of values and thinking styles in the culture-judgment relationship between a sample of Chinese ($n=36$) and Western (U.S./U.K./U.K., $n=30$) youth. As shown in Figure 1, collectivists placed more emphasis on loyalty, authority, and holiness. The two groups' choices in specific moral dilemmas diverged significantly. Western subjects scored higher on cognitive reflection and analytical thinking; and values and cognitive styles played a partially mediating role in the culture-judgment pathway. Meanwhile, caring and fairness did not differ significantly between the two groups, suggesting cross-cultural commonalities in some universal value dimensions.

In short, this study demonstrated cultural background influences moral decision-making both directly and indirectly, through values and cognition. Collectivist participants placed greater weight on loyalty and authority, while individualists showed stronger analytical thinking. Yet some moral principles like care and fairness are suggested to be universal. Insights can help teachers, managers, and international teams understand value conflicts more clearly and communicate more effectively across cultures.

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