

## Cultural Predictors of Self-Esteem: A Study of Chinese American Female and Male Young Adults

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*This study examined how specific domains of cultural orientation (language, social affiliation, and cultural pride) related to self-esteem for a sample of 174 Chinese American male and 179 Chinese American female college students. Participants completed measures of cultural orientation (General Ethnicity Questionnaire; J. L. Tsai, Y. W. Ying, & P. A. Lee, 2000) and self-esteem (M. Rosenberg, 1965). Cultural orientation significantly predicted self-esteem, above and beyond the contribution of age, gender, grade point average, and socioeconomic status. Specifically, proficiency in English and Chinese languages and pride in Chinese culture were positively correlated with self-esteem, whereas affiliation with Chinese people was negatively correlated with self-esteem. The cultural predictors of self-esteem differed for Chinese American men and women. Whereas self-esteem was mainly related to pride in Chinese culture for Chinese American women, self-esteem was mainly related to English and Chinese language proficiency for Chinese American men. Implications of these findings for understanding Asian Americans are discussed.*

• cultural orientation • self-esteem • gender • Chinese Americans

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*We would like to thank John S. Huang, Yuan Hung, Yu J. Lee, Melissa Lin, Malisa Tsang, and Ching Tin Wan for their research assistance and the participants of the study for their contributions to the research.*

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American psychology and psychiatry have long considered self-esteem, or “the level of global regard that one has for the self as a person” (Harter, 1993, p. 88), to be an important index of psychological health and well-being. Positive regard for the self has been associated with higher levels of experienced positive affect, lower levels of depressed affect (Brage & Meredith, 1994; Brown & Mankowski, 1993), and more adaptive coping (DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988). Given the psychological importance of self-esteem in American culture, it is not surprising that many studies have examined how different sources of individual variation—age, gender, academic achievement, and social class—relate to feelings about the self. Although findings vary across studies, by and large, self-esteem appears to decline during adolescence and to increase during young adulthood (Phinney, DuPont, Espinosa, Revill, & Sanders, 1994). Males typically report higher self-esteem than do females (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999), and individuals who achieve academically have higher self-esteem than those who do not (Baker, Beer, & Beer, 1991; Cheng & Page, 1989; Wiggins, Schatz, & West, 1994). Socioeconomic status has also been found to correlate with self-esteem, with individuals of higher social class having more positive feelings about themselves than those of lower social class (Francis & Jones, 1996; Rosenberg, 1965; Rosenberg & Pearlman, 1978). These differences have been attributed to a variety of factors, many of which are sociocultural in nature. For example, gender differences in reported levels of self-esteem have been attributed to the traditional roles of women and men in American society, the ways in which American society socializes women and men to behave, the differential treatment of male and female students by their teachers in American schools, and the American emphasis on female physical appearance (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kling et al., 1999).

### **Culture and Self-Esteem**

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Given that many of the group differences in self-esteem described above have been attributed to sociocultural factors, it is not surprising that several scholars have recently begun to study explicitly whether culture is a systematic source of variation in self-esteem. Culture shapes various aspects of the self: how people view themselves, what they strive to be, and when they feel good (or bad) about themselves. Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that culture shapes how people define themselves—whether they see themselves as autonomous and separate from others or whether they view themselves as inextricably connected to others. Indeed, evidence suggests that cultural differences in one’s self-conceptions influence one’s reported feelings of self-regard, or one’s self-esteem. For instance, Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999) and Yik, Bond, and Paulhus (1998) argued that members of East Asian (e.g., Japanese, Chinese) and Western (North American) cultures vary in the extent to which they value and promote positive feelings of self-regard. That is, because North American cultures view the self as separate from others, they encourage their members to demonstrate their uniqueness by engaging in self-enhancement strategies (i.e., presentation of the self as superior to others), whereas Chinese and Japanese cultures view the self as connected with others and therefore encourage their members to maintain interpersonal relationships through self-effacement strategies (i.e., presentation of the self as inferior to others). In other words, whereas North American individuals tend to view and present themselves positively, Chinese or Japanese individuals tend to view and present themselves negatively. As a result, normative reported levels of self-esteem tend to be lower among Chinese and Japanese than among North Americans (Heine et al., 1999). It is important to note that in these studies, cultural differences emerge in *reported* levels of self-esteem. Cultural differences in reported levels of self-esteem may

reflect differences in self-presentation or in feelings of self-regard. Therefore, other research methods are required to determine whether cultural differences exist in *actual* feelings about the self. Regardless, presentation of the self is an important area of study because in most interpersonal settings, how individuals present themselves influences how others respond to them.

