



# Is individual bribery or organizational bribery more intolerable in China (versus in the United States)? Advancing theory on the perception of corrupt acts



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## ABSTRACT

The Chinese government is making unprecedented efforts to curb corruption resulting in several high-profile prosecutions involving local and foreign businesses. Accordingly, we examined the influence of national culture on the intolerance of bribery, based on the premise that bribery is more intolerable when it is committed by the actor seen as more agentic in a given culture. As predicted, Studies 1a, 1b, and 2 found that the Chinese were more intolerant of organizational bribery than individual bribery, whereas just the opposite was true among Americans. Further supporting our reasoning, Study 2 showed that these cross-cultural differences were mediated by participants' tendencies to make internal attributions for the bribe payers' behavior. Study 3 found that when Chinese or American culture was primed, bicultural participants showed analogous reactions, but only when they believed their two cultural identities to be compatible (rather than conflicting) with each other. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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"We must have the resolve to fight every corrupt phenomenon, punish every corrupt official and constantly eliminate the soil which breeds corruption, so as to earn people's trust with actual results. ... [T]he fight against corruption is a long-term, complicated and arduous task. Anti-corruption efforts must be consistent and will never slacken."

[Xi Jinping, President of People's Republic of China (Yang, 2013)]

## 1. Introduction

China is taking possibly the most ambitious and sustained campaign against corruption since the nation was established in 1949. Not only have individual government officials and businessmen been investigated and arrested, but also local organizations and

international corporations such as GlaxoSmithKline and Danone's Dumex have been singled out for engaging in bribery. While the government is determined and taking a heavy hand, the campaign is a complicated project facing many challenges. As China's economy and society are becoming rapidly internationalized, the workplace values and business norms are becoming more diverse due to the increasing number of Western-educated employees, to multinational corporations opening offices in Mainland China, and to Chinese firms operating overseas (Leung, Friedman, & Chen, 2013). Given the broader social context of anti-corruption and the more culturally dynamic business ecosystem in China, it is important to understand the influence of both Chinese and Western cultures on people's perceptions of corrupt acts.

The present research takes a cross-cultural approach to investigate how judgments of bribery committed by two different entities (individuals and organizations) vary across Chinese and American cultures (Studies 1a, 1b, and 2), as well as to delineate the underlying psychological mechanism for this cultural difference (Study 2). We also take a cultural priming approach to investigate how people with both Chinese and American cultural backgrounds judge the intolerability of bribery as a function of the culture that

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is primed as well as the extent to which their two cultural identities are integrated versus conflicted (Study 3).

In the rich literature on the antecedents of corruption, the cultural dimension of collectivism has been identified as a critical variable, above and beyond economic underdevelopment and institutional factors. For instance, research by sociologists, based on Banfield and Banfield's (1958) theory about "amoral familism," has found that cultures emphasizing particularistic obligation to family members (e.g., Chinese culture) were more plagued by corruption (Lipset & Lenz, 2000). Research by organizational scholars, primarily based on the work by Hofstede (1984) and Triandis (1989), has repeatedly shown a positive correlation between collectivism and each of national corruption level (e.g., Davis & Ruhe, 2003; Triandis et al., 2001), firms' bribery of their governments (Martin, Cullen, Johnson, & Parboteeah, 2007), and individuals' perceptions of the justifiability of accepting bribes (Cullen, Parboteeah, & Hoegl, 2004). Behavioral researchers also have found that collectivism is associated with lower perceived responsibility for one's actions and a higher propensity to bribe abroad (Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011).

However, many important questions remain, particularly those pertaining to the effect of national culture on perceptions of and reactions to bribery. For instance, past research has focused on judgments about those on the receiving end of corruption (Martin et al., 2007). However, any corruption deal also involves the supply side which has been investigated far less often (Ashforth, Gioia, Robinson, & Trevino, 2008). Accordingly, the present study examines how much perceivers view acts of bribery to be intolerable. Furthermore, although the handful of studies on bribery has shown cultural differences in bribery practices and intentions (e.g., Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011), we know relatively little about how individuals with different cultural backgrounds perceive the intolerability of bribery. Given that such perceptions are likely to influence behavior, understanding individuals' judgments of bribery might shed light on how the general public would respond to corrupt acts, their willingness to act against them, and their own tendency to engage in them.

