

## Strategic Modesty in Japan and China

**This is a report of a research visit to China by Takafumi Sawaumi, a graduate student in his third year of the doctoral course at the Department of Social Psychology, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, the University of Tokyo.**

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## **Host Institute**

Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

## **Host Researcher**

Professor Huajian Cai

## **Duration**

January 27, 2012 to March 28, 2012 (62 days)

## **Main Accomplishment**

### (1) Initial Plan

Professor Cai has for a long time conducted cross-cultural research on modesty, and having sought his cooperation I set out to do an experimental study. Although previous literature has proposed a wide range of taxonomies of modesty, these are limited to overt or visible modest behavior. Namely, the covert or invisible aspects such as motivation and intention underlying overt or visible modesty have gone unexamined. Hence, I have focused on motivation and intention that elicit modest behavior and attempted to show empirical evidence for my typological approach.

### (2) Accomplishment Reached Heretofore

Following the initial plan described above, I attempted to classify motivation for modesty into two kinds: promotion-focused and prevention-focused modesty. This tentative dichotomy was inferred from Higgins's (1997) regulatory focus theory which is already widely accepted in social psychology. This theory basically posits that humans are fundamentally oriented toward two directions. One is that of positive outcomes, such as wishes being fulfilled or accomplishments, and behavior in pursuit of them are deemed promotion-focused. The other is prevention-focused which refers to the tendency people have of avoiding negative outcomes such as failures and losses. Based on this idea, I defined promotion-focused modesty as something triggered by motivation for positive responses, whereas prevention-focused modesty was defined as something triggered by motives for avoiding negative consequences and escaping duties or responsibilities. For instance, people's modest expression in general would be classified as promotion-focused modesty when the object is to give a good impression, but prevention-focused modesty if it is to avoid being seen in an unfavorable light.

I presented this provisional idea to Professor Cai and his laboratory members who graciously offered insights on Chinese modesty that no one else could have provided. I learned that modesty is regarded as one of the most important values among the Chinese. This conceptualization of modesty, as I see it, is less likely to be seen among Japanese individuals. Although the initial plan was to conduct an empirical study, that was not followed through. However, this visit offered me an opportunity to obtain enlightening and insightful feedback by the host researchers. For empirical evidence, the current research project needs further investigation as delineated below.

### (3) Future Prospect

Japan and China are located together in East Asia where modesty is valued highly and mandates individuals to follow the modesty norm. That is, it is highly expected of Japanese and Chinese people to behave modestly and express modesty. But just what kind of motivation elicits such behavior or what kind of intention strategizes their expressions of modesty is yet to be examined.

First, it is essential to conduct a qualitative study both in Japan and China so as not to omit concepts unique to China, for it is almost impossible for a Japanese researcher to learn enough about Chinese modesty without consulting the local experts. More specifically, I plan to ask participants to give an open-ended response (free writing) concerning their motivation for modesty. I will then create a provisional modesty motivation scale based on recurring responses. Second, another group of participants in Japan and China will be asked to respond to the tentative scale on a Likert-type scale (e.g. 5-point). Their responses will be analyzed by a statistical technique called factor analysis in order to identify subcategories such as promotion-focused modesty and prevention-focused modesty. Simultaneously, participants will be asked to use another set of modesty-related scales, one of which, for example, will measure how much they care about evaluation by others. Their responses will be investigated in terms of how these scales are related to the modesty motivation scale to check their validity. Third, I will experiment with a method called priming to see what kind of overt or visible behavior can be instigated by each subcategory of modesty motivation. For instance, the participants' modest behavior with an eye to attaining positive outcomes is expected when they are primed (unconsciously motivated) to become conscious of promotion focus. Following these steps, the modest motivation scale could be regarded as valid from a social psychological perspective.

It is worth noting that the modest motivation scale, which will have been established in this way, could be used not only in East Asia but also in other cultures. Indeed, modesty might not be emphasized among Westerners so much as among East Asians. However, recent studies have shown that modesty is one of the important values in Western countries as in East Asia. Therefore, it is promising to first establish and validate a modesty motivation scale in the way described earlier, then extend its use to Western culture. Hence, to grasp modesty from a broader viewpoint, it is important to create first a modesty motivation scale which could be commonly used in two nations in East Asia (i.e., Japan and China), then extend its usage to Western nations.