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### ***Generalizability to Asian Americans***

Although only a handful of studies have examined whether found differences in reported levels of self-esteem extend to Asian Americans (i.e., individuals of Asian descent who currently reside in the United States and who are exposed to both Asian and American cultures), in general, a similar pattern emerges. Asian Americans report lower levels of self-esteem compared with their White American counterparts (Crocker & Lawrence, 1999; Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999; Porter & Washington, 1993; White & Chan, 1983). It is presumed that lower levels of self-esteem among Asian Americans reflect the influence of Asian norms of self-effacement; however, cultural influences on Asian Americans may be somewhat more complex than this explanation suggests. Asian Americans differ from members of Asian cultures in three important ways. First, unlike monocultural Asians, Asian Americans are influenced by Asian *and* American cultural norms (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). As a result, although they are influenced by Asian cultural norms of self-effacement, they are also influenced by American cultural norms of self-enhancement. Second, because Asian Americans are influenced by more than one cultural belief system, traverse multiple cultural contexts, and alter their behavior to function effectively in a specific cultural context, they may be more aware of cultural values, norms, and customs than individuals who are monocultural. Thus, cultural influences may have a particularly strong influence on reported

feelings about the self in this group. Third, unlike monocultural Asians who comprise the majority group in their countries, Asian Americans are racial and ethnic minorities in the United States and must overcome barriers that accompany their minority status (Lung & Sue, 1997). Thus, they may use psychological strategies to defend against discrimination or prejudice they experience as a result of their minority status. These differences make it likely that bicultural Asian Americans have different cultural experiences than monocultural Asians, which may in turn make the relations between culture and self-esteem more complex for this group.

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### ***The Present Study***

In this article, we attempt to advance our understanding of the relations between cultural orientation and reported levels of self-esteem for Asian Americans. From our review of the literature, we observed that although research has focused on differences in mean levels of self-esteem between Asian Americans and other ethnic groups, many other important issues remain. First, for bicultural individuals such as Asian Americans, cultural adaptation and adjustment are persistent and salient parts of their daily experience. As a result, cultural orientation should be a significant predictor of self-esteem, distinguishable from other sources of variation. However, no study has shown explicitly that cultural variables explain a significant percentage of variation in self-esteem above and beyond other factors related to self-esteem (e.g., age, gender, academic achievement, and social class) for Asian Americans.

Second, different cultural influences may exert opposing effects on multicultural individuals. For example, for Asian Americans, engagement in mainstream American culture may increase their reported levels of self-esteem (because of norms of self-enhancement), whereas engagement in Asian culture may decrease reported levels of self-esteem (because of norms of self-

effacement). In a series of important studies, Phinney and her colleagues (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992; Phinney et al., 1994) have looked at the relationships between American and ethnic identification and self-esteem for Asian Americans and other ethnic groups; however, the focus of their studies has been on the development of ethnic group membership and its impact on self-esteem. None of their articles addressed the questions that we ask in the present article. Thus, to our knowledge, no study has examined whether engagement in American and Asian cultural domains exerts opposing effects on reported levels of self-esteem in Asian Americans.