If cultural differences in perceptions of the intolerability of bribery were to emerge, then it is also critical to unearth the psychological mechanisms of such an effect. For instance, we know that cultures vary with respect to how much members perceive the causes of behavior to be due to factors internal versus external to people (e.g., Morris & Peng, 1994). In like fashion, bribery may be judged as more internally driven in one culture but as less internally driven or more externally caused in another, which in turn may lead to different judgments of the intolerability of the bribery. In short, the literature is badly in need of rigorous theory and research examining cultural differences in people's perceptions of the intolerability of bribery.

In this research we distinguish between two types of bribery: individual bribery—bribe-giving on behalf of an individual to serve individual interests (e.g., a parent bribing the teacher to win favorable treatment of his child at school; a defendant or prosecutor bribing the judge for biased judgment), and organizational bribery—bribe-giving on behalf of an organization to serve the collective interests (e.g., a listed firm bribing the auditor for fraud report; an international company bribing the foreign government for policy support). The distinction between individual and organizational bribery is important because past research suggests that cultures vary in their construals of individuals and collectives as two separate, cognitively meaningful social entities (Kashima et al., 2005; for a review, see Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001). Moreover, there are cultural differences in agency beliefs, such that in some cultures the individual is seen as more agentic than the collective, and vice versa in other cultures. In turn, whether the individual or the collective is perceived to be the agent of wrongdoing

is likely to make a difference in attributions of responsibility (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999) and ultimately, judgments of intolerability.

Specifically, individualistic cultures (e.g., American, Australian) believe individuals to be more salient or agentic entities than groups, which are regarded more as a part of the social environment of, or a situational constraint on, the focal individuals. In contrast, collectivistic cultures (e.g., Chinese, Korean) believe groups/collectives to be more salient or agentic entities than individuals, who have less autonomy to behave freely from environmental constraints. This cultural difference in agency beliefs suggests the possibility that cultures differ in judgments of the intolerability of bribery committed by individuals versus organizations. We expect that in cultures emphasizing the agency of collectives over individuals (e.g., China), organizational bribery might be seen as a more significant transgression than individual bribery whereas in cultures emphasizing the agency of individuals over collectives (e.g., the United States), individual bribery might be seen as a more significant transgression than organizational bribery.

Moreover, if individual bribery is perceived to be more intolerable than organizational bribery in one culture but less intolerable in another culture, it is important to investigate why this may be the case. More generally, and as suggested by Leung et al. (2013), "the different cultural and institutional context of China vis-à-vis that of the West provides immense opportunities for evaluating, extending, and creating psychological theories." By studying characteristics of constructs and their relationships that may take different forms in various cultures, we can not only better understand our own culture (Pruitt, 2004, p. xii) and learn about other cultures but also contribute to the uncovering of universal psychological mechanisms (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007).

In sum, the present research examines the influence of Chinese versus American culture on perceptions of the intolerability of bribery committed by individuals relative to bribery committed by organizations. Beyond demonstrating the indigenous enactments of cultural influence, we also hope to contribute to the development of a general theory on the psychological processes of moral judgment (Brockner, 2003; Gibson & McDaniel, 2010). More specifically, the overarching thesis of the present research is that in both cultures, bribery committed by the more agentic entity will be judged as more intolerable. The present research also may provide practical implications for Chinese (as well as American) policy makers to combat corruption.

## 2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

Within some cultures, it has long been established that the individual, compared to the group, is a more agentic entity, having internal qualities (e.g., dispositions, traits) and willpower and acting in accordance with beliefs, desires and intents (for a review, see Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). However, recent developments in cultural psychology suggest that the primacy of individuals over groups is not a universally held assumption but rather one more commonly shared in individualistic cultures (e.g., American, Australian, British) than in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean; Kashima et al., 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For instance, research on responsibility assignment found that Asian Americans or people from Asian societies such as China, Hong Kong, and Japan were more likely than Americans to extend blame to the individual wrongdoer's group, to the representative of the group, and to other group members who are not causally related to the wrongdoing (Chao, Zhang, & Chiu, 2008; Chiu & Hong, 1992; Zemba, Young, & Morris, 2006).

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