Third, no studies have examined how the cultural predictors of self-esteem vary for Asian American men and women, despite the fact that women and men are treated differently by both Asian and American cultures. As stated earlier, men and women are treated differently in American culture (Kling et al., 1999). With respect to the self, American men are socialized to be autonomous and independent and therefore view themselves in terms of their abilities and strengths, whereas American women are socialized to be relationship oriented and interdependent and therefore view themselves in terms of their relationships with others (Cross & Madsen, 1997). Because women are deemed responsible for the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, they may place greater emphasis on emotions, both their own and others, compared with men (Cross & Madsen, 1997). Men and women also assume different roles in many Asian societies. Because both Asian American men and women may have interdependent views of the self, self-esteem may be based on social relationships for both groups; however, the roles that Asian men and women assume in their social relationships differ. For example, in the traditional Asian family, there is a strict hierarchy, with males (fathers, sons) holding higher status than females (mothers, daughters). Whereas males are socialized to be au-

thoritative, strict, and aloof, females are socialized to be nurturing and emotional (Okazaki, 1998). Thus, feelings about the self may be based on different domains for Asian American men and women. Although both groups may base their self-esteem on their relationships with others, Asian American women may base their self-esteem more on emotional domains (e.g., feelings) than Asian American men. Moreover, Asian American men may base their self-esteem more on nonemotional domains (e.g., non-emotional abilities or skills) than Asian American women.

In addition, Asian American men and women are treated differently by mainstream American culture. Although both groups are subject to favorable and unfavorable characterizations, stereotypes about Asian American women tend to be more favorable than those about Asian American men (Tsai, Przymus, & Best, in press). Whereas Asian American women are stereotyped as domestic and sexual, Asian American men are perceived as overly studious, socially inept, weak, and unemotional (Jackson, Lewandowski, Ingram, & Hodge, 1997). In fact, when Jackson et al. (1997) asked their participants (who were all Anglo American) to rate how physically and socially attractive they found Asian American, African American, and Anglo American men and women, their participants rated Asian American men the lowest in physical and social attractiveness of all of the race and gender groupings (including Asian American women). Because men and women are viewed and treated differently by Asian and American cultures, it is possible that Asian American men and women's feelings of self-regard are related to different domains of cultural orientation. Again, no studies have examined whether this is the case.

To address each of these issues, we administered cultural orientation and self-esteem measures to 174 Chinese American male and 179 Chinese American female college students. We chose to study one specific Asian American group to increase the homogeneity of our sample. We chose to study

Chinese Americans because they currently comprise the largest Asian American group in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998).

(e.g., cultural pride) than on nonemotional ones (e.g., language proficiency). We hypothesized that the reverse would be true for Chinese American men.

### Study Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis was that for Chinese Americans, cultural orientation would explain a significant percentage of the variation in self-esteem, above and beyond age, gender, grade point average, and socioeconomic status. Our second hypothesis was that self-esteem would be positively related to engagement in American domains of cultural orientation and negatively related to engagement in Chinese ones. Finally, we hypothesized that Chinese American men and women would differ in the cultural predictors of self-esteem. Specifically, we predicted that because Asian American women are socialized to view themselves as more emotional than Asian American men, women would base their self-esteem more on emotion-related domains of cultural orientation

### Method

#### Participants

Three hundred fifty-three Chinese American college students from a large university in the San Francisco Bay Area (174 male, 179 female; mean age = 20.23 years,  $SD = 1.77$ , range = 17 to 32 years) participated in a study of the "psychological adjustment to college life." Participants were recruited through a variety of methods (subject pool, student organizations, word-of-mouth) to create as large and representative a sample of Chinese American college students as possible.

As illustrated in Table 1, chi-square analyses revealed no differences between male and female participants in the percentage of individuals born in the United States,

**TABLE 1 Similarities and Differences Between Chinese American Men and Women**

Category	Men ( $n = 174$ )			Women ( $n = 179$ )		
	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Demographic variables</b>						
Place of birth (% in United States)	33.9			35.2		
Years in United States <sup>a</sup>		8.39	4.65		9.30	5.24
Marital status (% single)	97.7			95.0		
Socioeconomic scores <sup>b</sup>		27.86	15.72		29.25	14.80
Grade point average <sup>c</sup>		3.14	0.54		3.20	0.44
Age in years		20.01	1.72		20.45	1.80
<b>Cultural orientation variables<sup>d</sup></b>						
Orientation to Chinese culture		3.56	0.58		3.52	0.52
Chinese language		3.08	1.02		3.05	0.95
Chinese social affiliation		3.64	0.69		3.53	0.69
Chinese pride		3.97	0.69		3.92	0.64
Orientation to American Culture		3.54	0.53		3.61	0.50
English language*		3.90	0.81		4.03	0.69
American social affiliation		2.97	0.73		2.95	0.75
American pride		3.23	0.60		3.26	0.54

<sup>a</sup>Calculated for immigrants only. <sup>b</sup>Lower score indicates higher socioeconomic status. <sup>c</sup>On a 4-point rating scale. <sup>d</sup>Higher scores indicate greater cultural orientation.

\* $p < .05$ .

the number of years spent in the United States (calculated for immigrants only), or in the percentage of individuals who were single. The two groups also did not differ in their socioeconomic status (based on Hollingshead, 1957), or their grade point averages. One-way analyses of variance, however, revealed that men were significantly younger than women,  $F(1, 351) = 5.39$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### Questionnaires

**GENERAL ETHNICITY QUESTIONNAIRE (GEQ).** The GEQ (Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000) allows independent assessment of different types of cultural orientation. Two identical versions of the same instrument measure orientation to various domains of Chinese and American cultures. Participants used a scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* to rate how much they agreed with statements about their cultural orientation (e.g., "I was raised in a way that was Chinese" and "I was raised in a way that was American"). For items that inquired about participants' language proficiency, the scale ranged from 1 = *very much* to 5 = *not at all* (e.g., "How much do you speak English at home?" and "How much do you speak Chinese at home?"). Items regarding language use and proficiency were reverse-coded. Each scale comprised the same 37 items, with the exception of 1 item ("Are you bilingual?") that was asked only once and that was included as an item on the GEQ-Chinese version (GEQC). Internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) for both scales were high ( $\alpha = .92$  for the GEQC version and  $\alpha = .92$  for the GEQ-American version; GEQA); 1-month test-retest reliability was .62 ( $SD = .22$ ) for the GEQC and .57 ( $SD = .16$ ) for the GEQA ( $n = 60$ ).

As reported in Tsai, Ying, and Lee (2000), the GEQC and GEQA sample six domains of Chinese culture (determined empirically by principal-components analyses). To reduce the number of predictor variables that we included in our analyses, we chose to

examine the same three domains of cultural orientation for Chinese and American cultures: (a) language use and proficiency, (b) social affiliation, and (c) cultural pride. We chose these particular domains because they are important aspects of daily life and because we had explicit hypotheses about their relations to self-esteem. Greater mean values indicated greater orientation to that specific culture for that specific domain.

**PERSONAL SELF-ESTEEM.** This instrument (Rosenberg, 1965, 1979) is a widely used 10-item questionnaire (Hagborg, 1993) that examines perceptions and presentation of the individual self (as opposed to the collective self; see Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994). Participants used a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree* to indicate how strongly they agreed with statements such as "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" or "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure." The sum of all 10 items was calculated; the greater the value, the higher participants' self-esteem. In the present study, the alpha reliability of this instrument was .86, and its 1-month test-retest reliability was .90 ( $n = 52$ ).

### Procedure

Participants completed the instruments described above as well as a general demographic questionnaire. These instruments were presented in simple English. It was assumed that to have gained admission to the prestigious university at which the study was conducted, students had to have, at the very least, an elementary knowledge of English. No participants reported any difficulty understanding the questionnaires. These questionnaires were presented with several other filler questionnaires (not relevant to the focus of this article) to decrease attention paid to the questionnaires of interest. The same order of questionnaire presentation was used for all participants. Participants recruited through the psychology subject pool received course credit for their participation

in the study. At the end of the study, participants who were recruited through student organizations and by word-of-mouth received tickets to a party given on their behalf.

## Results

Unless otherwise specified,  $p < .05$  was used to identify significant effects and interactions.

### *Effect of Gender on Mean Levels of Cultural Orientation and Self-Esteem*

As revealed by their mean cultural orientation scores, our Chinese American sample reported being moderately oriented to both Chinese and American cultures (mean GEQC score for sample = 3.54,  $SD = 0.55$ ; mean GEQA score for sample = 3.58,  $SD = 0.51$ ). A paired  $t$  test found no difference between reported levels of orientation to Chinese and American cultures. There were no gender differences in overall cultural orientation scores, even after controlling for differences in age (see Table 1). To examine whether men and women differed in their cultural orientation for the specific life domains sampled, we conducted 2 (group: male vs. female)  $\times$  3 (domain: language, social affiliation, pride) multivariate analyses of variance, controlling for group differences in age, on Chinese domain subscores. Group was treated as a between-subjects variable; domain was treated as a within-subjects variable. Similar analyses were conducted for American domain subscores. Analyses revealed no significant main effects of gender or interactions involving gender for any of the domains of Chinese cultural orientation. A significant Gender  $\times$  Domain interaction was found for domains of American cultural orientation,  $F(2, 349) = 3.20$ ,  $p < .05$ . Follow-up analyses revealed that female participants reported greater proficiency in English than did male participants,  $F(1, 350) = 5.00$ ,  $p < .05$ . Table 1 lists the mean levels of cultural

orientation for Chinese and American domains for male and female participants.

To examine whether there were gender differences in mean reported levels of self-esteem, we conducted an analysis of covariance, controlling for age. Analyses revealed a significant gender difference,  $F(1, 350) = 4.46$ ,  $p < .05$ . Consistent with previous studies, male participants ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) reported higher levels of self-esteem than did female participants ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ).

### *Is Cultural Orientation a Significant Predictor of Self-Esteem for Chinese Americans, Independent of Gender, Age, Grade Point Average, and Socioeconomic Status?*

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses in which age, gender, grade point average, socioeconomic status, and place of birth were entered at the first step and in which Chinese and American domains of cultural orientation (language, social affiliation, and cultural pride) were entered at the second step were conducted. Although we did not have specific hypotheses about the relations between place of birth and self-esteem, we included this variable in our analyses because it has been found to be an important source of variation within Asian American groups (Tsai, 2000; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000). To determine if the cultural orientation variables predicted self-esteem above and beyond the demographic variables, we examined whether the change in  $R^2$  due to the addition of the cultural orientation variables was significant. Adding the cultural orientation variables to the model resulted in an increase in the adjusted  $R^2$  of .08 (from .03 to .11); as predicted, this change was significant,  $F(6, 341) = 6.17$ ,  $p < .001$ . As shown in Table 2, grade point average and gender were significant predictors of self-esteem. Consistent with previous studies, self-esteem was positively correlated with grade point average (however, this correlation may hold for men only; see below). Adding the cultural orientation variables did not alter the nature of these relationships.

TABLE 2 Standardized Beta Coefficients for Predictors of Self-Esteem

Variable	All (n = 353)	Men (n = 174)	Women (n = 179)
Model I. Demographic variables			
Age	-.04	-.12	.02
Grade point average	.12*	.18*	.04
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.12*		
Socioeconomic status	-.06	.03	-.13†
Place of birth <sup>b</sup>	-.06	.01	-.13†
Model II. Demographic and cultural orientation variables			
Age	.01	-.04	.05
Grade point average	.11*	.13	.06
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.15**		
Socioeconomic status	-.06	.01	-.12
Place of birth <sup>b</sup>	-.003	.07	-.03
Chinese language	.24*	.36*	.11
Chinese social affiliation	-.16*	-.16†	-.12
Chinese pride	.24**	.14†	.33***
English language	.32**	.56*	.12
American social affiliation	-.002	-.09	.11
American pride	.01	-.04	.05

<sup>a</sup>1 = male, 2 = female. <sup>b</sup>1 = United States, 2 = other.

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

#### *Does Engagement in American and Chinese Cultures Exert Opposing Effects on Self-Esteem?*

Among the cultural orientation variables, self-esteem increased with greater proficiency in Chinese, proficiency in English, and pride in Chinese culture. Self-esteem, however, decreased with increased affiliation with Chinese or Chinese Americans. We had predicted that reported levels of self-esteem would increase with engagement in American culture; our finding that proficiency in English was positively correlated with reported levels of self-esteem supported this claim. We had also expected that reported levels of self-esteem would decrease with engagement in Chinese culture. This prediction was supported for the domain of Chinese social affiliation only. Contrary to our predictions, self-esteem was positively correlated with proficiency in Chinese and pride in Chinese culture.

#### *Do Chinese American Women and Men Differ in the Specific Cultural Predictors of Self-Esteem?*

To examine whether the cultural predictors of self-esteem were different for women and

men for each gender, we conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses in which age, grade point average, socioeconomic status, and place of birth were entered at the first step and in which Chinese and American domains of cultural orientation were entered at the second step. The correlation matrices for each of the variables included in these analyses are presented in Table 3. To determine if the cultural orientation variables predicted self-esteem above and beyond the demographic variables, we examined whether the change in  $R^2$  due to the addition of the cultural orientation variables was significant.

For men, the addition of the cultural orientation variables to the regression model resulted in an increase in the adjusted  $R^2$  of .07 (from .02 to .09); this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(6, 163) = 3.29$ ,  $p < .01$ . As shown in Table 2, although at the first step grade point average was significantly correlated with self-esteem, after entering the cultural orientation variables to the model, this was no longer the case. Among the cultural orientation variables, proficiency in Chinese and proficiency in English were significant



TABLE 3 Correlation Matrices for Variables in Multiple Regression Analyses

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Esteem	—	-.01	.05	-.17*	-.15*	-.08	-.07	.30***	.16*	.18*	.13†
2. Age in years	-.09	—	.14†	.10	.18*	.15*	.03	-.07	-.23**	-.13†	.05
3. Grade point average	.17*	.16*	—	-.13†	.10	.07	-.02	-.02	-.12	-.13†	-.13†
4. Socioeconomic status	-.02	.21**	-.11	—	.22**	.11	.01	-.02	-.12	-.25***	-.14†
5. Place of birth <sup>a</sup>	.002	.26***	.08	.28***	—	.58***	.22	-.09	-.53***	-.51***	-.08
6. Chinese language	-.01	.28***	.13	.27***	.61***	—	.57***	.19*	-.75***	-.67***	-.14*
7. Chinese social affiliation	.002	.11	.26***	.10	.15*	.47***	—	.30***	-.36***	-.53***	-.09
8. Chinese pride	.12	-.02	.05	.07	.12†	-.24***	.47***	—	-.03	-.13†	.03
9. English language	.20*	-.32***	.04	-.24***	-.61***	-.80***	-.25***	-.10	—	.63***	.24***
10. American social affiliation	.01	-.17*	-.09	-.22**	-.52***	-.57***	-.29***	-.12	.60***	—	.32***
11. American pride	.05	-.10	.03	-.05	-.25***	-.23***	-.05	.11	.39***	.34***	—

Note. Correlations for Chinese American men are presented below the diagonal, and correlations for Chinese American women are presented above the diagonal. Esteem = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Score.

<sup>a</sup>1 = United States, 2 = other.

† $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

predictors of self-esteem: The more proficient individuals were in these languages, the higher was their self-esteem. Thus, consistent with our hypotheses, men based their self-esteem more on nonemotional aspects of cultural orientation (language proficiency) than on emotional ones (cultural pride).

For women, the addition of the cultural orientation variables to the regression model resulted in an increase in an adjusted  $R^2$  of .10 (from .02 to .12); this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(6, 168) = 4.30, p < .001$ . As shown in Table 2, none of the demographic variables was significantly correlated with self-esteem. Among the cultural orientation variables, pride in Chinese culture was significantly and positively correlated with self-esteem. Thus, consistent with our hypotheses, Chinese American women based their self-esteem more on emotional aspects of cultural orientation (cultural pride) than on nonemotional ones (language proficiency).

The negative correlation between self-esteem and Chinese social affiliation was marginally significant for Chinese American men and was not significant for Chinese American women. This may be due to the reduction in sample size that occurred when we examined the relationships between cultural orientation and self-esteem within each gender group, as well as to the moderate correlation between Chinese social affiliation and other cultural domains (e.g., Chinese language and Chinese pride; see Table 3).

### Discussion

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This study advances our understanding of the relations between cultural orientation and self-esteem in a Chinese American sample. The study attempted to answer three main questions: (a) Is cultural orientation a significant predictor of self-esteem, controlling for other demographic variables? (b) Do American and Chinese cultures exert opposing effects on self-esteem?

and (c) Do cultural predictors of self-esteem differ for Chinese American men and women? We discuss our findings in the context of each of these questions.

#### *Is Cultural Orientation a Significant Predictor of Self-Esteem for Chinese Americans, Independent of Age, Gender, Grade Point Average, and Socioeconomic Status?*

Consistent with our first hypothesis, we found that for Chinese Americans, cultural orientation was a significant predictor of self-esteem, even after controlling for age, gender, grade point average, and socioeconomic status. This finding supports our assertion that for Chinese Americans (and possibly for other bicultural individuals as well), culture is a salient part of daily functioning and has a significant relationship to self-esteem.

#### *Does Engagement in American and Chinese Cultures Exert Opposing Effects on Self-Esteem?*

Our second hypothesis was that engagement in American culture would be positively related to self-esteem (consistent with the American norm of self-enhancement), whereas engagement in Chinese culture would be negatively related to self-esteem (consistent with the Chinese norm of self-effacement). This prediction was only partially supported. English language proficiency was positively correlated with self-esteem, and Chinese social affiliation was negatively correlated with self-esteem for the entire sample. Pride in Chinese culture and Chinese language proficiency, however, were *positively* correlated with self-esteem. These last two findings reflect the unique and complex cultural influences under which Chinese Americans live; specifically, they suggest that Chinese Americans (and perhaps Asian Americans more generally) are not only influenced by traditional Asian and American cultural norms but also influenced in some way by their status as ethnic minorities in the United States. How ethnic minority status influences self-esteem may

depend on the level of cultural consciousness that exists in a group's surrounding community. For example, our sample lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, a hotbed of cultural diversity, and attended a university with a history of promoting cultural consciousness and pride. In this specific context, Chinese Americans are told explicitly by their community (which comprised a variety of ethnic groups) to take pride in their cultural heritage (which includes speaking Chinese) and to feel good about themselves because of their rich cultural background. This may serve to protect Chinese Americans from the racism and discrimination that often accompany being a member of an ethnic minority group. In sum, our findings suggest that the self-esteem of our Chinese American sample is influenced by (a) Asian cultural norms of self-effacement, (b) American cultural norms of self-enhancement, and possibly, (c) Bay Area community norms of pride in being an ethnic minority.

#### *Do the Cultural Predictors of Self-Esteem Differ for Chinese American Women and Men?*

As has been found across a number of studies, in our sample of Chinese Americans, male participants reported higher levels of self-esteem than did female participants. Consistent with our third hypothesis, the strongest cultural predictors of self-esteem varied for women and men. Women based their self-esteem more on emotional domains of cultural orientation (pride in Chinese culture) than on nonemotional ones (language proficiency), whereas men based their self-esteem more on nonemotional domains of cultural orientation (Chinese and English language proficiency) than on emotional ones. Thus, the association between cultural orientation and self-esteem differed for Chinese American men and Chinese American women.

#### *Study Limitations*

Our study was limited in a number of ways. First, our study, like most studies of self-

esteem, used a self-report measure of self-esteem. Clearly, how individuals present themselves may differ from how they actually feel about themselves. Thus, future studies should use different methods of measuring evaluation of the self that do not conflate these two aspects of the self. Second, our study was correlational in design, and therefore, we cannot draw any conclusions about causality from our data. It is possible that Chinese Americans with high self-esteem are more likely to feel pride for their Chinese heritage and to be more proficient in Chinese and English, and they may be less likely to socialize with Chinese and Chinese Americans. Studies that follow samples over time or experimentally manipulate cultural orientation may determine whether changes in cultural orientation cause changes in self-esteem or vice versa. Third, because our study was conducted on a Chinese American student sample attending a prestigious university in the multicultural San Francisco Bay Area, the generalizability of our findings may be limited. Moreover, we may have restricted the range of some of our variables, which may explain why they did not emerge as significant predictors of self-esteem. For example, age was not correlated with self-esteem; however, this may be because we studied college students only. Future studies should examine whether our findings hold for community samples, samples of different ages and levels of achievement, samples with different reasons for migration, and samples that reside in regions of the country with Asian American and other ethnic communities that vary in size. Fourth, we sampled only three areas of cultural orientation: language, social affiliation, and pride. Future studies should include other cultural variables (e.g., specific values, beliefs, and norms) to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural orientation relates to self-esteem.

It should be noted that the amount of variance in self-esteem accounted for in our study was modest (9% in men and 12% in women). This is not surprising as self-esteem reflects a global self-perception, encompass-

ing an evaluation of the self that is based on a multitude of factors. Other factors such as social relationships (especially family and peer relationships) or feelings about the group (see Luhtanen & Crocker's, 1992, measure of collective self-esteem) may be important to include in future studies of Chinese American self-esteem and should result in more comprehensive assessments of self-esteem for Chinese American men and women.

One final caveat is that the concept of self-esteem was originally conceived in Western culture. It is possible that self-esteem has different meanings and serves different functions in Chinese culture. Because Chinese Americans are influenced by both cultural traditions, the meanings and functions of self-esteem for Chinese Americans may be both similar to and different from those of self-esteem in monocultural Chinese and American groups. Future studies should examine the underlying meanings of self-esteem and their correlates with other measures of psychological well-being in these groups to examine if this is the case.

#### *Future Directions for Research on Cultural Orientation, Gender, and Self-Esteem*

In addition to addressing the limitations of our study, there are other directions for research that are critical to understand better the complex relations between cultural orientation and self-esteem, and how these vary for men and women. First, we suggested the ways in which the immediate social context may influence the relationships between cultural orientation and self-esteem; however, studies are needed to examine explicitly how the social context influences cultural orientation, conceptions of the self, and their interrelations. For example, pride in Chinese culture may result in higher reported levels of self-esteem when a Chinese American is in the presence of European Americans (because of the American norm of self-enhancement), but not when she or he is in the presence of Chinese Americans (because of the Chinese norm of self-

effacement). Similarly, affiliation with Chinese and Chinese Americans may be related to lower reports of self-esteem when a Chinese American is in the presence of other Chinese Americans (because of the norm of self-effacement) but not when she or he is in the presence of European Americans. These effects may become even more complex when one considers the distribution of men and women in the social context.

Second, among Asian Americans, place of birth has been found to be an important source of within-group variation. For example, there is evidence that American-born Asians and immigrant Asians vary in their models of cultural orientation (Tsai, 2000; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000). Although place of birth did not predict overall levels of self-esteem, it is possible that the cultural predictors of self-esteem differ for American-born Asians and immigrants. Studies that further examine within-group differences in cultural orientation will advance our understanding of cultural orientation processes in Asian Americans. Third, longitudinal studies are sorely needed; only they can truly reveal how cultural orientation processes change over time. Fourth, future research should attempt to disentangle the extent to which the construct of self-esteem reflects culturally normative responses and actual feelings about the self. Studies that examine the relations between self-esteem and other measures of psychological well-being may achieve this aim. Fifth, more sophisticated approaches to gender are needed to understand the mechanisms by which the relations between cultural orientation and self-esteem vary. Use of measures such as Bem's (1974) masculinity and femininity scales may reveal whether this dimension is responsible for found gender differences among Asian Americans. Similarly, more sophisticated methods of measuring cultural orientation (e.g., through behavioral observations) may reveal even more about how cultural orientation influences various aspects of human thought, feeling, and behavior (Tsai, Chentsova-Dutton, & Wong, in press).

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